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China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance

October 18, 2008 in [Self-Promotion](#) [Saturday](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

Last month, we announced our forthcoming book, *China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance*, to be published by Rowman & Littlefield in early 2009. With the manuscript beginning to take its final shape (and 2008 far enough advanced that we felt somewhat—but only *somewhat*, given what a crazy year it's been so far—safe beginning to reflect on it), we thought we would share a little bit from the book with you. In the coming weeks, we hope to share with you a preview of the table of contents as well as perhaps snippets of other new pieces from the book.

For today, here is a short selection from the introduction to the book, "China in 2008: A Reflection on a Year of Great Significance," by Kate Merkel-Hess:

The subtitle of this volume is a play on Ray Huang's groundbreaking Ming history, *1587: A Year of No Significance*. In that book, Huang examined a year of no particular importance when the Emperor Wanli was in power. The irony of Huang's title is that Wanli's disastrous reign was the beginning of the end for the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), which fell to internal rebellions and then the Manchu invasions that led to the establishment of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), China's last. Fifteen eighty-seven matters a great deal because, while it was not a year of important events, it was apparent in its day-to-day affairs that the Ming was headed toward ruin.

This year, in contrast, was a year of important event after important event for China. In fact, the year was an enormously important year globally, both for stories that pointed the way toward a new world order (geopolitically and financially) and stories that seemed resurrected from news cycles past. In the early panicked days of the fall's economic woes, coming amidst the U.S. presidential campaign as well as several other big domestic and international stories, David Folkenflik commented on National Public Radio (NPR) that "the breakneck pace of developments means a lot of news worth knowing receives the briefest burst of attention before being dropped for something hotter." China's tainted milk story was overshadowed by the U.S. presidential election and the escalating credit crisis. Russia's invasion of Georgia coincided with the highly-anticipated Olympic Opening Ceremony. The riots in Tibet and the contentious U.S. Democratic primaries pushed rising international food prices off the front pages.

China's presence in many international stories, from the banking crisis to the genocide in Darfur, was further evidence of its role as an emerging superpower. Just as Russia did for previous generations, China raises the specter for Americans of a functioning superpower with a markedly different economic system as well as a divergent set of political assumptions (several contributors explore the results of these fears in Chapter 15). In July, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman wrote about the Chinese (and Russian) vetoes of U.N. attempts to impose sanctions on Robert Mugabe, President of Zimbabwe. The votes, Friedman asserted, show us where the world is headed: "a world of too much Russian and Chinese power." Some China fear-mongers went further than the moderate Friedman, talking about "the coming China wars." But the fact was, the China stories of 2008, taken together, sketch a picture of a China not on the verge of destruction, as in 1587, or a nation spoiling for a fight with the international community, but instead a relatively stable country, focused above all else on trying to maintain its phenomenal 10 percent economic growth rate.

This may seem an incongruous assertion, as other than the relatively smooth two weeks of China's triumphant Beijing Olympics, when China was in the international news in 2008 it was at moments of crisis: crippling winter storms hit the country in late January, riots occurred throughout Tibet and other parts of southwest China in March, international protests accompanied the spring's Olympic torch relay, a devastating earthquake rocked Sichuan in May, a massive food safety scandal broke in September, and in October a plummeting stock market hit the Shanghai and Hong Kong as well as New York, London and Tokyo exchanges. Instead of a year of Olympic celebration, for the Chinese people 2008 was the most tumultuous and traumatic year of the post-1978 economic reform era. Unlike 1587, however, we cannot discern in China's day-to-day life signs of impending doom. Business as usual looks pretty good: the economy continues to grow and consumers continue to spend, China

continues to increase international engagements, and all signs point to continued (if incremental) increases in citizen participation in government affairs...