8-31-2009

Obama in China: Friendly Advice

Robert A. Kapp

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/388

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.
Obama in China: Friendly Advice

August 31, 2009 in Uncategorized by The China Beat | Permalink

After Barack Obama’s inauguration, we ran a series at China Beat of various China experts’ reading recommendations for Obama on China (See installments I, II, III, IV, V, VI). At the time, we assumed a trip to China would be one of Obama’s top priorities—as is now clear with last week’s announcement that Obama will visit China in November 2009. So we sent out a few emails to China watchers from a variety of backgrounds, asking if they had advice for Obama as he prepares for the summit in Beijing. Here, the first installment from Robert A. Kapp, former president of the U.S.-China Business Council.

By Robert A. Kapp

Dear Mr. President,

As a (perhaps the least prominent) member of your Asia Foreign Policy Group during the campaign, I am thrilled that you are soon headed for China. If your trip is, for you, anything like my trip was for me (albeit more than 32 years ago), you will be fascinated, impressed, and perhaps sobered at how much there is to see and know and how little time you have to accomplish all that you might want to.

Here are a few random tips on how to make your visit most successful; from what I have seen of you as president, most of the things I offer have long since come naturally to you anyway, and your personal grace and dignity, as well as your intellect and grasp of issues, will prove the guarantors of your successful visit. Still, here are a few thoughts.

1. Make a point of listening attentively. The pace of high-level meetings can be slow; don’t try to force it by pushing ahead before your counterpart has finished. If you do not fully understand, in translation, something your host has said to you, ask for clarification. Allow time for silence between deliveries. Sometimes the Chinese waits for a while to be sure that the American visitor has finished his remarks; unable to tolerate the silent interval, the American starts talking again. Let things settle in any back-and-forth.

2. Avoid verbal pyrotechnics and culture-bound American colloquialisms. You are blessedly well spoken anyway, but popular culture terms, US sports jargon, and humor based either on purely American experiences or on English language word play don’t work. We veterans of the early days will remember Doonesbury’s figure Honey (still very much alive and active in real life in Beijing, by the way) telling her Chinese official boss, “The American is making a joke; laugh now.”

3. Ask questions, particularly on topics generically similar to those of your own nation and your personal experience. How does China approach, say, the need for better health care delivery to the poor? How is China approaching environmental challenges such as mushrooming automobile-generated pollution in the cities?

4. Emphasize your commitment to promoting more and farther-reaching cooperation between the US and Chinese as uniquely significant global partners, but emphasize as well that despite differences in wealth and other national characteristics, such intensified “win-win” cooperation will require flexibility and realistic compromise by both countries.

5. While it is unlikely, there is the possibility that your Chinese hosts will subject you to one or another set-piece statement on an issue of contention. Your staff knows these issues well and you will be well briefed. My recommendation is to reply with a simple “Thank you for making your position clear,” without elaboration or attempt at response.

6. You will be well supplied by your staff with appropriate gifts and souvenirs for presentation at certain occasions. I hope they will include copies of your book, Dreams from My Father, which is a major contribution to the world’s understanding, not only of you, but of your country. If only Chinese leaders produced works of comparable insight, the world would be a better place.
7. Celebrate the contribution that Americans of Chinese descent have made, and continue to make, to the United States. This need not simply be a list of Nobel winners and world-renowned artists. The traditions of excellence, hard work, family and social community solidarity, and economic advancement that Americans of Chinese descent so widely embody are a credit both to the influences of their Chinese heritage and to the opportunities and rewards that America makes available to its citizens.

8. If Mrs. Obama, and especially your children, are with you, be sure to give them some China time. China can be a mind-expanding experience for kids, and the Chinese people love children and parents who love their children.

9. And finally: if you have to cite “old sayings,” cite ours, not theirs. The American experience has produced wonderful aphorisms; use them and explain them. Don’t pretend to instruct the Chinese on their own “old sayings” by reciting them back to your hosts. The Chinese will very likely provide you with some of theirs anyway.

Be Sociable, Share!