

# *Obama in China*

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## **Obama in China**

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## Obama in China

“The United States welcomes China as a strong, prosperous and successful member of the community of nations.”  
President Barack Obama, November 17, 2009.<sup>1</sup>

On Sunday, November 15, 2009, US President Barack H. Obama landed at Pudong International airport in Shanghai. Waiting for him, in a heavy downpour, was the Chinese Ambassador to the US, Zhou Wenzhong. After a few brief formalities, the presidential motorcade of black limousines drove him to the Ritz-Carlton hotel in the city’s center, where he spent the first night of his four-day visit to China.<sup>2</sup> Although the late-night arrival lacked the traditional pomposity of state visits, the occasion was a milestone in Sino-American relations. Obama was the first US president to visit China within the first year of taking office since George H.W. Bush. In the midst of a world recession, he wanted to show the Chinese leaders that he saw China as a key partner in solving present and future global crises. Significantly, the visit started in Shanghai, not Beijing, to highlight the importance of bilateral trade. While the White House’s main objective was to make progress on economic issues; North Korea, Iran’s nuclear programme and climate change were also on the US agenda. For their part, the Chinese hoped that Obama would be a fresh start in a relationship that had experienced quite a few setbacks in recent years. Washington had been unnecessarily harsh in the eyes of Chinese officials and public opinion alike. First, President William J. Clinton pushed China on human rights, then, President George W. Bush pressured Beijing about its currency rate. Obama’s more conciliatory statements, his unconventional political rise and his rockstar status promised to be a welcome change.<sup>3</sup>

The Chinese people were not immune to the Obama factor. A few days before his arrival, an internet poll asked them what they thought was most memorable about Obama. The vast majority said his Nobel Peace Prize. A close second was a report that the president had insisted on paying for his own burger at a restaurant in Washington D.C. Sales of t-shirts bearing his image went up in all major cities<sup>4</sup>. The Chinese translation of his latest book, *The Audacity of Hope*, sold more than 130,000 copies. His memoir, *Dreams from my Father*, and other works were favourites among street vendors of pirated best sellers. And on November 15, Madame Tussaud's wax museum in Shanghai saw record numbers of visitors queueing up to take photos of their loved ones with a replica of the US leader.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout his presidency Obama visited China on three occasions: in 2009, 2014 and 2016. The First Lady, Michelle Obama, made history by being the first US president's wife to travel to China independently in 2014. This chapter will explore these trips to 1) establish how the US leader engaged with Beijing throughout his administration and how his China policy evolved; and 2) determine these visits' impact on Chinese leaders and public opinion's perceptions of the American President and Sino-American relations.

The American president is not only the commander-in-chief, he is also the diplomat-in-chief. He represents the nation to the rest of the world. The image and values he projects affect the US standing on the international stage, or as Joseph Nye put it, are a significant indicator of the strength of the nation's soft power.<sup>6</sup> While public opinion might not shape a country's policy-making process, a positive image makes it easier to pursue certain economic and political objectives. Even though China is an authoritarian country, its modernization process, globalization, and new forms of communication have given rise to a strong Chinese middle class that is increasingly asking to play a more significant role in shaping political, economic and cultural policies.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the presidency of George W. Bush, the US image abroad suffered almost everywhere. A financial crisis, two unpopular wars in the Middle East, and climate change denialism, among other issues, turned the US into a bully in the eyes of the international community, and led to a perception that American values and democracy were in decline. Obama gave a new lease of life to US soft power. His unwavering belief in the power of American exceptionalism as a force for positive transformation at home and abroad projected an image of a United States that was finally ready to re-establish its moral leadership. His dual identity as an Black American and a cosmopolitan citizen raised hopes that he would engage in meaningful and constructive diplomacy. On the eve of his Inauguration, the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project found that confidence in Obama stood behind a resurgent US image everywhere in the world. What impact did Obamamania have on China, its leaders, people, and ultimately on US-China relations?<sup>8</sup>

### **US-China Relations and the 2008 Election**

US-China relations have always been complex, at times, turbulent, and so has the Chinese public perception of the US and its leaders. The Opium War of 1839-1842 between Great Britain and China marked the beginning of a “century of humiliation” for the Asian giant. Western powers forced China to make major territorial and economic concessions through unequal treaties. Foreign interference in China’s internal affairs and laws played a key role in its decline that culminated with Japan’s occupation during WWII. The trauma from these experiences is at the basis of China’s “never again” mentality and has been a significant driving force in shaping Beijing’s national strategy ever since.<sup>9</sup> The US greatly contributed to China’s mistrust of foreign powers. First, by issuing an Open-Door policy (1898) that effectively sanctioned the partition of China under foreign spheres of interest, followed by

traders and missionaries hoping to remake the country in the American image. Secondly, American racist attitudes toward Chinese immigrants eventually led to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the first law to ban a specific ethnic group from immigration to the US. The law was only repealed in 1943 (with a 105 Chinese people quota per year) already two years into WWII US-Chinese alliance.<sup>10</sup>

Mao's proclamation of the birth of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the American decision to support defeated Nationalist leader, Jiang Jieshi, on the island of Taiwan froze US-China relations for the next 20 years. It was only when President Nixon broke the "bamboo curtain" and travelled to China in 1972 that Washington and Beijing began a process of rapprochement. Throughout the last decades of the Cold War, the US pursued a policy of "containment by integration" towards China, whereby it sought to engage with it economically by further integrating it into a market-based world economic system, but at the same time, it sought to prevent its rise in order not to jeopardise US hegemony in the Asian Pacific. This dual strategy produced mixed results which left China puzzled and confused about American intentions, thus further fuelling its distrust towards Washington and the international community.<sup>11</sup>

After the end of the Cold War, relations became even more ambivalent. Clinton initially denounced the "butchers of Beijing" for the 1989 Tiananmen massacre and made the renewal of the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status dependent on China improving its human rights record. The two were quickly delinked in the interest of the US economy. While China welcomed the economic opportunity, its leaders also let it be known that they had not appreciated Clinton's mingling with China's human rights. Moreover, in 1999, the US accidentally bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during NATO intervention in former Yugoslavia, killing three and injuring twenty. Though Clinton issued an apology, the

Chinese media delayed its broadcasting and anti-American protests erupted across China as Chinese citizens, especially the younger population, attacked US property and the US Embassy in Beijing. US popularity was at an all-time low.<sup>12</sup>

According to the Pew Global Attitudes survey, there was a certain level of support and sympathy among the Chinese people towards the Bush administration following the 9/11 attacks (42 percent in 2005). This quickly dissipated because of the quagmire in the Middle East and Bush's accusations of currency manipulation against China (34 percent in 2007).<sup>13</sup> These figures were confirmed by the BBC annual survey on countries' influence in the world. In 2005, 62 percent of Chinese negatively viewed the US role in the world. When Democratic Senator Barack Obama announced that he would run for president in February 2007, there was hope in China that the US was finally ready to press the reset bottom on its foreign policy.<sup>14</sup>

The Chinese showed much interest in the 2008 campaign. A BBC survey suggested greater optimism in China toward Obama, finding two-thirds of the population believed that US relations with the rest of the world would improve under him. The campaign received extensive media and online coverage in China. *The China Daily* joined forces with the US Embassy in Beijing to map Chinese public opinion preferences among candidates, Obama always came out on top. The internet provider Sina.com in collaboration with the *International Herald Tribune* started collecting Chinese citizens' views on the election as early as primary season. It received 4.600 online clicks that showed a clear preference for Obama. Chinese media always portrayed Obama more positively than other candidates, especially the Republican opponent, John McCain. *The People's Daily*, the Chinese government mouthpiece, always described Obama as young and charismatic, whereas McCain was often painted as an old veteran that needed to remain in the past.<sup>15</sup>

The Obama campaign team worked tirelessly to promote a positive image of the Democratic candidate. They worried about America's negative reputation around the world during the Bush years. They also realised that many countries, especially in Asia, did not know much about this young Senator from Illinois and his foreign policy views. To prevent the emergence of a narrative that would portray him as an inexperienced candidate that could negatively influence the campaign and possibly future policy, Obama's team prepared daily briefings to be sent to foreign political figures, scholars and publications. These always emphasised the Democratic candidate's wish to strengthen relationships with allies and the need for turning attention towards Asia, after so much focus on the Middle East.<sup>16</sup> Obama was careful to avoid making any foreign policy commitments during the campaign, for fear that these might constrain him once in the White House. He made, however, clear that he was seeking a new type of engagement with Beijing. "It is time to engage with China on common interests like climate change, even as we continue to encourage the shift to a more open-market based society," he declared in his major campaign foreign policy speech in July 2008.<sup>17</sup>

According to scholar Shi Yinhong, most of the Chinese population favoured Obama because of his international background and as a representative of the unprivileged Afro-American community, who would pay more attention to the rest of the world and could improve US-Chinese relations.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, The Chinese welcomed the news of Obama's victory with enthusiasm. On election night, *the China Daily* declared: "Like many Americans on the other side of the Pacific, we are elated, too, at the landslide win of Democrat Barack Obama." Though "elated" was then replaced with "excited" in a later version of the story, still, it showed Chinese support for the outcome.<sup>19</sup> In a representative comment, Goa Zhikai, director of the China National Association of International Studies said that Obama "is a

“triple A president,” an American with strong connections to Africa and Asia and that would benefit the entire international community.<sup>20</sup>

### **Preparing for the Trip**

Prior to his election, Obama had not had much contact with China. Unlike many previous presidents after Nixon, who had visited the country before entering the White House, he had never been to China. The 2009 trip was his first personal experience in China and he saw it as an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the country. The so-called rise of China had completely changed the geostrategic scenario in Asia in the last decade. The Chinese economy had been growing steadily, averaging 10 percent a year. More significantly, the communist giant had been fully integrated into the global economy. In addition, Chinese military spending had grown even more than its economy, a fact that made many in the region nervous.<sup>21</sup> What were China’s plans and ambitions for the future? According to Jeffrey Bader, senior director for East Asian affairs on the National Security Council (NSC), during the Obama first term, for the president, it was clear that a black and white unidimensional approach would not yield positive results. A hard-line policy based on economic and military threats and pressure on human rights might only cause China to withdraw and disengage from the international scene. On the other hand, an overly friendly soft policy could send the wrong message and embolden China, thus making US regional allies even more nervous. The president wanted the rise of China to be a stabilising and positive development in the region and for the international community. His initial strategy was based on three points: 1) acknowledge China’s role on the global scene, 2) ensure that its rise conformed to international law and 3) support the Asia-Pacific area by making it a priority in US foreign policy and increasing US participation in its regional organisations.<sup>22</sup>

Obama had a clear set of priorities when he took office. Top of the list was kick-starting a global economic recovery following the financial meltdown of 2008. Though determined to keep on fighting terrorism, he wanted to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, halt Iran and North Korea's nuclear weapons programs, and get started on sorting out climate change. For Obama, China had a crucial role to play in all these issues. China was the third-largest economy in the world, the only country with a relationship with North Korea, and Iran's largest trading partner and investor in its energy sector. In 2009, it became the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases.<sup>23</sup>

Right from the beginning, the administration made a concerted effort to set up the best foundations for more intensive cooperation than had been the case in the past. Just a few days after the election, after calling all key European and Asian allies, Obama phoned Chinese President Hu Jintao to reiterate his intention to strengthen cooperation between the two nations, especially on the economy, security and climate change. On February 15, 2009, the new Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton travelled to Asia with stops in Japan, China, South Korea, Philippines, and Indonesia. A number of senior administration officials visited Beijing to kick-start talks on all major issues. Obama made sure to arrange a meeting with the Chinese leader at every international conference and summit. The first in-person meeting took place in London at the G20 in April 2009 where he and Hu announced the establishment of the high-level U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue co-chaired by Hillary Clinton and Timothy Geithner on the U.S. side and Dai Bingguo and Wang Qishan on the Chinese side. At the meeting, Hu officially invited Obama to visit China following the annual Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation organisation (APEC) meeting in Singapore in the fall of 2009.<sup>24</sup>

Organising the trip, however, proved more difficult than expected. Planning immediately bumped into an obstacle: the scheduled Dalai Lama's visit to the US in October 2009, just a few weeks before Obama was due to leave for Asia. The timing could have not been worse. Every president since George H.W. Bush in 1991 had welcomed the Dalai Lama to the White House as a sign of support for the Tibetan cause of independence. In 2007, George W. Bush bestowed the Congressional medal on him at the Capitol and Obama had met the Dalai Lama as a Senator. The Chinese leaders made clear that this would cause unspecified problems in US-Chinese relations. To Beijing, Tibet belonged to China and the Dalai Lama was a "secessionist." Some White House officials worried that China might withdraw the invitation to Obama. Even though the American President wanted to show support for the Tibetan leader, he decided to acquiesce to Chinese requests and put considerable pressure on the Dalai Lama to "voluntarily" declare that he was not going to ask for a meeting with the President. Ultimately, the administration justified its decision by stating that irritating Beijing might make things even more difficult for Tibet and cripple the US ability to help.<sup>25</sup>

### **Town Hall Meeting**

Obama started his first day in Shanghai by visiting the United States Consulate employees and families. He then held a bilateral meeting about economic issues with Party Secretary, Yu Sheng, and Mayor of Shanghai, Han Zheng in the banquet hall of the Xijiao State Guest House. This was followed by a lavish banquet for the US delegation and the Chinese and American business leaders where according to the US President: "rare delicacies and wine pairings that would suit a high-end wedding at the Ritz" were served.<sup>26</sup>

In the afternoon, Obama held a town hall-style meeting with Chinese university students. The organisation of the event had proven dire, US and Chinese officials clashed on every detail. The Chinese were nervous about allowing an event that fundamentally does not exist in Chinese political life. Moreover, the event was due to take place the day before Obama's meeting with Hu and Beijing was concerned Obama might raise issues, such as human rights, that would embarrass the Chinese president. Still, the Americans insisted on going ahead, they wanted to send a strong message about how democracies work, especially to young people. They asked for an audience of 1,500 students, but the Chinese limited it to 500. Beijing rejected the US request to live stream on the web and broadcast the meeting on Chinese Central Television (CCTV). In the end, they agreed on live streaming the transcript of Obama's opening remarks and answers to questions on the Chinese news website, Xinhua.net, without censorship, at least the first time (it was apparently censored subsequently). The meeting was also broadcast live in ShanghaiTV and the White House website and Facebook page. From a US point of view, it was still a win. The notion of a president taking questions, not a frequent occurrence in China, was itself the point. The symbolism was more significant than what actually happened.<sup>27</sup>

Obama's opening remarks focused mostly on praising China, its ancient history and its "belief in the promise of the future".<sup>28</sup> He greeted the crowd by saying "hello" in Chinese and apologised for not mastering the language as well as the students in the audience mastered English. After a brief and rosy review of US-China relations since the eighteenth century; he put a very positive spin on the Empress of China first voyage in 1784 and Sino-American relations during WWII; he then proceeded to discuss the values of American democracy. Even though there had been some dark chapters throughout history, progress was made possible thanks to the American belief in democracy. He referred to traditional

US champions of democracy, President Lincoln, Dr Martin Luther King Jr., and to his own story to illustrate some examples of the enduring power of the American dream. He then reassured the audience that the US had only peaceful intentions toward China. Washington did not want to impose its system on other countries, instead, it acknowledged the importance of China's role in a twenty-first-century interconnected world where cooperation was the only way forward for all countries. "We don't seek to contain China's rise. We welcome China as a strong and prosperous successful member of the community of nations," Obama declared.<sup>29</sup>

The speech was well-received by those in attendance and those following online. The president was greeted with warm applause and Chinese students made quite a few flattering comments. Dong Liang, a law student said that Obama appeared very friendly toward China and he was very exciting.<sup>30</sup> Over 55 million Chinese viewers watched the speech streamed on Xinhua.net in the first 24 hours. Xinhua reported that it had received around 3,200 questions over the internet.<sup>31</sup> Many were very light in tone, they focused on Obama's fitness regime, Mrs Obama's wardrobe, whether the president liked Kung Pao chicken, if he could use chopsticks, and what types of wine he liked. Some questions were about policy issues, such as the financial crisis, American import duties on Chinese products and the sales of weapons to Taiwan. The president replied in a very conciliatory and non-threatening tone. Only one question raised what Beijing considered a controversial issue: censorship. Obama was asked if the Chinese people should be free to use Twitter. His cautious answer clearly indicated that he wanted to avoid offending the Chinese leaders at all costs. He did not refer to China, but instead talked about his critics in the US and the fact that American democracy was stronger precisely because these critics were allowed to voice their disapproval openly, even if he did not like what they had to say. His answer was the

most popular topic of discussion on the Chinese internet for a few hours after the meeting. Key words such as “What’s Twitter?” and “Obama Shanghai” were among the top ten Chinese search engines. One Chinese twitter user who managed to circumvent the government firewall posted this message: “I will never forget this morning. I heard, on my shaky Internet connection, a question about our own freedom which only a foreign leader can discuss.”<sup>32</sup>

Whether the speech persuaded many hearts and minds is unclear. First, there is no guarantee that the actual audience was made of genuine students. According to the *New York Times*, most of those who attended the event at the Museum of Science and Technology in Shanghai were members of the Communist Youth League, an official organisation that prepared obedient students for future leadership posts. One student, who wanted to remain anonymous, reported that he had been trained for four days and had been told not to ask questions about Tibet or human rights because these would have serious implications on Sino-American relations.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, as Obama pointed out in his memoirs, these students were too young to remember certain dark chapters of Chinese history which for sure were not taught in schools or discussed at home. Moreover, China’s recent economic success had made its “brand of authoritarian capitalism a plausible alternative to Western-style liberalism”.<sup>34</sup> The challenges of organising the event, however, were a clear sign that the Chinese leadership saw Obama as a far more powerful persuader than previous presidents. When Bill Clinton spoke at Beijing University during his 1998 visit and George W. Bush met with students at Tsinghua University in 2002, they were both given the opportunity to answer questions in a live national broadcast on CCTV.

## **Beijing**

Following the Town Hall meeting, the president flew to Beijing where he was greeted by a welcome ceremony at the Capitol International airport. He then met with Hu in Yangyuan Hall at the Diaoyutai State Guest House where they held a bilateral meeting and had dinner at the Banquet Hall. Not far away, at the Panghao Theatre, nearby the Forbidden City, musicians from the Central Conservatory, dancers from the Beijing Contemporary Dance theatre and staff from the US Embassy celebrated the arrival with an artistic collaboration inspired by the wave of hope brought by Obama's trip, and more in general by his election. Created, produced and performed by Chinese and American artists and featuring original Chinese/Western fusion music composed for Obama's visit, the show centrepiece was a dance entitled: "Change" which drew from Obama's campaign slogan: "A change has come" and the ancient Chinese divinatory text, the "I Ching" or book of Changes. Producer Christopher Ruggles, a Chicagoan living in Beijing said: "It represents the kind of change President Obama has fought so hard for and demonstrates the hope for ethnic, racial and international harmony."<sup>35</sup>

On Tuesday, November 17, the president's motorcade arrived in Tiananmen Square where thousands of onlookers waited to get a glimpse of Obama. He was welcomed by Hu who led him inside the palace where bilateral discussions about trade, nuclear programs and climate change were to take place. Obama found the talks quite frustrating. He lamented that regardless of the topic, Hu always read from a thick stack of prepared notes, pausing only to allow for the translation into English.<sup>36</sup> Following the meeting the two leaders gave a press conference where they read from prepared statements, no questions were allowed from the press, staying in line with the minutely stage-managed atmosphere of the visit. They gave two separate speeches that overall presented a very positive and cordial relationship. First to speak was Hu who pointed out that most of the discussions had

been dedicated to the financial crisis. Progress was also made on climate change. The two countries established the US-China Clean Energy Research Center to facilitate collaboration between American and Chinese engineers. They also agreed to work together on securing the best possible climate deal at the forthcoming Copenhagen conference. Talks had also touched on terrorism and nuclear proliferation. For Hu, it was also very important that the US had reiterated its adherence to a one-China policy. In similar friendly tone, Obama thanked the Chinese president for the warm hospitality, reiterated most of Hu's points and only made a brief mention to human rights and Tibet. One word stood out in both speeches: cooperation.<sup>37</sup>

After a busy morning, Obama took the afternoon off for sightseeing. Authorities closed off the Forbidden City area so that the president could explore the former Imperial Palace undisturbed. He was very impressed by the sights. "It's a testament to the greatness of Chinese history," he declared and added that he would like to come back with his family and visit the rest of the country too.<sup>38</sup> The first day in Beijing ended with a state dinner. A lavish banquet was accompanied by a cultural programme that included Chinese opera, performances by Mongolian, Tibetan and Uighur dance companies, and in honor of the US President, a rendition of Stevie Wonder's hit song "I just called to say I love you".<sup>39</sup>

Obama's final day in Beijing started with a series of interviews with the American press and television networks. He then met privately with Premier Wen Jiabao at the Diaoyutai State Guest House to further discuss cooperation between the nations. As during previous meetings, the main topic of discussion was the economic crisis.<sup>40</sup> Before leaving for South Korea, the US President visited the Great Wall. Accompanied by the American ambassador to China, John M. Huntsman and Zhou Wenzhong, Obama described the sight

“spectacular” and a “reminder of the ancient history of the Chinese people”.<sup>41</sup> The president was certainly impressed by the rich Chinese culture and felt that overall, the trip had been a success. He had learnt a lot about the country and progress had been made on all the issues on the US agenda. American media did not share his view. There was a general consensus among all outlets that Obama had been too compliant and had compromised on American values, especially human rights, in order to please the Chinese leadership.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, the Chinese leadership was not impressed with Obama’s rhetoric of cooperation. Chinese citizens might have been charmed by his charisma and his American Dream story; 58 percent of Chinese public opinion had a positive view of the US President immediately after his visit; but both citizens and officials felt that the global economic crisis had altered the international relations game and had proven that the Western model was flawed. The China Development Research Foundation found that 22.1 percent of Chinese saw China as “risen already” and 64.3 percent thought China “was rising”.<sup>43</sup> The vast majority of public opinion also believed that China would soon play a more active role in international relations. Moreover, Beijing felt that its successful hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games had earned it a place at the big powers table. Nationalistic elements pressed the government to stand firm and assert China’s will rather than giving into cooperation.<sup>44</sup>

The first reality check for Obama came at the Copenhagen Climate Conference in December 2009. The meeting failed to secure any ambitious deals, largely because of China. This was ironic given that climate change had been one of the areas where Obama and Hu had made most progress during their talks. Relations worsened quite quickly in other areas too. Tensions arose, among other issues, over the East and South China Seas, the US announcement of a large arms sale to Taiwan, the rescheduled Dalai Lama’s visit to the

White House, and Chinese refusal to acknowledge North Korea's responsibility in sinking South Korean warship *Cheonan*. Faced with an assertive China, the Obama administration responded by announcing a new policy: a pivot to Asia, later to be renamed "Rebalancing". The US planned on strengthening American presence in the Asia-Pacific and engagement with Asian countries and picking up new allies among neighbors alienated by China's new aggressiveness, such as India, Vietnam and Burma. Beijing immediately replied that this so-called "pivot" was nothing more than a strategy of containment aimed at China. A belief reinforced by Obama's relaunch of the Transpacific Partnership (TPP), a trade agreement between the US and Asian-Pacific countries which did not include China. Beijing saw this as a countermeasure against China's growing economic importance in the areas and an attempt to counteract "ASEAN Plus Three" a trading bloc that included China, Japan, South Korea and the ASEAN nations but excluded the US.<sup>45</sup>

Not surprisingly the rhetoric heated further in 2012. Obama faced re-elections and criticism that he had been soft on China. At the same time, China was preparing for its once-in-a-decade leadership transition which saw Xi Jinping victorious. While both countries tried to prevent any major escalations, Sino-American relations had most definitely turned sour. Chinese people became far less optimistic about Obama's China policy than they had been on the eve of the election. The Pew Research Center revealed that between 2008 and 2011, approval for Obama's international policies had dropped by 30 percent. Only 38 percent of Chinese public opinion declared that they still had faith in Obama.<sup>46</sup> By 2013, relations were so tense that Chinese public opinion had completely reversed itself. Over half of the Chinese population (53 percent) had an unfavorable view of Obama.<sup>47</sup>

### **Mrs Obama to the rescue**

Between March 19 and 26, 2014, First Lady Michelle Obama, together with her mother Mrs Marian Robinson and her daughters Malia and Sasha, visited China. She spent three days in Beijing, then visited the Terra Cotta Warriors and the Walled City in Xi'an and ended the trip in Chengdu. Her global popularity exceeded her husband's. Everywhere she went, with the president or alone, she always received a warm welcome. It was only natural for Obama to use his best asset to try to break through Chinese mistrust of the US and repair the president's image. As national security advisor, Ben Rhodes, and Michelle Obama's chief of staff, Tina Tchen, explained to the press, the hope was to show that Sino-American relations were not just about the leaders, but about the people too, especially young people.<sup>48</sup> The First Lady remained almost entirely apolitical. She focused on people-to-people relations, education, and youth empowerment. Her theme was in line with Madame Peng Liyuan, her hostess and wife of the new president Xi Jinping, who was herself a UNESCO Special Envoy for the advancement of girls and women's education. The administration hoped that playing the family card and showing a non-political side of America would resonate with Chinese people. "I think they understand the significance as well of family and of three generations of family travelling together, and will appreciate the ties and bonds that the Obama family have with one another across generations," Tchen declared.<sup>49</sup>

On her first day in Beijing, the First Lady together with Madame Peng visited Beijing's elite Normal Second High School where she played table tennis and took a calligraphy class where she practiced writing the Chinese character for "eternal" under the guidance of one of the students, Lu Yuhong. Lu said, "the First Lady was so amicable. She was very approachable".<sup>50</sup> During the school visit, Obama met with Chinese president Xi Jinping. Although the meeting was not on the official itinerary, it was expected. Teng Jianqun,

director of the American studies department at the Chinese Institute of International Studies said: "it is only logical for President Xi to meet her, because it is a matter of etiquette for the head of the household to meet the guest of his wife."<sup>51</sup> Later in the day, the First Lady visited the former Imperial Palace and then had a private dinner with Peng followed by a performance.<sup>52</sup>

The following day, she visited the Stanford Center at Peking University where she met Chinese and American students there who studied abroad in each other's country. In her speech she talked about citizens diplomacy. She focused especially on the study abroad programme which she described as a vital element of US foreign policy because of the opportunities it offered to build friendships and collaborations between people and countries that would lead to a better future for all. Like her husband in 2009, she used her personal story to talk about freedom of speech as a fundamental human right, but she did not criticise China directly.<sup>53</sup> Chinese media only picked up on the education theme. *Xinhua* reported her praise for the students and the US support for increased educational exchanges between the US and China. However, there were no comments on her remarks on human rights.<sup>54</sup> She gave a similar speech in Chengdu province where she visited No. 7 High School before joining a Tai Chi class and visiting the Panda reserve.<sup>55</sup>

Overall, the trip was very successful. Michelle Obama received compliments for her clothing and her interaction with ordinary people in a country where it is rare to see leaders' spouses and children in public. "She is very warm and frank, and when she is talking to people conscientiously listens to what they have to say," said Wu Qing, a retired professor at Beijing Foreign Students University who met Michelle Obama at the roundtable on education held at the US Embassy.<sup>56</sup> "It is touching to see so many people waiting for her

arrival and departure, that's because of her personal charisma," declared one of the students in Chengdu, noting that she was impressed with the manners of Malia and Sasha.<sup>57</sup> Was the First Lady's charm enough to drum up support in China? Opinion polls never showed a great improvement in ratings for Obama's image and policy. In 2015, 49 percent of Chinese public opinion had an unfavorable view of the US president, only 44 percent had a favorable view. In the last two years of the Obama administration US-China relations settled on very pragmatic modus operandi. Gone were the pleasantries, the two leaders worked to cooperate on issues of common interests while trying to avoid any major disruptions. This was reflected in Obama's last two trips to China.<sup>58</sup>

### **Obama's trips in 2014 and 2016**

On November 10-12, 2014, Obama visited China for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders meeting and a state visit. The trip was a much more modest affair than the previous 2009 visit. The expectations were low and public events were avoided altogether, no scheduled events with Chinese citizens or visits to iconic Chinese cultural sites. The schedule was very tight with official meetings planned on Tuesday and Wednesday, just after the APEC meetings and before Obama flew to Burma; in total a visit of 24 hours. The shortness of the visit did raise some questions about US commitment toward China. National Security Advisor Susan Rice justified the decision by saying that the "schedule was constrained by the timeframe because of APEC and other meetings taking place in Burma".<sup>59</sup> Administration officials added that the relationship between the two countries had "matured" and was at "different level" meaning that a longer visit was not required at this point.<sup>60</sup> Press access issues still plagued the organisation of the trip. Administration officials told the press that they had been pressing hard at all levels for greater press access

to the president and Xi Jinping. The issue was particularly sensitive because several US news organisations had been denied renewal of their visas or residence permits for China-based journalists. In the end, during the joint press conference, Obama and Xi only took two questions: one from the *New York Times* and the other from the Chinese state-run media.<sup>61</sup> Still Obama and Xi reached an agreement on a wide range of issues: visas, counterterrorism, military exchanges, law enforcement, trade, and most important of all, climate change which would then form the basis of the Paris agreement. Six years after the failure of Copenhagen, Obama had finally brought the Chinese on board.<sup>62</sup>

Obama visited China for the last time on September 3, 2016, for a bilateral meeting with Xi on the margins of the G20 leaders summit in Hangzhou. The talks were unfortunately overshadowed by a misunderstanding over the stairs to be used on Obama's arrival. As no stairs were waiting for him to disembark from the front door of Air Force One, a decision was taken to use a smaller exit in the belly of the plane equipped with fold out stairs. Chaos ensued, with Chinese security staff arguing with members of the White House press corps to prevent them from recording his arrival. One White House official tried to intervene in defence of the media. A Chinese man yelled in response: "This is our country, this is our airport!"<sup>63</sup> While Obama tried to downplay the incident, the exchange, filmed by a smart phone, made headlines on one of China's most powerful government social media sites: Weibo (the equivalent of Twitter). A tsunami of negative press reports followed. Xi and Obama managed to set the media funfair aside and focused on working constructively on differences and deepening their cooperation in several areas including: peacekeeping, refugees, maritime risk reduction and cooperation, stabilising Iraq and Afghanistan

situation, nuclear security and liability, cybersecurity, counterterrorism, law enforcement.

Once again, they made the most progress on climate change.<sup>64</sup>

## **Conclusions**

Chinese public opinion showed much interest in Obama during the 2008 election and his first visit in 2009. Like many around the world, they too were intrigued by the first Black American president and the hope of change he had brought to the White House and international relations. But Obamamania ultimately failed to sway China's leaders and its people. The US President went to great lengths to improve relations and develop dialogue and cooperation. He declined to meet the Dalai Lama in order not to anger Beijing, he acquiesced to all Chinese requests to stage manage his 2009 visit, and publicly stated on several occasions that Washington was not seeking to contain China but that it acknowledged and welcome its new role on the world stage. Still, historical mistrust, China's new status following the 2008 financial crisis and stronger nationalistic feelings, especially among the younger generations, made it impossible for genuine collaboration to take place. The Chinese only cooperated on issues that were relevant to them, the clearest example being climate change. China's economic growth came at the expense of the quality of air, water and soil. Once the full scale of its impact was clear, they joined Obama's signature policy. This was not the case for all issues though and Sino-American relations inevitably returned to the old familiar pattern of cooperation and competition.

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