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Presidential Reading Recommendations

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By Kate Merkel-Hess
There are many people just now wondering what Barack Obama’s China policy will look like, and many eager to advise him. For instance, the National Bureau of Asian Research’s journal, Asia Policy, has published a lengthy roundtable that does just that. I was curious too—what would a learned group of distinguished China watchers, including academics, journalists, and public intellectuals, propose as the new President’s information sources? Here was the note I sent out:

The United States has a new President who seems intellectually curious, will definitely have to deal with many issues relating to China, and is likely to take a trip to Beijing before too long. Imagine that you have just been told that he wants you to send him (via his Blackberry, of course) a list of five things you think he should read to help him formulate policies relating to China and/or prepare to go there on a state visit. He’d also like you to give just a sentence or two of explanation for each item, justifying its inclusion on your list, and he wants you to be clear that you can choose books, articles or online pieces as readings, and that they can be old or new. What would you write?

Over the next few weeks, I’ll be running the answers China Beat receives. I hope some of them will be inspirations for further inquiry and reading, for you and for (fingers crossed) President Obama. Here is the first installment...

Ezra Vogel is Henry Ford II Research Professor of the Social Sciences, Emeritus at Harvard University, where he has taught since 1964. From 1993 to 1995, Vogel served as National Intelligence Officer for East Asia at the National Intelligence Council. His publications include Japan as Number One: Lessons for America as well as numerous other books and articles on China, Japan, and East Asia.

1. Qian Qichen, Ten Episodes in China’s Diplomacy. A readable authoritative account by China’s leading diplomat of recent decades of China’s diplomacy.
5. Sections in books by Jimmy Carter, Kissinger, Zbyszinski on their contacts with China.
6. Recent speeches by Stapleton Roy, former ambassador to China (whose brother David Roy is a professor at U of Chicago). [Editor’s Note. Here are few links to recent speeches by Stapleton Roy: At National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, 2005; At Center for American Progress, 2008; and see video below.]

Edward Friedman is professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His publications include Chinese Village, Socialist State and What If China Doesn’t Democratize?
1. I would want the new president to understand how the CCP regime has taken on the role of enemy of the spread of human rights and therefore urge him to read Ann Kent’s new book on the topic [Ed note: *Beyond Compliance: China, International Organizations, and Global Security*]. But I’d also want the new president to reverse the Bush policy of walking away from the U.N. Human Rights Council which now highlights social and economic rights rather than civil, political and religious rights. The U.S. should be a leader of the cause of all of these rights treated as part of a single agenda, including labor rights, women, indigenous people, and development. This would be change the world could believe in.

2. Second, I would want the president to understand the dog-eat-dog nature of Chinese life combined with the great broadening of personal freedom within an unaccountable, corrupt and cruel party-state. There are numerous books which could clarify these domestic Chinese realities, including novels. I prefer John Pomfret’s *Chinese Lessons*. It makes vivid the entrepreneurial frenzy that creates the China price which facilitates China’s global competitiveness.

3, 4. Third, I want the new president to cooperate with, deeply engage and even accommodate China (e.g. welcome it to rule-making bodies such as the G-8 in return for China bearing more of the global economic burden) but to do so understanding how Chinese politics infuses Chinese foreign policy with explosive possibilities since the traumas of 1989-91 which led to the purge of liberal reformers and the entrenchment of dangerous left conservatives, the military and security forces. Two books which capture this politics are Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower*, and Robert Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*. These books also reveal how Chinese domestic political forces contain nasty tendencies which can be dangerous to peace and to fundamental American interests and values. There is too much wishful thinking by analysts who are predicting China’s democratization tomorrow and its peaceful integration with the norms of the industrialized democracies globally the day before that. This is silly. Chinese leaders see China as a moral pole which has as much right as America to be its own global superpower, but serving Chinese interests.

5. Finally, for a president who cares about energy and the environment, I’d have him read, as a fifth book, Elizabeth Economy, *The River Runs Black*, which makes clear the ecological degradation and human cost of the CCP’s growth path. In short, I would want the president to have a positive agenda in approaching China, but to be without illusions about the nature of the Chinese system because the Beijing-Washington relationship decisively impacts what kind of a world will be left to future generations.

**Dr. Kerry Brown** is a senior fellow on the Asia Programme at Chatham House (the Royal Institute of Institutional Affairs, an international affairs think-tank). Brown writes widely on China, from briefing papers published by Chatham House (such as “Thirty Years On – China Celebrates the Reform Process”) to regular pieces for openDemocracy (such as his recent “China in 2009: a year for surprise”) and book reviews at Asian Review of Books.

1. *The River Runs Black*, by Elizabeth Economy. It sets out, in the starkest terms, the environmental price China has paid for its economic model, the mess it is in dealing with this, and why this is not now just China’s problem – but the world’s too.

2. *Will the Boat Sink the Water: The Life of China’s Peasants*, by Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao – banned in China, a no-holds barred account of the suffering of China’s 750 million farmers at the hands of corrupt officials and central government policy making. A remi
under of how China still relies on its agriculture sector, and of how much poverty there is in this new superpower

3. China Into the Future, edited by John Hoffman and Michael Enright – Excellent collection of essays on every aspect of China as it moves into the next decade. Tony Saitch’s piece on the demographic time bomb (ageing, and gender imbalance) is particularly sobering. As he said, “China will be the first country in history to grow old before it grows rich, and poison itself before it gets rich.”

4. China at the Crossroads by Peter Nolan – a brilliant account, by one of the most knowledgeable economists now operating in the UK, on the key issues facing China in the next decades – from its economic challenges, to its problematic integration into the global economy.

5. Struggling Giant: China in the 21st Century, by, alas, me! Very brief book, which sets out the characteristics of China now, and looks at the options for what it might be, negative and positive, by 2028.

I’ll keep posting recommendations as they arrive...

Tags: Barack Obama, China Policy