

5. *The Narrowing Gap Between Hong Kong and the Most Developed Mainland Cities*

When we first went to China, going from Shanghai or Beijing felt like moving not just through space but also through time, like from one century into another, but this is no longer the case. Today, plenty of things still set Hong Kong off from other cities of the PRC. For example, only there can bookstores stock works on 1989's June 4th Massacre and the Dalai Lama. Often, however, the lifestyle divide between China's most developed mainland cities and the countryside or even China's most developed cities and its second-tier urban centers now seems larger than that between these vibrant metropolises and the former Crown Colony. It's not only the cellphones, private cars and so on – it's an attitude, a way of carrying oneself. Two decades ago, even a fairly unobservant person could pick an overseas Chinese out of any urban crowd in China, even if they wore locally-acquired clothes. A million little hints, from the way they walked to teeth, eyeglasses and so on, gave it away. Today, a quick snapshot of a Beijing or Shanghai street scene could be mistaken for Hong Kong,

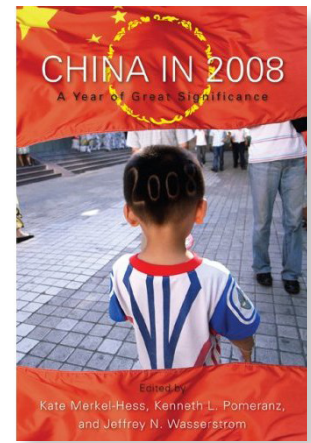


Professor Jeffrey Wasserstrom in Beijing.

This is no definitive list. Another pair of scholars would come up with different items. Some of ours reflect our interests (in local history, globalization, popular culture, etc.) and generation (we not only each went to China first at about the same time but at about the same age, while in our mid-twenties). But the list reveals something generic and far from generationally specific: that for a full appreciation of how China has changed (and stayed the same), it's crucial to go beyond the soundbites. This is what the best PRC-based journalists

strive to do, and what we aim for—whether we're teaching, writing for scholarly journals, or blogging for *Huffington Post* and *China Beat*.

History professors Kenneth Pomeranz and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, along with history graduate student Kate Merkel-Hess, are editors of *China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance*. Based on postings from The China Beat blog as well as works from other leading publications and completely new material, the book showcases the as-it-happened reports and commentaries of a mix of distinguished academics, high-profile journalists, freelance writers and up-and-coming young China specialists. ■



HAITI: A LONG CONNECTION

By Amy Wilentz

Just before Christmas, I went down to Haiti for the first time in eight years on assignment to write a travel piece and a political piece. The nights in Port-au-Prince were illuminated with *fanales*, urn-sized paper lanterns -- in the shapes of old-fashioned Haitian gingerbread houses or churches -- that are made by street craftsmen during the Christmas season and that hang from roadside trees on the hills going to the suburbs. It's as if there are two Haitis at this time of year: a sort of Thomas Kinkadee country, filled with clean little white buildings brightly lit up from the inside, and then the real place, dark, poor, hungry and often without electricity.

The latter was the subject of my first book, *The Rainy Season: Haiti Since Duvalier*, published in 1989. In many ways, Haiti has changed enormously since I first visited in 1985, just before the fall of the dynastic dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier. First of all, an ele democracy

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is in place. That's good, although governmental effectiveness is hampered by a lack of money as well as by traditions of corruption inculcated during centuries of national penury. Second, Haiti burst out of the Duvalier era into an age of voluble freedom of speech. For example,

while the cranky and weak leadership endlessly mulls over the wisdom of permitting the ousted, controversial and hugely popular president Jean-Bertrand Aristide to return to Haiti from exile in South Africa, on the walls of Port-au-Prince, the capital city, are huge scrawling graffiti proclaiming "Aristid Wa." Which, translated from the Haitian Creole, means Aristide is King.

For me, though, the biggest difference since 1985 is that Aristide is not there.

Aristide, an outspoken Catholic priest in the slums of Port-au-Prince when I lived in Haiti in the 1980s, was in some ways the hero of my book, published just before he took the politically unwholesome step of running for president. It was odd for me to be in Haiti without him there—I felt as if I were unfairly treading on his turf, the place where, in his mind at least, he should be. We'd had a falling out in 2000 over a short profile I published in *The New York Times* magazine, and have never communicated since. I heard from mutual friends that he considered the piece a *trahison*, or betrayal. He'd come to believe that I existed to serve his cause in some way, not realizing that the fact of taking power utterly transforms a subject's relationship

to a journalist just as it utterly transforms a public figure's civic responsibilities. With him in the presidential palace and not the priestly parish, I was less tolerant of his defects, and he, less accepting of my criticism. So my visit was tinged with nostalgia for a simpler time in my Haitian life.

On this trip I realized — as I bought up small souvenirs or ate peanut butter with hot pepper, or lit the one light in my hotel room, not by switching it on but by plugging it in, or drove over roads that felt more like jagged stairs than roadbeds, or as I watched people do laundry in street runoff or saw them marching through a country town clad all in white for Jesus — that for me there is no escaping Haiti. It's essential to me. A part of my brain, or soul, is now hardwired (if a soul can be hardwired) to understand, or at least recognize with familiarity, Haitian politics, Haitian behavior, Haitian culture.

I wanted to take a *fanale* home with me. But fanales famously do not survive the plane trip back to the States. So I left them there, hanging from the trees in a Haiti that is changed and different, yet as transparent to me still as the air through which, defiantly, they shine.

English professor Amy Wilentz teaches in the Literary Journalism program. The former Jerusalem correspondent for *The New Yorker* and a long-time contributing editor at *The Nation*, she is also the author of *Martyrs' Crossing* (2000), and *I Feel Earthquakes More Often Than They Happen: Coming to California in the Age of Schwarzenegger* (2006). ■