

2011

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Wasserstrom, Jeffrey, "China in 2010: A Baker's Dozen of Links" (2011). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 881.
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China in 2010: A Baker's Dozen of Links

January 5, 2011 in [Uncategorized](#) by [jwasserstrom](#) | [Permalink](#)
By Jeffrey Wasserstrom

Last month, many commentators offered up lists of top books and top news stories of 2010, sometimes focusing on a particular place or topic. It would be easy to follow suit here, in my first 2011 blog post about China. After all, there were plenty of books on the country published last year (some of which I reviewed [individually](#) or in [groups](#)). There were also plenty of China-related headlines, from those twelve months ago detailing rising tensions between Washington and Beijing, to summer ones reporting that the nation had surpassed Japan to become both the world's number two economy, to early fall stories of Shanghai's World Expo becoming the most-visited World's Fair in history, to late fall commentaries on an empty chair at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony.

I've decided, though, to take a different route here, in an effort to place China's 2010 into perspective, eschewing a list of books or a summary of headlines in favor of a link-per-month round-up of short pieces from last year. I have come up with a dozen that seem particularly worth reading—or re-reading if you caught them the first time around—and then thrown in a bonus “track,” published on the first day of 2011, to bring the total up to a baker's dozen. This is not meant to be a “best China writing of 2010” list, but more like a non-musical equivalent to an old-fashioned mix tape. The goal is to present an appealingly diverse set of readings that between them provide a window onto some of the main new Chinese developments, recurring Chinese phenomena, and China-related controversies of the year.

One of my main criteria for selection is that each piece continues to have some relevance at the start of 2011 (something I'll highlight when introducing some of the links). Another is that it is available full-text free online (as of this writing at least). A third is that it each be written in English, since my aim is to provide Anglophone readers with an efficient and illuminating way to keep up with how China changed in 2010, though the value of some of the pieces chosen is obviously at least in part the window they open up onto Chinese language writers, publications, or debates.

One reason for singling out articles rather than longer publications is an awareness that only the truly China-obsessed are likely to find time to check out more than one or two books on the country in any given year. As for avoiding the top news stories option, well, there seemed no need for one after reading David Bandurski's [“What Were China's Top Stories in 2010?”](#) Bandurski's post describes the 15 potential top ten 2010 news stories that *People's Daily* published and analyzes comments at that paper's website by critical readers who managed to elude censors and get their “fault-finding” responses published online. This is followed by a list of ten important 2010 stories that *People's Daily* would like us all to forget—with links to relevant reports about each topic that help place it into context. And in its comment thread, the post has an interesting exchange between Bandurski and a reader on the contrast between the upbeat focus of the *People's Daily* list and the downbeat focus of his alternative one.

Now, here's my “play list” of 2010 China readings:

Track 1 (January): [“Sinomania”](#) by Perry Anderson.

Ostensibly this *London Review of Books* essay is simply an assessment of a few books, including *When China Rules the World*, one of the most talked-about 2009 publications on the PRC. It is also, though, a thoughtful reflection on long-term trends in Western thinking about China, highlighting the swings between and occasional combining of “Sinophobia” and “Sinomania” (a term Anderson uses where some others might use Sinophilia). Particularly astute is the claim that *When China Rules the World*, despite its seemingly Sinophobic title, has many passages that veer toward Sinomania. The same mix of concern about and amazement at the country's rapid rise can be seen in other recent writings on the PRC, including Niall Ferguson's late 2010 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed [“In China's Orbit”](#) and is likely to continue to influence publications in the months to come.

Track 2 (February): [“America and China by Fits and Starts.”](#)

The *Economist* ran this right after a series of minor spats between Washington and Beijing had occurred. It offers a sensible assessment of a crucial bilateral relationship, which has relevance not only for remembering what happened early in 2010, but also for preparing for Hu Jintao's upcoming visit to the United States.

Track Three (March): ["Google Rules, an interview with David Drummond."](#)

Due to her tenure at CNN as the station's Beijing bureau chief and her subsequent emergence as a leading analyst of new media, Rebecca MacKinnon was uniquely positioned to comment on the flap between Google and the Chinese Communist Party that made headlines last year—and to pose questions to Drummond, who holds a high post within the American company involved, in this *Index on Censorship* interview. Needless to say, debates over the role of the Internet in Chinese life, tensions between foreign business and the CCP, and concern about censorship remain important parts of the PRC story .

Track Four (April): ["Expo Offers Shanghai a Turn in the Spotlight"](#) by David Barboza.

This overview of the lead-up to and very beginning of the Expo remains a useful place to start in assessing this massive spectacle. And it bears re-reading as smaller scale international exhibitions (e.g. the horticultural fair taking place in Xi'an this year) continue to be used to try to raise the profile of specific Chinese cities.

Track 5: (May): ["The Next Empire"](#) by Howard French.

French has spent significant parts of his career reporting from Africa and China. This makes him ideally suited to cover the story of Chinese immigration to and investment in Africa, a phenomenon of importance in and well beyond 2010 that he reports on superbly here.

Track 6 (June): ["China's Female Suicide Mystery"](#) by Megan Shank.

While China is rapidly urbanizing and much of the reporting on the country focuses on cities, more than half of the Chinese population still lives in rural settings. In addition, when the social impact of issues such as poverty makes headlines, the importance of gender as a variable affecting these issues is often overlooked. This report zeroes in on the countryside and the specific reasons for the high percentage of rural suicides that involve female victims. It has a forward-looking aspect (as well as a hopeful one), in the author's focus on factors that have started to bring about a decrease in suicides by rural women.

Track 7 (July): ["Chinese Abroad—Strangers at Home"](#) by Geremie Barmé.

This is a smart, historically informed look at the important roles that people of Chinese ancestry living in other parts of the world have played in China's economic resurgence—and the vulnerable position they can find themselves in when working in the PRC. It makes particularly good reading in 2011, due to this being the year of the centenary of the 1911 Revolution, an event associated with Sun Yat-sen, who relied heavily on fundraising outside of China in his efforts to bring about radical change in that country.

Track 8 (August): ["We Are Not Machines': Teen Spirit on China's Shopfloor"](#) by Mary Gallagher.

A political scientist's savvy take on labor issues, including working conditions and pep talks in the Foxconn plant (which made headlines when a series of suicides took place there) and the strike wave that swept through Japanese-run factories in South China in May and June. While focusing in part on stories in the news last year, it frames discussion of them in terms of ongoing trends, including shifting demographics.

Track 9 (September): ["A Message Too Powerful to Stop"](#) by Perry Link.

One of the most astute analysts of Chinese writing weighs in here on Han Han, the difficult-to-categorize race car driver and novelist who is probably China's (and the world's) most widely read blogger. Link describes Han Han as "a master of Aesopian wit," an apt characterization of a figure who had a particularly busy year in 2010, launching a new magazine (which was [abruptly shut down last week](#)) and writing posts that dealt with topics such as anti-Japanese protests and Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Peace Prize in subtly subversive ways, some of which appeared only briefly online at his site, before being scrubbed away by censors, yet lived on by being quoted by others.

Track 10 (October): ["China's Quest for a Suitable Nobel"](#) by Julia Lovell.

There was a lot of smart writing on the Nobel Peace Prize, some by journalists on the ground, some by human rights activists, and some by academic China specialists. Lovell, who falls in the latter category, draws on the work she did back in graduate school on the PRC's "Nobel Complex" and on writer-in-exile Gao Xingjian, another person whose prize was viewed by Beijing as the wrong sort of Nobel recognition for a Chinese individual.

Track 11 (November): ["The Rise of the Tao"](#) by Ian Johnson.

While the resurgence of Confucianism has gotten more attention, Taoism's increasing significance is important. Johnson's profile of a Taoist nun offers a superb introduction to this phenomenon. One forward-looking aspect of this piece, like that of French's article on Chinese migration to Africa, is that the essay showcases themes that an author plans to expand upon in a book-length project.

Track 12 (December): ["The Revolution of 1911"](#) by Zhou Nai-Ling.

This provocative article by an American-trained but now PRC-based political scientist is a perfect hinge reading for moving from 2010 to 2011. It looks at current trends that parallel those of a century ago, as the 1911 Revolution drew near.

Track 13 (New Year's Day Bonus Track): ["China's Big Zhang!"](#) by Michael Meyer.

Read it to learn why a Chinese "online forum voted 'zhang'—rapid price increase—2010's 'character of the year.'" And why: "Even the dead are affected by zhang."