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Reading Round-Up

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Little bits and pieces from around the web...

1. In case you missed it, David Brooks wrote a column about China in The New York Times last week. In it, he details two perspectives on China’s future presented at the Aspen Ideas Festival. On the one hand,

The agent provocateur was Niall Ferguson of Harvard. China and the U.S., he argued, used to have a symbiotic relationship and formed a tightly integrated unit that he calls Chimerica...

During the first few years of the 21st century, Chimerica worked great. This unit accounted for about a quarter of the world’s G.D.P. and for about half of global growth. But a marriage in which one partner does all the saving and the other partner does all the spending is not going to last.

The frictions are building and will lead to divorce, conflict and potential catastrophe. China, Ferguson argued, is now decoupling from the United States...

Think of China, Ferguson concluded, as Kaiser Wilhelm’s Germany in the years before World War I: a growing, aggressive, nationalistic power whose ambitions will tear through pre-existing commercial ties and historic friendships.

On the other hand,

James Fallows of The Atlantic has lived in China for the past three years. He agreed with parts of Ferguson’s take on the economic fundamentals, but seemed to regard Ferguson’s analysis of the Chinese psychology as airy-fairy academic theorizing. At one point, while Fallows was defending Chinese intentions, Ferguson shot back: “You’ve been in China too long.” Fallows responded that there must be a happy medium between being in China too long and being in China too little.

Fallows pointed out that there is no one thing called “China” or “the Chinese,” and that many of the most anti-American statements from Chinese officials are made to blunt domestic anxiety and make further integration possible.

Make the jump to read the full column.

2. China Beat contributor Guobin Yang has a new book out: The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online, published by Columbia University Press. Last week, Yang published an accompanying commentary on Green Dam at the publisher’s website:

The incident demonstrates yet again the power of the Internet in China. Both Chinese bloggers and Western media have hailed this new brand of online activism. I myself have commented on this display of Web power here. With the “Green Dam” controversy quieting down for now, it is helpful to step back and reflect a bit on some more enduring issues about Internet control and online activism in China.

The Green Dam policy indicates that there is still a surprising degree of bluntness in the exercise of state control over the Internet. In recent years, the Chinese government has demonstrated new levels of sophistication in affairs of Internet governance. One sign is the adoption since 2004 of a soft-management approach, which emphasizes self-discipline, civic responsibility, and the use of legal rather than administrative power to contain harmful contents. Part of the reason why the Green Dam policy met with such strong resistance is that it represented an unbearably heavy-handed approach to Internet control.

The case further reveals an ambivalent and complex relationship between government and Internet businesses. It shows that private businesses can be recruited for the control of the Internet. Indeed,
many Chinese netizens see the Green Dam more as a sweet business deal for the software company than an effective control measure. This kind of outsourcing and privatization of control had long caused concern, and the Green Dam controversy brought the issue back into the public limelight, raised concerns about future state-market collusion.

The Green Dam case, however, is much more revealing about online activism than about Internet control. It shows that control almost always encounters opposition, and such opposition—a new form of online activism—can be powerful enough to seriously undermine control efforts.

Read more here.

3. **China Heritage Quarterly’s June issue** is now available, with a batch of rich reflections on the notion of “commemoration,” including a piece by historian Vera Schwarcz that puts her experiences on May 4, 2009 into historical context:

I reflected on this pairing of commemorations during my bicycle tours of Beida; I also noticed something new: a huge number of birds had returned to the campus in the past two years. Most noticeable were the magpies: large, lustrous flyers with black and blue tail feathers that crisscrossed the paths leading down to No Name Lake (Weiming Hu 未名湖). A poet-scholar friend from the Social Science Academy, Fu Hao 傅浩, came to visit me and remarked that these xi qu’er 喜鹊儿 were bearers of good news for the Chinese landscape: ‘In preparation for the Olympics, the Chinese tried to repair their relationship with nature. In return, nature has been kind and responded with generous renewal.’

Signs of this renewal were amply evident all over Beijing: It was not just the birds that had come back to fly freely, minds too were roaming less hindered, especially those out of the glare of publicity. I savored this freedom on 3 May, during the first day of the formal, academic conference on the ninetieth anniversary of the May Fourth Movement hosted by the Modern History Institute of the Social Science Academy. In the newly refurbished seminar room of their compound located in the north of the Wangfujing 王府井 area, seventy five scholars from different institutions in China and three foreign countries gathered to discuss new research on the events of 1919. Scholars from abroad were far fewer than they had been during the seventieth anniversary conference in 1989, which had brought to Beijing Chow Tse-tsung and others from the US as well as people from Europe, Southeast Asia and Japan.

Now, twenty years later, a couple of researchers from Korea, a few from Japan and two from the US were the only representatives from abroad. The limited numbers may simply reflect the ‘normalization’ of May Fourth research over the past decades. Whereas in 1979 the national conference of the May Fourth Movement’s sixtieth anniversary had been overshadowed by political condemnations of key intellectual figures such as Hu Shi 胡适, Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 and Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (because they had not followed the path of communist revolution), thirty years later the Social Science Academy conference had more that two dozen presentations on these formerly controversial figures.

Now it was possible to also have research presentations on the May Fourth origins of Wang Jingwei 汪精卫 (once damned simply as a ‘traitor’ for this role during the Japanese occupation) as well as extended discussion of a paper on 'the tragedy of modern Chinese intellectuals'. Broken up into three simultaneous sessions, each lasting an hour and a half, this conference was professionally organized and academically challenging. New explorations of archival sources enabled younger scholars to re-think earlier assumptions about the role of students in labor organizing not just in Beijing, but in Shanghai and Wuhan as well. Broad generalization about the 'Chinese enlightenment' were challenged and redefined in light of careful historiographical reflection on European history, and this lead to new questions about the role of critical thought in challenging the abiding authority of religion and politics in French as well as in modern Chinese history.

Visit here for access to features, articles, and more in the most recent issue.
4. During April, May, and June, we ran several excerpts from Philip J. Cunningham’s new book, *Tiananmen Moon*. The Bangkok Post recently ran a review of the book:

Like Cunningham himself, the reader begins as an outsider to the movement and gets drawn further and further in, first out of curiosity and then a sense of solidarity. The author – friends with students and other liberal Chinese, and fluent in Chinese – gets as far inside perhaps as a Western eye can get. His account, accessible and readable, is a foreign perspective – perhaps being partially outside the frame helps to see the greater picture at times, to ask the right questions – but one with an insider’s fondness for and grasp of China’s idiosyncrasies.

Cunningham is sympathetic to the cause – he joins the march, he throws a rock at an armoured personnel carrier – but at times highly critical of some aspects of the movement, from hyperbolic talk of bloodshed to hypocritical corruption in the ranks of Tiananmen Square power. There is cash support from groups in Hong Kong and some tacit support from Western embassies and CCP officials. Who is protesting whom? The lines get thinner and blurrier. Who is in charge, and by whose authority; is it a genuine spontaneous hierarchy created by necessity, or perhaps by coercion or design? So much depends on this movement, it seems, but who is playing whom? A busload of military weapons shows up – is it a Trojan Horse of sorts, pretence for a violent crackdown, “evidence” that the students have changed their non-violent stance and deserve purging?

5. Those who are not familiar with the publication *Renditions* may want to check it out. Based at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the publication presents a variety of translations of Chinese sources into English, centered around a different theme in each issue (the most recent issue examines Chinese film). Though the majority of the material is only available in hard copy, one or two translations from each issue is available online (and can be found at the link above).