Playing Politics with Cats and Dogs

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By Jeffrey Wasserstrom

As regular readers of this blog already know, I recently crossed the Pacific to take part in the Beijing Forum, a fascinating if sometimes hard to figure out event that was valuable in part simply because of how many different countries were represented by at least one presenter. How often, after all, does an American academic find himself or herself in a room where there is an exchange of opinions going on between a scholar based in Moscow and a scholar based in Cairo, or hears an administrator from a university in Nairobi respond to comments his counterparts from Sri Lankan and Australian institutions have been making? (I know that dog and cat lovers may be getting impatient with this lead-up, but I promise I will get to animals and politics eventually, so feel free to skip to the final paragraphs.)

After the Forum concluded on November 9, as followers of China Beat also know, I had the opportunity to give a talk at the Beijing Foreign Correspondents Club of China. This was memorable for various
reasons. One was that just before, during and after the formal event, I got to take thoughtful questions from and exchange ideas with a mixture of both people whose bylines I often come across, such as Mark Magnier (who writes for the Los Angeles Times, the paper I read with my morning coffee) and Melinda Liu of Newsweek (who graciously hosted the event), and journalists I hadn’t known of before (but will now look out for on the web). Another thing that made it memorable was that the talk’s setting afforded a great bird’s eye view of part of the city, which according to local residents is still enjoying post-Olympic reduced smog levels. And, finally, the talk led to me being quoted, for the first time ever I think (and quoted very appropriately at that), in an Indian newspaper.

Over the next week or two, I’ll blog about other parts of that quick trip, which began right after the American Presidential election (the result of which was seen as a very good one by every Chinese person I encountered who voiced an opinion) and ended with a few days spent in the big city on the Huangpu River that’s the subject of my latest book, Global Shanghai, 1850-2010, a work due out in Britain in two weeks (with slightly later release dates in other parts of the world). I’m not sure yet what the focus of my future trip-related posts will be. I’ll likely have things to say about how Shanghai is gearing up for the 2010 Expo, the event that provides the endpoint for my book. I’ll also have something to say about two publications by China Beat contributors I read and enjoyed while traveling: Lijia Zhang’s engagingly written and often moving Socialism is Great! A Worker’s Memoir of the New China, and Xujun Eberlein’s compelling short story collection, Apologies Forthcoming.

In addition, though this site hasn’t gone in for restaurant reviews in the past (and probably won’t often run them in the future), I’ll have something to say about two eateries that were mentioned recently on China Beat in the interview with NPR’s Louisa Lim, “Fish Nation” (pictured in the accompan
I had enjoyable meals in very interesting company in each of them. I'll also likely refer to other restaurants I ate in or simply noticed that provide windows into how China is changing and the complex ways that globalization can work.

For now, though, just some ending comments about the feline turn that political commentary about the American election took while I was in China, just as U.S. discussions of Obama made a lot about the puppy problem his family is facing. Let me begin with the canine conundrum—or what in Mao's day might have been dubbed the canine contradiction. On the night before my Beijing FCCC talk, I caught a CNN report on President-Elect Obama's first press conference, which included his now much-dissected humorous reference to being torn between getting a specially bred hypoallergenic dog (due to one of his children being allergic) and getting a shelter dog (even though these tend to be "mutts," a term he said could also apply to himself).

Nothing related to dogs came up the next day (if the Chinese press latched onto the mutt maodun, they didn't do so in the papers I saw). But cats did—via the first joke in Chinese I have ever been sent via text messaging. On my second day in Beijing, I had bought my first Chinese mobile phone—it didn't take long to discover how essential it is to have one of these, in part simply to be able to inform people you are planning to meet how late you will be due to traffic delays. Until November 10, though, the only text messages I had gotten had either been spam advertisements or queries about whether traffic delays were going to make me late for a lunch engagement (for once, they didn't). Then, as I sat with a colleague, he began chuckling at a message he'd received and when I asked him what he was laughing at, he said "why don't I just zap it to you." So, through the wonders of modern technology, the joke, which had likely made its way around much of the PRC by that point (since I later learned it was a more refined version of one that China Daily had written about a few days before), moved through the ether from his phone inches away to mine.
It was a perhaps predictable play on Deng Xiaoping’s famous line, which has been riffed and mocked and modified in so many ways before, that it is foolish to be too ideologically dogmatic, for when it comes to catching mice, it doesn’t matter whether a cat is black or white, just whether it gets the job done. The Chinese characters that showed up on my phone said, in essence: "It used to be that in the electoral process, the American people would only choose white presidents, never black ones. But then after the American people studied Deng Xiaoping Theory, they realized that it doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white, a cat that can solve a crisis is a good cat."

By the way, the photo of the dog at the top of this posting obviously has nothing to do with the presidential election. It was just a shot I found interesting, since it was taken on a street that in general looks much like those I remember from my first trip to Shanghai back in the mid-1980s (in the way that, say, the face-lifted and spruced up Nanjing Road doesn’t at all), yet via the pet in the sweater flags one of the many ways that the city has changed since then.

Tags: cats, dogs, Global Shanghai, Obama