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Handing Out Five Media Medals
August 18, 2008 in The Five-List Plan by The China Beat | No comments

Here is an admittedly quirky list of some pieces I’ve come across recently that seem medal-worthy. Not all deal with “big” topics. Isn’t that fitting where the Games are concerned, though, since Olympic athletes don’t just compete in globally popular sports (like soccer) but also in ones that have few practitioners and, shall we say, niche followings (like synchronized diving)?* This list focuses almost exclusively on Western and English language publications, so I hope readers will bring Chinese and other publications into the mix via their comments. And while I’d like to award medals to some China Beat pieces (they clearly deserve them), I won’t. This isn’t, after all, a Self-Promotion Saturday. I will, however, mention one China Beatnik before the list is done.

1. Gold medal for taking on the “collectivist” East versus “individualistic” West cliche: to John Pomfret for his excellent blog post that points out some flaws in, among other things, a recent David Brooks op-ed on the theme.

2. Gold medal for clarifying the different ways that medal counts can be tallied: to Ian Johnson for his article on the subject (and nice to see a title that puns on “Who’s on First” without mentioning the name of China’s President).

3. Gold medal for humor at the expense of television coverage cliches: to Andy Borowitz for his Huffington Post piece with a title that says it all (but read the whole thing anyway): “Athlete without Compelling Personal Drama Expelled from the Olympics.”

4. Gold medal for coverage of a story that deserved more attention on two fronts (the fact that there was at one point a plan to include a segment on the Cultural Revolution in the Opening Ceremony, and the fact that even after Spielberg withdrew, international consultants played key roles in the spectacle): to Dipesh Gadher for his Guardian piece on Mark Fisher (and if you don’t recognize this name, you’ll realize after reading the piece why you should).

5. Gold medal (team category) for making a lot of use of an expert who could all too easily have gotten too little attention: to USA Today, People’s Daily, the PBS NewsHour, Al Jazeera, and all sorts of other media outlets for their interviews with and quoting of Susan Brownell. Given her background as a China specialist working on sports, an athlete who had once competed in a Beijing track meet, a consultant to the IOC, someone who was in Beijing during the lead-up to the Games and is still there now, and the author of an important recent book on the Olympics, one might think that there was no difficulty factor involved in winning this particular medal. In fact, though, as recently as six months ago, even though commentary on the lead-up to the Games had kicked into high gear, she was rarely being sought out by the press. And I think that it is fair to say that in the past at least (here’s where the difficulty factor comes in), there was a notable tendency for the most frequently quoted Western China specialists to be people who were based in disciplines other than hers (she’s an anthropologist), were at institutions that had a different sort of profile and location than hers (she’s based at the University of Missouri, St. Louis), and were, well, not to beat around the bush, men. If her break out as a media figure turns out to be part of a trend, it will be a welcome one.

*For better or worse, some of the most colorful of obscure Olympic events—from the “tug of war” that as I’ve pointed out elsewhere generated controversy during the London Games of 1908, to the “Live Pigeon Shooting” featured in the 1900 Paris Games, to the dueling pistol event that had competitors fire at dummies dressed in frock coats—are now a thing of the past. For a fascinating partial list of discontinued events, including the “two hands shot put,” see this post at the website for Top End Sports.