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Just over a year ago, in one of the first posts that appeared on this site (and one of the very first commentaries I had written for any blog), I directed readers to five short pieces worth checking out that had one thing in common: they were about China but not by China specialists per se. One was a London Review of Books essay by Pankaj Mishra, who we’ve gone on to link to or quote often and who will be represented in our China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance, via a commentary on Tibet that first appeared on The Guardian’s lively and wide-ranging “Comment is Free” site. Now, in today’s New York Times Sunday Magazine he has yet another piece likely to interest readers of this blog, which focuses mainly on the novelist Yu Hua (still best-known in the West as the author of To Live, which became a Zhang Yimou film), but features a cameo appearance by historian and “new left” cultural critic Wang Hui. Since the LRB essay alluded to above was devoted largely to Wang Hui (a close friend of Yu Hua’s), this latest publication of Mishra’s (which has the catchy title of “The Bonfire of China’s Vanities”) can be read as a kind of more literary-minded sequel to that earlier overview of intellectuals trends in the PRC. It is also interesting for what Yu Hua has to say to Mishra about various issues “China Beat” has addressed before, from the legacy of 1989 to recent upsurges in virulent nationalism.

Readers who come away from “Bonfire of China’s Vanities” wanting to know more about Yu Hua or Wang Hui might want to turn to the following readings: a New Left Review essay on Dushu, the periodical that Wang formerly edited, and this interview with Yu Hua. Better still, there are Yu Hua’s fictional works. I’ve just begun to read around in these, starting with the widely varied tales (there’s even one that plays with the convention of martial arts magical sword stories) collected in The Past and the Punishments: Eight Stories, which comes with a valuable translator’s afterword by Andrew F. Jones that puts the works and the author into context. An interesting discussion of contemporary youthful nationalism to place beside the comments in Mishra’s piece is this Evan Osnos New Yorker article to which we’ve directed readers before.