

Sixth form student Michael Alhadeff attended the Battle for China conference as a reporter for WORLDwrite and the news programme WORLDbytes and produced this comprehensive report:

Moore London Place is one of those new swanky developments that seem to frequently pop up in London and is home to a number of major firms. Walking through its pristine streets with its artistic water features can be quite inspiring, especially when the sun is out gleaming off the River Thames. The sun also alerts you to the golden tops of the Tower of London which stands staunchly over on the other side of the river, the famous landmark known all over the world can be seen to represent the English desire for power and how some things change but others don't which is very apt when looking at China's new position in the world.

This is what had dragged many people to one of the tall swanky buildings. They hoped to gain valuable insights into a country they knew little about and was the reason for Institute of Ideas decision to set up The Battle For China on the eve of the Olympic Games.

With the auditorium at full capacity, everybody was poised to enter into the first plenary of the day. Just like in the Olympic Games where there are considered to be blue ribbon events, the first plenary might well be considered the academic equivalent with its high class academic field and weight of issue. The field had been brought together to discuss whether the growth of China was of an opportunity or a threat. Assembled on stage similar to that of a start of a race, the audience waited in much anticipation, and just like the sprinter who gets out of the blocks the fastest tends to make the biggest impression on the race, Frank Furedi's five minute piece made the pulsating start. The distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent managed to find that extra something, in this case a completely different view point, which seemed to strike the audience. Instead of discussing the threat level of China, Furedi went deeper into the question by asking why the West may see China as a threat at all. And the answer, according to him, is because the West has lost confidence in modernity it thus struggles to deal with China. A strong performance indeed but that is not to say the rest lagged behind. James S. Coleman Professor of International Development Studies UCLA, dispelled the idea that we were all under threat from China being economically dominant, as he rightly pointed out, it is in China's interest to maintain economic partners and, as the logic of comparative advantage shows, it is not possible for China to dominate all trade.

It was also particularly insightful to gain a Chinese perspective with Chinese diplomat Weimen Liu acknowledging China had problems but was working to rectify them. The strong field, like a short track event, made the audience want to see more so it was disappointing to see the plenary all too soon drawing to a finish but the spectators, who as usual got their voice, would surely be satisfied by the events that would follow.

It was as though we had moved from the agile world of sprinters to the drawn out slog of two heavyweight boxers going at each other for twelve rounds. Only this time they were not fighting for a belt but whether the West should use every opportunity to pressure China into improving its Human Rights Record. While there seemed to be no tension over the fact that Chinese people have a lack of freedom, the debate centred

on the West's position with Brendon O'Neill, editor of Spiked, arguing that London's handling of the Olympic torch relay hardly set a good example. Minky Worden, media director of Human Rights Watch, seemed to slightly miss the point of the debate putting great emphasis on how human rights are monitored, leaving her open to possibly valid criticism of NGOs by the audience. The pace of the morning was frenetic by academic standards with people just having enough time to grab a coffee and a bite to eat before the slightly alarmingly named 'Chinese Conversations' started. Thankfully the audience weren't required to be fluent in Chinese, rather it was a discussion about China's environmental problems. Dr Yiyi Lu, research fellow, China policy Institute, University of Nottingham, starkly put some of the problems China is facing such as poor water quality affecting a number of its rivers. During the industrial revolution the River Thames suffered from the same problems but now the water quality is much improved and as Michael Massey, associate fellow, Energy, Environment and Development Programme, Chatham House, pointed out, the same is likely to be seen in China. Plus Massey sees this time-frame as being very much compressed as China will quickly learn new environmental methods at a faster rate than the Europeans managed to do. James Woudhuysen, Professor of forecasting and innovation, De Montfort University, added with a certain dry wit, that the West would probably find something wrong even with Chinese solar panels.

The discussions in the morning were profound and a feeling of uneasiness had spread over the audience as the newly acquired information threatened to change the status quo. But there was little time to dwell on new insights and just like an Olympic diver untangles themselves after a 360 degree spin, we yet again plunged into the crystal blue academic pool with Alan Hudson. Hudson, director, leadership programmes for China, University of Oxford, argued that China was not experiencing an intellectual renaissance and in fact many Chinese intellectuals are concerned with process rather than content and that the regime provided some sort of suffocation. Mark Leonard, executive director, European Council on Foreign Relations, on the other had, argued that because Chinese intellectuals have found some space for manoeuvre in the tight regime and are developing very fast, that it is experiencing some sort of renaissance. Renaissance or no renaissance, it is clear that China is producing intellectuals that are prepared to present their ideas to the world.

The next discussion centred around the awe inspiring construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Much debate has centred around the dam not because it has provided much needed irrigation and hydro-electricity but due to the fact that it has displaced many people and is of environmental concern. An excellent comparison was drawn by Sheila Lewis, director, Volanti Consulting, who remarked on the difference in reception between the Three Gorges Dam and the Hoover Dam which was received much more favourably. In explanation for this difference in reaction Dr Peter Martin, lecturer, School of Chemical Engineering and Analytical Science, University of Manchester, explained that because the Hoover Dam was built in a much less populated area and less likely to silt in the long run it was as a result much more warmly welcomed. Catherine Sampson, crime novelist and resident of Beijing, made the interesting remark that the opposition towards the dam in China, which stems from such things as missing compensation packages, can almost be seen as opposition towards the regime.

How much China has changed was to be the centrepiece of the last debate as China's role in the new world order was set to be discussed. As a prelude to China being at the top of this new world order, the speakers were invited to answer the question – Should we all learn Mandarin? Despite the somewhat amusing responses, the question can be seen as fairly serious as if China is seen near the top, then just as they have had to learn English to progress we will have to learn Mandarin to keep up with them. Each speaker gave their assessment on the new world order but Dr Bill Durodie, associate fellow, Chatham House, particularly stood out. Durodie reflected on China's involvement in Africa and how often their 'no-strings-attached' aid packages are in direct conflict with the West who often attempt to seek the moral high ground, rightly or wrongly. Durodie, as a result, drew the conclusion that Africa will be the major battleground for this new world order as they compete for the top spot. The day had reached its dénouement with the audience now in fever pitch mood all wanting their turn on the microphone to add to the final debate of the day. They had much to reflect on with two key ideas standing out amongst the rest; one was the fact that China now provides an alternative authoritarian model, at a time when the West is possibly facing a loss of confidence in democracy, which is attractive to many developing nations. If there wasn't this loss of confidence then the West would have no need to fear China as they would feel democracy was superior. The second is more profound and that is along with the West's uncertainty, China is also uncertain of where it is possibly going and therefore it is hard to tell whether things will change or not.

As the clock had just passed six in the evening, the audience began to stream out of the building, chatting amongst themselves, and started to walk back along the gloriously lit Thames. Through the process of the day we had been transformed from possible China bashers to people who could look at China critically, able to see both the benefits and drawbacks of a new China. As one walked back along the Thames it felt very much like the calm after the storm as the newly acquired knowledge seemed settling and as the Tower of London drew into view once again one was reminded how history is so important when looking at what the future might hold.