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By Angilee Shah
In the land of news-meets-the-Internet, China has been fertile soil for very interesting blogs by journalists. There’s Evan Osnos’ Letters from China at the New Yorker, the China Journal at the Wall Street Journal, Pomfret’s China (John Pomfret, that is) from the Washington Post, James Fallows’ often-China blog on The Atlantic, Peter Foster and Richard Spencer at the Telegraph, The New York Times reporter Howard French’s non-New York Times’ blog, and last but not least, Tim Johnson’s long-standing China Rises for McClatchy Newspapers. Though this list is long, it is not exhaustive.

Perhaps what is most interesting about these blogs is the opportunity to get a greater picture of reporters’ perspectives as foreigners living in a new country. But if the recession — and the seating arrangements at a G-20 summit dinner — tells us anything, it is that the West’s perception of the East is not all that counts. How emerging powerhouse economies see each other is of great importance, and lucky for us is incredibly interesting. An excellent entrée into Asian takes on Asia is a Hindustan Times blog, Middle Order, written by the newspaper’s first China correspondent, Reshma Patil.

Just a few months and 13 posts old, Middle Order brings to the table a fresh take on the "foreigner in China" story. The introduction to Patil’s musings is tempting: “Find out why this vegetarian is still staying on, a few floors above a restaurant that serves bullfrog, and in an apartment where the DVD remote control to the fax machine has Chinese instructions that she cannot read.” Patil’s posts about her life in China are engaging and interesting, as varied as her ten-year career. She was a special correspondent for the Indian Express until 2006, when she joined the Hindustan Times as an Assistant Editor. As she explains it, she was working on stories that “could be anything from politics to floods in Gujarat to spending a night at a morgue after terror attacks in Mumbai.” It was that hectic variety, she explains, that prepared her the most for becoming a one-woman show in Beijing. It also helped that she had been studying Mandarin in weekend classes for six months when the Hindustan Times approached her about a job in China. “But I had never planned to relocate to China. It just happened,” she writes in email. “I was told I had the job one hour after the interview in Delhi, and I said yes immediately. If I hadn’t come to China, I would probably be covering the Indian elections right now.”

Instead, she is filing news reports, writing a Friday column called “Inside the Dragon,” and posting one blog entry every Sunday night from her Beijing apartment. And spending a bit of time typing out answers to questions from a curious China Beatnik.

Angilee Shah: How did you prepare for working in China?

Reshma Patil: My preparation was more about mentally strategising how I would cover China to make it fresh and relevant to Indian audiences. I don’t push in India comparisons in every China story. But here’s an example: In a latest page one interview with Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba, we focus extensively on his India expansion plans that got only a mention in his interviews with the other international media organizations. The western media calls him China’s Bill Gates. I called him China’s Narayana Murthy (both started their companies out of their apartments) so Indian audiences instantly make a connection. [N. R. Narayana Murthy was one of the founders of Infosys Technologies.]

I did read some books, especially to brush up on the India-China border dispute. I also read or sifted through a literal carload of China stories in international news magazines to hone in on the stories that
were already reported and stories I needed to keep an eye on as they unfolded. (The carload of magazines were brought in by my editor one day from the office library). I made a recce trip for a week last March, and found my apartment that houses the Beijing bureau on my second morning in Beijing.

**AS**: Do you think the paper has taken a greater interest in China news than before?

**RP**: Yes, the greater interest is reflected in the fact that I am the paper’s first China correspondent. The newsroom in Delhi and Mumbai is very interested in the stories and they are given high visibility. Some stories have made it as the front page leads. Since China’s urban planning is of interest in India, sometimes the newsroom asks for a comparative China story. An example: The paper carried a series last year on Gurgaon’s urban planning and infrastructure problems and one package included a short piece on how China got Pudong’s infrastructure right, since both places began developing in the nineties.

**AS**: How did the blog start? Was it something you wanted to do from the beginning?

**RP**: The blog was launched on Jan. 26 with a set of new blogs from *HT* writers. The editor of our website in Delhi asked me to write a China blog, and the only request was for lighter material than what goes in the paper. I was keen to write a blog as well. I think the paper’s interest in launching a China blog also kicked off after I filed a daily China column during the Olympics in August, in addition to Olympics news stories. The Olympics marked the beginning of our extensive China coverage in the paper and we received enthusiastic feedback from readers. Readers have also pointed out that they are interested in our reports because they are looking for news about China that is not just academic political and trade analysis.

**AS**: It seems like the blog focuses on showing how India is portrayed and seen in China, whereas your goal in news is to show China’s relevance to people in India. What role do you see *Middle Order* playing in your work as a reporter?

**RP**: *Middle Order* was not planned as an ‘India-China’ blog and I wouldn’t categorise it that way. It has evolved into a mix of posts about my life as an Indian expat and reporter in China and stand-alone China posts as well. It is barely a dozen posts old and still evolving. It is a space to engage readers’ interest in China with the voices and flavour from the ground that can go unreported in the paper’s news reports due to limited word space. It is also a space for readers to make a personal connection with the reporter and give feedback. As a reporter, I enjoy using the blog as an open space to experiment with new and fun ways to tell a China story or drive home a point through a narrative.

That’s why this blog post is my favourite: “A wild tiger chase behind Beijing’s invisible India bus”. It started as a spontaneous idea to ride Beijing’s first Incredible India bus, with no expectations of the reactions I would get aboard the bus or whether the ride would be worth blogging about. The post ended up as the result of three days of legwork that required as much effort as chasing a news story.

And “At a Slumdog afternoon in China... ‘is this real?’” — this post was a spur of the moment idea. I was looking for a more interesting way to record Chinese reactions to Mumbai and *Slumdog Millionaire* than through a routine news report.

**AS**: Your latest post is about going back home after one year in Beijing. Is living in China what you expected it to be? Are there things about China that you weren’t expecting?

**RP**: Life as an expat in China is easier than life in Indian metros in terms of essential infrastructure like power supply and transport. I think Beijing’s traffic moves superbly compared to Indian metros, so I find it amusing when foreigners and locals complain of traffic jams. But simple things that I took for granted in India take much longer in China, partly because I don’t have the support structure of a full-fledged office with a Chinese assistant. I had no idea until I landed that tax and banking paperwork would be only in Chinese, despite opening a foreigner’s account.
**AS:** Do you think Indian people understand China well enough? What do you think are the biggest strengths and weaknesses in India-China relations, both on political and cultural levels?

**RP:** I think these two questions are answered in some of my posts. For too long, India-China relations were defined by the border dispute and unresolved political issues. It's only over the last few years that the focus shifted to optimise trade and cultural ties. It's evident in the fact that the India Tourism office in Beijing is just one-year-old and faces a huge task in convincing the Chinese to visit next-door India. There is a lot of ongoing effort to improve ties at the diplomatic level and within pockets of Indian-Chinese groups across certain professions, but not at the mass level in either nation.

India’s strength lies in skilled English-speaking manpower while China has leapt ahead in infrastructure and city building. I regularly meet Indian and Chinese professionals who talk about the great potential for collaborations between the two nations using their respective strong points. And the slow, tricky progress in making these collaborations work primarily because of a lack of information and understanding about each other’s work culture, language and bureaucracy.

**AS:** And — I have to ask — what did you think of *Chandni Chowk to China*?

**RP:** I didn't enjoy *Chandni Chowk to China* at all. I found it ridiculous and ended up fast forwarding through a DVD a friend brought from India in 30 to 40 minutes.