



ON THE

FRONT

*Shantou University students
bit the US campaign trail*

By Drew Conrad



IT STARTED AS A BOLD AND VISIONARY IDEA: Send seven intrepid Chinese print and broadcast journalism students from the prestigious Shantou University to the United States and partner them with five, hand-picked University of Utah academic all stars to cover the 2008 presidential campaign.

The project, Campaign Coverage '08, supported by the Li Ka Shing Foundation, was designed to give select Chinese journalism students the opportunity to experience an American presidential campaign, to grow as hard news journalists, to share cultures and perspectives with American students, and expose



Election special: Interviewing a demonstrator in St Paul, Minnesota; Barack Obama campaigning in Dayton, Ohio; the Campaign Coverage '08 team (from left to right: Sara Hua Qi, Eliot Gao Wenhuan, Nightingale Zhang Yan, project supervisor Tony Li Zixin, Mr Li Ka-shing, Masa Ma Jing, Daisy Feng Miaolan, Yamaha Gong Jietong and Jelen Zheng Jialiang); John McCain and Sarah Palin wave to the crowd in Media, Pennsylvania.

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them to experiences they will cherish all their lives.

In many ways, Campaign Coverage '08 embodies Mr Li's philosophy that, "A person who is adept at learning can foresee and seize the future, able to meld observation, experience and knowledge into wisdom and apply it in such a way that enables him to hold steadfast to his dreams and make short work of the most arduous tasks." Campaign Coverage '08 started with the Shantou students arriving in Washington DC in August to participate in intense planning and training sessions to hone their print, photography and broadcast journalism skills, and





Throughout the campaign, the team interviewed people on the streets, at rallies, in restaurants and bars, and on Capitol Hill

to learn about covering American politics.

Frank Folwell, former photo editor of *USA TODAY*, and Professor Sherry Ricchiardi of the University of Indiana were their American tutors. Frank accompanied the group on their entire journey along with a former reporter Tony Li Zixin who acted as Chinese editor and tutor.

Ready for action, they travelled to Denver, Colorado to meet their American teammates. Almost immediately, the Campaign Coverage '08 team was standing amidst convention delegates in the Pepsi Center, the location of the Democratic National Convention, observing and reporting on the events alongside some of the most seasoned reporters in the world.

While serving as a learning experience, the students worked tirelessly as real journalists and were responsible for reporting and filing their stories with their advisors acting as editors. Their stories, pictures and video were posted in Chinese at www.usastory.net and in English at www.campaigncoverage08.org and read by

911 AND SICHUAN

"I felt it," I whispered to myself as I was one block from Ground Zero, former site of the World Trade Center. I sensed that my nose smelled something like disinfectant, the same thing I smelled while working as a reporter at the epicentre of the Sichuan earthquake. I can't imagine that 108-storey twin-tower buildings stood here. Seven years have passed and the whole place is being rebuilt. "Evil people can never beat good things," a Danish tourist in his seventies told me. He said the rebuilding of Ground Zero is the symbol of standing up again after tragedy. "People from around the world need to work together and accept each other," he said. Yes, I promise to treasure, appreciate and love life more from now on.

— Gao Wenhuan

people all over the world. Indeed, *The Wall Street Journal* recommended the websites to readers as part of the newspaper's online "Best of the China blogs" service. Four edited excerpts from the Shantou students' reports are printed with this article.

The team interviewed delegates, recorded events and speeches, and also had a once-in-a-lifetime experience. They reported from INVESCO Field where some 75,000 supporters witnessed the historic nomination of Barack Obama, the first African-American to be named a party candidate for President and who, of course, went on to claim a famous victory.

The students also had an experience outside both conventions for which, perhaps, they were not completely prepared: a barrage of protests on issues as varied as the war in Iraq, the

Democratic and Republican parties, education, and abortion.

As police patrolled to ensure order among the protesters, Shantou student Zheng Jialiing noted the differences between American and Chinese law enforcement. "I don't get many chances to talk to police in China, and in Denver I was able to talk with a lot of them," he said. "Although the police were cautious because of the political figures, they would still engage in conversation and talk about their gear and weapons. I also saw a lot of helicopters patrolling in the sky. This was another security measure that I had not seen much of in China."

Without time to catch their breath, the students packed their bags in Denver and headed to the Excel Energy Center in St Paul, Minnesota, the site of the Republican National Convention, where delegates experienced the effects of two storms, one named Gustav and the other Sarah Palin, the Governor of Alaska and Republican candidate for Vice President.

FINDING OBAMA

Barack Obama talks about his favourite restaurant, MacArthur's, in his book *The Audacity of Hope*. The restaurant is on West Madison Street, on Chicago's northwest side. This Sunday morning MacArthur's is filled with black churchgoers from a local church and families from afar. Maurice Gaiter, the restaurant manager, said before Obama's presidential bid the family often dined here. "We've known each other for four years now and we would talk on the phone once every two months and ask how the other's doing." Gaiter believed this presidential election would have the biggest African-American turn-out yet. "They will help him make history," he said

— Hua Qi, Zheng Jialiing,
Gao Wenhuan and Gong Jietong

was surprised by John McCain's choice but was more surprised by the overwhelming positive reception from the Republican National Convention. She created a change in the political atmosphere, more than Hurricane Gustav would have if it had struck St Paul."

Hurricane Gustav reached land on the first day of the convention in the Gulf Coast and caused damage in the states of Louisiana and Texas, and Mississippi. Before the storm hit, Republican Party leaders decided to modify and delay activities out of respect to those who were at risk.

While the hurricane put the convention on hold, it failed to dampen the spirits of delegates for long, particularly after Governor Palin arrived and, as one student observed, electrified the convention with her acceptance speech.

"Sarah Palin created a reaction that was unlike anything I had ever seen in my short time watching the political system," said Utah student Jed Layton. "I



Getting both sides of the story:
(opposite page) **Jelen Zheng Jialiing reports from Strongville, Ohio.**
(Clockwise from top left) **Interviewing members of the public in New York and Washington; Joe Biden with Shantou student Masa Ma Jing; a Republican rally in Sterling, Virginia.**



The day after Senator McCain gave his acceptance speech at the convention, the students found themselves packed in a van heading east to set up base on Washington, DC's famous K Street, just blocks from the White House.

Throughout the campaign, the team interviewed people on the streets, at rallies, in restaurants and bars, and on Capitol Hill, to get their perspectives on the campaign and their reactions to the presidential and vice-presidential debates.

They were particularly interested in listening to and reporting on the observations and opinions of American students attending academic institutions such as Johns Hopkins, George Washington University, American University and Georgetown University. This connection with students has been an invaluable learning process for Shantou student Gong Jietong.

"I noticed that young Americans are so excited

to support the candidates from both parties," she said. "During their voting process, they had problems with registering people to vote. I listened to their problems, talked to them and saw how they attempt to solve the problems. These discussions were good experiences for me. It helped me to learn and when I return to China, I can explain the process to my peers and broaden their understanding of democracy."

OHIO WATCH

Jim Locke used to be a lifelong Democrat but changed his mind. So it goes in Chillicothe, Ohio, a bellwether town in a bellwether state. Locke said he is voting for McCain because his strong character and record as a leader could deliver the country, and the city of Chillicothe, out of the economic meltdown. The economy is a priority in Ohio, a manufacturing centre that lost a quarter of its manufacturing jobs in the past seven years. "I am really concerned about the current economic situation," said the Chinese-American owner of Chinese fast food restaurant in Chillicothe who would only give her last name of Wang. "Business is getting worse. If the economy can get better, I don't mind paying more taxes."

— Zheng Jialiang

The students also got a first-hand look at the candidates at rallies in Virginia and Ohio where the nominees appeared before a crowd to boost media coverage and energise their supporters. At a rally in Sterling, Virginia, Ms Gong and a fellow Shantou student, Ma Jing, had the opportunity to talk to and have their picture taken with Democratic Vice Presidential candidate, Joe Biden.

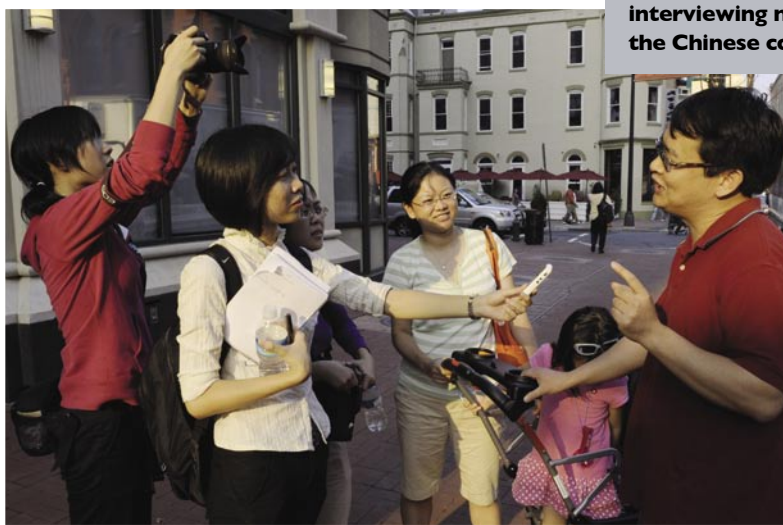
"I was initially surprised to see such a high ranking leader acting like an old friend to ordinary people," said Ms Ma. "He walked up to people and talked to

Police were out in force at both conventions to keep order among people protesting about a wide range of issues





Reporting from the front line: (opposite page) **A demonstration in St Paul, Minnesota.** (Clockwise from top left) **Gauging the public mood as the bears triumph on Wall Street; children celebrate on election night in Grant Park, Chicago; interviewing members of the Chinese community.**



them like he had known them for years. It was exciting to have my picture taken with him, he put his arm around me and I told him that I am a student from China here to observe the election. He was very kind and said that I should be proud of my country. It was a great moment, but the thing that stuck out the most was his friendliness.”

When the economic crisis became news during the campaign, some of the students travelled to Wall Street, the famous financial district in New York City, to get reactions from people about the crisis and observe activities at the New York Stock Exchange.

They also attended hearings on Capitol Hill where they heard Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke testify before the Joint Economic Committee in Congress as part of discussions about legislation designed to stabilise the American economy. The students had front row seats when President George W Bush signed that legislation into law.

Having the opportunity to observe the political process in the United States has given all the Shantou students a unique perspective on the democratic experience.

“When I was watching the election on TV at home I just looked at it as two parties competing to get into power,” said Zhang Yan. “Not until I arrived here and started reporting did I realise how active and involved the American people are in the political process regardless of race, age, or gender. They enjoy

participating and take it seriously because which candidate gets elected has an impact on their future lives.”

While the Shantou students received an education in American politics and the passion that many have in the process, the Utah students gained insights into Chinese culture and a deep appreciation for the impressive work ethic of the students from Shantou University.

“Living with the Shantou students has been one of the most educational and fulfilling experiences of my life,” said Utah student Christine Angstman. “They are the hardest workers I have ever met. They are driven, determined, and will stay up all hours of the night to perfect their articles, video and pictures.

“On the surface our cultures are very different, however at the end of the day we are all very similar. We talk about what girls in their young twenties talk about: our days, our lives back home, and our dreams and aspirations.”

For those lucky enough to have been part of it, Campaign Coverage ’08 was about the endowment of knowledge to students that will remain with them as they move forward in their careers. It also gave all involved a deep appreciation of the Li Ka Shing Foundation for making this unique opportunity possible. The students unanimously reported that the Foundation’s objective to “nurture a culture of giving and to foster creativity, constructive engagement, and sustainability through supporting empowerment focused projects,” was attained in Campaign Coverage ’08. 