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Obama Recommendations: IV

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By Kate Merkel-Hess

The search terms “Obama China” have brought a lot of readers to China Beat over the past two months. We are by no means the only ones experiencing an Obama-related reader boost (though we are the second hit on Google, right behind the BBC for a search of “Obama China”!), nor the only ones getting an Obama-related content surge. If you are looking for smart commentary on the recent Obama administration’s China snafus, for instance, check out James Fallows’s analysis from last week (hat tip: kuluyi). Those interested in live (as in right now) discussion of Sino-American relations under Obama may want to listen in to the Japan Society’s panel (including Howard French, who weighed in on our last recommendation list) on “The U.S. & East Asia Under the Obama Administration” (it will be webcast live at 6:30 p.m. EST).

Below, our fourth installment of reading recommendations for Obama (though this time with a little twist in answers to our “what should the President be reading” question). Feel that you’ve got too much to read already? If so, you may want to bop over to Huffington Post where Jeff Wasserman has posted a list of recommendations for Obama, in which he admittedly offers up titles of yet five more books, but he pairs each one with a relevant, China-related film or video that you might have missed.

French Sinologist Marie-Claire Bergere is professor emerita at INALCO (Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales) and author of, among many other books, the recent Capitalismes et capitalistes en Chine, XIXe – XXIe siècle (Paris: Perrin, 2007).

Thank you for asking, but I mostly follow the writings on China in French, and I would hate to think of suggesting that a busy President learn a new language. But if in an alternative universe the Francophone John Kerry had been elected instead of Bush in 2004 and was now starting a second term, here’s what I would advise him to read about China.

1) Les origines de la révolution chinoise 1915-1949, by Lucien Bianco, Paris, Gallimard, 2007 (This recent French edition was thoroughly revised and completed by a one-hundred-page essay entitled: “La révolution chinoise: une interprétation.”)


Daniel A. Bell is professor of political theory at Tsinghua University (Beijing) and his latest book is China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society (Princeton University Press, 2008).

1) Sidney Rittenberg and Amanda Benet, The Man Who Stayed Behind (Duke University Press, 2001). A gripping read by an American who spent decades in China, including sixteen years in solitary confinement. Rittenberg has somehow emerged from his experience with unparalleled understanding and balance. In his late 80s, as lucid as ever, he would also make an excellent ambassador to China.

2) James Fallows, Postcards from Tomorrow Square: Reports from China (Vintage, 2008). Clear and insightful writing from different parts of China. Shows the good and the bad and anybody reading the book cannot but be impressed by the diversity and complexity of the country. Fallows is a sensitive
and reliable observer who somehow managed to write an in-depth and accessible account of major developments after only two years in China. Obviously a sign of great intelligence!

3) Randall Peerenboom, *China’s Long March to the Rule of Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). The book provides an empirically grounded and comparative perspective of legal developments in China. Points to the possibility of different models of law and human rights appropriate at different levels of economic development. This book should be read in conjunction with Susan Shirk’s *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford University Press, 2007) – a reliable guide to the key political challenges in China and how the US should respond to them – but I would guess the President already knows about this book so there is no need to mention it.

4) Guy Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (University of California Press, 1986). A fascinating account about a Confucian-inspired thinker who also tried to implement educational and agricultural reforms intended to benefit the poor. Had Mao taken his views more seriously, China would have been better off today. I would suggest reading this book in conjunction with Gloria Davies’ *Worrying about China* (Harvard University Press, 2007), a reliable guide to the latest intellectual debates in China which also shows how age-old concerns about moral improvement and public-spiritedness still animate those debates. Ideally, the President should also read the works of influential Chinese intellectuals, but most remain untranslated into English. One exception is Wang Hui’s *China’s New Order* (Harvard University Press, 2006).


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