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(A posting by guest contributor Catherine Sampson.)

For the past week, all over China, writers have been bumping into each other at hotel check-ins, or at breakfast, in taxi queues. They have waved/hugged/air kissed, and asked: “Are you doing Beijing? Shanghai? Suzhou? Chengdu? Hong Kong….?” (In terms of one-upmanship a simple ‘yes’ to each can’t be beaten.)

Who’d have thought it? Book festivals – originally the cultural preserve of western cities – are popping up in several of China’s big urban centers. With one major difference, of course – they are run and largely attended by a rapidly growing population of expatriates. Much of the content is China-related – even those of us who have China in front of our eyes are always eager for more information, and different ways of interpreting what we see.

I started at the Bookworm in Beijing, where I live, then flew down to Hong Kong, and now, if it’s Thursday, I must be in Shanghai. (No Suzhou or Chengdu for me, I hang my head in shame.)

In Beijing, I was delighted to take part in an event with Qiu Xiaolong, now based in the US, whose atmospheric crime books are set in Shanghai, where he was born. He uses crime fiction to write about Chinese society, and his Inspector Chen is a gentle and poetic man who struggles to do the right thing in a politically complex world. Qiu described with great good humor how, when translated into Chinese, his mainland publisher finds it necessary to excise all mention of Shanghai, and instead to set the stories in a fictional city despite the fact that the descriptions in the book could be of nowhere else.
In Hong Kong, I met another of my literary heroes, US-based Yan Geling, whose book \textit{The Uninvited} (\textit{The Banquet Bug} in the US) is a wonderfully funny satire. It tells the story of an unemployed man who discovers that if he poses as a journalist he can not only gorge himself at fabulous banquets, he can also support himself with the cash he is given in the red packets he takes away from press conferences. The trouble begins when people who believe he is a real journalist approach him to ask him to write about their very real grievances. Yan Geling has the same dry sense of humor in person that she has on the page, and spends much of her time in Beijing researching her stories.

I particularly enjoyed arriving in Hong Kong and plugging in my high-speed internet access line. The first thing I did was to visit the \textit{China Beat} site for the first time. For the first time because… now, this is where I have a problem… according to a recent blog I read on \textit{China Beat}, I should not be defining China by the use of negatives. Indeed it shows my arrogance to do so. Oh dear! My problem is that I simply cannot access \textit{China Beat} in Beijing. I’m not meaning to look at this in a negative way, but every time I try to access \textit{China Beat} my screen goes blank.

I couldn’t help thinking, this week, that I know lots of Chinese people who would welcome the chance to gather (without fear) and listen to Chinese writers speak in Chinese, about the books they had written (also without fear) in Chinese on all sorts of topics, including Chinese politics and recent history.

This week, at China’s various book festivals, there will be launches for the English-language editions of Jiang Rong’s \textit{Wolf Totem}. Winner of the Asian Man Booker prize, a huge bestseller in China itself, \textit{Wolf Totem} and its author walk a political tightrope. Because of his political background, Jiang Rong uses a false name. It doesn’t fool the authorities, of course (indeed, he’s allowed himself to be photographed) but the pen name allows them to look the other way. It is, after all, a story about wolves. It may have a political message, but it is not an overt polemic, it doesn’t name names or cite numbers. Still, so far Jiang Rong hasn’t dared to accept his many invitations to speak about his book abroad because he is afraid he may not be allowed to come back.