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Recommendations for Obama: V

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February 10, 2009 in The Five-List Plan, Watching the China Watchers by The China Beat | 6 comments

We asked China watchers from a variety of backgrounds to answer the question “What should Obama be reading about China?” While we’ve already run four installments (I, II, III, and IV), new suggestions continue to arrive. For a few of the cinematic variety, read on…

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I suggest that President Obama recover from the lousy week he just had by chilling out in his private movie theater and watching the following movies. None will give him a complete, or even, necessarily, contemporary perspective, but each will give him a piece of the complex, diverse puzzle that is China, and help him understand that there are no easy answers – for the Chinese or for us.

1. Irv Drasnin’s “Misunderstanding China,” a cinematic companion to Harold Isaac’s classic Scratches on Our Minds (which would have been on my list if I were suggesting books instead of films), provides a look at ourselves and how and why we think about China the way we do.

2. Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon’s trilogy of one hour films on Long Bow, which update the village her father, William Hinton, made famous in Fanshen and Shenfan. “A Small Happiness,” focuses on the plight of rural women and has one of the most emotionally wrenching scenes I’ve ever seen: Richard, the cameraman of the talented husband and wife team, says that it was all he could do to hold on to the camera while a woman described smothering her own child because there was not enough food to feed whole family.

3. “To Live” — Zhang Yimou’s panoramic portrait of one family’s struggle to make it through four decades (the 40s through the 80s) of roiling turmoil in China.

4. The wonderfully comic, yet profoundly sad “Shower,” shows the confusion and angst that the passing of an era instills in the inhabitants of Beijing hutongs.

5. “Young and the Restless in China” is the latest of Sue William’s many excellent documentaries on China. This one vividly portrays how nine very different young men and women handle their personal and professional lives in a rapidly changing society.

Tags: Barack Obama