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Reading Round-Up

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To start, a few pieces not related to the events in Xinjiang:
1. “Edge of the American West,” a history/philosophy academic group blog, ran a piece today by David Silbey titled, "Death Preparatory to Resurrection [Boxers, July 13-16, 1900]” that reflects on Western media coverage during that time of the supposed massacre of foreigners in Beijing (later proven to be false):

This was the week that the westerners besieged in the embassies in Beijing died. They would be reborn again quite quickly, but for several days in the middle of July the world was firmly convinced that they had all been slaughtered. According to the New York Times of July 13th, working off a report by the Daily Mail of London, the Chinese Army had mounted a final assault on the legations in Beijing on July 6th, backed by heavy artillery...

Also in the historical news this week: “Nixon Announces Visit to Communist China”—that’d be July 15, 1971 (ht Ray Kwong via Aimee Barnes). (Last year, we reviewed Margaret MacMillan’s recent book, Nixon and Mao, which details the visit the following year, and the negotiations that led up to it.)

2. Also from Aimee Barnes, her blog features a fascinating interview with Joel B. Eisen, a professor from Richmond School of Law who was a Fulbright lecturer in China in 2008-09:

Preparing for classes in China was much more difficult than at home...They knew little about our legal system, so I was often starting from scratch there. In Energy Law I spent several weeks explaining the basics of American law, and administrative law in particular. Learning how administrative agencies work can be frustrating and difficult for American law students, let alone those with a rudimentary knowledge of our legal system, so that was a challenge. In International Environmental Law, I spent much time discussing bedrock principles of international law before moving on to talk about global warming...

In the International Environmental Law course, I conducted an exercise over the course of the semester with teams of students representing individual nations seeking to reach an international climate agreement. Many aspects of this – role-playing, advocating for nations other than their own, and direct in-class negotiations – were obviously new territory for the students, but they rose to the occasion. They were often zealous advocates for the nations they represented, even if it sometimes meant taking positions appearing to contradict their own beliefs. One day, students representing the United States took those representing China to task, criticizing the government’s position that China is a “developing nation” that need not agree to carbon caps.

I was quite surprised by the autonomy I had in Chinese classrooms. No one attempted to exert influence over me, although each class had a ”monitor” and I had to be somewhat politically sensitive. However, I was never reproached, even when I had less than flattering words for Chinese environmental policies.

3. Now, on to a few pieces on Xinjiang worth taking a look at. In case you missed it last week, The New York Times ran one of its “room for debates” on the situation for Chinese Uighurs. The series includes commentaries from four contributors, including City University of New York Professor Yan Sun:

Without any need to repeat government accounts to me, my relatives mostly see “outside forces” as the main reason for the latest as well as other riots in Xinjiang in recent years. Citing long-term good friendship with local Muslims, they are hard-pressed to think of divisions serious enough to cause deadly riots. Rather, they claim to have seen outside influences at work from their own experience,
e.g., money for underground mosques where mullahs engage in inciting rhetoric, for “terrorist groups” that make explosives and bombs, or for restless Muslim youths who stage trouble on the streets.

4. At Yale Global Online, Dru Gladney writes about the use of media to make the Uighur debates global conversations:

Given the ubiquity of the new media, it will be impossible to quarantine the ethnic pandemic spreading across China and indeed the world. News and popular expression have continued to Twitter out of China despite the government’s efforts to halt its spread. A remedy needs to be found not in shutting down these new media, but in addressing the complaints and general well-being of its populace.

5. At openDemocracy, Kerry Brown writes that China watchers have been underestimating Xinjiang’s powderkeg properties:

By 2009, Xinjiang looks like a place with a delicate ecosystem placed under impossible pressure. Just as much of its natural resources now are being exhaustively exploited, so the area has an impossible mixture of Han, Uyghur, and over a dozen other minorities, including a large number of Mongolians in the central region. It is now a territory with a population almost evenly divided between settlers and local groups that are themselves ethnically, religiously, and culturally different. Tensions have evidently been building. What happened on 5-6 July 2009 could be a mere precursor to much, much worse.