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Coming Distractions: Postcards from Tomorrow Square

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China Beat has been faithfully following James Fallows’s reports for the Atlantic from first Shanghai and now Beijing since he moved to China in 2006. His reports have covered topics from China’s international image to the financial crisis to the Great Firewall, and he blogs regularly at the Atlantic’s website. Fallows’s reports have now been gathered together in a collection, Postcards from Tomorrow Square, that will be available for purchase tomorrow. Over email, Fallows chatted with Kate Merkel-Hess about the new book and his thoughts about reporting from China.

Kate Merkel-Hess: Your forthcoming book Postcards from Tomorrow Square is a collection of essays about China that cover some of the same topics you have touched on in your writings for the Atlantic over the past two years. One of the overarching themes you mention in your introduction is the diversity and variety in China—something you say you suspected before coming to China in 2006 but that was confirmed for you as you did your reporting. What other China myths are most in need of debunking, and which did you have the most fun exploding in the book?

James Fallows: I know that for a lot of people based in China, or who have far deeper familiarity with China than I do, my emphasis on the diversity and individuality of modern Chinese life could seem obvious, or banal. It might also seem that way to people with no China experience at all. One American with whom I was talking recently said, “Well, of course, every human being is an individual.”

And of course that is true. But I have found the emphasis important when talking about China for several reasons. One is that, in my judgment, this universal truth about humanity is more vividly true about China than about some other countries and cultures. Partly that’s because of China’s scale, in all senses—geographic reach, regional difference, range of individual
experience in the last twenty years and the thirty years before that, and so on. Simply to be true to
the spectacle I’ve seen here, I’ve found it worth pushing this theme.

Another important reason to stress the diversity of modern Chinese experience is that it takes some
nudging to get many Western readers thinking that way. People freely talk about “China” doing this
and “the Chinese doing that,” and I think the starting Western assumption is that there’s one big
unified mass. While admiring the technical achievement of the Olympic opening ceremony, I actually
thought it served the country ill in projecting the image of countless hordes all doing the same thing
under central control.

Oh, yes, to answer your question: the other main assumption I found myself working against is that
“rising China” is something that should be feared. Taken seriously, yes. Not condescended to. But the
tone in much US and European discussion is that China has solved all its problems and its marching
unstoppably onwards. It’s not quite that way, I’ve tried to explain.

**KMH:** Did you move to Shanghai in 2006 with the intention of writing a book about China? And did
that book resemble what eventually became *Postcards*?

**JF:** My wife and I left Washington, D.C. for Shanghai with a combination of assumptions and
uncertainties similar to those with which we’ve begun other similar long-term reporting stints. There
were some things I knew that I wanted to learn about China. How should outsiders feel about the
economic miracle underway there? How seriously, really, were its environmental problems? How
much, if any, of the old Communist era did people miss – as people miss some of the old days of
Soviet glory in Russia? Etc. But mainly we wanted to see and learn about the things we hadn’t known
we should be interested in – the things that are obvious and important once you’re on scene but that
don’t always make their way into journalistic account.

In writing terms, this meant that I went assuming I’d do a series of articles for the *Atlantic*, as I have
been doing – roughly half on topics I knew ahead of time I’d be looking into (environment, financial
relations) and the other half on things I’d learned about on scene. While feeling strongly that I didn’t
want to write a book just for the sake of writing one, I had my eye open for topics that I thought
would support long narrative treatment. (Long narrative because I think there are already lots of
good books offering overviews on China. I wanted to find specific stories that might shed light on
larger trends.) I did find one of those themes, which I plan to explore in a second narrative book I
hope to finish in the next year. I hadn’t anticipated that the *Atlantic* articles I did formed a kind of
narrative sequence of their own. The idea to combine them, with new material, occurred to the
publisher and made sense to me. That is the genesis of *Postcards* – which in my biased view does
have a kind of coherence in trying to convey what parts of China looked and felt like at this stage in
the country’s history.

**KMH:** This was not your first stint in Asia. How did the four years you spent in Asia in the 1980s
inform your time in China? In your first piece for the *Atlantic* from Shanghai, you mentioned that your
time in Japan in the 1980s coincided with the dollar’s collapse against the yen. Was it eerie to be in
Asia for another economic crisis? Were there other ways that you drew on that earlier experience—
practically or intellectually—to do your work this time?

**JF:** You’re right: the reason I’m in China in the 2000s is that I spent four years in the neighborhood
twenty years ago. My wife and I actually made our first visit to several major cities – Beijing,
Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, a few more – in 1986, when we were based in Japan and faked our
way into China as part of the U.S. delegation to the World Esperanto Congress. (We had to learn the
language as part of the deal; it’s easier than Mandarin!) I then came back to China three or four times
over the next four years, while mainly learning about Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan, the
Philippines, Singapore, and places other than the PRC itself.

That experience had several residual effects. The main one was to make me interested in China – and
aware (as I still am) of how little I know about it. Another was to give me the perhaps misguided
confidence that my wife and I could make our way through a place where we had little previous
experience and no well-developed connections. And of course it was an intellectual construct: in
watching Japan’s rise and then its financial stagnation, we’d seen the last dramatic stage in East Asian economic development. The similarities in China’s approach – and, mainly, the differences – have been an important touchstone all the way through. And as I think will be evident to readers, I have found China’s economic rise to be a fundamentally more open phenomenon, for the rest of the world, than Japan’s approach was.

As for the latest crisis – hey, blame Alan Greenspan! Not me.

**KMH:** Many of your pieces for the *Atlantic* move forward from a premise of “Americans typically think X about China, but actually...” Did those pieces grow from your own surprise at discovering something new about China? What were some of your surprises or realizations about China that didn’t make it into your pieces?

**JF:** Ahah! You have cruelly revealed the trademarked secret of everything I’ve ever written for the magazine! Probably I find it easiest and most natural to write that way for two overlapping reasons. One is that I most enjoy learning about, and then writing about, things that are different from what I expected before bumping into them. I don’t really like writing, but I love reporting, because it gives me an excuse to satisfy my curiosity and often to change my mind. The other reason is that I feel there is some journalistic benefit in exposing people to information or ideas they don’t currently hold. I figure: if I hadn’t heard about subject X, maybe a lot of other Westerners haven’t heard about it either. So I’ll tell them about it and let them see if it changes their outlook as it changed mine.

As for what I haven’t conveyed yet – hmmmm. I have had pretty much a Just-In-Time strategy of getting out the ideas as soon as I learn them. But I have five or six more articles to do from China, and I’ll try to portion them out that way and in the next book.

**KMH:** In “The View from There,” which originally ran in the *Atlantic* last fall, you discuss the ways living abroad can change or clarify one’s ideas about the U.S. You argue there that openness to the world is a fundamental component of maintaining American prestige. What opportunities does Barack Obama’s election open for renewed or altered interactions with China? Are there concrete things you are hoping to see from the next administration that could make a real difference for future relations with China?

**JF:** As for the general prospect of America under Obama: I am sure that heartbreak and disappointment of various sorts lie ahead, just because no one can do as much as is expected from Obama just now. But I view the election results as having spared America a true disaster – by which I mean, ratifying rule by the party that, among other things, had nearly destroyed the “brand” of America in the world’s eyes – and also elevating a person well equipped to address some of America’s most acute needs. Here I’m talking not so much about the financial crisis of the time but rather the cultural underpinnings of America’s long-term vitality and strength. I think that the United States has been successful and vibrant in exact proportion as it has been open to the talent of the world – notably including Chinese talent. Obama stands for that in his policy and his life identity. So from my perspective as an American nationalist, I am relieved to think that our main comparative advantage will no longer be undercut.

Specific dealings with China are a strange exception to what has been, in my view, the general catastrophe of Bush Administration foreign policy. The one area in which Bush has more or less managed to keep his eye on sane, long-term interests has been in relations with China. The U.S. speaks up where it disagrees with the Chinese government, but it treats the relationship as one that must be maintained. (e.g. Bush never threatened to boycott the Olympics, but in his Bangkok speech just before arrival in Beijing he also laid out the areas where the U.S. and China disagreed.) So the initial goal for Obama will be “do no harm” to existing US-China relations. Addressing the financial imbalance will help in that regard.

**KMH:** It is clear from the books you reference in *Postcards* that you read widely among popular books on China, from John Pomfret’s *Chinese Lessons* to Susan Shirk’s *Fragile Superpower* to even a passing reference to David Landes’s scholarship. (It is always exciting for historians to see historical work
What readings do you recommend to friends and colleagues heading to China? What have you been reading and enjoying recently?

JF: One reason I love my kind of journalism – by which I mean, the high-end magazine world – is that it provides an excuse to read everything you can on a topic. My wife and I spend basically all our time reading as much China-related material as we can: histories of the language, pop novels, political tracts, business analyses. I just finished reading again Jonathan Spence’s *To Change China*, which I’d first read twenty years ago. Sitting two feet away from me right now is *China Marches West: the Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*, by Peter Perdue, which a friend recommended. I gave a friend for Christmas *The Banquet Bug*, by Geling Yan, which I love on many levels. *Two Kinds of Time*, by Graham Peck, justly deserves the big push that Robert Kapp is giving it now. The canon of recent good words of journalism and history is too large for me to dare to start naming names: the risk of offending by omission is huge! It’s a great time to be reading about China.

Tags: James Fallows