A Man Bites Dog Story: Picky Academic Praises Journalist

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Well, I don’t think I’m actually quite as bad when it comes to giving reporters their due as the title I’ve selected for this post suggests, as I have recently gone on record praising a variety of journalists based in China. Still, the ones I typically say the best things about are people who have a long-term commitment to the country (though I’ve been critical of some of these, of course), while the ones I most often pick on for things like missing important aspects of a story or failing to go to the best possible specialists for quotes are those who, like Barbara Demick of the Los Angeles Times, end up in China while cycling through different foreign bureaus (in her case, based on a very quick web search, it seems she was in the Middle East and Seoul before heading to Beijing). And true to form, when I started reading Demick’s “Clocks Square Off in China” in this morning’s paper, where it was given the excellent front-page “Column One” feature spot (saved for longer than usual and often somewhat personal pieces) that remains one of the best things about the Times, I was initially on my guard, looking for flaws. I quickly had to admit, however, that the piece handles very well indeed a couple of fascinating issues: the fact that China could easily have five or six time zones, yet officially all clocks are supposed to keep Beijing time, and the cultural divides that tend to separate Uighur and Han residents in this part of China’s “Far West” (as the region is sometimes dubbed—including in the retitled online version of Demick’s article).

I am sure that there are terms used or ideas broached in the article that could be picked apart by still more specialized readers than me—someone who tends to focus on a city, Shanghai, that lies far to the East of Xinjiang and someone who has not done much on either issues of ethnicity or, for that matter, on what clocks read, aside from co-writing one commentary that used the one time zone curiosity as a lead-in. For me, though, it was a very fine example of smart and accessible journalism, which effectively mixed on-the-spot anecdotes (I particularly like the interchange with the young boy who
looked at the foreigner’s watch) and analysis on the fly with queries put to just the right academic experts.

I was pleased to see recent China Beat contributor James Millward quoted, and delighted to see that he managed to slip in an allusion to former Association for Asian Studies President and Southeast Asia specialist James C. Scott’s important “weapons of the weak” concept—and do so in a manner that made it immediately understandable to those who had never read that theorist’s important 1987 book by that title. I was even happier to see a quote solicited from Gardner Bovingdon, a former Indiana University colleague of mine (he’s still there, I’ve just moved on to America’s “Far West”). Why? Because everything I know about time zones in China I learned from reading a draft of a very smart paper of his that is mentioned in passing by Demick.

All in all, it was nice to start the day reading a story dealing with China (complete with a map that very nicely showed just how far it is from Beijing to Xinjiang and a good color photo of Kashgar store selling clocks showing different times—not the one included with this post, but similar to it) that seemed right on target. It didn’t leave me itching to write a letter to the editor suggesting that something be corrected or some glossed over point be brought into the light.

Still, there’s one small issue that I want to bring up, since it has been perplexing me ever since I made my first phone call to India a couple of months ago—and discovered inadvertently, while trying to figure out how to phone a friend there without waking him up, that there’s more than one big Asian country with a single time zone. If the way Beijing handles time zones is linked to authoritarianism, which definitely seems correct, why is it that democratic India has a similar chronological approach? Yes, India does not have nearly as wide an east-to-west spread, but there does still seem a story to tell here, even if it is a matter of 3 time zones rather than twice that many being compressed into 1. And while I like Demick’s report a lot, it doesn’t enlighten me on this, as when she looks to a neighboring country with which to compare China’s situation, her gaze goes, not surprisingly and very effectively, to Russia...with its 11 time zones!