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Inside-Out China

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By Xujun Eberlein

1. A proprietary approach I use to help assess English journalism books about China is to measure how much they tell me, a Chinese, that I don’t already know. This, needless to say, lacks objectivity, and it can easily undervalue an otherwise excellent book. As an example, Out of Mao’s Shadow by Philip Pan consists essentially of stories I had already read from the Chinese media or the internet. Not new to me, but that doesn’t mean the book is not worth reading for Western readers (in fact, it is).

On the other hand, this approach raises a high bar for journalists writing about China. To find stories not broadly known even to the Chinese requires not only extraordinarily acute ears, but also the admirably open mind of a deep thinker. Thus, I can narrow down my reading list to a few outstanding books. James Fallows’ new book, Postcards from Tomorrow Square: Reports from China, is one of them. Many things he writes about are new to me, but that’s the least of the delightful surprises.

Being an old China foot, having stepped out after growing up there but still keeping a close eye on it, I found Postcards from Tomorrow Square to be surprisingly fresh and deep. Nowadays, with outspoken critics of China shouting from one line, and vocal supporters yelling back retorts from another, it seems there is little room left for dispassionate discussion. This book enquires into the heart of some of the most important issues facing China, and America, rather than picking at them from the sides. As such, it forms one of the best collections of writing on China I have seen.

The book is made up of twelve essays, eleven of which were published in The Atlantic Monthly between 2006 and 2008. There is a fair breadth of topics covered, and a fascinating array of characters lined up. The topics range from gambling to the balance of trade to technology innovation, from farming to internet policing to reality shows. The book provided me by far the clearest explanation of how China’s “great firewall” works, and why the imbalance in trade between the United States and China is unsustainable for both countries.

Unlike some other Western reporters who thought they knew what they were looking for in China, Fallows, a renowned journalist, was unexpectedly unassuming when he entered China again in 2006, having been there several times already during the 1980s and 90s. “This opportunity for discovery is the real payoff of life as a reporter: the chance to answer questions you did not previously know you wanted to ask,” Fallows writes in “Introduction.” And he does not shy away from saying his stories “do
not presume to be complete or final accounts. They offer a few parts of the complicated picture of China.”

2. In fact, they offer a few very important parts of the complicated picture. While the chapters are organized chronologically in the order they were reported, I find the ninth chapter, “China’s Silver Lining,” one of the most significant.

In a small town in eastern China, an engineer named Tang Jinquan has spent his entire career trying to clean up cement production. He has created a cogeneration system, an energy-recycling technology that shoots two vultures with one arrow: it turns the huge amount of heat normally wasted in cement making into electric power, while at the same time reducing dust and waste in the process. Now Tang is selling the system to cement producers in many other countries.

The cement plant case is only one of those homegrown, and very creative, “green” efforts popping up across the country. I’ve seen others during my annual visits to China. One of my favorite examples is the electric bicycle which I first saw in Chengdu several years ago. These are popular with people who want more than a bicycle, but can’t afford, or don’t want to deal with, a car. And there is not just one kind. There are lots of different brands using different kinds of components. Nobody is waiting for the right battery. They just make the things and try, apparently successfully, to sell them. Some look like junk, some look pretty good, but they are out there and being used.

Solar water heaters, flourishing on rooftops in some cities, are another example. In many hotels, guests must keep the door key inserted into a switch to obtain electricity, which shuts off power use when one leaves the room. Flying out Shanghai’s airport, I’ve seen big fields of wind mills. Most recently, Bloomberg.com reported that China has become only the second country to begin operating a plant that converts coal into liquid motor fuel.

And I just heard this: When Fallows was doing a phone interview from Beijing with NPR on this book, it was afternoon in the US but 2 a.m. in China. He was frozen in the cold of his office, because the building’s heat was turned off at night. Another small effort to save energy.

Here’s a bigger one: in the second chapter of Postcards from Tomorrow Square, Fallows tells a story of how Zhang Yue, a tycoon in central China, runs the world’s largest Freon free air conditioning manufacturer, using technology abandoned in America. Such air conditioning utilizes a nonelectric cooling process that saves energy by requiring fewer stages of conversion and taking advantage of seasonal availability of natural gas.

This is the first time I’ve heard the stories of Tang Jinquan and Zhang Yue. They are my favorite characters from the book, and their stories excited me enormously. The two men and their stories are remarkably different but both have success based on Chinese education, ingenuity and hard work, instead of graft and corruption. It is heartening to read about people who are, very simply, doing things that are helping in a country that is facing so many difficult obstacles. They are no less heroic than the democracy activists often hailed by the West. People like Tang and Zhang might not be fighting for human rights directly, but they work toward saving mankind’s otherwise dismal future, and the importance of this should be recognized.

These stories are significant because mankind is facing an unprecedented energy and environmental crisis. Solutions and efforts like the above are not just China’s silver lining. Like many of Fallows’ other stories, they also have policy implications for Americans. While America is bailing out GM hoping for a car of the future, the Chinese are innovating from the bottom up.

America is the world’s largest energy consumer, China is second. China is the world’s largest greenhouse gas producer, America is second. Only when the two countries work together in all sorts of “green” efforts, can we have more hope. Any effort in either country toward a greener economy should be encouraged. This means while China learns from America, so should America learn from China. Both countries should be willing to follow suit when a good idea emerges in either one.
The extent to which the essays in Postcards reflect not only on what is happening in China, but also in America, is impressive. Understanding China and the way to deal with it requires an understanding of both how Chinese people perceive America, and how America really works. Too often, both Chinese and American ideologies are presented as cartoons and the consequences of this can be terrible.

A popular columnist of the New York Times had an op-ed piece several months ago with a title quite similar to this book. He had recently visited Zhuhai’s wind turbines, but somehow reached the conclusion that unless the one-party system is changed, “China can’t have a greener society.” This assertion is simply illogical and foolish. China does need political reform, but should its people halt all “green” efforts until that happens? Furthermore, a multiparty system hardly guarantees results on the energy and environmental front. A united effort across nations and ideologies is needed more than anything else.

3.
So it is all the more impressive that there is a lot of simple honesty in Fallows’ essays, which is both disarming and informative. Taken as a whole they provide a picture vivid with colors that do not seem shifted to the red or the blue.

In fact, even when Fallows writes about things going wrong, from billowing clouds of white and black smoke, to a stubborn intention to control information flows, it evokes a certain optimism. There are two reasons for this. First, his writing is not judgmental, it does not try to demonstrate any conclusion so much as present the evidence and discuss what can be concluded from it. More importantly, it clearly reflects the dynamic nature of modern China. Things are constantly changing, some for the worse, some for the better, but there is always a difference. In fact, a concept Fallows repeatedly emphasizes is variety. In his own words, Fallows says, “The most important thing about them is, indeed, the variety of the aspects of China they present.” I can’t agree with him more that variety is the key concept for Westerners to begin to understand China.

I read Postcards not long after reading Out of Mao’s Shadow by Phillip Pan. Taken together, these two books help understanding where China is today and where it is heading. Style-wise, I have the impression that Pan is more interested in telling good stories, while Fallows is trying hard to figure out how things work. In content, Out of Mao’s Shadow focuses much more strongly on the dark side of human nature. While Pan does a splendid job of bringing the characters to life, his stories are quite depressing and provide a limited view for readers who are not familiar with China. Postcards from Tomorrow Square covers a broader range of disciplines and activities that reflect the bigger picture, and shows us the sky is not all grey. In fact, to gain a more complete picture of China, one should read the two books side by side.

Tags: James Fallows