

Misconceptions in Comparative Study of Public Diplomacy: A U.S.-China Case Study

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Abstract

The study of public diplomacy often proceeds with an empirical approach, focusing on crafting policy instruments and measuring policy efficiency. But this approach tends to render descriptive and quantitative results. This paper contextualizes public diplomacy in theoretical terms, institutional structure, and policy priority, and points out three common misconceptions in comparison of U.S.-China public diplomacy. It means to draw attention to normative and qualitative approaches that should be applied to the fledging interdisciplinary study of public diplomacy.

Keywords

Public diplomacy, comparative study, China, USA, soft power

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Overview

China's fast rise in the past three decades from an isolated backwater leftist regime to a top-tier economic and political power is an historic phenomenon. China's economic success poses challenges to the status quo of the world order on two levels.

First, it demonstrates that developing countries can bypass Western-style economic privatization, market absolutism and democratic institutions to achieve economic fulfillment and political independence. Inspired by the showcase of China, Third World countries think that their survival could be bettered by cherry-picking the adaptable parts of the Western development model and availing themselves of foreign investments and technologies without themselves becoming Westernized. China's model of development, coined as "The Beijing Consensus" by Joshua Cooper Ramo in 2004, could chip away the viability of the U.S. model prescribed in the Washington Consensus, and promote an alternative worldview that reinforced by the U.S.-led West and commonly shared by the international community.

Second, fueled by its growing economic and political power, China's national interests have become more diversified and expanding. China has become more assertive in territorial disputes over islands in the East and South China Seas. It has increased its defense budget substantially in recent year to upgrade military weaponry. China has also gone on the defensive against Western criticism on its human rights records and authoritarianism and has insisted on the legitimacy of its political system at the present stage of social development. China, once a follower

of the international order during its process of integration into the world, is now trying to reshape the rules and institutions of the international system to better serve its interests. In addition to its mighty presence in the UN and WTO, China's marching footsteps have been found in international financial institutions usually dominated by the West. It has gained over 6% membership quotas in IMF, becoming the third largest power in this institution. China's share in World Bank has also risen to 4.42%, next to Japan and the U.S. China now has the will and capacity to pursue its own global agenda.

Against this backdrop is a seeming decline of U.S. power. America's excessive use of military force in the Middle East and increasing number of cases of human rights abuse in secret prisons around the globe turned international sympathy for the U.S. after 9/11 into international outrage. The global financial crisis that broke out in 2008, with the Wall Street at the eye of the storm, dragged down the national economy and put a huge question mark on the viability of the U.S. development model based on deregulation, overconsumption and hyperfinancialization. Edward Snowden's revelation on the U.S. National Security Agency's blanket surveillance on a global scale compromises the moral height of the U.S. as the advocator of democracy and freedom. It seems that a rebalance of global power distribution is in process.

The point of concern about the rebalance is that the U.S. and China are heterogeneous powers in terms of political and social institutions, ideology and culture. This generates a vicious circle of distrust. On the one hand, the U.S.-led West worries that China is becoming a rogue force that will overhaul the international order; on the other hand, suspicious about U.S. strategic intention to contain China's rise, China feels precarious in an adverse external environment. To

make the rebalance less disruptive, the U.S., the most powerful custodian of the existing West-dominated world order, has to shape a rising China into a responsible stakeholder instead of a revolutionary, and China has to demonstrate the peaceful intention of its rise. Therefore, public diplomacy is needed to foster a common ground of mutual respect and understanding between the two countries.

China has made enormous public diplomacy efforts to assure the U.S. and the world of its goodwill and to make its message of peace and harmony heard and understood. When Russia invaded Georgia's South-Ossetia region in 2008, Beijing was hosting the Summer Olympics with extravagance and courtesy. When the world economy was at the peak of the financial crisis in 2010, China hosted Shanghai Expo, inspiring the world with technological innovation and new investment opportunities. Since 2005, under the endorsement of the Chinese government and in collaboration with American education institutions, 97 Confucius Institutes and 357 Confucius Classrooms have been established across the U.S., serving as Chinese culture and language education centers.¹ In terms of international broadcasting, the Chinese government has allegedly spent \$7.1 billion to expand the overseas outlets of its media.² Flagship state-run media, such as China Central Television, Xinhua News Agency and China Daily all have established state-of-the-art facilities either in New York or Washington, D.C., and have started localizing their productions in the U.S.

The U.S. is also becoming more public diplomacy savvy in handling U.S.-China relations. When President Obama visited China in 2009, he creatively held a town hall meeting with over 400 Chinese university students. He greeted the audience with local dialect, and advocated the universal value of freedom of expression, religious belief, access to information and political participation. The

event was live streamed online in China and reviewed positively by young Chinese. The U.S. Embassy in China is keen to use social media to conduct public diplomacy in China. For instance, the Embassy has kept posting Beijing air quality data recorded by the Embassy's facility on Weibo – China's most popular social media platform. This measure strengthened environmental protection awareness among China's civil society and created popular pressure on the Chinese authorities to upgrade its air quality monitor standard. At the same time, the U.S. Embassy also took these opportunities to share information about the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Clear Air Act on Weibo to advocate U.S. environmental policy.

This kind of checklist-like quantitative comparison can help the two countries draw lessons from each other's policy practice. However, without contextualizing public diplomacy in clearer theoretical, institutional, and policy frameworks, this kind of comparison can also be misleading because it correlates the quantity of public diplomacy measures with their effects, and engenders policy contest with no clear purpose.

Theoretical Misconception

According to liberal international relations theory, the fundamental actors in international politics are individuals and private groups who are rational and risk-averse. They communicate and take collective action to promote differentiated interests under constraints imposed by material scarcity, conflicting values and variation in societal influence. States represent some subset of domestic society, and it is on the basis of the subset's interests that state officials define state preferences and act purposively in world politics. The configuration of

interdependent states' preferences determines state behavior. (Moravcsik, 1997) In the liberalist view, international and domestic spheres are inextricably linked. States' internal structures determine whether their relations are cooperative or conflictual; more focus should be given to the precise interactions between individuals and states. (Slaughter, 2000)

The rationale behind public diplomacy is based on the assumption that government policy should be responsive and responsible to its citizens' public opinion. Therefore, country A could shape the public opinion in country B through direct communication and exchange with the public of country B, and hence indirectly influence country B's government policy towards country A. In this sense, by targeting societal actors to shape representation and state preference, public diplomacy is a liberal approach to diplomacy and international relations. It inherently embraces the ideal of interdependence, cooperation and mutual understanding, and is non-excluding in its nature.

However, in reality, people often view public diplomacy through the lenses of realist power politics, partly because of the popularization of the concept of "soft power" that blurs the line between liberalism and realism. According to realist international relations theory, in international politics the only important collective actor is state; power determines the outcomes of state interaction; state can be treated as if their dominant preference were for power (Slaughter, 2000). It stresses the exclusiveness of power politics and hegemon. It leads to a comparative and competitive view on a nation's ability to coerce or induce another nation to perform a course of action. Scholars and diplomats have often view public diplomacy as a measure to craft a nation's soft power, and consider the persuasion and

communication ingrained in public diplomacy as calculated measures to add up to soft power.

This theoretical misconception leads to the misunderstanding of the relations between soft power and public diplomacy. Joseph Nye (2008) pointed out:

The resources that produce soft power arise...from the values...a country expresses in its culture, in the examples it sets by its internal practices and policies, and in the way it handles its relations with others. Public diplomacy is an instrument that governments use to mobilize these resources to communicate with and attract the publics of other countries. (p.94)

In other words, soft power is an organic quality of a country exuding naturally from its history, culture, social and political institutions. Public diplomacy is an international political communication practice that makes a country's soft power more visible, audible, tangible and comprehensible. Public diplomacy "sells" a country's soft power as it is; it doesn't produce soft power.

U.S.-China public diplomacy has always been framed in a zero-sum mode. Senator Richard G. Lugar argued that U.S. was in deficit in terms of public diplomacy competition with China.³ Senator Dana Rohrabacher called for establishing a reciprocal relationship between the number of visas issued to state-controlled media workers in China and in the United States.⁴ In 2010, over 170 University of Chicago faculty members petitioned against the establishment of a Confucius Center and called the center an academically and politically ambiguous initiative sponsored by the Chinese government and a risk to the university reputation.

Correspondingly, U.S. public diplomacy practitioners also sense hostility in China. Former U.S. Consul General in Shanghai Beatrice Camp complained that

the Chinese government refused to allow the U.S. Consulate General in Shanghai to open an American presence post in Nanjing, required U.S. universities to have Chinese partners, and restricted the number of U.S. movies that can be shown in China. Her impression was that the Chinese government was not always comfortable with the U.S. public diplomacy practitioners' efforts to speak directly to the Chinese people, and sometimes even cancelled the U.S. public diplomacy programs without explaining the reasons.⁵

It is obvious that the theoretical misconception also causes confusion of public diplomacy and propaganda. To start a comparative study of public diplomacy, a fine line between propaganda and public diplomacy has to be drawn. Propaganda is a form of disinformation, which is set to produce an emotional response from the audiences. It has destructive intention to gain ground by defaming the adversary and whitewashing oneself. On the contrary, public diplomacy stresses on the impartial dissemination of information, truth telling and policy interpretation. It intends to decrease misunderstanding, stereotype and distrust between countries through candid political and cultural communication and exchanges between peoples. It is a win-win and constructive policy practice in which the gain of one is not at the cost of the other.

The confusion about public diplomacy and propaganda has ideological and political roots. For China, the biggest liability in its public diplomacy toward the U.S. is its regime's nature. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rules the Chinese government. Due to collective memory of the Cold War antagonism, for Americans, communism is strongly correlated with foreign propaganda and repressive domestic censorship. Although the CCP has departed from the leftist revolutionary mindset and led the country onto a path of state capitalism, a regime

that still calls itself “communist” and rhetorically pursues socialist aspiration is hard to be appreciated and trusted by the American public. Any public diplomacy endeavor carried out by the Chinese government will be viewed as a propaganda activity that whitewashes the Communist China and counters American values. Although the curriculums and textbooks of the Confucius Institutes are about the Chinese language and culture, some Americans view the Confucius Institutes with wary eyes and regard them as CCP propaganda outlets. Despite the fact that China’s global push for its media is more for self-explanation than it is an anti-U.S. campaign, the presence of the Chinese media in the U.S. – such as CCTV America and China Daily USA – has been seen as the localization of CCP’s propaganda machines.

For the U.S., the biggest liability in public diplomacy towards China was a part of an outdated legislation – the Smith-Mundt Act, which banned the domestic circulation of publications and broadcasting for U.S. public diplomacy use. This was tantamount to announcing that U.S. public diplomacy is an overseas-oriented propaganda activity, from which U.S. citizens should be quarantined. This undertone gave the Chinese government a good reason to question the intention of U.S. public diplomacy in China. Fortunately, on July 2, 2013, the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act became effective. It finally broke down the compartmentalization of domestic and foreign audiences and introduced transparency and candidness into the U.S. public diplomacy effort.

Institutional Misconception

It is widely agreed that public diplomacy is a type of government-sponsored diplomatic activity. Since government is the major actor in public diplomacy, the

government autonomy granted by the political institution of the country decides how public diplomacy can be carried out.

The U.S. government is in a political institution of checks and balances. The U.S. economy is based upon market-oriented private entrepreneurship. On the contrary, the Chinese government has very centralized power, and state-owned enterprises take the lion share of the country's economy. When the two countries' public diplomacy programs are paired up for competitive comparison, the result of the comparison is misleading.

China's vibrant public diplomacy programs benefit from the fact that China's highly centralized political institution fits the general definition that public diplomacy is a government-sponsored effort. China is a country with strong state and weak society. The Chinese government seldom worries about checks and balances with regard to budget making. It can effectively mobilize astronomical amount of money to boost certain programs that it values, such as vigorous global expansion of Chinese media outlets and the Confucius Institutes.

However, although China seems to have formidable numbers of public diplomacy programs, a closer check reveals that China's public diplomacy resources are scattered and tangled in a complicated bureaucratic system. The cultural exchange programs are in the charge of Ministry of Culture; the education exchange programs are in the charge of Ministry of Education; the international broadcasting is in the charge of Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the CCP and the State General Administration for Radio, Film and Television; foreign aid is in the charge of Ministry of Commerce; the internet-based communication programs are in the charge of the Information Office of the State Council; political affairs, diplomacy and foreign journalists stationed in China are

in the charge of Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There is no single central authority to fully coordinate the public diplomacy effort.

In recent years, to ramp up China's soft power, Chinese officials and scholars have united in their call for making public diplomacy resources even more concerted and integrated by the government (Wang, 2008). Take China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs for example. In 2009, it upgraded the Division of Public Diplomacy under the Information Department to the higher level and more heavily staffed Public Diplomacy Office to coordinate and mastermind the public diplomacy effort of the Ministry, its foreign missions and beyond. The office strengthened training programs catering to various tiers of diplomats to make them more public diplomacy conscious and more qualified in policy advocacy towards foreign audiences.⁶ Under its initiative, the Foreign Ministry established the Public Diplomacy Advisory Panel in 2010, mainly composed of retired senior Chinese ambassadors. The panel's missions are to give public diplomacy policy advice and to make public diplomacy campaigns by taking advantage of their diplomacy expertise and less sensitive status as retirees.⁷ The Public Diplomacy Office also established an inter-ministerial coordination mechanism in an effort to achieve better communication between public diplomacy-related ministries in the Chinese government.⁸

On the contrary, the U.S. democratic system features a strong society and weak state. Intricate legislations put the government budget under rigid scrutiny of the Congress. For example, the Smith-Mundt Act, also called the Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, strictly regulated government public diplomacy activities. It cautiously allocates public financial resources, and puts public diplomacy under the supervision of the Congress. Sec 401 mandated:

Whenever the Secretary shall use the services, facilities, or personnel of any Government agency for activities under authority of this Act, the Secretary shall pay for such performance out of funds available to the Secretary under this Act, either in advance, by reimbursement, or direct transfer. The Secretary shall include in each report submitted to the Congress a statement of the services, facilities, and personnel of other Government agencies utilized in carrying on activities under the authority of this Act, showing the names and salaries of the personnel utilize, or performing services utilized, during the period covered by such report, and the amounts aid to such other agencies under this section as payment for such performance.

The Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948 also limited the proliferation of government-sponsored public diplomacy programs by giving preference to private-owned entities, as Sec 502 mandated:

In authorizing international information activities under this Act, it is the sense of the Congress (1) that the Secretary shall reduce such Government information activities whenever corresponding private information dissemination is found to be adequate; (2) that nothing in this Act shall be construed to give the Department a monopoly in the production or sponsorship on the air of short-wave broadcasting programs, or a monopoly many other medium of information.

The spirit of this legislation foretells the future of U.S. public diplomacy. Due to limited public funding, public diplomacy programs are heavily subject to government fiscal prejudice. Fiscal hardships caused by the economic crisis since 2008 have led to downsizing public diplomacy. Voice of America was asked to turn off its Mandarin Chinese broadcasting service; the 63-year-old Advisory

Commission on Public Diplomacy was dismissed for 19 months beginning in December 2011.⁹ Due to the institutional preference to the role of private entities in public diplomacy, the U.S. government has retreated from the major sponsor to major initiator, and a large portion of public diplomacy effort has been relayed to the private sector. Hence, the inaction of VOA is not only because of the shortage of funding, but also because of the fact that the dominance of U.S. private media groups, such as CNN and *The New York Times*, over the international media sphere makes state-run media unnecessary.

Therefore, if institutional differences are not considered, a mere superficial comparison between government-sponsored public diplomacy programs by China and the U.S. is invalid. On the one hand, although the Chinese government can afford proliferation and upgrade of public diplomacy programs, close affiliation with the Chinese government makes many programs seem politically charged and ideologically sensitive in the American people's view. This negates the accessibility and effectiveness of China's public diplomacy in the U.S.

On the other hand, it is not realistic to fit China's "square peg" in the U.S. "round hole." The best universities in China are all public universities, while in the U.S. the best are private. In China, big media companies are all state-owned, while in the U.S. big media companies are all private. If the proposals by some U.S. Senators to equalize U.S.-China public diplomacy, such as requiring a reciprocal number of journalists stationed by state-run media or reciprocal number of culture and language institutes funded by government, are implemented, there will be a sudden die out of China's public diplomacy in the U.S., simply because there is no private sector to back it up. Therefore, China's massive push of government-

sponsored public diplomacy programs in the U.S. is an institutional byproduct rather than a conspired scheme.

In contrast, although the U.S. government is diffusing and scaling down its public diplomacy programs, the strong presence of U.S. private cultural and educational businesses in China, which pursue no obvious public diplomacy agenda, are contributing to the U.S. public diplomacy automatically. Many American TV programs have started to reach wider Chinese population due to growing availability of private TV dishes and the Internet. The Chinese people can read major newspapers such as *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* online. Major publishing companies in China synchronize cultural and newsworthy publications in the U.S. Cultural performances with unique American taste, such as jazz performances and Broadway musicals are introduced to the Chinese audience by private performing art agencies. There are hundreds of thousands of Chinese students learning English language at private American English education institutes such as the Wall Street Institute School of English and Berlitz in China. All these enriched and omniscient private businesses have been performing an adequate public diplomacy function objectively and making the U.S. government-sponsored programs such as VOA, Information Resource Center, Educational Advising, and Cultural Exchange less and less relevant and more and more symbolic. To some extent, a waning government role in U.S. public diplomacy is an institutional and economical choice rather than a political nonfeasance.

Policy Misconception

Public diplomacy often becomes null in front of incommensurable foreign/domestic policy. In the U.S. case, inefficiency of its public diplomacy

towards China originates from an incoherent China policy. In public, U.S. officials have insisted for years that they do not have a policy to contain China. On January 14, 2011, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said: “A thriving America is good for China, and a thriving China is good for America. And U.S. friends and allies in the Asia-Pacific want to move beyond outdated, zero-sum formulas that might force them to choose between relations with Beijing and relations with Washington (Clinton, 2011).” However, on November 16, 2011, during China-Philippines disputes over South China Sea, Secretary Clinton announced: “the United States will always be in the corner of the Philippines and we will stand and fight with you (Tandon, 2011).” Her announcement was accompanied with the declaration of the U.S.-Australia agreement to deploy 2,500 Marines in Australia to strengthen alliances in Asia, a move that was seen as a signal to balance the growing influence of China in the Southeast Asia region. This is just one of many cases in which the U.S. government’s deeds belie its words. Public diplomacy as an integral part of the overall diplomacy cannot stand on itself. If U.S.-China policy is antagonistic in general, its public diplomacy, no matter how friendly it seems to be, will be seen as an expediential distraction.

For China, inefficiency of its public diplomacy is caused by its domestic policy rather than its U.S. policy. Joseph Nye (2012) pertinently pointed out:

What China seems not to appreciate is that using culture and narrative to create soft power is not easy when they are inconsistent with domestic realities... The 2008 Olympics were a success, but shortly afterwards, China’s domestic crackdown in Tibet and Xianjiang, and on human rights activists, undercut its soft power gains. The Shanghai Expo was also a great success, but was followed by the jailing of the Nobel peace laureate Liu Xiaobo and the artist Ai

Weiwei. And for all the efforts to turn Xinhua and China Central Television into competitors for CNN and the BBC, there is little international audience for brittle propaganda. Now, in the aftermath of the Middle East revolutions, China is clamping down on the Internet and jailing human rights lawyers, once again torpedoing its soft power campaign.

To sum up, it is the Chinese government's domestic policy, which is heterogenic to the U.S. democratic values, that discredits the Chinese government and makes its public diplomacy measures in the U.S. unwelcomed and distrusted. The Chinese government has to be seen as a legitimate and righteous government in the eyes of the U.S. public before any substantial public diplomacy program can further its influence; otherwise, China's public diplomacy that aims to project a balanced image on China will be seen as an attempt to make believe.

From a broader viewpoint, inefficiency of U.S.-China public diplomacy is a curse of the dilemmatic bilateral relations. The U.S.-China relationship is the most important bilateral relationship in the world. Public diplomacy aiming at creating a solid basis of mutual understanding between the peoples and minimizing strategic misinterpretation is essential for the healthy development of U.S.-China relations and the security of the world. However, the importance of this bilateral relationship is based more upon strategic deterrence rather than on strategic alliance; and the relationship is charged with ideological dichotomy and political sensitivity. Therefore, public diplomacy has always been marginalized and overwhelmed by strategic planning on hot-button issues, such as arms sales, territorial disputes and national security.

Summary

Generally speaking, three common mistakes are usually made unconsciously in comparing U.S.-China public diplomacy. 1) Confusing public diplomacy with another form of political communication: propaganda. This mistake is due to incoherent and confused theoretical and ideological approaches to public diplomacy. 2) Overstressing the role played by the government. The reason for this mistake is the institutional compatibility of public diplomacy, which is defined as a government-sponsored diplomatic practice, with the political institution of big government. 3) Overestimating applicability of public diplomacy. This mistake is made if the relations between public diplomacy and overall domestic or foreign policy are overlooked. Being mindful of the theoretical, institutional and policy misconceptions behind these mistakes can help public diplomacy scholars and practitioners evaluate public diplomacy in a more qualitative and comprehensive way.

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