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Notes on a Conversation: Ian Johnson and Angilee Shah

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Earlier this week, we held the final event of this year's “China Lecture Series” at UC Irvine, featuring a dialogue between Ian Johnson and Angilee Shah. Johnson, formerly of the Wall Street Journal, is author of *Wild Grass: Three Stories of Change in Modern China* and *A Mosque in Munich: Nazis, the CIA, and the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West*. Shah is a freelance writer and blogger; her work has appeared at the Far Eastern Economic Review, Global Voices Online, Zócalo Public Square, and The China Beat. Below, a summary of the conversation between Johnson and Shah.

By Miri Kim

Angilee Shah’s first set of questions touched upon civil society in China and its relationship to the Chinese government. When asked if the government has made any progress in winning over the faith of the people since *Wild Grass* was published (2004), Johnson noted that at the larger level, there has been no real change in the degree of official control on what can be discussed; however, in areas such as religion, the government has allowed more leeway in what can be practiced and expressed, perhaps learning from the lesson provided by the now-banned Falun Gong, which flourished where officially sanctioned religions could not go at the time. And while the creation of grassroots networks on the national level has been discouraged, examples like the earthquake relief efforts for Sichuan show that there are instances when large sectors of Chinese society can mobilize for a common good. Organizing is definitely a frustrating process for many Chinese, but, Johnson emphasized, their efforts are often not overtly dramatic or political. Even so, he suggested, such low-key political activity is a double-edged phenomenon; on the one hand, it can channel goods and services where they are needed without being threatening; on the other, it brings in an “embarrassment factor,” showing exactly where and how the government is unable to do certain things.

Shah then asked a few questions about how the role of the journalist can shape the narrative and asked Johnson to comment on balancing the good news with the bad, as well as dealing with the gravity exerted by US foreign policy concerns, the news cycle (the danger of becoming irrelevant if you stick too close to something that is “hot”), and the tendency of stories about China to be sorted
Johnson talked about the hurdle of dealing with the gap between the China in people’s imaginations, which might be shaped by older stories and images, and the current reality. He pointed to Leslie T. Chang’s *Factory Girls* as one recent work that uses individualized stories to make workers into agents, not victims, of China’s rapid economic growth, in contrast to, for example, the largely negative recent coverage of the the Foxconn suicides. Even though his new book, *A Mosque in Munich*, is not about China, Johnson commented that in it, he is still interested in the ways civil society gets instrumentalized by the government. He also emphasized the importance of keeping one’s eyes open when tackling sensitive topics.

The issue of writing and craft then came up around *A Mosque in Munich*, which tells the story of how radical Islam was exported to the West by the CIA the 1950s and ‘60s, through a particular mosque and the Muslim Brotherhood. The book, Shah mentioned, is more about the US than about Islam, discussing the effects of American efforts to harness religion for foreign policy objectives.

Asked about parallels between US-China relations today and the US during the Cold War, Johnson replied that present-day American propagandizing in the case of China is much more explicit than for it was for the Soviet Union, and that it is likely to be unsuccessful at creating a lot of influence.

Shah then noted how *A Mosque in Munich* reads like a mystery, as well as being an analysis of big geopolitical issues largely based on archival research, and asked how Johnson went about “translating” dry documents into “real life” in the book. A very insightful behind-the-scenes look at the researching/writing of the book followed, introducing the audience to figures such as Bob Dreher, who had rather interesting hobbies to go along with his interesting job with the CIA. (To my chagrin, I’m afraid that I’m not able to reproduce for you here how wonderfully Johnson brought this character to life during the talk.) A part of research is luck, Johnson admitted, and is dependent on the willingness of relatives and acquaintances to share information about a subject, but it seemed clear from the discussion that the intense investigative footwork underpinning this book is a major factor upping the chance of encountering this kind luck. The other side of that, however, is the sheer amount of time and sustained effort involved in gathering information and bringing it together in writing a book like *Wild Grass* or *A Mosque in Munich*, in a publishing environment/market where readers have to deal with limited time and favor quick takes.

We had many great questions from the audience, of which I’ll highlight just a couple. One concerned journalists’ responsibility to their subjects. Johnson panned cavalier attitudes about sources in foreign countries where the worst things that might befall a journalist is deportation, versus imprisonment or worse for informants. He also disagreed with the stereotype of Chinese people as being reticent and not willing to talk, commenting that in his experience, he has had to tread carefully concerning the frank outspokenness of his sources — for example, when the discussion is about politically sensitive topics.

Johnson had a very interesting and nuanced response to a question about whether or not better reportage on China comes from those with language and area expertise, characterizing language as just one of the many tools a journalist needs to have — perfect Chinese would not be that useful to a journalist if not accompanied by analytic skills or the writerly know-how to turn pieces of information into a coherent piece. As an example, a journalist with a deep knowledge of an industry, just from being familiar with things like mechanical specs and factory conditions, would be able to parse out much more intimate information than someone with only spoken/written language or general area expertise. Johnson suggested that what we conventionally think of as “language” is just one (albeit important) component in the the foreign correspondent’s toolkit.

Other questions dealt with the impact of the Internet on the news and newspapers. Johnson suggested that it has hastened the demise of strong regional newspapers while concentrating readership at national newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, which have ramped up their foreign coverage, but in a way that encourages short pieces rather than long-form investigative pieces.
Angilee Shah’s questions, connecting *A Mosque in Munich* with Ian Johnson’s previous work, and drawing from her own experiences covering Indonesia and Sri Lanka, made for an engaging but also really fun talk. The question-and-answer at the end provided an excellent opportunity to pick the brain of a writer thinking deeply about some important issues — and the messy history behind them — shaping our world today. A great way to wrap up *China Beat* talks for this academic year!

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Tags: Angilee Shah, Ian Johnson