“Obamania” in China and Its Yielding to Nationalism: Quantitative Responses from Elitist Chinese Students in Beijing toward the 2008 U.S. Election and Structural Analysis*

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Abstract

By drawing upon firsthand empirical sources, this article aims to discuss the various responses of elitist Chinese students in Beijing—who might have a direct future role to play in shaping China’s perception of the United States—toward the 2008 U.S. presidential election, including questions like which candidate Chinese youth favored and why, what impact they saw the election having on future Sino–U.S.

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relations, and how they evaluated the American political system overall. The article uses these sources to illustrate the real essence of Obama’s global popularity from the perspective of soft power and to evaluate the intrinsic limitations to “Obamania” being spread in China by assessing the response when U.S. values and Chinese nationalist sentiment are juxtaposed. Most importantly, the article finds that despite “Obamania,” U.S. values are found to lose out to nationalist sentiment in the minds of young Chinese, who seem to have a gradual tendency to favor the “China model” over its Western counterpart.

The 2008 U.S. presidential election was one of the most closely watched contests since the Nixon–Kennedy election in 1960. Not only were fellow U.S. citizens choosing their 44th president in the hope of restoring the soft power tarnished by George W. Bush, but the rest of the world was also searching for a more benevolent leadership to stabilize the 21st century. Although Sino–U.S. relations were far from being a primary issue in the election, the extensive media coverage and heated debate online within the People’s Republic of China suggested that the Chinese government and the populace nonetheless paid much attention to what was happening on the other side of the Pacific. Indeed, despite the growth of anti-American nationalist sentiment in China since the Belgrade Embassy Bombing in 1999, which is particularly prevalent in the younger population, the response of the Chinese to the U.S. presidential election and the implications behind it are rarely studied. When Barack Obama and his competitors were campaigning and appealing to young U.S. voters in particular, which candidate did Chinese youths favor and why? What impact did the Chinese see the election having on future Sino–U.S. relations? How do they evaluate the American political system overall? Most importantly, can “Obamania” in China effectively benefit the extension of U.S. soft power? By drawing upon firsthand empirical sources, this article aims to discuss the various responses of elitist Chinese students in Beijing—who might have a direct future role to play in shaping China’s perception of the United States—toward the 2008 U.S. presidential election. More importantly, the article will use this to illustrate the real essence of Obama’s global popularity from the perspective of soft power and to evaluate the intrinsic limitations to “Obamania” being spread in China by assessing the response when U.S. values and Chinese nationalist sentiment are juxtaposed. If, despite the “Obamania,” U.S. values are found to lose out to nationalist sentiment in