

**POSTCARDS FROM TOMORROW
SQUARE: REPORTS FROM CHINA**

by James Fallows
Vintage, 288 pages, \$14.95

Reviewed by JACK PERKOWSKI

CHINA IS A popular topic these days, so any new book on the subject is judged based on whether it has something different to say. James Fallows' *Postcards From Tomorrow Square* passes this test with flying colors. Everyone, even the most experienced China hand, will learn and gain new insights from reading it.

Mr. Fallows is a national correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly* who has been based in China since 2006. His book draws its name from Tomorrow Square, the futuristic building in Shanghai where he and his wife have been staying, and is a compilation of monthly articles on China that he has written for the magazine. Taken together, they provide interesting perspectives on a broad range of subjects—from outsourcing to reality shows in China—all in a highly readable format.

In each article, Mr. Fallows delves into the subject matter at hand in sufficient depth to provide meaningful new information. For example, the chapter entitled "Macau's Big Gamble" provides rich background on this former Portuguese colony and the business of gambling. It describes how the industry generally works and

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the incredible development that is now taking place on the peninsula. As Macau opens to the outside world and becomes an Asian gambling Mecca, it mixes Stanley Ho and other local players with Las Vegas moguls such as Steve Wynn and Sheldon Adelson.

In comparing gambling practices in Macau to those in highly regulated venues like Las Vegas, Mr. Fallows raises relevant questions: "Which side will prevail in the battle for Macau? The shady system that has been the backbone of its economy and that local companies rely on? Or the international standards that the Nevada Gaming Commission and the shareholders of the world are forcing on the likes of Wynn, Adelson and MGM Mirage?" His discussion

The Chinese are generally optimistic about what life may hold 20 years from now. Postcards begins to explain why.

of Macau and gambling also provides a unique angle from which to understand the "tensions between 'Chinese values' and the outside world" that are playing out as the country marches forward on its path of development.

Another strong feature of *Postcards* is Mr. Fallows' effort to examine the "other side of the coin" on matters that are typically viewed only through the prism of Western observers. A case in point: China has been roundly criticized for the environmental damage caused by its rapid industrialization. Fair enough, but rather than simply join the chorus of criticism, Mr. Fallows broadens the discussion. "China's environmental situation is disastrous. And it is improving," he writes. "Everyone knows about the first part. The second part is important, too."

To make his point, Mr. Fallows describes in vivid detail Beijing's efforts to improve air quality in advance of the 2008 Olympic Games. As the Games neared and concerns about the air heightened, Mr. Fal-

llows relates how the city government was mocked in the foreign media for reporting an ever-improving count of “blue sky days” per month. But after spending a day with a group of more than 20 physicists, atmospheric scientists and other researchers from the Chinese Academy of Sciences in charge of measuring the real quality of the Beijing’s air, Mr. Fallows was “less ready to scoff.” In his words, “everything about the people and the process seemed serious and scientific rather than political.”

Among other steps being taken, he learned that the scientists had built 1,000 foot-high towers around the city to measure pollutants at different altitudes, were using American-made spectrometers to measure ozone and nitrous oxide levels, and were comparing their results to a steady stream of data they received from geophysical satellites in the United States. His point: “Outside recognition of where and why China has made progress increases the prospects that it will make further advances.”

At a time when the entire world is focused on energy efficiency and climate change, Mr. Fallows also describes how China’s entrepreneurs are developing creative solutions to the country’s environmental problems. He tells the story of Chinese tycoon Zhang Hue, who built the company Broad Air Conditioning into an industrial powerhouse by developing and promoting a form of air conditioning that uses less energy than conventional means. As Mr. Fallows is careful to note, Broad did not invent the technology, but rather took the risk of “investing heavily in an approach that companies in Japan, Korea, Europe and North America had looked at and neglected.”

Innovation in China is also playing a role, according to Mr. Fallows. Tang Jinquan, a Chinese engineer, found a way to “make the dirty, wasteful fast-grow-

ing cement industry less environmentally destructive” by capturing the enormous amount of heat normally wasted in cement-making and using it to run turbines that generate electricity, cutting the power needed to produce cement by 30%.

Finally, the book benefits from the fact that Mr. Fallows spent time in Japan during the 1980s when Japan was “on its way up.” Japan’s experiences are often compared to those of China. However, Mr. Fallows has lived in both countries in similar periods of their development and is more qualified than most to explain where they are the same and, as importantly, where they are different.

Because *Postcards* is a series of articles written on a number of disparate subjects, the author’s views on China are not developed as methodically as they might be in a more conventional book, though this is a small price to pay for those who missed the articles when they were first published in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

With the global economy in disarray, and the tendency for many to blame others, including China, for their own misfortune, I found the healthy balance that Mr. Fallows brings to the table very refreshing. He understands that we are witnessing the emergence of a new world order, and that China and the rest of the world need to make greater efforts to understand each other for this evolution to be as smooth as possible.

Mr. Fallows sums up his attitude toward China in the final pages of the book: “Almost everything the outside world thinks is wrong with China is indeed a problem ... But China’s reality includes more than its defects. Most people are far better off than they were 20 years ago, and they are generally optimistic about what life holds 20 years from now.” *Postcards* begins to explain why.