

Reflections on Chat with Ambassador Platt and *China Boys*

When I was in New York City in late March, I had the privilege of meeting in person with Ambassador Nicholas Platt to chat about his experiences strengthening the “nuts and bolts” of Sino-U.S. relations during his 35-year career in the State Department. My husband had obtained a copy of Amb. Platt’s memoir, *China Boys: How U.S. Relations with the PRC Began and Grew*, and we both read it with great interest. I was particularly intrigued by Ambassador Platt’s time spent in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) during the pivotal years of 1972 and 1973, which set the groundwork for the normalization of Sino-U.S. relations in 1979.

Amb. Platt’s final phase of his formal Mandarin Chinese language training through the State Department’s Foreign Service Institute was spent living in Taiwan in 1963. While there, he and his late wife, Sheila, had the opportunity to meet the Generalissimo (or “the G.”) and Madame Chiang Kai-shek at a garden party. Later, he and Sheila would come to greatly value the encounter, as it made them one of the few couples in their generation to meet leaders on both sides of the Taiwan Straits. Amb. Platt never met Mao, but he did meet both Zhou Enlai and Madame Mao.

After language training (impressively, Sheila also learned Mandarin on her own time), Amb. Platt was assigned to the Mainland Section of the American Consulate General in Hong Kong, or what he called “the China Watching headquarters of the world during the 1960s” (*China Boys*, pg. 31). There, he learned that “the process of watching China was, and still is, labor intensive” (32). It was from Hong Kong that he observed the violent stage of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 and 1967. Upon returning to Washington, D.C., he worked at State at the Mainland China desk, rapidly advancing in 1969 to head the division in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) that covered the PRC.

From there, Amb. Platt observed the Nixon White House’s groundwork for the major U.S. policy shift toward China. At the end of 1970, he was assigned to the Secretariat Staff that managed the daily affairs and travels of the Secretary of State, William Rogers. He was working there in July 1971 when President Nixon announced Henry Kissinger’s secret trip to the PRC and his own plans to visit the following year. It came as a total surprise to him and Sheila when they heard the news over the radio: “If we had not been lying down,” he wrote, “we would have fallen to the ground” (66). Amb. Platt was “beside himself with curiosity” (66) about what had happened – although he had not been working on China in his position on the Secretariat Staff, he hoped that his background and abilities would give him an opportunity to accompany the Secretary of State.

After Secretary Rogers interviewed him on Friday, January 21, 1972 for a total of 4 minutes, Amb. Platt had to wait the entire weekend before finding out he was to go to China in February. While reading through *China Boys*, I learned that there was considerable friction between White House and the State Department in the lead-up to the 1972 trip. In fact, the White House had the records of Kissinger’s talks with Zhou Enlai in 1971, but had not shared these with the State Department. The “State Department and

NSC [National Security Council] tracks merged” (77) at a meeting at Kissinger’s office, in which Kissinger “made it clear that he wanted a unified delegation,” (78) although there was still some drama behind the scenes later in Beijing between the White House and the State Department. Even before the trip, Amb. Platt’s knowledge of Chinese culture came in handy. For example, there were originally some clocks included on the US gift list to PRC leadership. Amb. Platt was quick to warn the delegation that this was a taboo gift in Chinese culture, and the clocks were quickly removed!

I could almost feel Amb. Platt’s excitement as I read through his account of traveling to the PRC for the first time after having studied China for so many years. They first landed in Shanghai “under overcast February skies...over stretches of snow-dusted paddies and villages interlaced with canals, up which floated junks with tall flat sails” (85). The “distinctive field smell” wafting from the surrounding farms was also familiar to Amb. Platt from his time in Taiwan. After landing in Beijing, Amb. Platt was able to witness from a distance President Nixon’s historic handshake with Zhou Enlai. After arrival at the official guesthouse compound, he had a delicious lunch with “the best food and service of any Chinese restaurant anywhere in the world. This visit was going to be fattening,” he remarked (86).

“What was it like meeting Zhou Enlai and Madame Mao?” I asked Amb. Platt over coffee. “Zhou was a very pleasant person...and very smart,” he noted. As for Madame Mao, she was “tough, difficult, and ran culture with an iron hand.” Amb. Platt met Madame Mao after attending a performance of the revolutionary ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*. She looked “sharp, dignified, and self-contained in a well-tailored blue Mao suit,” and shook hands with “a firm, polite, schoolmarm grip” (91). When he was serving in the US Liaison Office, Amb. Platt met Madame Mao again, this time at a U.S.-China basketball game. In a matter of months, she had changed her appearance considerably – this time, instead of a Mao suit, she wore an elegant dress. “It was the kind of outfit Eleanor Roosevelt would have worn, a midlength grey gabardine, with a discreet collar and pockets...Her first words of welcome were spoken slowly and in queenly tones, a tip-off to the new role she wanted to play” (142).

As for meeting Zhou Enlai, it was after a tour of the Great Wall and the Ming Tombs. Upon returning to Beijing, Amb. Platt was introduced to Zhou in Chinese. “We stood face-to-face, and the premier began to talk, quoting in his thick Zhejiang accent a famous Mao poem with the line that one could not be considered a real man until he had been to the Great Wall. Did I think the quote would be appropriate in a toast to President Nixon on the day he had visited the wall? I was having some difficulty understanding but nodded sagely and uttered a few grunts of comprehension” (93). Later, Amb. Platt ran into Zhou again when Zhou personally called on Secretary Rogers in Shanghai before the return trip to the United States (this was possibly to make up for Secretary Rogers’ exclusion from Kissinger and Nixon’s meeting with Mao, who was in poor health by this time).

Ironically, Amb. Platt met most of the Chinese leadership before he was finally able to meet US President Nixon! The two finally met at a 10:30 PM meeting in Nixon’s

suite after a banquet that ended the US delegation's visit to the PRC. He arrived to find the president "sitting in a flowered silk dressing gown over an open-collar shirt and trousers, a long, fat cigar in one hand and a tall scotch and soda in the other. He looked drained but satisfied with what he had accomplished" (101). President Nixon took the time to thank each member of the US delegation for their work. Accompanying Amb. Platt to the door of his suite, Nixon commented to him, "Well, you China boys are going to have a lot more to do from now on" (101).

In 1973, Amb. Platt was assigned to the new US Liaison Office in Beijing. While living there, he went everywhere on his bike through the capital city, which was "dusty and down-at-the-heels, for all its ancient and well-kept splendors" (115). What really struck Amb. Platt, though, was the beauty of the local language: "Having been educated that the Beijing dialect is the purest of all Chinese, I was still surprised to find every urchin in the street sounding like a grand concubine. Even insults were elegant" (115). He there for a year with his wife, Sheila, and their three sons, the "Three Tigers" (Dahu, Erhu, and Sanhu." (His third son, Sanhu, even went by this nickname at school!) I was touched to hear Amb. Platt speak so highly of his late wife, Sheila – he described all of their adventures together as a "joint venture," and glowingly described her as incredibly savvy and being up-to-date on all the geopolitical issues of the day.

During these early years of US-PRC relations, Amb. Platt told me he was particularly proud of the efforts made to strengthen people-to-people relations, the tendons and the sinews that comprise the relations between our two countries. Growing up as a swimmer myself, I was especially interested in Amb. Platt's account of the US Olympic swimmers that visited China. "They were excellent diplomats," he told me, "and the Chinese loved them." The swimmers were young, achievement-driven, and were physically huge compared to the average Chinese. Through exhibitions and lectures, they explained how to make Olympic swimmers through individualized programs and rigorous training. Clearly, Amb. Platt noted, the Chinese "mastered these lessons" (130), as shown by the top quality of the Chinese Olympic swimming and diving teams today.

I was also captivated by Amb. Platt's account of the inaugural visit of the Philadelphia Orchestra that year. He spoke very highly of Maestro Eugene Ormandy and his wife, Gretel. Madame Mao herself came out to the concert in Beijing. Although Ormandy had initially refused the Chinese request to play Beethoven's Sixth Symphony (the *Pastoral*), Amb. Platt worked hard to change his mind. He explained, "the *Pastoral* themes represented peasant life in the countryside. Theirs was a peasant revolution, and they identified the storm in the fourth movement with the struggle they had been through" (189). The request had come from Madame Mao herself, and Amb. Platt was relieved when Ormandy conceded. In the end, the long-term impact of the Philadelphia Orchestra's visit was "profound" and created important grassroots ties between American and Chinese musicians that endure to this day.

This is but a brief sampling of the rich content in *China Boys* and of the conversation I had with Ambassador Platt. I could go on, but will instead urge everyone to read his memoir and leave readers with final reflections that Ambassador Platt

impressed on me. As he mentioned in a 2008 keynote speech he gave at Fudan University, we “want the economies, political systems, and societies to become so closely connected that conflict and confrontation are no longer even thinkable, much less doable. The relationship, while certainly not friction-free, and surely not without competition, should be free of the dangers of the great power rivalry which once threatened the world” (344).

In the end, top-level diplomatic relations are important, but so are people-to-people relations – the intangible cultural, social, and economic ties that bind countries together. When we talk about US-China ties, we must pay attention to these “nuts and bolts” of the relationship. I asked Amb. Platt what recommendations he would give to those of us invested in maintaining and improving US-China relations today. There is nothing to substitute visiting China in person, he said. For those of you who can, “go an visit, and learn as much as you can.” The relationship between our two countries will continue to be important not only for the United States and China, but for the world, and we need to manage it from a basis of knowledge.

Thank you, Ambassador Platt, for your tireless efforts as a “China boy” in improving relations between the United States and the PRC!