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After a few weeks of vacation, China Beat is back to posting (though we considered making an 8 percent reduction in our future posts in honor of the UC furlough, we'll just be back to business as usual). Even so, it is still summer and a few contributors have been using the time to publish in other venues.

Last Saturday, Ken Pomeranz mentioned a few of his recent publications, including this one at the New Left Review.

Jeff Wasserstrom recently reviewed Lisa See’s new book, Shanghai Girls for Time Asia. (We ran an interview with See this spring, which you can read here.)

The new issue of Journal of Democracy also features a piece by Wasserstrom, "Middle-Class Mobilization," which revisits some issues he’s written about for China Beat and The Nation. This issue also includes pieces from Yang Guobin (a China Beat contributor) as well as Elizabeth Perry and Andrew J. Nathan. Journal of Democracy makes a few articles from each issue free; this issue the free-access articles are “The Massacre’s Long Shadow” by Jean Philippe-Béja and "Authoritarian Impermanence" by Andrew J. Nathan. (The other essays can be accessed through Project Muse, for those with library access.)

Here is a short selection from Wasserstrom’s piece:

I worry that some foreign observers will jump to the wrong conclusion when thinking about Chinese middle-class protests, especially if we see more and larger ones in the years to come: namely, that they signal the imminent arrival of the sort of democratic transition that has so often been predicted for China since the 1980s. When protesters took to the streets of Beijing twenty years ago, with the fall of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos fresh in many minds, some thought that the CCP would be toppled by something akin to the “people power” rising in Manila. Then, after Solidarity won elections in Poland and the Soviet system unraveled, some outsiders predicted that China would follow in the footsteps of one or another East European country. All it would take would be some “X factor” or other, perhaps the appearance of a reform-minded official with bold ideas or the rise of a charismatic organizer able to bring workers and intellectuals together.

More recently, while the search for a Chinese counterpart to Mikhail Gorbachev or Lech Wałęsa has not been abandoned completely, one “X factor” on which some have begun to bet has been a restive middle class. Once an authoritarian country has undergone a dramatic period of economic development, members of the middle class will demand more of a say not only in how they make and spend money, but in how they are governed. The CCP, according to this logic, could end up facing the same pressure to share power that its erstwhile rival, the Nationalist Party (KMT), faced and eventually gave in to on Taiwan. It is easy to see the appeal of the thought that China, a country which has so often surprised us of late, is still destined to have a future that will resemble some other formerly authoritarian country’s recent past. Yet there are important flaws in this mode of thinking. How justified, for instance, is the assumption that because a number of Leninist regimes fell between 1989 and 1991, communist rule everywhere must be teetering?

In Central and Eastern Europe and many parts of the old USSR, communist rule was essentially a foreign imposition. In China, as in Vietnam, Cuba, and North Korea, the communist regime has at least some basis for grounding its claim to legitimacy in its role in a struggle not to impose but to throw off foreign domination. Then too, one must account for the cautionary lessons that many Chinese (ordinary citizens as well as rulers) have drawn from watching the post-communist travails of places such as the former Yugoslavia and the former USSR. Have the economic hardships, internal wars, social upheavals, and loss of respect in the world that such countries have had to bear made
them seem like models for emulation in Chinese eyes, or worrisome examples of sad blunders best avoided?

And here is a short selection from Yang Guobin’s article, “Online Activism”:

One reason why contentious activities thrive in online communities is that controversy is good for business—disagreement raises interest, and with it, site traffic. Within limits, websites encourage users to participate in contentious interactions. Some sites strategically promote and guide controversial discussions in order to generate traffic. Behind this business strategy of promoting user participation is the logic of nonproprietary social production in today’s Internet economy. Internet consumers are Internet-content producers too. When they post on message boards, write blogs, upload videos, or protest online, they contribute directly to the Internet economy. Chinese Internet users are active and prolific content producers. A January 2008 nationwide survey shows that about 66 percent of China’s 210 million Internet users have contributed content to one or more sites. More than 35 percent indicated that in the past six months they had either posted or responded to messages in online forums. About 32 percent had uploaded pictures, while 18 percent had uploaded films, television programs, or other video materials.

A third important condition is the creativity of Chinese netizens. Generally speaking, netizens try to stay within legal bounds and refrain from directly challenging state power. As skilled observers of Chinese politics, they understand which issues allow more leeway for discussion, and when. To a certain extent, the four types of online activism reflect netizens’ strategic responses to the political opportunities for pursuing different issues. If the cultural, social, and nationalist varieties of activism online are more widespread than political activism, that is partly because the former types enjoy more political legitimacy. As in street protests, cyberprotests directly challenging the state are much more constrained than those that can be based either on existing laws or else on claims about justice and morality that do not touch directly on questions of state authority.