


2-13-2008

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February 13, 2008 in [China Annals](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

This week, The China Beat interviews Catherine Sampson, former [BBC](#) journalist and *The Times* correspondent, as well as the author of four mystery novels (see below). You can learn a lot more about her on her [website](#), which also includes an exciting blog.

NB: What was the most intriguing, amusing, inspiring, or eye-opening story that you covered in China?

CS: I worked as a journalist in Beijing for *The Times* of London between 1988 and 1993. Both the most inspiring and then the most awful was 1989. The student demonstrations went on for 6 weeks and drew in all sorts of other people. It was an exhilarating time, a gutsy, good-natured, hopeful, time. It all came to a horrible end on June 4th, and the next few years in China were bleak ones. I haven't worked as a journalist here since 1994, and it's June 4th that stays with me, the political intrigue that surrounded it, and the myriad stories of bravery and tragedy. I think we're wrong if we believe people have forgotten about 1989 in the excitement of economic activity that has swept the country.

NB: How has your "previous" life as a journalist impacted your work as a novelist?

CS: My 'previous life' as a journalist reminded me to keep my sentences short, my storyline clear, and to deliver on deadline. I think it also made me a good editor of my own writing. But starting to write as a novelist I also had to learn how to leave journalism behind, and to shift stylistic gear entirely. My 'previous life' as a journalist in China also taught me a lot about the country, so that when I started writing about it in fiction, it felt like a natural step.

NB: Tell me about your books and their settings—Beijing and London.

CS: I started writing my first novel, *Falling Off Air*, set in London, when I was living in London from 1998 to 2001. We moved back to Beijing in 2001 because my husband, James Miles, was taking up a job as Beijing correspondent for *The Economist*. At that point I had a draft novel but no contract. In 2004, *Falling Off Air* was published in the UK and the US (Mysterious Press), and my next book, *Out of Mind* had to be set in London also because I was contracted to write a series. I found it hard to live in Beijing and write about London. So, when it came to my third book, I was determined that I should write a mystery set in Beijing, and that's how *The Pool of Unease* was written. It is set in Beijing, in Anjialou, a neighbourhood just down the road from where I live, and has a Chinese protagonist, private detective Song Ren. (It has no US publisher as yet. [But the Macmillan edition can be bought on UK Amazon](#)). My next book, *The Slaughter Pavilion*, is also set in Beijing, and Song Ren is once again my hero.

NB: What was the most difficult thing about being a foreign correspondent, or a foreign author in Beijing? What has been the most exciting or rewarding aspect of your work?

CS: Way back in 1988 to 1994, when I was working as a foreign journalist, the most difficult thing was the harassment of Chinese friends and contacts by the police and by the state security apparatus. We were followed, our phones were bugged, and friends knew that they were running a risk by seeing us. On a less important level, believe it or not, at that point in history, even after June 4th, it was still difficult (in the UK anyway) to interest editors in China stories. I think that has probably changed... The most rewarding part of my work, whether as a journalist or an author, has always been the opportunity to travel and to meet people in all walks of life. The best part about being a journalist is being able to ask questions.

NB: What first drew you to China, and how have your interactions with Chinese people and culture changed your life in ways that you never imagined?

CS: I can't pinpoint what it was that first drew me to China – whatever it was, it's lost in the mists of time... I think my parents' interest must have played a part. Anyway, I was interested in languages

and interested in politics, and that inclined me to study either Chinese or Russian. I was part of a group of Leeds University students who came to Fudan University [in Shanghai] way back in 1981-2 at the age of 19, and a lot of us have kept coming back to China time and again. I have spent a total of 15 years in China, and a further 2 in Hong Kong. I count myself immensely privileged to have witnessed history unfold here, and immensely privileged to have met brave and gracious people who have lived fascinating lives often in the most difficult of circumstances. Looking out my window at the New Year fireworks, I'd say this is also a very optimistic culture, and that is good for all of us.