6-5-2008

The Dirt on China Reporting

Pierre Fuller

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/221

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
By Pierre Fuller

Reporting China for a Western readership gets a whole lot easier once you master the discursive montage of cheap China associations. When discussing the Chinese state, for example, plug in Orwell. When referencing anything in the period 1949-1976, plug in Mao. If, say, your topic is changing environmental behavior among the Chinese, ascribe it only to orders from the “new emperors” above; national pride could also do. And so on. A recent International Herald Tribune and New York Times website report, “Smoke Clears, Dust Does Not in Beijing,” follows the formula to a T.

In it, Mao makes his first appearance as the explanation for Beijing’s sooty sky. His “vision” for China, we learn, produced the many smokestacks belching out pollutants into the capital. “Mao got his wish,” the report continues, “everybody else got a persistent cough.” In other words, constructing heavy industry (i.e. capital goods) across China in the past was a single man’s project – and resulted in anything from cancer and climate change to an eyesore of a skyline, but not in the industrial foundation for the production of consumer goods that propels China in world stature today. But the thrust of the article is that this type of pollution, curbed for the Olympics, has been replaced by dust from the growing Gobi desert, which sweeps past where Beijing’s old city gates were “demolished by Mao and other visionaries.” This is our second Mao in a short report, and our second variant on the word “vision.” Note that when “vision” or its variants is used in the Chinese context, one must often read rash “delusion.” I suppose this journalist thought of conveniently balancing or bookending his piece with the odious constructions and familiar destructions of a favorite media character. Finally, the Beijing Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games, or Bocog, is said to sport “an Orwellian acronym that suggests James Bond’s more ambitious villains.” For their nefarious ends, I hadn’t realized Bond villains ever looked to beautifying a city.

In Beijing, we are told, “dust never sleeps.” Neither, it seems, does the China cliché.