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Looking Backwards: From 1989 to Han Times and from 2008 to 1964

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There have been many efforts during the last month, on this site and elsewhere, to bring history into discussions of the twentieth anniversary of June 4th (particularly via allusions the May 4th Movement of 1919), just as a year ago there were many efforts to bring history into discussions of the Beijing Games (especially via allusions to the Berlin Olympics of 1936 and Seoul Olympics of 1988). But there’s still room for this Top Five list of historically minded pieces on 1989 or 2008 that have just appeared and stand out as especially worth checking out, due to either how deeply they delve into parallels with earlier times or the novelty of their strategies for bringing together past and present.

1) On June 1, Alan Baumler of the estimable Frog-In-A-Well blog, which has separate sections devoted to the histories of different East Asian countries, offered up a very thoughtful look at a precedent for the 1989 student-led protests that pre-dated (by many centuries) the founding of the first modern Chinese university in 1898. Here’s a snippet that we hope will encourage you to make the jump to read all of his "Student Protests in Han China":

“Like most university students, [those of Later Han times, circa 160] were in an anomalous position in society. Imperial University students were members of the elite, but not elite enough to get government jobs just based on their family. Like later students they were also frustrated by their prospects. By the Later Han the curriculum at the University was considered hopelessly out of date and attending was no longer a reliable route to office. Students were deeply concerned with the problems of the state, which is not surprising, and they were particularly concerned with the problem of corruption and favoritism in official appointments, which is also not surprising, given that they were the ones most likely to be passed over if jobs were not given on merit. During this period the student’s enemies were not the Communist Party, but the eunuchs and their faction, who were rivals of the great aristocratic families.”

2) On June 2, Duncan Hewitt, the Shanghai-based author of China: Getting Rich First: A Modern Social History, weighed in on the meaning of the twentieth anniversary of the Tiananmen protests on a Newsweek blog. He has many things of interest to say in this piece, which is well worth reading in its entirety, but one notable point is that the it is not just the details about 1989 but also those about the Democracy Wall Movement that preceded it by roughly a decade that have been fading.

3) On June 5, Evan Osnos ran an insightful piece on his “Letter from China” blog called “The Other Tiananmen Moment,” which stressed the importance of thinking about the complex ties between the events of the mid-to-late 1960s and the late 1980s in the minds of some Chinese. (And for more about the Cultural Revolution-era photographs he discusses and shows, see this guest post by Jean Loh we ran in April.)

4) Regular readers of this site have seen many pieces by frequent contributor Susan Brownell exploring different aspects of the Beijing Games, including its parallels to and differences from past Olympics. (And material from those posts is also showcased in China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance.) But there’s still much new to be learned from her latest publication on the topic, which she has just done for the excellent and wide-ranging Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus. She offers her most detailed and sophisticated look to date at the connections between the Beijing Olympics and both of the previous Asian Summer Games, those that took place in Tokyo in 1964 and Seoul in 1988.

5) The same online journal has two other good pieces about Asia and the Olympics. The one with the most historical bent is a fascinating essay on the Tokyo Games by Christian Tagsold, which though focusing on Japan should be of interest to many people more concerned with China. Called “The 1964 Tokyo Olympics as Political Games,” it argues, as its title indicates, that the tendency to treat the
Japanese Games as more "apolitical" than the Korean and Chinese ones that followed is misleading. (Those in a mood for looking forward rather than backward should be sure to check out as well William W. Kelly’s smart companion piece on the prospects for the 2012 and 2016 Olympics, another essay that concentrates on Japan but has relevance for other parts of East Asia as well.)

Tags: The 2008 Beijing Olympics, Tiananmen