3-19-2009

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We like to keep tabs on the contributors who write for us, and some of them have been publishing some interesting pieces lately. Here’s a quick reader of five excerpts from China Beatniks.

1. At Inside-Out China, Xujun Eberlein has translated an essay (in two parts) by Sun Liping, professor of sociology at Tsinghua University. The essay has been making the rounds on the Chinese Internet. A selection:

   In recent years, signs of societal breakdown have become more apparent. The core problem is the loss of control over power. During the past 30 years of reform, despite the establishment of a basic framework for a market economy, power remains the backbone of our society. Because societal breakdown first appears as the loss of control over power, corruption is but the surface manifestation. By loss of control over power I mean that power becomes a force unconstrained not only externally, but also internally. Before this, although it lacked external constraints, internal constraints had been relatively effective. The power base is weakening; several years ago we had already heard the saying “commands don’t reach outside of Zhongnanhai [the headquarters of the CCP and China’s Central Government].” Local power and sector power have become unconstrained from above and unmonitored from below, at the same time lacking any check or balance from the left or right. This is to say, state power is fragmented, and officials are unable to work responsibly. To preserve their positions they don’t balk at sacrificing system benefits (not to mention societal interest). With this background, corruption has gotten beyond control and become untreatable.

2. Earlier this month, Jeff Wasserstrom analyzed the legacy of the Beijing Games, six months later at History News Network (HNN):

   The Chinese government had varied international goals vis-à-vis the Games. Three key ones were to present the PRC as the following things: modern, not to be feared, and a place that ethnic Chinese living in different countries can identify with—however they once felt about Mao or now feel about the Chairman’s successors.
   The Games and subsequent global commentary point to the need for a mixed assessment of this three-pronged effort. The venues and spectacles definitely left many viewers around the world with a powerful sense that Beijing definitely can do modern. The event was less successful at creating a sense that this is not a source of concern—as it was not only “South Park” characters who found nightmarish some parts of the “One World, One Dream” Olympics, and many things happened before and during the Games (acts of censorship and repression, for example) that reinforced negative ideas about the PRC as a highly controlled, oppressive state.

3. Amy Hanser, professor of sociology at the University of British Columbia, gave a talk at UCLA in January titled “Service Encounters: Class, Gender, and the Market for Social Distinction in Urban China” and the podcast is now available online. Though Hanser’s writing has never appeared at the blog, she contributed a piece to China in 2008 and Maura Elizabeth Cunningham reviewed Hanser’s book, Service Encounters, in July 2008.

4. Last July, we interviewed Pallavi Aiyar about her book Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China. Last month, she published a piece at Asia Times Online on crises in Sino-Indian trade relations:

   On the Indian side, there is a widening trade deficit, worry over the composition of exports and concern at the inability of Indian companies with Chinese operations to break into the domestic Chinese market.
The Chinese complain that India is holding back on a proposed regional trade agreement and that Chinese companies have on occasion been prevented from investing in India on the grounds that they pose a security threat.

Both sides also complain of insufficient knowledge of the business practices and the regulatory framework of the other country. Cultural discomfort involving language and food habits form an additional barrier – despite being neighbors, the two countries appear culturally more comfortable doing business with the West than with each other.

5. David Flumenbaum hasn't ever published anything at China Beat, but he is our contact at Huffington Post and so we keep an eye on his occasional writings on China there. A few weeks ago, Flumenbaum wrote a column about the censorship and mistranslation of the Oscars in Asia:

Instead of simply omitting Penn’s acceptance speech, as they did for Dustin Lance Black, China’s censors decided to mistranslate Penn’s words so that his speech appeared to make no mention of gays. According to the China blog Black and White Cat, CCTV subtitled Penn’s line, “You commie, homo-loving sons of guns,” with “你们可真够宽容的.” The rough translation of these characters is, “You really are so generous.” So, to non-English-speaking Chinese viewers reading the subtitles, Penn never uttered the word “commie” or “homo,” or Mao forbid, a sentence incorporating both.

6. Sky Canaves has also never written anything for China Beat, but she does link to us frequently at the WSJ China Journal. So we were pleased to learn more about her in Danwei’s recent interview.

What are your areas of interest in China reporting, and what do you hope to achieve in 2009?
The pressing social issues that are often cited as the top concerns among Chinese people — employment, health care, education, corruption — and how these are being addressed by the government and the people, along with the impacts of the economic downturn on various groups — the rising middle class, young people who have only known the boom years and the elderly who lack a safety net.

This year I’ll continue my work on the blog, expanding its China coverage in collaboration with the rest of the WSJ’s China reporting team. On a personal note, I’m looking forward to a long overdue return visit to Nanjing, where I lived ten years ago, and seeing how much it has changed since.