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2010

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Wasserstrom, Jeffrey, "On Michael Jackson in Mongolia, Hanging out at Shanghai's World's Fair, and Other Topics: A Quick Q & A with Marketplace's Rob Schmitz" (2010). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 840.

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# On Michael Jackson in Mongolia, Hanging out at Shanghai's World's Fair, and Other Topics: A Quick Q & A with Marketplace's Rob Schmitz

November 16, 2010 in [Uncategorized](#) by [jwasserstrom](#) | [Permalink](#)  
by Jeffrey Wasserstrom

*Over the summer, there was a changing of the guard in the Shanghai office of [Marketplace](#), an American radio program that has consistently carried smart reports about China. Scott Tong moved from the PRC back to the US (where he continues to work for the show) and former Peace Corps volunteer [Rob Schmitz](#) took his place. I had the pleasure of meeting them both in Shanghai in July and ran a post with the former in early August, in which he reflected on his time covering the China beat. Now, as a sequel to that post, comes a quick q and a with Schmitz, who recently did a great feature on Inner Mongolia (listen to it [here](#), and check out the striking photos that he took to accompany the report [here](#)), which among other things is a fascinating addition to the growing number of intriguing pieces, in varied media, on how life in the PRC is being transformed by the increasing importance of cars as forms of [transportation](#) and [status symbols](#):*

*JW: What story has been the most fun to cover for Marketplace since you arrived in Shanghai?*

RS: I just finished a series of stories on the rapid economic transformation of the Ordos basin in Inner Mongolia. All the big dreams, hope, and optimism that make life in today's urban China so full of electricity seemed to shine even brighter in this tiny region. The area is making a mint off its status as one of the most prominent coal and natural gas producers of China.

Nearly everyone I met there was either looking for investors or looking to invest. Both groups were overcome with a type of gold fever that made them fun to be around. One guy intercepted me on the airplane to Ordos and talked me into scheduling an interview with the CEO of his logistics company. When I showed up the next morning, I was ushered to the corner office. The CEO shook my hand without letting go. At the point where it started to become uncomfortable, a photographer appeared out of nowhere and began to snap photos. The CEO then released my hand and announced that he was too busy for an interview. They had gotten what they needed: a photograph of their leader with a foreigner for promotional material to attract more investors. But I fought for a consolation prize. After the paparazzi shoot, I asked my new acquaintance for a tour of the automobile industrial park his company was constructing. He was happy to do so, and the result ended up in the first piece of the series.

Two days later, I met my Mongolian fixer. I found him through a mutual acquaintance, and we had spent the week prior emailing each other about the details of my upcoming trip and some of the rural areas where we could find ethnic Mongolian herders to talk to. I expected him to be middle-aged, possibly a former herder. Not even close. Baigal was 24 years old, had a shaved head, and upon meeting me, had one question: "Do you like Eminem?" Baigal was an aspiring rapper. He brought two of his college friends along on our day-trip through the grasslands. There we were: three ethnic Mongolians, my Chinese assistant, and me, crammed into a tiny Suzuki Swift, listening to a mix CD Baigal had put together of Mongolian hip-hop music. All of the sudden the car goes silent. Two electronic gongs pound through the speakers. It's 'Beat It' by Michael Jackson. Within a minute, we're all humming along—Mongolians, a Chinese, and an American—as the grasslands of Inner Mongolia flash by outside our Japanese car... there's nothing like Michael Jackson to make the world a little smaller.

*JW: What do you consider the biggest challenge to reporting from China just now?*

RS: On the surface, China is a journalist's playground: It's changing at an historic pace, it's home to the largest human migration the world has ever known, and its fate has become intertwined with the world's fate. The trick is to make sense of all this. China forces you to become a better reporter—you're constantly having to check your facts, because what you thought were facts oftentimes weren't

facts to start with. It's difficult to find the reality behind economic numbers from Beijing, and it requires persistent follow-up with a variety of economists, academics, social scientists, and, most importantly, laobaixing. Once you've got what you think is a reasonable amount of material to tell a story, then the challenge becomes trying to fit the nuance and complexities of China into a four-minute feature. The amount of material left on the cutting room floor could fill books.

*JW: What has surprised you most about how China has—or hasn't—changed since you were there last?*

RS: After living in Sichuan as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the mid-90s, I've returned to China every two years or so as a journalist, and, like many who live here, I've learned to reset my expectations each day when I wake up. Anything can and will happen here, and the rapid pace of change makes surprises an everyday part of life. I just came back from a weekend trip in Hangzhou. My wife, son, and my mother, who's visiting from the states, walked a few blocks from our home to the subway, where it took 20 minutes to arrive to Shanghai's new Hongqiao train station. From there, we boarded a sleek, comfortable bullet train that whisked us to Hangzhou in 38 minutes. A trip that used to take 3-4 hours was now reduced to under an hour. As the countryside went by at around 220 mph, my two year-old sat in my lap with his forehead planted on the window, screaming in excitement at how fast we were going. I felt the same way.

*JW: During your first stay in China you were based in Sichuan and now you are living in Shanghai. Any thoughts you want to share, besides the obvious ones of infrastructure and access to international goods and the like, about how the two living experiences are similar and different?*

RS: My China experience has changed alongside my evolving career path and in tandem with the economic transformation of the country. In the 1990s, I was a volunteer teacher in the city of Zigong. My Peace Corps site mates and I were the first foreigners to live in the city since 1949. I lived on a hundred US dollars a month and it was my job to help people. Today, I'm a journalist in China's largest city, I'm one of at least 150,000 foreigners in Shanghai, and it's my job to pester people with questions. I make more money than I did during my Peace Corps days, but I miss the relationships I shared with my Chinese students and colleagues when I was a teacher. As a journalist, it's more difficult to cultivate these types of meaningful relationships because you're always rushing to meet the next deadline. But it's not impossible. I'm working hard to establish a handful of sources from all walks of life who I can check-in with from time to time. It's not a daily routine like I had when I was a teacher, but it's regular enough to serve as a suitable substitute. On the flip side, being a journalist gives me the freedom to explore and analyze parts of Chinese society I was always curious about but didn't have access to as a teacher. It gives me the opportunity to tell the stories of the Chinese people to an audience thirsty for more knowledge about this fascinating land. It's a fantastic job. China inspired me to become a journalist in the first place, and I'm thrilled to have this opportunity.

*JW: Now that the Expo is over, any predictions on how it will be viewed in China a year from now, whether it will be thought of as a success, a failure, a bit of both?*

RS: I think it depends on whom you talk to. For the Chinese, I think Expo was a rousing success. Tens of millions of people attended the event. Many of them were from smaller cities throughout China and were making their first trip outside their province to 'see the world' in Shanghai. It's easy to criticize the flaws of the event, and many foreign journalists did. But I think dwelling too much on the negative aspects misses the point that this World's Fair really wasn't designed for the international community. It was made for China, and the Chinese clearly benefitted from it, no matter how long the lines became and how tacky some of the pavilions were. For the more sophisticated worldly visitor, yes, parts of the Expo were a huge disappointment. To many, the mix of corporate and Chinese propaganda throughout much of the fair was an accurate reflection of a disturbing new world order. But for me, a former teacher in rural Sichuan whose Chinese friends were constantly dreaming of seeing the world and learning about different cultures and ideas, Expo gave them a chance to do that, and I think that's great.