

First Lady Surprises in China Speech

By Laurie Burkitt

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U.S. First lady Michelle Obama had an unexpected message in China today: Freedom of speech, access to information and educational equality are “universal rights.”

Speaking to students from the U.S. and China at the Stanford Center at Peking University Saturday, Mrs. Obama said that “when it comes to expressing yourself freely, and worshipping as you choose, and having open access to information—we believe those are universal rights that are the birthright of every person on this planet.”

Those words surprised. Mrs. Obama’s weeklong China trip was billed as part family break—she’s traveling with her two daughters and her mother—and part cultural outreach. U.S. government officials have for many years been expected to promote American values while visiting China, if not directly criticize Beijing for its rights abuses.

But the authoritarian Chinese government is in the midst of a renewed effort to tighten control over the Internet, media and schooling. One theme White House officials said Mrs. Obama would promote on the trip is education. Prior to the visit some encouraged her to address academic freedom and access to information.

Chinese economist Xia Yeliang, a politically outspoken professor who lost his teaching position at Peking University last year for expressing liberal views, said he hoped the first lady would confront China on educational controls. “Schools in China and elsewhere must ask, ‘What’s the purpose of education?’” said Mr. Xia. He said in China students lack freedom to pursue their curiosity.

Chinese leaders have pushed to foster more creativity in learning and to expand access to education to bridge a yawning urban and rural gap. But innovation and analytical thinking are stifled by requirements for students to study Marxism and to blindly follow authority, said Mr. Xia, who is now a visiting fellow at Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C.

China’s wealthy have been able to provide better educations to their children by sending them overseas, Mr. Xia said. “That’s only 1%, so what about the other 99%,” he said.

Gardner Bovington, an associate professor at Indiana University in Bloomington, said the call for free speech must go far beyond Mrs. Obama. Of particular concern, he said, are U.S. academic organizations, which have been opening centers in China such as the Stanford Center where Mrs. Obama spoke. Many of those centers, after investing money to build in China and

recruit students, have been less likely to speak out against controls there, said Mr. Bovingdon. He said that Indiana University will soon be opening a center in Beijing.

“I’m concerned about the rights of many people who go to China to do balanced academic research,” said Mr. Bovingdon, who is part of a group of 13 authors who in 2004 were denied permission to enter China and many have been barred since. The reason was an academic book they co-wrote on China’s western region of Xinjiang, which has faced a separatist rebellion against Chinese rule.

Mr. Bovingdon said he attempted to re-enter China last summer on a valid visa but was turned away upon arrival at the Beijing airport. “I have an enormous investment in my own study and it’s a matter of utmost sadness for me that I can’t return,” he said.