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Coming Distractions: China Watcher

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Richard Baum, professor of political science at UCLA, has been engaged with China for over four decades as a scholar, analyst, commentator, and author. This month, he publishes *China Watcher: Confessions of a Peking Tom* (University of Washington Press) — a genre-bending book in which Baum blends elements of memoir with a history of the country from the 1960s to the present. Baum is also the founder and moderator of Chinapol, an invitation-only internet forum in which China specialists come together and share their thoughts. Since its founding in 1995, Chinapol has grown into a dynamic online community frequented by many of the world’s leading China-focused academics and journalists, as well as people with related interests from the worlds of policy and business. In this excerpt, Baum explains how Chinapol came into being and traces the way it has developed — and the challenges it has faced — over the past 15 years.

By Richard Baum

In the winter of 1994 I moved to Yokohama, Japan, to direct a semester-long U.C. Education Abroad Program (EAP) curriculum on Peace and Development Studies at Meiji Gakuin University. Because all electronic communications in Japan were controlled by the government’s telecomm monopoly, NHK, Internet access was extremely expensive, and my Compuserve subscription was costing me a small fortune —over US$250 each month — in connection charges. Since I was in more-or-less regular e-mail contact with a number of other China scholars in various countries, I decided to economize on my on-line connection charges by periodically sending group e-mailings to several recipients at a time, on subjects relating to Chinese politics. My monthly telecomm bills quickly dropped by 70 percent.

By the time I returned to Los Angeles in the late summer of 1994 there were twenty-one China watchers on my group recipient list; by March of 1995 the list had grown to thirty-one, including a handful of international journalists residing in China. At that point I decided to set up a dedicated on-line SIG (special interest group) exclusively for specialists working on contemporary Chinese politics. The idea was to create an interactive electronic forum where scholars, journalists, diplomats, and other China experts could exchange information, ideas and insights about current events and developments. I sent out a request to each of the thirty-one people on my group e-mail list, inviting them to take part in the new forum and asking them to provide the names and addresses of other China watchers who might be interested in participating. Needing an eight-letter alias for the group in order to conform to the standard DOS file-naming protocol, I called the group “Chinapol.” Here is the letter I sent out:

Date: Wed, 15 Mar 95 08:45:00 PST  
Subject: creating a Chinese politics forum

Dear friends and colleagues:
I would like to establish an on-line e-mail forum to facilitate rapid, informal communication among Internet-linked specialists in contemporary Chinese politics, economics, and related fields. Insofar as my personal list of e-mail addresses is rather limited, I would like to invite you to help me expand my mailing list. For the moment, I would like to limit the group (which I have called “Chinapol”) to academics, Government analysts, and journalists who specialize in contemporary Chinese affairs. It may also be possible later to add a few advanced graduate students, people in the private sector, and others on an individual basis. . . .

The response was immediate and enthusiastic. By the end of 1995 over 100 people had joined the group. Thereafter, membership in Chinapol grew more slowly, leveling off at around 130 by 1999. Because a recipient list of that size was extremely awkward to manage, in the fall of that year I converted Chinapol from a personal e-mail group to a private, fully-functioning Web-based listserv, hosted by the UCLA International Institute. With the help of Richard Gunde, assistant director of the UCLA Center for Chinese Studies, I established a formal set of membership criteria, rules and regulations governing group communication and conduct. Thereafter, membership surged, passing the 200 mark within a year, and then continuing to grow dramatically . . .

In 2002 I added a fully searchable data archive, making it possible for subscribers to retrieve past postings from our restricted website by date, sender, or keyword. By the fall of 2008 Chinapol had subscribers in 25 countries throughout the Americas, Europe, Asia and Australasia, counting among its members 397 scholars, 262 journalists, 98 NGO/think tank analysts, 96 diplomats and government analysts, plus a scattering of independent consultants, international lawyers, and others.

For more than a decade, Chinapol has been the primary information network linking the growing global community of China watchers. With its large multinational, multiprofessional and multidisciplinary membership base, and its ethos of open information sharing and candid discussion of controversial issues, Chinapol has gained a unique reputation for promoting intellectual synergy, cross-fertilization, and critical analysis. Scholars in their offices can instantly communicate with colleagues in the field; journalists can gather background material and conduct timely interviews on breaking stories; diplomats and policy-analysts can access expert opinion on issues affecting foreign policy decisions. Information about fast-breaking news stories — such as the March 2008 Tibetan unrest and subsequent Sichuan earthquake disaster — has often been made available first on Chinapol, forming the basis for timely reporting and analysis in the international media.

Chinapol has also, on occasion, contributed to the promotion of human rights in China. One such case involved a petition drive initiated by list members to protest the incarceration of a Chinese-American research scholar, Song Yongyi. Song had been arrested in China in January 2000 while collecting research materials on the Cultural Revolution. He was charged with violating PRC “state secrets” laws — a vaguely defined but potentially serious criminal offense. Partly as a result of the Chinapol petition campaign and the attendant media publicity generated by group members, Song Yongyi was freed from captivity. Shortly after his release, he addressed an open letter to Chinapol:

With tears in my eyes, I read the petition letter in support of me signed by you and 150 other distinguished senior scholars and colleagues. Some of them I know personally, others I don’t, but you all came to my aid in times of crisis. . . .

Without your petition letter, without the rescue efforts by . . . friends from all over the world, my academic career would have ended in a dark jail cell.

No words in any dictionary can adequately express my gratitude. I will therefore give you a simple yet most sincere “Thank you!” from the bottom of my heart.
Yongyi Song

On another occasion, in October 2006, Chinese border guards in Tibet shot and killed two young Tibetan civilians who were attempting, along with a dozen or so others, to leave China on foot across a snow-covered Himalayan mountain pass. The Chinese government initially claimed that the Tibetans had attacked the guards and that the latter had fired in self-defense. But videotape footage captured
by a member of a nearby Romanian mountain climbing expedition clearly showed that the two Tibetans were shot at a distance by military snipers as they peacefully trekked single-file through the snow. A Chinapol member posted the video to the group within 24 hours, thereby alerting more than 200 journalists to the story. The resulting storm of adverse international media publicity forced the Chinese government to retract its claim of self-defense.

Most recently, when several Chinese intellectuals circulated a “Charter 08” petition in December 2008, calling for far-reaching democratic reforms, political liberties and human rights in China, I openly endorsed their appeal and circulated their petition on Chinapol, resulting in a substantial amplification of the group’s message and a broadening of its burgeoning signatory base. Subsequently the New York Times affirmed the significance of Chinapol’s participation in this campaign.

While the vast majority of Chinapol discussions focus on issues of immediate political or diplomatic concern, every so often a conversation will jump the tracks and become, well, downright surreal. Not long ago, a disagreement arose among several group members on the question of exactly what had — and had not — been decided with respect to the legal status of Taiwan during WWII, at major allied conferences held in Cairo, Potsdam, and Yalta. The conversation began innocently enough, when one member asserted that Taiwan had been recognized as an “inalienable part of China” at the Yalta Conference of March 1945. Then the fun began. (Be advised: the people quoted below are eminent China specialists; names have been withheld to protect their reputations.)

Professor A: By international treaty, at Yalta in March ’45, Taiwan was recognized as an inalienable part of China. . . .

Professor B: Yalta did not discuss Taiwan. This was a three-way conference [Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin] at which Chiang Kai-shek was not present. The Potsdam Declaration (where Chiang was present) said nothing about Taiwan’s status. . . .

Journalist C: I am very sure Chiang Kai-shek was not in Potsdam, but he signed the Potsdam Declaration “by wire”. . . .

Professor D: It does not seem so strange that Taiwan was not taken up in the declarations at Yalta and Potsdam. That was because it had been conclusively settled at the Cairo Conference, with the participation of Chiang Kai-shek.

Professor E: The view that Chiang Kai-shek was not present at Potsdam [has been] raised recently in Taiwan. . . . But the majority are still convinced of his presence there because of the famous photo that included the three leaders — Chiang, Stalin, and Roosevelt. . . . Could that photo have been doctored with the technology of sixty years ago?

Journalist C: The famous picture that you refer to must be the one of the Cairo meeting in 1943 of Roosevelt, Churchill and Chiang, No Stalin! Chiang never met Stalin. . . . If there is a picture of Chiang and Stalin with Roosevelt in circulation . . . it must be a forgery. . . .

Professor F: And of course Roosevelt was dead by Potsdam.

Professor G: You are right that Chiang was not at Potsdam, and neither were Roosevelt (he was dead) nor Churchill (he lost the election). The meeting you are talking about was Cairo. Chiang was . . . at Cairo.

Professor H: Churchill WAS at Potsdam. The meeting at Potsdam . . . included Truman, Churchill, Stalin and others, but NOT Chiang. . . . [It] ended on 26 July with the Potsdam Declaration, to which Chiang assented by radio. Churchill resigned as British Prime Minister the same day. . . .

Professor I: Thank God none of our students can see how confused we are.

Thank God, indeed!
As Chinapol’s sole list owner and moderator, one of my principal responsibilities, aside from vetting new applicants, is to keep the tone of conversation civil, collegial, and on-point. With such a large subscriber base of articulate, well-informed people discussing issues that are often quite controversial, it is inevitable that disputes — and tempers — would flare from time to time; and over the years I have devised a system of "yellow cards" and "red cards" to deal with serious violations of the norms of professional courtesy, confidentiality and collegiality within the group.

While it is vital to allow room for different viewpoints and shades of opinion to be freely expressed on Chinapol, I strongly discourage partisan advocacy, polemical argumentation and *ad hominem* attacks. Consequently, from time to time I run afoul of members who hold strong views about a particular subject (or about another member). At one point in 2003 my efforts to maintain an atmosphere of self-restraint in the midst of an intense debate over the ethics of the Beijing government led a small group of vocal human rights critics of China to split off from Chinapol to form their own on-line discussion group, which they called "Pangolinpol." (For the uninitiated, a pangolin is a large, scaly South African anteater.) Today Pangolinpol is the largest open-membership alternative to Chinapol.

In monitoring the tone and quality of Chinapol traffic, I have at times acted too quickly to terminate a thread (or conversation) that seemed to be veering off course. This happened most memorably in the winter of 2003, when I prematurely closed off debate on the subject of the newly-emerging SARS epidemic in South China and Hong Kong. At the time, a number of unsubstantiated rumors were flying about in the media concerning the SARS mortality rate and a possible deliberate cover-up of the epidemic by the Chinese government. Hard facts, on the other hand, were extremely hard to come by. Under these circumstances, when the editor of a major East Asian newspaper (a Chinapol member) called for a total quarantine on China, I thought this was going too far, so I pulled the plug on the discussion, forcing it off-line. It was a questionable call on my part. The SARS epidemic turned out to be very serious, and the Chinese government was subsequently shown to have quite deliberately — and quite irresponsibly — suppressed timely disclosure of the rate and extent of infection.

As Chinapol membership increased, and the average daily flow of e-mail traffic swelled from three or four messages a day to more than twenty-five, displays of incivility and intolerance inevitably occurred, sometimes leading to the open exchange of epithets. At one point in 2005 a dispute flared among three or four members concerning allegations of paranoia on the part of certain U.S. China scholars. I tried to put an end to the name-calling quietly, through off-line persuasion. When repeated exhortations (and one yellow-card warning) failed to stanch the flow of insults, I posted a stern message to the group:

If you cannot stop yourselves from subjecting others to your personal peeves, polemics, and petty quarrels, I will do it for you. Chinapol is a serious forum for mature professionals, not a sandbox or a fraternity house. From now on I will shoot first and ask questions later.

That seemed to get people’s attention, and the bickering soon subsided. For me personally, however, the most distressing incidents have been the ones where I have had to red-card members who violated our rules of confidentiality and civility. Fortunately, this has only happened in a handful of cases. The most unpleasant of these involved a rather headstrong, Beijing-based American journalist, whose intense views on the subject of the U.S. invasion of Iraq led him to post on Chinapol a blistering critique of George W. Bush’s foreign policy. When I reminded him, off-line, that Chinapol was a forum for the discussion of China-related issues, he accused me of trying to suppress criticism of the Bush Administration. This led to my issuing him a cautionary yellow card which, unhappily, failed to deter him from continuing his tirade. Finally, after repeated warnings, I red-carded him and removed him from the list. But it didn’t end there. He logged on to a popular China-based blogsite — Danwei — where he went public with his complaints:

Chinapol is not just another chat group; it is a hidden locus of power, influencing what you read in the media, what books teachers chose to teach in the classroom and what actionable advice is being spoon-fed to Congress and various US agencies that in turn influences US foreign policy. . . .
As for moderator Rick Baum’s legendary “discipline,” he pokes fun at anyone he chooses, flaunting his status as moderator. . . . [He] apparently keeps his commentator base happy with a velvet glove approach to US government agencies and right-wing media. . . .

While I confess that I secretly find the idea of Chinapol as a “hidden locus of power” that influences US foreign policy to be rather appealing, alas, it is not so; for Chinapol is nothing more nor less than the sum of its members’ views, which range widely across the political and ideological spectrum.

A non-scientific survey conducted at the end of 2007 revealed that by roughly a 3-to-1 margin, Chinapol members tend to be relatively optimistic about the PRC’s role as an emerging global power. When members were asked to choose between two op-ed articles, one presenting a positive assessment of recent trends in Chinese diplomatic behavior and the other a more critical assessment emphasizing China’s use of its growing military might, 61 percent of the 352 respondents selected the positive article as most closely reflecting their own views, while 21 percent opted for the more pessimistic outlook. Among the 18 percent who abstained, the overwhelming majority volunteered that they could not choose between the two assessments, since each ostensibly reflected important — and more-or-less equally valid — aspects of China’s international behavior. For reasons not entirely clear to me, Chinapol’s journalists turned out to be somewhat more skeptical of China’s peaceful intentions than either its academic or diplomatic members.

Despite the occasional outburst of righteous indignation from an irate member, and despite periodic grumblings about the steadily rising volume of Chinapol traffic, the forum functions smoothly most of the time; and many members regard it as an indispensable asset in their professional lives. Perhaps not surprisingly, China’s increasingly active Internet police also seem to find it of some interest. I have been reliably informed that the Beijing authorities have been intercepting Chinapol messages flowing into and out of the e-mailboxes some of our China-based members, who currently number over 150. And every so often, perhaps as a reminder that Big Brother is (or could be) watching, Chinapol’s UCLA administrator and I also receive strangely worded messages from non-existent Chinapol members, hinting strongly at the presence of outside monitors. On one occasion, a Beijing-based Chinapol member told me that a Chinese acquaintance of his, a mid-level government official, had, in the course of a personal conversation, casually revealed the contents of a recent, confidential Chinapol message.

My sense of being under official scrutiny was reinforced in the fall of 2005 when an old friend and Chinapol colleague, John Thomson, and I decided to organize a no-host banquet for our Beijing-based list members. The event, held at the Louwailou Restaurant in Beijing’s Chaoyang district, was attended by 74 members and was, by all accounts, a rousing success. More disconcerting, though, were the comically inept bus-boy and his walkie talkie-toting colleague who hovered conspicuously around the edges of our soiree. Observing their anomalous behavior it occurred to me that they were almost certainly plainclothes security cops — flesh-and-blood cousins of “Jing Jing” and “Cha Cha,” the PRC’s anime-inspired cartoon Internet cops whose benign, iconic image appears as a pop-up warning to anyone logging onto certain Chinese Internet portals and websites. Evidently, the police had known in advance just when and where our banquet would be held. In my role as host for the evening, I invited our two surveilleurs to join the festivities, but they sheepishly demurred.

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