12-2-2009

The Forbidden City and American Presidents

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/387

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.
With all of the attention generated by Barack Obama’s speed-touring of Beijing sites, we became interested in finding out a bit about previous presidential sightseeing itineraries. There were some useful summaries on the web of what Nixon and company had said about the Great Wall, but what about the Forbidden City as a presidential tourist attraction, past and present? This complex of palaces, which are the subject of a recent book by Geremie Barmé that we’ve praised already on this blog, would seem a more problematic place to include on the go-to lists for foreign dignitaries, given its links to the Qing Dynasty, whose last emperor was toppled by the 1911 Revolution — still celebrated as a prelude to the 1949 one that brought the Communist Party to power. Here are two vignettes that people in the know have said we can share with our readers to fill in some blanks:

Sheila Melvin is a Stanford-based writer whose books include Rhapsody in Red: How Classical Music Became Chinese, which she co-wrote with her conductor-husband Jindong Cai. She offers this brief account of a day in 1972 that her spouse remembers fondly:

My husband was a middle school student in Beijing during Nixon’s first visit to China and by chance his class was scheduled to visit the Forbidden City on the same day as Nixon — a day on which there was also a huge snowfall. My husband and about 200 other students got to the Forbidden City and were told it was closed, but then somebody decided that they should make it look “normal” for Nixon by allowing at least a few people in — they handpicked 50 students, including my husband. (He claims he was chosen because of his sartorial style, a light blue “qingnian zhuang” not commonly seen during the Cultural Revolution.) He and his select few classmates had the entire Forbidden City to themselves in a snowfall. They never saw Nixon, but it was a magical moment for them all.

Anne Marie Brady, a China specialist based at New Zealand’s University of Canterbury, whose works include the aptly-titled (for the purposes of her comments) Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People’s Republic, adds this to our understanding of the subject:

According to a 1979 waishi (foreign affairs) handbook, a typical visit for a high level VIP should include taking them to both traditional tourist spots such as the Forbidden City, in addition to letting them see sites more in keeping with China’s revolutionary ideology such as the Beijing Coking Plant, the No. 1 State Cotton Mill, the Beijing General Petroleum Chemical Works, and the Beijing No. 3 Deaf-Mute School. Visitors could also expect to be given extensive briefings on production figures and the current political line. President Obama and his team should count themselves lucky...

Tags: Barack Obama, Richard Nixo