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1948 & 2008: The George E. Morrison Lectures and Beijing’s Years of Great Significance

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The 69th Morrison Lecture, “Reporting the Olympic Year,” was presented by Jane Macartney, The Times’ correspondent in Beijing, on October 22, 2008. The Morrison Lecture is an annual event in the academic calendar and public program of The Australian National University in Canberra. As 2008 was a major year for China, and Beijing in particular (something that will be marked by an upcoming publication by the editors of China Beat, China 2008: A Year of Great Significance), the Morrison Lecture Committee invited Jane to make this year’s presentation. As Jane noted in her précis of the Lecture, “The Olympics were always going to be a pivotal moment for China’s leaders: a moment in the international spotlight for sporting might and communist efficiency. But an almost trivial incident revealed another scenario. With just a year to go, police detained foreign reporters at a news conference by Reporters Without Borders. The response was revelatory. The Olympics would see no such nonsense. Behind the spectacle, China would revive the 1980s when lemons were unobtainable and State Security stealthily photographed affairs between Chinese and foreigners. While Beijing raced to complete its spectacular stadiums, more intangible aspects of life were retreating to a more authoritarian age.”

Jane presented a richly illustrated and fascinating on-the-ground view of reporting the Olympic Year from Beijing (the text of her Lecture will be posted shortly online). As the Beijing reporter for The Times she has a direct link to the journalistic career of George E. Morrison (1862-1920), after whom the lecture series is named. Morrison's accounts of the Beijing Siege during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 made him famous (and controversial). Jane herself has her own history with China, one that reaches back to the advent of her ancestor Lord Macartney at the court of the Qianlong Emperor as the representative of His Brittanic Majesty George III in 1793. Jane now lives not far from Wangfu Jing in Central Beijing, a street known throughout much of the Republican era by its English name, Morrison Street (Molixun Jie). It was named after the famous Anglo-Australian writer and journalist who lived on it (for an account of the demolition of the remnants of Morrison’s house, and the site of his famous library, see Claire Roberts, "George E. Morrison’s Studio and Library").

Another Times correspondent, Thomas Bowlby, was also intimately involved with Beijing. He was the first writer for that paper who went to the capital of imperial China in 1860 with a delegation negotiating the final treaty concluded at the end of what is known as the Second Opium War. Bowlby was among a group detained at Tongzhou, just east of Beijing, as they were traveling to the city to arrange the preliminaries of peace. The delegation was imprisoned and Bowlby died from the torture he was subjected to during his incarceration. The cruel deaths of this group were a contributing factor to the decision by Lord Elgin and Baron Gros, the leaders of an Anglo-French Expeditionary Force, to destroy the imperial garden palaces to the northwest of Beijing, the most famous of which was the Garden of Perfect Brightness (Yuanming Yuan). (For more on this, see my "The Garden of Perfect Brightness, a Life in Ruins," the 56th Morrison Lecture presented in 1996. A pdf version of that speech is available online).

In a somewhat circuitous fashion, the sacking and destruction of the Garden of Perfect Brightness in 1860 links the three Olympic cities of Athens (2004), Beijing (2008) and London (2012). The author of the devastation of the Manchu gardens, Lord Elgin, was the son of Thomas Bruce, the Seventh Lord of Elgin, a man infamous for his stripping of the "Elgin Marbles" from the Parthenon from 1801 to 1812. These sculptures are now housed in the British Museum in London.

Another turning point in the history of Beijing featured in the 68th Morrison Lecture, presented in September 2007. The Morrison Lecture Committee, of which I am a member, invited Dai Qing (the noted journalist, investigative historian and environmental activist), who was working on a research project at The ANU as a visiting fellow, to give that Lecture. She chose as her topic, "1948: How Peaceful Was the Liberation of Beiping?", a subject in line with her current research on the fate of the
philosopher, writer and political activist Zhang Dongsun (the lecture is available in Chinese and English).

According to sources at The ANU, when the Chinese Embassy in Canberra got wind of this they instructed Chinese nationals, as well as patriots (including university teachers) to stay away from what appeared to be a subversive speech. They were under the impression that Dai Qing was a questionable US-based Chinese dissident, as opposed to being a Beijing-based critic of mainland absurdities and iniquities, and that academics at The ANU had purposely chosen that date for the Lecture to divert attention from, and attendance at, the arrival of President Hu Jintao in Canberra that week. In the event, the Embassy had the date wrong and Hu did not arrive on the night of Dai Qing’s speech. However, few Chinese colleagues or students attended the Lecture (we nonetheless did have an audience of over 80 people).

The George Ernest Morrison Lecture series was founded in 1932 by Chinese residents in Australia. It was, in their words, “to honour for all time the great Australian who rendered valuable service to China.” It is easy to forget now that the lecture series not only commemorated Morrison—well known for his work on China and, among other things, for his acute observations on Japan’s imperial ambitions in that country—but also that they were related to Chinese-Australian resistance to White Australia, reflecting also the alarm and outrage resulting from Japanese attacks on China in 1931. It was also hoped that the lectures would contribute to the cultural relations and understanding between the two countries at a time of heightened international tension and suspicion.

From its inception, the Lecture Series was associated with the Institute of Anatomy in Canberra where, of the first ten lectures, all but one were delivered in May each year. This annual event was interrupted by the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1942, and the Morrison Lecture Series might never have been heard of again but for two fortuitous happenings: the founding of the Institute of Advanced Studies, the newly conceived academic institution that provided substance to the new Australian National University, and the advent of Sir Douglas Berry Copland. This New Zealand-born economist-guru, academic and civil servant, upon completing his assignment as Australia’s first post-War Ambassador to China, was called upon to assume the foundation Vice-Chancellorship of the new institution. Whether he had anything to do with the currency of a jocular description of the new institution as the “Australian Institute of Advanced Studies of New Zealand”, he was certainly responsible for reviving the Morrison Lecture. The first address he gave, in 1948, marked the re-foundation of this series of lectures, sponsored henceforth by the ANU. The annual Morrison Lecture is organised by a committee of ANU colleagues in the College of Asia & the Pacific. This committee includes academics from the China and Korea Centre (Faculty of Asian Studies), the Contemporary China Centre and the Division of Pacific and Asian History, both in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. For more on the Morrison Lectures, a list of lecture titles, including downloadable pdf versions of recent lectures and an appreciation of George E. Morrison by C.P. Fitzgerald, see here.