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Current History: Issue on China and East Asia

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Current History's September issue focuses on Asia. Though its articles are not accessible online, the publication has allowed China Beat to print short selections from a few articles. In addition to those excerpted below, the issue also includes pieces from Kenneth Lieberthal, Merle Goldman, Bruce Cumings, and others.

From "Unruly Stability: Why China’s Regime Has Staying Power" by Andrew Walder:

It is no longer as clear to China’s intellectuals and other educated urbanites that the nation’s political trajectory compares unfavorably to those of its former socialist brethren. In the late 1980s the socialist world appeared on the verge of a dramatic and promising democratic breakthrough, with China’s hidebound leaders hesitating to take the plunge. The history of these transitions over the past two decades has prompted a more sober realism today. Of the 30 post-communist regimes in the world, fewer than half are now reasonably stable multiparty democracies. All of these success stories are in small and ethnically uniform nations and all but one (Mongolia) are on the eastern edge of the European Union. The rest are either harsh dictatorships or deeply corrupt and illiberal regimes whose attempts to move toward democracy have largely fallen short. In some cases, the attempt to democratize led to the collapse of the nation-state: The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia are prime examples. In other cases, the transition touched off years of nationalist violence or civil war. And in virtually all cases, the attempt to shift to a market economy in the midst of a political revolution ushered in a deep depression that lasted almost a decade. Many of these economies, including Russia’s, only recently emerged from their years of hardship. By contrast, the two countries in this group that have had by far the largest sustained increases in per capita GDP are, ironically, both still ruled by their communist parties—China and Vietnam.

The equation of political stability with economic and social progress is a far more appealing argument today than it was in the 1980s. Any zeal for multiparty democracy as a panacea for China’s problems is far in the past. It has been replaced with a more sober awareness of the potential costs of a failed leap to a different type of political system....

From "The Revolution Will Be Digitized," a review by Kate Merkel-Hess of Guobin Yang’s new book, The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online:

In his new book, The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online, Barnard College sociologist Guobin Yang sketches the scope of online activism in China and limns the ways in which Chinese internet users express their goals. In prose that remains clear even when it grapples with complex theories of civil society or social movements, Yang makes the case that this new medium has not changed China, nor will it. (The author dismisses such beliefs as “technological determinism.”) He argues rather that online mobilization and contention are manifestations of broader social changes. The internet, to him, is not itself a force for change but instead a tool that can be manipulated by savvy netizens (wangmin).
The broader social changes that Yang stresses are the economic boom and the intellectual despair and pragmatism of the post-Tiananmen years. He claims that one response to China’s rapid growth and economic opening—which despite enormous economic and social gains have nonetheless left hundreds of millions behind—has been a fundamental shift in the goals and approaches of modern Chinese intellectuals. Historians have long emphasized that, beginning with the Opium Wars in the mid-1800s, the critical issues for Chinese intellectuals were national salvation and unity. This focus was apparent in 1989, when deft student protesters insisted that their goal was not regime change but rather to strengthen the nation by remonstrating against corrupt officials. But since 1989 the key feature of social activism, according to Yang, has been different: Activists, no longer content to sermonize on high ideals, want to produce practical, concrete change.

Yang describes an “artful contention” that occurs on the Chinese internet, evident in everything from petitions supporting the rights of hepatitis-B carriers to nationalistic hackers’ defacement of foreign websites. Weaving together personal observation and accounts of key events from the Chinese internet’s past decade, Yang tells the tale of the medium’s growth in China and joins it with another recent news trope: an increase in popular protests.