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Kate Merkel-Hess

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As China Beat Heads Into Its Third Year...

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By Kate Merkel-Hess

In January, we marked the end of our second year online. China Beat has changed a lot during that time, and will be changing more in the coming weeks and months as China Beat's new editor, Maura Cunningham, takes the helm. It's been my pleasure to have been founding editor of China Beat, and as I transition to a new role at the blog (I will now join the ranks of the blog’s consulting editors), I wanted to look back at how China Beat has developed since January 2008—for new readers and for readers who have been with us since the beginning.

How did China Beat get started?

China Beat grew out of conversations between Ken Pomeranz and Jeff Wasserstrom, both professors of Chinese history at the University of California, Irvine (UCI). In fall 2007, they began to talk about the likely focus on China during its Olympic year, and felt there was a need to bring more scholars of China into those media discussions. Inspired by other historian bloggers, for instance the big crew at History News Network and Juan Cole's Informed Comment, they thought that a blog might be one way to start getting those voices into the mix. At the time, I was a Ph.D. candidate at UCI, and when Jeff and Ken began to draw up a list of potential regular contributors to the blog (mostly academics in various disciplines, but also a couple of writers from outside of the academy) I was one of the people they approached. As the only local who had previously dabbled in blogging, I volunteered to get the venture up and running. At that point, we all envisioned that the blog would be self-perpetuating—that the "editor" would be doing little more than ensuring that the blog stayed online and that the group of 20 or so contributors would regularly generate and post their own content.

As it turned out, however, we quickly began soliciting new content from contributors outside that initial group to respond to current events or to address specific topics. Very quickly, we were operating much more like a standard magazine than a group blog—soliciting pieces, editing submissions, and heavily moderating the content that appeared online. Jeff and Ken, as the blog’s founders and "Consulting Editors,” have not only contributed posts but also play an important role in recruiting contributors and brainstorming with me (and more recently Maura, too) about new directions the blog could or should move. I kept the blog running day-to-day; I also wrote or pulled together the many byline-less posts from the author “China Beat” (those posts have, in recent weeks, largely shifted to Maura’s responsibility).

What was China Beat’s primary goal and how has it changed over time?

China Beat’s primary goal was to counter the steady refrain of reports on air pollution, Chinese nationalism, and other Western media tropes that were the stock in trade for many daily journalists and even more so newscasters leading up to the Olympics. That isn’t to say that those weren’t important stories—just that we felt that there were more complicated, interesting ways to tell those stories (as well as the many other stories that were overlooked). And we knew that we could draw on a network of scholars of China who were rarely, if ever, tapped by journalists and Western media as “China experts,” despite the fact that these people had valuable, critical knowledge to contribute to the discussion. We also thought we would find willing collaborators among some non-academics (such as China-based freelance writers and journalists) with an interest in offering beyond the headlines views of the PRC.

In addition, we worried that the media was relying too heavily on a small group of “China experts” (some of whom were wonderfully perceptive but others of whom had rather limited knowledge of China), and these voices were dominating the discussion, sometimes to the detriment of Western understandings of China. We wanted to feature opinions and perspectives on contemporary China that were grounded in cutting edge scholarship, that were historically contextualized, and that were informed by what was actually happening on the ground in China. Most importantly, we hoped to convey the diversity and heterogeneity of China (intellectually, socially, culturally, demographically,
What is special about specialists and writers who seek to reach a wider audience. In its early days, we now see ourselves as reflecting a broader conversation among China and framing of analysis to institutions. As the blog has grown over the past two years, we have incorporated contributors from many other institutional structures. Some of our early contributors even had a foot in both academia and journalism. But there is still a lot of work to do to shift how China is framed in popular discussions in the US and elsewhere, and it will take more than just the work of China Beat to accomplish it.

That’s one important reason we think of ourselves as part of a broader network of China-interested writers, and why we celebrate when one of China Beat’s contributors has work appear elsewhere. That is really our second mission—to draw attention to quality writing on China. That is a pretty standard goal for a blog, and one that we share with our colleagues at China Digital Times, Danwei, and others. To that end, we are always looking to bring new voices into the discussion. Our special approach is that we focus on voices that are coming from the academy, but we’ve always had contributors who are outside it as well, from Leslie T. Chang (part of the original group Ken and Jeff lined up for the blog) to Xuxun Eberlein (a more recent addition), whose works are, like those of our academic contributors, grounded in research and careful analysis. Some of our early contributors even had a foot in both academia and journalism—like Susan Jakes, a former reporter for Time and current graduate student of Chinese history at Yale, and Howard French, the former Shanghai bureau chief for The New York Times and current professor at Columbia School of Journalism.

What is the institutional structure for China Beat and how does that shape its content?

China Beat was initially built around a group of contributors at the University of California, Irvine (not only Jeff, Ken, and me, but also Yong Chen, Guo Qitao, Nicole Barnes, Pierre Fuller, Jennifer Liu, Shi Xia, Miri Kim, Chris Heselton, and others), but quickly grew beyond that. Even so, the blog’s focus on thinking of China in the world reflects some of the particularities of how China is studied at UCI—which has a vibrant and friendly cross-disciplinary community of China scholars (like Dorie Solinger in Political Science, Wang Feng and Su Yang in Sociology, Hu Ying and Bert Scruggs in East Asian Languages and Literatures, and many others across campus) as well as being the center of an innovative approach to the study and teaching of world history that was pioneered by two China scholars—Ken Pomeranz and R. Bin Wong (now at UCLA). In addition, UCI hosts a lively community of writers centered around the UCI MFA in Writing program and the International Center for Writing and Translation (an organization that funded a memorable weeklong visit to campus by novelist and essayist Pankaj Mishra, a longtime friend of the blog).

Despite the strong influences of UCI on China Beat, the blog does not share an official affiliation with the university—we do not receive regular financial support from the university (though some campus entities have helped us to put on local events, like the recent campus reading by Peter Hessler, an original member of the blogging team) and none of us are paid for our work at China Beat. This limited support means that, over time, we have scaled back the interactive features of the blog, such as the decision last year to eliminate reader comments. We do invite readers to submit more traditional “letters to the editor” (they can be sent to our email address, thechinabeat@gmail.com) and we have run several of these submissions as stand-alone commentaries at the blog in recent months.

As the blog has grown over the past two years, we have incorporated contributors from many other institutions—not just in the United States but around the world—and each brings a unique perspective and frame of analysis to China Beat. As a result, though our UCI roots were important in shaping the blog in its early days, we now see ourselves as reflecting a broader conversation among China specialists and writers who seek to reach a wider audience.

What is China Beat’s future?
As I mentioned above, we are going through some personnel changes. I have recently accepted a position in History and Asian Studies at Penn State, and will begin my position there in fall 2010. In anticipation of my changing status, we brought Maura Cunningham on as associate editor in fall 2009; she will now transition into the post of editor of the blog and I will move into the role of consulting editor, continuing to contribute posts and be involved, as Ken and Jeff have been, in coordinating and recruiting content.

At a less functional level, China Beat’s future is hard to predict. Practically, we intend to keep on as we have—featuring quality writing about China and drawing attention to good stuff that appears elsewhere—but we also recognize that the blog is a platform that continues to evolve. Blogs are now recognized as an important component of the media landscape (and now look more like magazines than the navel-gazing personal sites that were the granddaddies of the form), but the technology is not standing still. We want to continue to reach new audiences where and how they read. To do that, and yet retain the deep and critical analysis we think is a vital part of the intellectual project, is an exciting challenge. We love our print books enormously (we are historians, after all, and we were delighted to see a print book, China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance, bring the sensibility of and some material from China Beat into bookstores and Amazon.com), but we aren’t afraid of the changes that are inevitably coming to how we teach, learn, discuss, and, ultimately, think. China Beat is just one way that many of us are experimenting with how to reshape (or perhaps revitalize) the role of the academic as public intellectual.