5 Good Short Reads on China Beat Topics—All by People Who Aren’t China Specialists

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Academics focusing on China, like other area specialists, tend to place a high value on formal training in the language and culture of the place we’ve devoted ourselves to teaching and writing about. We think (and I’m no exception) that most of the best scholarly work on Chinese issues has been done by people with this kind of training. And the people outside of the academy that we pay the closest attention to—journalists, free-lance writers, business commentators, policy analysts, etc.—tend to be those who have had some training in Chinese studies, or know the language and have demonstrated a primary interest in China. This is an understandable position. And it is likely, and I believe defensible, that most of the publications on China to which contributors to this blog will draw attention (positive attention, at least—what we pan may be another story) will end up being by people who fall into the categories just described.

Still, there’s always a danger of a guild mentality setting in. So, it is important for us to acknowledge from time to time just how valuable a different sort of perspective can be, whether it is offered by Chinese writers who are not China specialists or by non-Chinese scholars and journalists who have a recent or just passing interest in Chinese topics. Sometimes a journalist just posted to China, without much background on the place, will come up with fresh insights, noticing something to which others were blind. And within the world of scholarship, I can think of several people based outside of Chinese studies who have made major contributions to topics that interest when they’ve turned their attention, even if briefly, to China. Judith Stacey’s work on gender in China, Saskia Sassen and John Logan’s comments on Chinese cities, and Barrington Moore and Eric Wolf’s studies of comparative revolutions—these are just a few “outsiders” with insights who come to mind.

This explains the reason for the list below, which points readers to five worthy short works by non-China specialists who have contributed to debates on fairly recent (I go back as far as an insightful eyewitness account of Tiananmen by a sociologist, Craig Calhoun, who admitted at the time to having a very limited knowledge of Chinese) topics within the purview of China Beat. Some have a serious ongoing interest in China (manifested in going there regularly, writing more than occasionally about, in one or two cases even taking lessons in the language), but part of what they bring to the subject that is useful is an immersion in the history and present dilemmas of other parts of the world.

The people I’ve chosen are a widely varied lot: Calhoun and also Perry Anderson straddle the line between sociology and history, Amartya Sen’s a philosophically minded economist, Andrew Ross is a specialist in cultural studies, and Pankaj Mishra is best known as a novelist and author of thoughtful pieces of travel writing and reportage. And the sample publications I provide links to below are about disparate subjects, from the Tiananmen protests (Calhoun), to Shanghai as a center for outsourcing (Ross), to the concept of “Asian Values” (Sen), to China’s “New Left” (Pankaj Mishra), to Taiwan elections (Anderson).

One thing they have in common for me is that each is someone whose writings on topics unrelated to Chinese affairs I had already read—and appreciated—before I came to the works listed below. Two have whole books devoted to China that are definitely worth reading (Calhoun and Ross), while the other three have excellent books that include chapters on Chinese themes—if, that is, these samples leave anyone wanting more.

The list (to which I hope followers of this blog will add by sending in a comment with a link to a favorite in this category) is provided below. When you click on each name, you’ll be taken to a complete short article from a political magazine or literary review, except in the case of Ross—with him (because the best comparable thing by him was a “for subscribers only” contribution to the Nation), you’ll be taken to an online excerpt from his latest book:

1. Craig Calhoun
2. Andrew Ross
3. Amartya Sen
4. Pankaj Mishra
5. Perry Anderson