Reading Round-Up: 12/18/09

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China Beat will be going on vacation for the next two weeks, and will return in 2010. Before we sign off for the holidays, here are a few stories that have caught our eye lately:

1. In the Business Standard, Pallavi Aiyar writes that the "Ghosts of Beijing Lurk in Brussels." Moving from Beijing to Brussels, Aiyar was anticipating a departure from the relentless cycle of urban destruction and construction that had marked her years in China:

Imagine my surprise when I arrived at Schuman, the headquarters of the European Union and a 10-minute drive from downtown Brussels, to scenes right out of the rubble of Beijing's incessantly re-wrought cityscape.

Box-like structures of glass and chrome glinted dully through the fog of dust flying about the carcasses of half-demolished older buildings. Bulldozers blocked traffic and passers-by had to resort to mime to communicate over the cacophony of construction clatter.

This piece of Beijing in the heart of Brussels was the home of the thousands of European Union bureaucrats that run the 27-member bloc's affairs. The centrepiece was an orange coloured fortress-like hulk of a building called the Berlaymont which I was later to find out was more often referred to as the Berlaymonster.

Built in the 1960s, the "Berlaymonster" was constructed upon the ashes of the Dames de Berlaymont, a 300-year-old convent. The surrounding area, once a pleasant residential neighbourhood dating back to the 19th century and teeming with neighbourhood stores, churches and parks was also laid waste to make way for other lacklustre EU institution buildings.

What had happened in this part of Brussels was in fact exactly what was happening across China today: the wanton destruction of heritage in the service of the desire of an arguably mistaken concept of modernity.

2. Friend of the blog and Philadelphia Inquirer writer Jeff Gammage has a recent feature about the tensions between the past, present, and future in Shanghai as Expo preparations continue. One of the sites mentioned in Gammage's article, the CCP First Congress Memorial in Xintiandi, has also been explored in depth by Samuel Liang in a China Beat post earlier this year, which you can check out here.

3. Evan Osnos of the New Yorker conducted a live chat with readers about climate change and China, which has been archived and is available here.

4. Earlier this month, we heard about the "garlic bubble" in China, and now China Daily is reporting that the rising price of cooking oil and other products has consumers concerned:

The price of 5-liter bottles of cooking oil, such as soybean oil and peanut oil, increased by 10 yuan on average this month, the China News Service reported yesterday. Some residents in cities such as Shenyang, Chengdu, Shanghai and Fuzhou, began hoarding cooking oil last week.

(h/t Danwei)

5. For an explanation of global economic trends since 1849 that is both entertaining and informative, check out this video featuring Hans Rosling titled "Asia’s Rise — How and When."

Thanks to all our readers and contributors for being part of China Beat in 2009!