

# China's Public Diplomacy: Main Vectors

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## Abstract

**This paper examines China's public diplomacy components and content in general, discussing some of the main vectors of China's public diplomacy, cultural and political influence by the way of "soft power". The paper does not review PRC's public diplomacy politics toward specific countries or regions. In the 60-plus years since the birth of the Peoples Republic of China in 1949, and in the last 3 decades in particular, China's national strength has grown constantly and its role on the world stage has become more important. In this term, brilliant achievements in the field of diplomacy have been made. But still China faces new tasks and challenges. Because of its development and influence in the world, it is a necessary step for China to take to strengthen its PD (public diplomacy) in both domestic and foreign context.**

## Keywords

**China, Public Diplomacy, Diplomacy, Soft Power**

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Diplomacy came from day one when people of different groups began to communicate and negotiate in order to resolve problems and conflicts, and to seek cooperation, among them. Diplomacy has deep roots and rich history covering all nations and centuries. Diplomacy has various definitions and is easy to explain.

In comparison with the state-run diplomacy, public diplomacy (PD) is relatively a new term that emerged during the Cold War. PD is one of the most salient political communication issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The emergence of PD does not threaten the existence of traditional diplomacy. In fact, it is said that PD is old wine in new bottles (Jeffers, 2012). The distinction between PD and TD (traditional diplomacy) is clear: TD is about the relationship between representatives of states or other international relation actors, while PD is more about influencing foreign publics and leading dialogue between people. So far, there is no internationally accepted definition of PD, although governments and scholars in many countries come up with their own definitions. For instance, in 1987, the US government defined PD as "government sponsored programs intended to inform or influence public opinion in other countries" (Zhao Qizheng, 2012).

However, when we want to analyze the PD of the PRC we have to redefine the term because of the different understandings of this foreign concept in China. The term commonly used in China is "duiwai xuan" 对外宣 or

“*waixuan*” 外宣 which means external propaganda and is aimed at advertising China’s achievements and presenting the country’s image worldwide (Lejli, 2011). In Chinese, unlike in many other languages, translation propaganda has a positive connotation associated with such activities as “release of news, general shaping of ideology”. Sometimes it is called “people-to-people diplomacy” 民间外交 or “non-traditional diplomacy” 非传统外交 in Chinese (Lejli, 2011).

Scholars usually identify three major starting points in the PD of PRC aimed at the rebuilding image of this country.

- The first attempt is considered to have been made in mid-1930’s when American journalist Edgar Snow (1905-1972) was traveling to China in order to report on the ongoing civil war<sup>1</sup>. The practice of inviting foreign journalists and academics to visit China and afterwards making reports on it continued on the 1940’s. Edgar Snow recorded his China experience and current situation in China in his book *Red Star over China*<sup>2</sup>.
- The second attempt was made in the 1970’s by the end of China’s international isolation and with “Ping-Pong diplomacy” 乒乓外交 and pandas. Deng Xiaoping introduced “open-door policy” which brought in foreign businessman, tourists and resulted in an open economy. Deng’s PD is considered to be very effective because it contributed to opening up, and modernizing China.
- The third attempt was in the 1990’s when leaders of PRC hired one of the biggest PR firms in the world “Hill and Knowlton” in order to help repair China’s image. In 1984, the firm was the first international public relations agency set up in the Chinese mainland<sup>3</sup>.

But it is interesting that scholars do not mention what would portray China as one of the forerunners in PD. The term “diplomat brides” comes from the practice of sending Chinese princesses to make an alliance with various enemies who threatened the borders of the empire. For example, over the course of the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.), over 20 known princesses were sent out to forge peaceful relation and ensure proper trade with enemy kingdoms<sup>4</sup>. On achieving the status and power of wife of high official, a “diplomat bride” was in a position to become “eyes and ears” of her “native culture” through books, textiles, foods and religious belief.

In our discussion of China’s PD, we emphasize the integration of Chinese culture with elements from other cultures. China’s profound civilization, which legendarily spans over 5000 years of history, is the source of wisdom and ideological wealth that enriches China’s PD. Chinese culture traditionally puts people first, values harmony, and cherishes friendship with neighbors. It is characterized by openness, tolerance, and a capacity to absorb and integrate the strengths of other cultures. PD has been viewed as an important vehicle promoting interactions between Chinese culture and other cultures in recent years and particularly since the beginning of the reforms and opening up drive, which has laid solid foundations for China’s PD.

The popular impression of China’s power has changed. According to a recent survey of 10,250 people worldwide, 55 percent of respondents expected China to be a world power in the year 2020<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, the impression about China’s unique culture will remain. China can thus take advantage of its cultural uniqueness when developing its soft power on the world stage.

In developed countries, culture is a “soft power” 软实力. The notion of “soft power” was authored by American scientist Joseph Nye. According to Nye’s thesis, “soft power” means existence of diplomacy in military components. It is mentioned that the forefather of this perspective to look at diplomacy and military is not J. Nye at all, the perspective was first used by philosopher and strategist Sunzi 孙子 in early China. “SP” connotation was spoken at Sunzi’s *The Art of War* tractate in B.C 500 (Sargsyan, 2010). Sunzi was sure about the possibility of winning without fight, using what we can classify as soft power today. Confucian philosophers also generally preferred the use of socio-cultural means—which they considered to be the most appropriate way to restore peace and harmony in the world—to the use of military power. Besides Confucianism, there is Mohism, which advocates “universal love” 兼爱 in human life. And there were such philosophical giants as Laozi and—especially—Zhuangzi in Daoism who have no use for violence or direct conflicts.

<sup>1</sup>Edgar Snow Facts, <http://biography.yourdictionary.com/edgar-snow>, last checked 11.11.2014.

<sup>2</sup>*Red Star Over China*, a 1937 book by Edgar Snow, is an account of the Communist Party of China written when they were a guerrilla army still obscure to Westerners. Along with Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* (1931) it was the most influential book on Western understanding and sympathy for China in the 1930s.

<sup>3</sup>Hill-Knowlton Strategies celebrates 30 years in China (2014),

<http://finance.yahoo.com/news/hill-knowlton-strategies-celebrates-30-164500991.html>.

<sup>4</sup>Mazhidenova D. *Diplomatic practice specifications of Ancient China, Policy and Government*, Academy of State governance under the rule of President of Kazakhstan, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup>China to Rival US as World Power by 2020, Reuters Report, China Daily, June 2, 2006.

It is reasonable to assume that the strategy of cultural diplomacy is not something new but a tradition that has lasted for centuries. The tradition has laid a solid foundation for the present Chinese PD.

Nowadays PD is implemented by a wide variety of social members and it is presumably aimed at the following goals:

- To portray China as a country that works hard to give its people a better future and seeks understanding for its political system and policies.
- To present China, in commerce and trade, as a stable, trustworthy, and responsible economic partner, a rising economic power that does not have to be feared.
- To present China, in international affairs, as a trustworthy and responsible member of the international community, capable of contributing, and willing to contribute actively, to world peace.
- To be respected as an ancient civilization with a long history of culture.

In short, the basic task of China's PD is to explain what China means to the world and promote the understanding of China—including China's cultural traditions, social development, economic conditions, political system and domestic and foreign policies—in the world.

In its way of conducting worldwide PD, China—as do other countries—uses a variety of instruments as such as the media, internet, events, celebrities, publications, academic areas...

**Media:** Until recently, China's domestic newspapers were the main instruments for informing the outside world about China. There have been English-language Chinese newspapers and journals targeted at international audience since the early years of the PRC. The Chinese have Chinese international radio, which is known as "Voice of China" or VOA for short. The biggest player in this field is TV with CCTV's 12 channels accessible around China and the world. They broadcast programs in English, Russian and Portuguese (to cover Latin American countries). CCTV hires foreign editors and journalists.

Media has become more liberal, featuring interviews on focal issues like Tibet and Taiwan. Chinese leaders are no longer reluctant to give press-conference during their visits abroad. To the contrary they include several press moments creating nice photo opportunities. Foreign journalists are increasingly welcomed to China.

**Celebrities:** China has made much progress in increasing its soft power through sports. A number of world-class Chinese athletes are acting as de facto sports envoys for China. They include NBA star Yao Ming 姚明, a new world record holder sprinter Liu Xiang 刘翔, as well as Chinese well-known tennis player Zheng Jie 郑洁.

Fueled by movies by Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan and Jet Li, Chinese martial arts or *wushu* 武术 is attracting practitioners and audience worldwide. The international *wushu* federation recognized in 1995 by the International Olympic Committee, has members in more than 75 countries and on all continents. With the strong lobbying from China, *wushu* has been instituted as a sport in 2008 Beijing Olympic Games<sup>6</sup>.

Famed actresses, actors, pianists act as "cultural envoys" 文化特使 for China.

**Publications:** When we talk about publications, we imply published books, reports, journals, and results of academic and scientific research. The importance of printed publications has decreased with the development of the internet. China devotes much attention to explaining its policies in white papers, the most recent of which deals with the environment, defense policy, care for the aged-space activities and Chinese peaceful development.

**Academics:** China's communication with the external world was quite limited until 1980's. It was isolated by international powers, who branded PRC as one of the worst enemies to the western world. In 1990's the thesis about "China Collapse" was roused, which forced Chinese leaders to seriously deal with the issue of image. Deng Xiaoping required that China be more open to the world.

At the beginning of 1990's the implementation of the new world image order was assigned to scientific and academic areas. Director of the political research center of CCP central committee political Wang Huning 王沪宁 was the first scholar to highlight the "soft power" and the first scientist to argue that culture was the only method to activate "SP" (Lejli, 2011).

Contemporary Chinese literature is full of "SP"-related ideas and they are mainly focused on the use of cultural resources. Writers in their works put accent on the development of China's civilization and cultural heritage in the context of world history. Striking exchange is the list of literature devoted to voyager Zheng He's 郑

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<sup>6</sup>Previously the IOC allowed China to organize an international Wushu event during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. This event was not a demonstration event or one of the official Olympic sports—it was called the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games Wushu Tournament, <http://www.topendsports.com/events/summer/sports/wushu.htm>.

和 (1371-1433 A.D.) adventures. Chinese writers and historians describe him as the world first voyager before Columbus and Marco Polo (Zakaria, 2008).

It seems to us that PRC leadership spare no efforts to improve academic side of PD and this nationwide issue has been shouldered by the academics and intellectuals as pioneers in ideology and culture.

**Events:** Not to underestimate the power of events and forums. With the aim of increasing its visibility in the world, China has become a great organizer of big events. In recent years, international forums hosted or co-hosted by China have become an important channel in PD. The same applies to international forums such as the World Economy Forum, the Boao Forum, the forums of the World Bank, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Forum and the Beijing-Tokyo Forum (Zhao Qizheng, 2012). As a result, these forums have become an important platform for PD.

China has also sponsored international cultural forums and dialogues. Endorsed by the Chinese government, the first international Buddhist forum in China since 1949 was held in Hangzhou in April 2006. The forum attracted over 1000 Buddhist monks, experts and politicians from 34 countries and areas (Lai Hongyi, 2006).

In Russia, France and US, China organized the “The Year of Chinese Culture”. It also organizes arts exhibits, arts performance, speeches by celebrities, exhibits on social customs and Expo’s (such as the Shanghai Expo in 2010). These events are mainly organized outside China to showcase the uniqueness of Chinese culture.

**Overseas Chinese:** Overseas Chinese are both actors and target groups of PD. They form an enormous and diverse group of more than 40 ml Chinese living in more than 130 countries. There are target group as authorities in Beijing want to keep them on their side and encourage them to invest in China. These people also play a significant role in promoting Chinese culture and lobbying for Chinese political interests.

**NGOs:** NGO’s recently act very actively alluring people in the world to friendship. For instance, in the PRC, The Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) 中国人民对外友好协会 is one of the three major organizations specialized in foreign affairs. It aims to promote friendship and mutual understanding between Chinese people and other nations.

**Student exchange:** Inviting foreign students to China has become another powerful diplomatic instrument. The statistics of foreign students enrollment in China provides another illustration of the international attraction to China’s language and culture. In 2005 more than 141,000 international students came to study in China, up 27% from one year earlier. In 2011 about 287,000 international students studied in various universities in China.

1	South Korea	62,442
2	United States	23,292
3	Japan	17,961
4	Thailand	14,145
5	Vietnam	13,549
6	Russia	13,340
7	Indonesia	10,957
8	India	9370
9	Pakistan	8516
10	Kazakhstan	8287
	All Other Countries	110,752

This shows the statistics of foreign students flow to PRC in 2011<sup>7</sup>.

These young people come to China to learn language with the aim of doing business with China in the future, but an increasing number of them are studying Chinese art, philosophy, history and traditional Chinese medicine.

**Confucius Institutes as cultural ambassadors:** Confucius Institutes (CI) differ from their foreign counterparts such as the Japan Foundation, UK’s British Council, Germany’s Goethe Institute and France’s Alliance Francaise.

<sup>7</sup>Project Atlas, China, <http://www.iie.org/Services/Project-Atlas/China/International-Students-In-China>.

The idea of launching CI around the world was suggested by CCP propaganda commission chief. The name of the center was chosen after many discussions. As Confucianism preach humanity, harmony, unity and education, the brand would best serve the interests of various Chinese ethnic groups around the world and the best method to show the international community China's non-stop stride civilization.

In 2004 CI initial regulations envisaged language and culture learning by international students. By now CI programs have been widened from cultural exchange to academic cooperation. Currently CI program planning is mainly up to the host university. A large number of CIs are located in North America, some of them assume the role of academic center. For example, the CI in Stanford University emphasizes the study of Tang-dynasty literature. Other CI's at Chicago and Columbia Universities consider themselves to be centers of scientific research (Sargsyan, 2013).

In short, CIs in the world act as cultural ambassadors that both unite overseas Chinese and influence people in the world by using Chinese culture and history.

China's rise should, evidently, rest not only on its economic, scientific, technological, and military power, but also on its soft power. Through cultural exchange, China seems to hope to assure the world that China is a civilized, responsible and trustworthy nation.

The first attempt to characterize PD was made by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1957: "It is one that combines official bodies, semi-official and non-governmental diplomacies" (Zhao Qizheng, 2012). Chinese culture remained traditional through centuries, though different undertones were brought by various leaders. Despite Mao's anti-Confucian position, he definitely used Confucian ideology and thoughts while leading the "cultural revolution" 文化革命 in 1966-1976. Jiang Zemin's "decent governance" 正当管理<sup>8</sup> theory and Hu Jintao's "harmonic society" 和谐社会 confirm us that Confucianism still lies at the bases of governance system. In 2002 Jiang Zemin invited Russian Federation Putin's two daughters to China. Modern leaders request that China not spare arts and literature to show China's real face in a positive manner. PRC new president Xi Jinping talks about PD which will realize Xi's concept of "Chinese dream" 中国梦 overseas and in China.

In one of his interviews Xi Jinping said: "The stories of China should be well told, voices of China well spread, and characteristics of China well explained" (Zhu Feng, 2012).

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<sup>8</sup>In 2002 Jiang Zemin invited Russian Federation Putin's two daughters to visit China. They were fascinated with the Chinese culture. Both learned Wushu and one even studied Chinese.