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Self-Promotion Saturday: China’s Brave New World

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My latest book—and my first that is virtually free of footnotes, includes lots of first-person anecdotes, and has some chapters that combine equal parts historically informed analysis and playful musings—went into production a year ago. At the time, I didn’t realize quite how much of a “best of times, worst of times” year 2007 would turn out to be for the appearance of a work like *China’s Brave New World—And Other Tales for Global Times*, which strives to offer an alternately serious and whimsical look at ways the PRC and the world at large have been changing.

On the plus side, general interest in China, already on the rise, grew even greater over the course of 2007. On the negative side, this interest sometimes took forms (including dreams of striking it rich by investing in a new market and fears of a menacing rising power) that led people to seek in books simple answers to complex China questions, and mine refuses to offer a simple thumbs up or thumbs down assessment.

On the plus side, the newsworthiness of China made it more likely than it might have been in another year that radio show hosts would interview me about the book. On the negative side, due to budget cut-backs, 2007 saw many American newspapers dramatically reduce the number of reviews of books of any kind they ran.

On the plus side, more and more foreigners took or began planning trips to the PRC, which was good for a book, like mine, that might be considered agreeable airplane reading (and that even got a plug from an in-flight magazine). On the negative side, it wasn’t as though PRC-bound travelers were limited in their options, as 2007 saw a lot of interesting books appear and saw at least two very notable ones—Peter Hessler’s *Oracle Bones* and John Pomfret’s *Chinese Lessons*—make it into paperback. (And to compound this problem, I published a couple of pieces—one at *Outlook India*, reprinted here by History News Network, and another for *Campaign for the American Reader*—that drew attention to the quality of works that could be thought of as “the competition,” though in a way that admittedly encouraged readers to also keep my own work in mind.)
What kind of year will 2008 be for *China’s Brave New World*, in terms of its ability to find a comfortable niche in the curious and often hard to understand (particularly perhaps for an academic) world of trade publishing? Frankly, I have no idea.

I do enter the new year, though, with some ideas about things I will do differently the next time around. I have thoughts, that is, about strategies to try to make sure that my next book, *Global Shanghai, 1850-2010* (a work that is eagerly awaited—at least by me and my wonderful and patient series editor, Mark Selden, and publisher, Routledge—and finally near completion), comes to the attention of lots of those “elusive general educated readers” for which it too will be intended. (Though as I think is indicated by my recent short publications on Shanghai’s past and present that try out ideas to be showcased in that book—such as one in *The Nation* and another in *The Globalist*—that work also will not offer simple answers to complex China questions.)

And, where *China’s Brave New World* is concerned, I’m upbeat about one aspect of the way 2008 is starting, namely with the appearance of two urls that allow curious readers to listen to me read aloud from two of my favorite chapters, “Mr. Mao Ringtone” and “All the Coffee in China,” and then decide whether they want to buy the book (published from the start in paperback, incidentally), check it out from the library, or, if they teach courses on globalization or modern Chinese history and are looking for a “dessert course” reading to wrap up a class, even assign it to their students.