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Looking Back, Looking Forward

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The last year is gone, and 2009 predictions are rolling in. Here are a few of our favorite 2008 wrap-ups and 2009 predictions from the past few weeks.

Looking back...

1. *China Beat*'s Jeffrey Wasserstrom has posted a few of his own reflections on 2009. At the *Christian Science Monitor*, Wasserstrom wrote about "the two big China stories you missed this year" (though regular China Beat readers likely won't have...!). The subheading should tip you off to these two stories: "The brief yet radical shift of patriotic fervor into criticism of the government after the Sichuan earthquake and the official revival of Confucius were crucial moments in a pivotal year."

And at the *Guardian*’s Comment is Free, Wasserstrom discussed how 2008 had showcased a new "golden age" of English-language reportage on China:

The year saw a bumper crop of unusually illuminating books of reportage. The four works I have in mind take widely varying approaches to contemporary China. What they have in common is that each is by someone with good Chinese language skills, has a long-term commitment to understanding China on its own terms, and has hit upon an interesting way to frame a book. Each offers readers a valuable opportunity to move beyond simplistic visions of China that downplay the diversity of the country and the complex nature of the social and cultural shifts its people are experiencing.

**Make the jump** to find out the four works Wasserstrom singled out for notice.

2. *Access Asia* (if you aren’t already reading their weekly updates, you should be…) published a 2008 retrospectives on the best and worst of books on China in 2008 (republished at Danwei.org):

It was hardly a stellar year – there were no really big picture books this year that stormed the shelves, though there were a few interesting memoirs (Rowan Simons’*s *Bamboo Goalposts* and Zhang Lijia’s *Socialism is Great!* both deserve a mention) but not one good business book. 2008 was a good year for general history though as reflected in our choices below.

3. *China Digital Times* has been publishing regular wrap-ups on the China issues of 2008, including this one on food and product safety:

In 2008, food and product safety issues that had been smoldering in China finally erupted in a rash of scandals, most having to do with melamine-tainting in food products such as milk, eggs, ammonium bicarbonate, protein powder, and animal feed, but also including food poisoned with pesticides, a maggot outbreak in oranges, hazardous toys, and toxic furniture.

Other CDT wrap-ups include China and the Developing World, Nationalism, Internet Culture, and Identity, Environmental Crisis, The Global Financial Crisis, the Revaluation of the Yuan, Human Rights, and China’s domestic market.

Looking forward...

1. In talking about what China will look like in 2009, the recent economic woes have loomed large. At Reuters, Chris Buckley argues for rising unrest in the coming year:

While foreign commentary about risks to China’s recipe of fast economic growth and one-party control are common, the nation’s leaders are usually reticent about such threats.

This report and other recent open warnings may be intended to help snap officials to attention, said one Chinese expert.
"The candor about these problems reflects the severity of the unemployment problem. It's meant to attract the attention of all levels of government," said Mao Shoulong, a professor of public policy at Renmin University in Beijing.

"The government wants to show that stability is at the top of its agenda."

Many China commentators, however, are concerned that the unrest (and its potential for government destabilization) is being overstated and may blind foreigners to the true situation in China. In reaction to predictions over the importance of Charter '08 (and its contribution to bringing down Beijing), Mutant Palm blogged on "'To Collapse or Not to Collapse' is Not the Question," pointing to rising citizen demands on the government for social services as the likeliest outcome of an economic downturn.

2. At this week's Access Asia weekly update, editors posted "The China Retail Quarterly...The "What Will 2009 Be Like?" Edition."

3. In addition to reflecting on 2008, Jeff Wasserstrom also had time to make a few predictions for 2009 at the Nation. The upshot? It all happened already. Take a gander to see how many of the events China specialists might have been predicting for 2009 took place in 2008.

4. For a view to how one Chinese newspaper (Southern Weekend) looks forward to 2009, see CDT's full translation of the paper's New Year editorial, which ranges across both the newspaper's responsibilities to its readers and readers' responsibilities to their nation:

The more we look to the depths of history, the firmer we are. Yes, we want to support those common human values unwaveringly. We support progress, democracy, freedom, human rights; we support China's move toward modern civilisation. Do we not recall how, over a century ago, our predecessors found that being complacent in their own culture would not save them, so hiding their pain deep inside, they undertook a long journey to find a way to revitalise the country? Therefore western winds blew eastward, arsenals were built to ward off external humiliation, schools built with a view to the future, to build the newspaper for the opening of their wisdom, and Mr Democracy and Mr Science brought the light of rejuvenation to this ancient country. At this juncture of our long history, have we not thought about where this country's hope comes from? Have we never thought about how to extend the hope, so as not get the future path of state and the people wrong?

It's worth reading the whole editorial in full.