

University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012

China Beat Archive

2010

Confessions of a Lifelong China Watcher

Angilee Shah

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

Shah, Angilee, "Confessions of a Lifelong China Watcher" (2010). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 779.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/779>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Confessions of a Lifelong China Watcher

June 14, 2010 in [Books](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)

Richard Baum, [China Watcher: Confessions of a Peking Tom](#) (University of Washington Press, 2010).

By Angilee Shah

Looking back on China's dramatic recent history, from the devastation of the Great Leap Forward to today's exuberant "socialism with Chinese characteristics," is a fascinating exercise. *China Watcher* offers the rare opportunity to learn this history as author Richard Baum did — from the front row.

China Watcher is a memoir and a contemporary history rolled into one. A professor of political science at UCLA, Baum is a self-proclaimed China addict. "For more than forty years China has been my drug of choice," he begins his narrative of "more than three dozen trips to China" to almost every province.

Baum began his academic career at a time when virulent anti-communism and the Free Speech Movement collided with leftist academic admiration for the Cultural Revolution, and when China was still closed to foreigners. Baum spent a year researching in Taiwan, where he recalls accidentally spending his first night abroad with his wife and infant son in a hotel frequented by prostitutes and their clients. Baum is forthcoming about his own cultural education, stumbling with language and bureaucracy — or, as he calls it, "China's Great Wall of Inconvenience." And he took the country's tensions in stride, writing limericks about Mao's notorious wife and the shortcomings of a colleague's television appearance, and recognizing his own imperfections. "Over the years," Baum explains, "I have generally prided myself on not taking myself — or my career — so seriously that I couldn't laugh at my own foibles."

Being a smart-aleck got him in trouble in academic circles at times, but it has served his memoir well. It is rare to find a serious scholar who is able to write about his life's work with such levity. We witness not just his knowledge (and ours) about China grow, but also watch him coming of age. These are the strongest chapters, full of political missteps and scholarly achievement — sometimes both in one, as when he illegally copied a classified document outlining Mao's socialist education program, which helped him analyze the Party's secret directives.

The violent end of student and worker protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989 represent a turning point in history and in Baum's narrative. The second half of *China Watcher* focuses more on China's growth — its relationships with American universities and Baum's own experience building exchanges included — and on the author's cultural observations and political assessments, leaving behind the wonderfully vulnerable and personally revealing tone of earlier chapters. Baum believed that the Chinese Communist Party would have to do much to repair the wounds they inflicted in 1989, but "Reform and Opening" re-awakened a nationalism among Chinese students that he could not have predicted. By the late 1990s, alongside China's growing economy and pride came rifts in U.S.-China relations and a spate of American books warning against China's rise.

Baum does much to counteract China hysterics; he argues that China's politics and society are becoming more open, along with its economy. He also holds that China's leaders are insecure about the potential for uprisings: "The long, dark shadow of post-Tiananmen stress disorder lingers in China, casting a pall over the country's political life," he writes. His measured optimism for the country and its relations with the rest of the world are all the more convincing for his exciting narrative about a long career of China watching.

Angilee Shah is a freelance journalist who writes about globalization and politics. You can read more of her work at www.angileeshah.com.

This review originally appeared at [Zócalo Public Square](#). It is reposted here with permission.

Read an excerpt from China Watcher [here](#).

Tags: [Angilee Shah](#), [Richard Baum](#)