

《米歇尔来华不谈政治》

When Michelle Obama declined to attend a crucial "shirtsleeves" summit between her husband and the newly promoted president of China last June, it was widely seen in Beijing as a stinging political snub.

The meeting was to be an unprecedented pairing of first ladies; Xi Jinping's wife, an elegant People's Liberation Army singer, has enough star power inside China to match her American counterpart.

Nearly nine months later, however, the Chinese public will this week finally get the chance to see the two women together when Mrs Obama takes her two daughters, Malia and Sasha, on a six-day half-term break to China that will be part family getaway, part international soft-power diplomacy.

In her role as first lady, Mrs Obama has always confined herself to ultra-safe areas like winning jobs for veterans, promoting education and espousing healthy eating for children, but she finds herself walking a political tightrope by visiting China.

The trip, which opens in Beijing on Wednesday will include that belated meeting with Mrs Peng, several official visits to schools and universities to highlight the value of US-China educational exchanges, as well as sightseeing trips to the northern city of Xi'an to see the famed terracotta warriors, and to the southern city of Chengdu for an obligatory encounter with a giant panda.

Malia, 13, and Sasha, 9, have been largely screened from public view since their father won the White House, but they will be under the spotlight.

Sasha is known to have studied Mandarin at school, famously testing out her skills as a nine-year-old on the former Chinese President Hu Jintao at a 2011 state dinner, whom she greeted with a 'Ni hao'. China will very likely want to hear if her skills have improved.

However the trip is already raising questions at home over whether Mrs Obama can really carry her assiduously non-political style into an arena as politically charged as US-China relations.

Categorised as an "official visit" on the White House website, Mrs Obama's East Wing staff are at pains to present it as a trip just like any other she has undertaken to Mexico, India or South Africa, inviting schoolchildren across America to email questions which Mrs Obama will answer in a daily blog.

"During my trip, I'll be visiting a university and two high schools in Beijing and Chengdu (which are two of China's largest cities)," she wrote, "I'll be talking with students about their lives in China and telling them about America and the values and traditions we hold dear."

Mrs Obama's decision to try and look past the difficult politics has drawn some unflattering comparisons with her

two most recent predecessors, Laura Bush and Hillary Clinton, who both used their positions to raise the profile of universal rights.

Mrs Obama's trip takes place against the backdrop of a difficult nine months in US-China relations in which many of the hopes expressed at the California summit at Sunnyslands – billed as a chance to reset relations with a new Chinese president – proved overstated.

Internationally, things have also been strained since California. It has been noted that Mr Obama will not be stopping in Beijing on his own Asia trip next month, when he will instead visit Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

Those are all nations that are warily eyeing China under Mr Xi which has become newly assertive in its lingering territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas, to the point that Washington was forced to send a pair of B-52 bombers through a hastily erected Chinese 'air defence zone' last year.

All of which, Mrs Obama will be resolutely trying to ignore as she travels around China marvelling at pandas, terracotta warriors and the scholarly prowess of – no doubt carefully selected – Chinese schoolchildren.

However, there is already no shortage of acid criticism from the Chinese public using the Internet. "That silly woman," remarked one critic. "Last time when Mr Xi and his wife went to the US, she refused to meet. Now what does she want? Just kick her out."

Others questioned the use of public money, lately a hot-button issue in China because of the current administration's insistence that Chinese officials are seen to lead frugal lives.

"How come the liberals are not criticising the first lady for holidaying on public money? She is even bringing her mother-in-law for heaven's sake!" remarked one.

Yet more saw the trip as some great geopolitical game. "She is trying to win China over to the US so that we do not side with Russia. We should fully support Russia, the Americans are not reliable. They will always want to keep us down."

And when it does come to policy, the accent will all be on the positives, encouraging people-to-people exchanges such as the official '100,000 Strong Initiative' that aspires to send that number of American students to China – balancing the large numbers of Chinese coming in the opposite direction.

Maintaining her resolutely soft focus from the off, Mrs Obama has been doing her homework by visiting a dual language Mandarin-English charter school in Washington last week where she was warned by the children not to forget her hand sanitiser, expect "super different lavatories" and beware the chicken's feet at dinnertime.

"I have all of these wonderful policy people that help me prep," she told the children, before apparently conceding they were really surplus to requirements. "I'm going to look to you guys to be like my advisers on this trip."

????????????????????“?????????????????????????????????”

