Frivolous Friday: China Beat Goes Hollywood

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Last year saw some curious news stories appear that linked China with Hollywood, from ones involving Mia Farrow’s critical views of the Beijing regime, to ones reporting Paris Hilton’s trip to Shanghai to attend an MTV awards show, to ones detailing sex scenes being cut from the version of Ang Lee’s film so that it could be showed in the PRC. With these still fresh in China Beat’s mind, this week’s “Frivolous Friday” offering takes the form of quiz, which tests the pop culture acumen and in some cases also the Sinological savvy of our readers. (Answers as well as bonus “You Might Be a Sinologist If…you know this factoid” queries come after all the questions.)

1. Which of the following actresses studied Mandarin at Harvard and wrote a senior thesis on anti-African sentiment in the PRC?
   a) Jodie Foster
   b) Mira Sorvino
   c) Nicole Kidman
   d) Uma Thurman

2. Which of the following actors took a Chinese history class with Jonathan Spence at Yale, cites this as having inspired him to make a film set in China, and says he read one of his former prof’s books to prepare for his role in that movie?
   a) Tim Robbins
   b) Ralph Fiennes
   c) Kevin Bacon
   d) Ed Norton

3. Which of the following actresses can be seen speaking Chinese and quoting Confucius in a film called "Stowaway"?
   a) Judy Garland
   b) Mae West
   c) Shirley Temple
   d) Lana Turner

4. Which of the following celebrities performed in a film whose name flagged a Chinese location—but did not include a single scene set in that location?
   a) Jack Lemmon
   b) Rita Hayworth
   c) Owen Wilson
   d) Jane Fonda
   e) All of the above

5. Long before Steven Spielberg agreed to serve as a consultant to Zhang Yimou for the extravaganza that will open the 2008 Olympics, he made a film that opened with a song and dance number (“Anything Goes” by Cole Porter, fittingly enough) being performed in a nightclub in Old Shanghai. Was that film:
   a) The Empire of the Sun
   b) Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark
   c) 1941
   d) Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom

ANSWERS:
1. b—and we’ve been told by a Harvard prof who read it that Sorvino’s thesis, with a little work, would have been publishable, meaning that Hollywood’s gain, in this case, was Sinology’s loss.
   Bonus question…You might be a Sinologist if…you can tell us what Uma Thurman’s tie to China studies is…Answer: Her father is a noted specialist on Tibet.
2. d—though the other actors all have ties to China, since Robbins recently starred in "Code 46" (a film set in a Shanghai of the future), Fiennes starred in "The White Countess" (a film set in a Shanghai of the past), and Bacon’s architect father (who later played a key role in the redevelopment of Philadelphia) spent some time as a youth working in Shanghai. You might be a Sinologist if you can guess which of Spence’s books Norton says he turned to in order to understand the character of the British doctor he played in "The Painted Veil"...Answer: To Change China.

3. c.

4. e—the films in question are "The China Syndrome" (a and d), "The Lady from Shanghai," and "Shanghai Noon" (that’s the only one with scenes set in any part of China, but only Beijing is portrayed).

5. d—though the action quickly moves from Shanghai to India. Bonus question...You might be a Sinologist if...you know why it is somewhat anachronistic in the film when the Chinese gangsters who appear are dead set on getting hold of the ashes of Nurhaci, whom they seem to treat as a sacred figure...Answer: members of the kinds of secret societies to which these gangsters belonged tended to look at the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) as foreigner usurpers from Manchuria who had unjustly wrested control of China from the Ming (1368-1644). Since Nurhaci was a Manchu leader, they wouldn’t have worried about his ashes being scattered or destroyed in their fight with Indiana Jones.