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A Few Reading Recommendations

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July 30, 2009 in [The Five-List Plan](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)

1. The [new Journal of Current Chinese Affairs](#) is out—and all its articles are available for free in PDF at its website. Those of possible interest to CB readers include:

“Beijing Bubble, Beijing Bust: Inequality, Trade, and Capital Inflow into China” (by James K. Galbraith, Sara Hsu, Wenjie Zhang);

“Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship: Forging a Strategic Partnership?” (by Maria Raquel Freire, Carmen Amado Mendes);

“The Regulation of Religious Affairs in Taiwan: From State Control to Laissez-faire?” (by André Laliberté);

“Nationalism to Go – Coke Commercials between Lifestyle and Political Myth” (available only in German, by Nora Frisch);

“China’s Employment Crisis – A Stimulus for Policy Change?” (by Günter Schucher); and others.

2. The 60th anniversary assessments have started to roll out. At *The Daily Beast*, two commentaries stand in contrast to one another. First, Peter Osnos’s optimistic take in [“Why China Eclipsed Russia”](#) (Osnos is the *Washington Post*’s former Moscow correspondent):

...when it comes to comparing China today with the Soviet Union at a comparable stage, it feels safe to conclude that China is a country with a much stronger foundation for progress than its predecessor Communist behemoth. This is mainly because it has abandoned Marxist-Leninist economic principles without meaningful political reform, a trade-off its own people seem largely to accept. The simple way to summarize the difference is that the Soviet Union, for all the immense nuclear strength and apparent self-regard of its heyday, was really a facade, behind which was an economy that, at its pinnacle, was shallow and shoddy. Neither the industrial nor the agricultural system was of a size or quality to fill its needs. Most of its international trade was essentially in barter, particularly with its Eastern European satellites. Those were the early years of the computer age, but for all the engineering and scientific talent in its population, the Soviets were way behind the West in most areas, except the military—even as the United States, in particular, chose to portray the Soviet Union as being on the verge of overtaking it in crucial ways.

Russia still has a nuclear armory of immense strength and has become a formidable petrocracy. But whatever Russia’s revived superpower pretensions, there is no real doubt that China far exceeds it in economic, financial, and technical development. By sheer size, China’s military capacity and reach is enormous, though still lagging far behind that of the United States. History suggests that armed power tends to be used one way or another once it is accumulated. Yet the Chinese leaders appear for now convinced that only by steadily lifting the living standards of its people can party supremacy be assured. The Soviets said they would and could improve the lives of the citizenry, but never remotely reached their goals...

Over thousands of years, China’s history has experienced cycles and eras far longer than the six decades since 1949. My own measurement of time is even shorter. It is only twenty years since the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy movement ended in tragedy, and forty years since the upheavals and violence of the Cultural Revolution. There are deep-seated tensions in China—the riots in Tibet last year and in Urumqi this summer being only two recent examples. Nonetheless, this is an extraordinary period of largely positive changes for China. And unlike in the Soviet Union at sixty, the Chinese leadership’s rhetorical declarations of triumph seem to be anchored in accomplishments that are measurable to the population in ways that count. As the fate of the Soviet Union dramatically showed, modern superpowers cannot be sustained by polemics and police forever.

Isabel Hilton (editor of *China Dialogue*), takes [a more pessimistic tack](#):

...But mistakes not acknowledged tend to be repeated, and policies that have provoked angry responses in the past are unlikely to promote harmony in the future. The test of China's future trajectory, of its ability to go from large power to great power, is only partly about economics. Thus far, China's economic growth has been based on unsustainable low-end manufacturing for the export market and the legitimacy bestowed by rising living standards. To manage the next phase of development successfully, China needs to move up the value chain, improve its governance, cut down on the huge waste in the economy, distribute the rewards of the effort more fairly, and inject some justice into its politics and legal affairs. But to do that, the Communist Party has to take on the vested interests on which it depends for its power.

We all have an interest in China's success, as President Obama underlined at the opening this week of a two-day high-level dialogue with visiting Chinese officials. With just a nod to the recent troubles in Xinjiang, Obama ticked off a list of common concerns from climate change to economic recovery. In all of them, Chinese cooperation is essential.

In a globalized world, China's troubles are everybody's troubles and the U.S. has little interest in seeing them grow. But China's solutions, to date, are unlikely to help. The revolt of the minorities is only a symptom of a wider political malaise. Even taken together, their numbers, compared to the overwhelming majority of Han Chinese, are small. But the indignation and resentment that burst into view in Xinjiang in Tibet are also visible, for a wide variety of reasons, in the Han population.

3. Pico Iyer reflects on travel writing in the post-imperial age at *Lapham's Quarterly* in "[Travel Writing: Nowhere Need Be Foreign](#)," with a mention of Peter Hessler (he writes "if you want an American narrative of sensitivity, learning, and reflection, there are few better books (let alone better guides to contemporary China) than the deeply literate, graceful narratives of Peter Hessler"):

I call, therefore, for a travel writing that doesn't care where it comes from and doesn't get fussy about what it's addressing (The Mall of America and John F. Kennedy International Airport are scenes as worthy of scrutiny as the Great Wall of China or the Pyramids of Giza ever were). A kind that, as in the best of Greene, blurs to some degree the issue of nationality in favor of something more human. Our hybrid world makes a mockery of saying that Kenyans are all savages, or that Laotians or Tibetans are all saints. The Kenyan is now an upper-class girl from Edinburgh; the Laotian is working in a hospital in Sacramento; the Tibetan is busy setting up a shop in Paris with his Breton wife. Writing about travel becomes a matter of writing about confusion and mixed identity and the snares of cultural transformation.

4. At *PopMatters*, [a review of Ted Koppel's 2008 Discovery Channel documentary on China](#) (as well as of Leslie Chang's *Factory Girls*). Jack Patrick Rodgers writes:

In essence, it's a broad primer on the Chinese pre-meltdown economy and culture, designed to appeal to viewers who don't know much about the country. The series opens with a segment on US-Chinese relations that quickly taps into the resentment of many blue-collar Americans who have watched their jobs migrate to China over the past two decades.

Take for example the company Briggs and Stratton, a maker of small motors for lawnmowers, which recently moved a manufacturing plant to the Chinese city of Chongqing and laid off almost 500 US workers in the process. At first it seems like Koppel is ready to depict this situation as an example of China stealing jobs that should rightfully belong to Americans, but the truth reveals a more complex relationship between the two countries.

Goods manufactured in China are substantially cheaper thanks to lower wages, and superstores like Wal-Mart owe their success to the rock-bottom prices that Chinese factories are able to provide.

Koppel interviews Pam Leaser, a 50-year-old former employee of Briggs and Stratton, who is angry about the loss of her job but admits she does most of her shopping at Wal-Mart. When Koppel points out that her own shopping habits are the reason why China is siphoning jobs away from the America, Leaser has no response.

5. If her blog is not already on your RSS feed, [this post from Xujun Eberlein](#) (we've re-run several of her blog postings at CB in the past) should convince you to add it. It is a smart analysis of how the Tonghua Steel Corp. riots demonstrated that the government's media policies continue to be ill-suited (at least in practice) to a changed media environment:

Two seemly unrelated but notable events took place in China on Friday, July 24th. In the morning, the official news agency Xinhua published an article titled "Ten Suggestions for Local Governments on How to Respond to Internet Opinion" on its website... [CB Edit: Eberlein directs readers to [Danwei's full translation of the article.](#)]

As if setting up an immediate reality test for the government's new media policy, that very day a large mass incident erupted in Tonghua, Jilin. Thousands of workers of the Tonghua Steel Corp protested a private takeover of their enterprise, which had a 50-year history of state ownership. The steel factory had already suffered a failed privatization attempt from the same company. It was recovering from that and last year's financial crisis, when the renewed and expanded ownership was announced. Angry workers beat to death the new general manager appointed by the private company, Jianlong of Beijing, on his first day at work. The workers gradually dispersed only after the Jilin provincial government announced its on-the-site decision to have the private company withdraw from Tonghua Steel's business. Some Chinese netizens called the event "the first workers movement since 1949" – the year Communist rule in China began.

As a test of the new media policy, it seems to have failed. For three days, China's media kept totally silent on the shocking incident, not even the independent and daring papers such as Caijing said a word. On every commercial web portal, posts and discussions on the Tonghua riot were quickly deleted. The Western media first learned the news from a Hong Kong human rights group and reported the incident briefly on the 25th, all in a monotonous and minimalist way, quoting the same source.

Meanwhile, Chinese netizens acted quicker than the government's media controllers, and one detailed anonymous eye-witness account landed on overseas Chinese websites and was circulated around the world. It could no longer be deleted. (An English translation of this account can be found on Hong Kong-based ESWN, one of the most popular China blogs.) So far no Western media outlet has cited the far more informative account, whose content seems to be verified by various sources, including the government's own belated reporting. The speed of selection and elimination by internet surfers is amazing, and the quality control of the selection process is even more impressive.

6. At "Writers Read," [Guobin Yang gives some of his recommendations.](#)

7. Just in case you haven't heard, some [violent video games are now verboten in the PRC.](#)