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Chinese-American Rapport During the President's Visit

The Chinese are masters of style, which they tend to consider as being as important as substance--or at least as being inextricable from substance. They are superb hosts. Western susceptibility to oriental charm is a widely recognized pitfall.

It is recognized that the following observations will not be needed by some of the likely readership. Some of the members of the party, however, may not have had experience in oriental ways. This paper is offered in the belief that the elements of style which it discusses can have considerable influence on the quality of communication achieved with the Chinese. The style of the "advance party" will be crucial in paving the way for a successful Presidential visit.

A. Chinese Etiquette

The more sophisticated Chinese will not expect an American to act like a Chinese, and will show an easy tolerance for differing customs. Chinese not accustomed to Western ways, however, could take offense at some of our habits, where certainly no offense would be intended. And even sophisticated Chinese appreciate the Westerner's attempts to abide by their social customs.

While the Chinese Communists have relaxed some of the traditional forms of social behavior, most of them have carried over into the post-revolutionary period. Where they are not in evidence, this may be an attempt on the Chinese part to make Westerners more comfortable. One cannot go wrong in bearing in mind the following points of etiquette, while taking into account the Chinese lead in possibly altering local custom to accommodate the visitors.

(1) Adherence to the rule that one does not touch one's drink at table without proposing a toast to another, or

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to others, at the table--though only a symbolic sip need be taken except in the case of those of equal or superior rank, when the glass should be drained. (This will require us to formulate in advance toasts appropriate to each member of the Chinese hierarchy present--to omit a ranking Chinese would be interpreted as a serious slight. The Department will suggest toasts appropriate to each official, which can be translated into Chinese conventions.

(2) The Chinese are precise about the use of titles when addressing Chinese at all ranks. They do not use the Chinese equivalent of "Mr." even for low-ranking personnel as a free substitute for "Committee Member Wang," "General Li," "Factory Manager Hsieh," or "Bureau Chief Cheng." (The use of the neutral term "Comrade" is of course not open to us.)

(3) Chinese are very sensitive to problems of precedence at doorways, in automobiles, etc. Even a token gesture of yielding right of way or the seat of honor to a Chinese is very much appreciated; failure to make the gesture when expected would be interpreted as arrogance.

(4) Members of the Presidential party should carry calling cards identifying their position. While there is far less emphasis upon this in present-day Peking than there has been at some points in the past, the Chinese custom of extravagant exchanging of calling cards has not died out.

B. Body Language

American and Chinese behavior patterns of gesticulation and "body language" are in general similar. However, the following should be carefully avoided:

(1) Standing with arms crossed. This pose, which could be interpreted by Americans as a gesture of nervous insecurity or even deference, is universally interpreted by Chinese as arrogance and hauteur. (This gesture has even become a convention with this meaning in Peking Opera.)

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(2) Standing with arms akimbo (hands on hips, elbows out). To Chinese, this is a pugnacious stance, symbolic of angry defiance.

(3) Beckoning with the index finger or with an upward motion of the arm or hand. The index finger is used to call cats and dogs or very small children. It is insulting to beckon to an adult Chinese in this way. To an American, beckoning with an upward sweep of the right arm or half opening and closing the outstretched palm of the hand are the two most common, friendly ways of saying: "come on over here!" This is how Chinese call servants or inferiors; to call an equal in this way is to insult him. The standard Chinese gesture used to beckon an equal is often mistaken by Americans for a wave goodbye. With arm outstretched and the palm of the hand facing downwards, Chinese half open and close the hand (repeatedly drawing the tips of the fingers toward themselves) to call a friend or equal to them.

C. Praise

Chinese are shameless flatterers, and expect to be flattered in return. The most sincere kind of flattery is of course imitation--evidence by the flatterer of a sincere desire to profit by learning from the wisdom of the flattered.

For anti-Communist Americans the necessity of flattering attentive PRC hosts during the President's visit presents problems. To praise many of those aspects of modern Chinese life of which the PRC is most proud would be inappropriate in terms of the US image, and would of course have unfavorable US domestic impact. What is there in PRC practices which the President or his entourage could publicly find admirable? What is there for Americans to learn from China? Some possible answers follow:

(1) Acupuncture: The average American reacts to the idea of acupuncture with a mixture of horror and disbelief

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in its efficacy. Yet, acupuncture (as refined by the Chinese Communists) is said now to incorporate elements of Western as well as traditional Chinese medical theory. Most importantly, it evidently works. The PRC evidences great pride in the achievements of its acupuncture technique. There is already some interest in the US in its study. A request by one or more ranking members of the party to view acupuncture technique, followed by a statement announcing an intention to urge study of acupuncture within the American medical community, would be very well received in the PRC.

(2) Pharmaceuticals and Surgery: The PRC is proud of its practical, scientific application of traditional herbal medicine to the curing of illness and disease. It is also proud of its achievements in surgery, especially the re-grafting of severed limbs; and in pharmacological chemistry, especially the synthesis of insulin. The US could indicate a desire to learn more about PRC discoveries in these fields, and could simultaneously offer to host PRC scientists interested in studying American medicine and pharmacology. Both countries would probably in actual fact gain from this exchange.

(3) Ecology: Out of necessity, the PRC has developed strains of grain and vegetable crops which do well with non-chemical ("organic") fertilizers. The Chinese have developed new techniques of treating human ordure to render it safe for use in the cultivation of vegetables. They have valuable experience to impart to American ecologists in the fields of "organic" gardening and non-chemical pest control. Moreover, they have paid a great deal of attention to the problems of erosion and reforestation of denuded land. In this area also, we probably have something to learn from them. The President could, with justice, hold Chinese achievements in these fields up for study by American environmentalists.

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(As evinced by many newspaper articles recently, herbal medicine and "organic" farming appear to be fields of growing interest in the United States, especially among young people, and public recognition of Chinese accomplishments in these fields would probably be well received not only by the Chinese, but also by important elements in the US.)

(4) Major Construction Projects: Such massive buildings as the Great Hall of the People in Peking and major bridges (as the one across the Yangtze), said to have been built in remarkably short time by the Chinese people, are objects of great national pride in the PRC. Similarly, the Chinese are proud of the many well-publicized technical innovations made by workers and farmers in the course of the PRC's drive for economic self-reliance and self-sufficiency. A Presidential expression of admiration of these creative achievements, or of regret that there was no time personally to study them, would be very appropriate.

(5) Chinese Cuisine: While citizens of many countries regard their native cuisine as the finest in the world, the Chinese have more basis than most for their pride. They react with much pleasure to compliments about the truly remarkable variety of tastes, textures and aromas in Chinese cuisine.