Chinese History Readings

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A hodgepodge of historically or (historian-) relevant readings from the last few weeks...

1. Of greatest interest to the historians around here (particularly those of us who don’t make it to Cambridge regularly), Harvard and the National Library of China have signed a deal to digitize Harvard’s collection of 51,000 rare Chinese books:

Once completed, these images dating as far back as the Song dynasty in 960 AD, will be publicly available for free on the Web to scholars in China and elsewhere.

“We need to change the mindset that rare materials must be kept behind closed doors,” said James Cheng, the head librarian at Harvard-Yenching, a separate building just outside Harvard Yard. “A library is not a museum.”

Furui Zhan, who oversees his country’s national library in Beijing, said this is China’s first major digitization project of rare-book collections outside China. Depending on how it goes, he said, his library may join with other institutions on similar projects. He said the goal of this venture is to enable scholars everywhere to have access to the richness of China’s history through access to its documents.

2. Last month, Shanghaiist noted Melissa Chan’s clip at Al Jazeera on the Long March.

3. Danwei excerpts from Carl Crow’s wartime diaries, newly edited by Paul French.

4. China Daily has a fabulous photo essay on marriage in Communist China.

5. Feministing links to China Global Times’ list of “60 Most Influential Foreigners Shaping the Last 60 Years of Chinese Development,” noting that Margaret Thatcher is the only woman to make the list (for returning Hong Kong to China).

6. Xujun Eberlein reflects on the family history provoked by reading Leslie T. Chang’s book, Factory Girls, in which Chang writes about her family’s memories of her grandfather’s murder. Eberlein’s own mother remembers the high-profile case as the catalyst for her own radicalization:

This time, my mother was no longer a mere participant. She became a leader and an organizer at her school. She did this because of her “righteous hatred toward injustice and violence,” as she proudly put it during my interview. Curiously, she didn’t note her political naïveté here. She was unaware of the heavy involvement of Communists in facilitating this later demonstration, but they were watching her, and she was soon recruited. She became an underground Communist at age 17, and met my father, another comrade, two years later.

My family’s tortuous fate was thus sealed, long before my birth, by the “Zhang Shenfu Incident.” Our path was the opposite of the one followed by Leslie Chang’s family.

7. Last week, The Chronicle featured a series of articles on education in Asia. Though the content is limited to subscribers, here are a few excerpts. From Mara Hvistendahl’s piece, "Asia Rising: Countries Funnel Billions Into Universities":

Asia’s approach to higher education contrasts markedly with that of the United States, where, even before the global recession hit, the percentages of state budgets dedicated to higher education have been in steady decline.

“Out here the government is looking at education as a driver of the country’s future, so it isn’t last in line,” says Rajendra K. Srivastava, provost of Singapore Management University, who spent 25 years at the University of Texas at Austin.
In Texas, he recalls with dismay, "when they were allocating the state budget, education was one of the last things to get approved."

But while the government-led push is quite different from America’s decentralized approach, Asian college and government officials say they are taking cues from the United States. Specifically, they hope to replicate America’s post-World War II path to growth.

“Asians have studied very carefully the reasons why Western populations are now successful,” says Kishore Mahbubani, a dean at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore and author of The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East. “They realize that unless you create good universities and attract the best minds in the world, you can’t move into the next phase of development.”

All this is against the backdrop of declining American dominance in global research.

And from Hvistendahl’s article on China specifically, “China: Attract Talent First, and Outstanding Universities Will Follow,” which focuses on the story of former Stanford Professor (of computer science) Andrew Chi-Chih Yao, now at Tsinghua:

Mr. Yao was first approached about joining Tsinghua’s faculty in 2003 by Chen Ning Yang, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, who had himself recently begun lecturing at the university.

Through that and later discussions, Mr. Yao came to understand that the university’s officials were more interested in hiring world-class talent than they were in building up specific areas.

“They want to catch up in a global way, and therefore it doesn’t matter where they get started,” Mr. Yao explains.

That hunger translates into money for leading Western-trained scientists willing to relocate. “China is a very exciting place for science and engineering for people who have vision,” he says.

You can find further stories in the series at The Chronicle’s international news page.

8. We linked to China Heritage Quarterly’s new issue last week, but failed to note that you can see at the website three excerpts from a forthcoming volume on “Critical Han Studies,” which grew out of an April 2008 conference (you can see Nicole Barne’s write-up on the conference here). At CHQ, you can read excerpts from pieces by Tom Mullaney (“Introducing Critical Han Studies”), Mark Elliott (“Hushuo: The Northern Other and Han Ethnogenesis”), and James Leibold (“In Search of Han: Early Twentieth-century Narratives on Chinese Origins and Development”).