

DOKUZ EYLÜL UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PROGRAM
MASTER’S THESIS

**WOLF WARRIOR DIPLOMACY: AN ASSET OR
LIABILITY FOR THE SOFT POWER OF CHINA IN
THE DIGITAL AGE?**

Eda TUNÇ

Supervisor

Assist.Prof. İlkim ÖZDİKMENLİ ÇELİKOĞLU

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İZMİR – 2025

YÜKSEK LİSANS
TEZ ONAY SAYFASI

Üniversite : Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi
Enstitü : Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü
Adı ve Soyadı : EDA TUNÇ
Öğrenci No : 2007802022
Tez Başlığı : Wolf Warrior Diplomacy: An Asset or Liability for the Soft Power of China
in the Digital Age?
Savunma Tarihi : 15/04/2025
Danışmanı : Dr.Öğr.Üyesi İlkin ÖZDİKMENLİ ÇELİKOĞLU

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I hereby declare that this master’s thesis titled as “Wolf Warrior Diplomacy: An Asset or Liability for the Soft Power of China in the Digital Age?” has been written by myself in accordance with the academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that all materials benefited in this thesis consist of the mentioned resources in the reference list. I verify all these with my honor.

15/04/2025

Eda TUNÇ



ABSTRACT

Master's Thesis

Wolf Warrior Diplomacy: An Asset or Liability for the Soft Power of China in the Digital Age?

Eda TUNÇ

Dokuz Eylül University

Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of International Relations

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This thesis examines China's "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy conducted in the late 2010s and early 2020s particularly via social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter). By exploring the strategic rhetoric and public messaging employed by Chinese diplomats, the study attempts to comprehend how this assertive approach shapes global perceptions of China and impacts its soft power. The findings reveal that particularly with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, China began to utilize a more aggressive diplomatic tone, namely "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, due to the severe criticisms it faced. In order to defend itself and deflect these criticisms, Chinese officials adopted a confrontational style which was unlike the traditional Chinese diplomatic approach. Additionally, this strategy was also chosen to strengthen national pride and convey a sense of confidence domestically. However, this study finds that such an aggressive diplomatic style risks alienating international audiences and limits China's ability to build a positive global image, as supported by global attitude surveys. This research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of digital diplomacy and emphasize the importance of balancing assertiveness with more constructive and globally appealing strategies in the digital age.

Keywords: Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, Soft Power, China, Digital Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy.

ÖZET

Yüksek Lisans Tezi

Savaşçı Kurt Diplomasisi: Dijital Çağda Çin'in Yumuşak Gücü İçin Bir Avantaj mı, Yoksa Bir Yük mü?

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Bu tez, 2010'ların sonları ve 2020'lerin başlarında, özellikle X (eski adıyla Twitter) gibi sosyal medya platformları aracılığıyla yürütülen Çin'in "Savaşçı Kurt" (Wolf Warrior) diplomasisini incelemektedir. Çinli diplomatların kullandığı stratejik söylem ve kamu mesajlarını araştırarak, bu iddialı yaklaşımın Çin'e ilişkin küresel algıları nasıl şekillendirdiğini ve yumuşak gücünü nasıl etkilediğini anlamaya çalışmaktadır. Bulgular, özellikle COVID-19 pandemisinin ortaya çıkmasıyla birlikte, Çin'in karşılaştığı sert eleştiriler nedeniyle daha agresif bir diplomatik üslup kullanmaya başladığını, yani "Savaşçı Kurt" diplomasisini benimsemiş olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Kendini savunmak ve eleştirilerin yönünü tersine çevirmek amacıyla, Çinli yetkililer, geleneksel Çin diplomatik tarzından farklı olarak, çatışmacı bir üslup benimsemişlerdir. Ayrıca, bu strateji, ulusal gururu pekiştirmek ve ülke içerisinde bir güven duygusu oluşturmak amacıyla da seçilmiştir. Ancak bu çalışma, böyle bir agresif diplomatik tarzın uluslararası kitleleri yabancılaştırma riski taşıdığını ve Çin'in küresel çapta olumlu bir imaj oluşturma yeteneğini sınırladığını, küresel tutum anketleriyle destekleyerek ortaya koymaktadır. Bu araştırma, dijital diplomasiinin daha geniş bir şekilde anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmayı ve dijital çağda iddialılığı daha yapıcı ve küresel ölçekte çekici stratejilerle dengelemenin önemini vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Savaşçı Kurt Diplomasisi, Yumuşak Güç, Çin, Dijital Diplomasisi, Kamu Diplomasisi.

WOLF WARRIOR DIPLOMACY: AN ASSET OR LIABILITY FOR THE SOFT POWER OF CHINA IN THE DIGITAL AGE?

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ABBREVIATIONS

BRI or B&R	The Belt and Road Initiative
CCTV	China Central Television
COP15	The United Nations Biodiversity Conference
CIA	The Central Intelligence Agency
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPI	Committee on Public Information
CSIS	The Center for Strategic and International Studies
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICTs	Information and Communications Technologies
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
OBOR	The One Belt One Road
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRS	Presence Switzerland
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SNS	Social Networking Site
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
VOA	Voice of America
WHO	World Health Organization
WWD	“Wolf Warrior” Diplomacy

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INTRODUCTION

China has become one of the major global powers with economic, political, and cultural ambitions that go far beyond its borders in the 21st century. In addition to its economic growth, China has also worked to increase its global influence, namely “soft power” which is defined by Joseph Nye as the capacity to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion.¹ Lai states that as far back as 1993, Chinese scholars began embracing Nye’s notion of soft power. For instance, by December 2010, a search on Baidu, China’s leading search engine, revealed over 14 million websites discussing the Chinese term for soft power. Also, soft power has become a popular term among publicists, academics, officials, and even entrepreneurs throughout China.² By 2003, Chinese scholars started researching the origins of China’s soft power and strategies to enhance it. They propose that China should actively work on cultivating and projecting its soft power by acting as a responsible global power, promoting a harmonious and peaceful world order.³ Consequently, the Chinese government has dedicated billions of dollars to this initiative and articles about soft power are widely featured in Chinese journals and newspapers.⁴

When Chinese scholars first explored Nye’s theory, they noted that the idea of power that comes from the success of virtuous institutions works well with their cultural values. They claimed that the theory of soft power aligns with traditional Chinese concepts, particularly the Confucian principle of leadership by moral elites. This understanding helped Chinese intellectuals consider ways to boost China’s cultural attractiveness.⁵ Since using soft power has become crucial for advancing Beijing’s international interests, it was no longer sufficient for China to rely only on hard power in order to be an active global player. To enhance its influence abroad, China has employed various soft power tools such as culture, language, arts, aid, trade,

¹ Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power and American Foreign Policy”, **Political Science Quarterly**, Vol: 119, No: 2, 2004, (SAF), p. 256.

² Hongyi Lai, “Introduction: the Soft Power Concept and a Rising China”, **China’s Soft Power and International Relations**, (Ed. Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu), Routledge, London, 2012, (ISP), p. 11.

³ Hongyi Lai, “China’s Cultural Diplomacy Going for Soft Power”, **China’s Soft Power and International Relations**, (Ed. Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu), Routledge, London, 2012, (CCD), p. 84.

⁴ Joseph S. Nye, “The Information Revolution and Soft Power”, **Current History**, Vol: 113, No: 759, 2014, (IRS), pp. 20-21.

⁵ Daniela Caruso, “China Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy. The Educational Engagement in Africa”, **Cambio**, Vol: 9, No: 19, 2020, p. 50.

and investments. This strategy aims to create a peaceful environment for economic development, addressing energy demands, and counterbalance the influence of other global powers, particularly the United States (US).⁶ According to Nye, soft power of a country primarily depends on three key resources: culture, political values and foreign policies in international affairs. States that desire an effective approach to soft power needs to address all three of these resources.⁷ Therefore, China has made significant investments in its soft power strategies in order to become a global power. These initiatives include the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), educational/cultural programs such as Confucius Institute and growing digital presence which are all intended to shape the global perceptions.

China's use of digital diplomacy has become a significant tool since they help project an image as a strong and successful nation. Chinese diplomats have used these platforms to communicate directly with foreign publics to control narratives and gain international sympathy. However, at the same time, a noticeable shift in the diplomatic tone of the Chinese officials has emerged in the late 2010s and it is commonly referred as "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy (WWD).⁸ While it takes its name from a series of popular Chinese action films⁹, WWD is known for its aggressive and nationalistic style. Therefore, it departs from the traditional, calm, and careful approach of Chinese foreign policy.¹⁰ This transformation has led to serious debate about its impact on China's soft power as it is argued that an assertive diplomatic style risks alienating international audiences and weaken the soft power China has aimed to build over the years.¹¹ As soft power relies on attraction rather than confrontation, this tension due to the aggressive diplomatic tone is particularly significant for understanding China's evolving global strategy.

⁶ Caruso, pp. 47-48.

⁷ Nye, IRS, p. 21. Joseph S. Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power", **The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science**, Vol: 616, No: 1, 2008, (PDS), p. 96.

⁸ Linjiang Guo and Qian Qin, "Wolf Warrior Spreads Superior: The Narrative and Effectiveness of Chinese Public Diplomacy Behaviours on Twitter", **Journal of Chinese Political Science**, 2024, p. 6.

⁹ Zhao Alexandre Huang, "Wolf Warrior" and China's Digital Public Diplomacy During the COVID-19 Crisis", **Place Branding and Public Diplomacy**, Vol: 18, 2022, p. 37.

¹⁰ Guo and Qin, p. 6.

¹¹ Simon Namwandi Indongo, "The Emergence of "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy": A New and Assertive Brand of Chinese Diplomacy", **International Relations and Diplomacy**, Vol: 11, No: 3, 2023, p. 137.

While much of the literature on China's WWD has centered on its aggressive tone and its implications for diplomatic relations, there is a lack of studies that examine how this rhetoric has evolved within China's diplomatic strategy. For example, Shumba examines the diplomatic tone used by China, with a particular focus on media posts related to the US administration in early 2020 and their responses to the pandemic.¹² Chen studies how Chinese officials and the digital audience view the WWD label by examining the differences between top-down state-driven nationalism and bottom-up digital nationalism in China's foreign policy.¹³ Sullivan and Wang focus on how Chinese diplomats and online nationalism work together to promote a WWD style. They demonstrate how bottom-up incentives and top-down pressures from China's leadership contribute to this approach.¹⁴ Dai and Luqiu explore WWD in the wider framework of Xi Jinping's foreign policy and analyze transcripts from press conferences held by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁵ Chang-Liao analyzes the factors contributing to the emergence of the aggressive tone adopted by Chinese officials in recent years.¹⁶ However, there remains a gap in understanding how the tone of Chinese diplomacy has evolved over time and how it continues to influence China's soft power, particularly through digital platforms. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring WWD's tone and its implications for China's cultural diplomacy and broader soft power strategies. By focusing on the evolution of this diplomatic tone, this research seeks to contribute to the existing literature on the subject and provide a deeper analysis of the nuances behind China's digital diplomatic approach. This thesis investigates the relationship between WWD and China's soft power through two interrelated research questions: "How does China's "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, particularly pursued through social media platforms like X, impact its soft power in the digital age?" and "Does the assertive tone of "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy influence

¹² Ellison Shumba, "An investigation into 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomacy in Africa via Twitter and Facebook at the Height of the COVID-19 Pandemic", **South African Journal of International Affairs**, Vol: 28, No: 3, 2021, pp. 471-483.

¹³ Keyu Alexander Chen, "Digital Nationalism: How do the Chinese Diplomats and Digital Public View "Wolf Warrior" Diplomacy?", **Global Media and China**, Vol: 8, No: 2, 2023, pp. 138-154.

¹⁴ Jonathan Sullivan and Weixiang Wang, "China's "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy": The Interaction of Formal Diplomacy and Cyber- Nationalism", **Journal of Current Chinese Affairs**, Vol: 52, No: 1, 2023, pp. 68-88.

¹⁵ Yaoyao Dai and Luwei Rose Luqiu, "Wolf Warriors and Diplomacy in the New Era", **China Review**, Vol: 22, No: 2, 2022, pp. 253-283.

¹⁶ Nien-chung Chang-Liao, "Why Have Chinese Diplomats Become So Aggressive?", **Survival**, Vol: 64, No: 1, 2022, pp. 179-190.

global perceptions of China?”. The main hypothesis of the study is that the assertive tone of WWD had a negative impact on Chinese soft power, and thus there have been recent efforts by China to retune its public diplomacy. The existing literature on public diplomacy provides insight into this research. The works of Goldsmith et al., Mattingly and Sundquist, Harting, Evans and Steven, and Joseph Nye have been pivotal in shaping the foundation of this study, providing valuable perspectives into the dynamics of positive and negative messaging in public diplomacy.

The study employs a qualitative methodology making use of academic literature, journalistic resources, and data from X in order to analyze the tone, content, and implications of China’s digital diplomacy. There are certain limitations of the study. The first one is the language barrier which restricts access to Chinese-language texts and social media platforms. Another important limitation is X’s closure to third-party searches since January 2023. It has limited comprehensive data collection. Despite these challenges, the study aims to contribute to the literature on Chinese public diplomacy efforts in particular, as well as to the broader field of public diplomacy by exploring how assertive digital messaging relates to soft power in today’s geopolitical context. It demonstrates how digital diplomacy efforts via platforms like X can play a critical role in international relations and public perceptions.

The thesis is organized into three chapters, each focusing on different aspects of China’s public diplomacy and its relationship with soft power. The first chapter lays the theoretical foundation. Key concepts such as soft power, public diplomacy, and digital diplomacy are discussed. It explores how these elements are interconnected and how they shape a nation’s global influence. Additionally, the outcomes of positive/negative messaging in public diplomacy and its impact on soft power were also specifically addressed. The second chapter delves into China’s public diplomacy efforts. The strategies China has employed to enhance its soft power through cultural diplomacy, international cooperation and media influence are examined. It looks at how China’s policies and initiatives have contributed to building a positive global image and strengthening its influence. Also in this section, the impact of assertive tone and negative messaging on soft power is specifically addressed. The third chapter has the more specific focus of WWD which represents a more assertive and nationalistic

approach. This chapter analyzes the recent aggressive tone of Chinese diplomacy, the domestic and global motivations behind WWD, its impact on China's global image, and the latest signals of a shift to a more positive approach.

By examining WWD in the digital age, this study highlights the challenges and opportunities China faces as it seeks global influence. In today's increasingly polarized world, it provides a deeper understanding of the changing nature of diplomacy where assertive discourse and soft power coexist. Finally, the findings also offer insights into how China must navigate this complex balance in order to maintain its influence while adapting to changing global politics.



CHAPTER ONE

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SOFT POWER, PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND DIGITAL DIPLOMACY

1.1. RESOURCES OF SOFT POWER

Ever since the beginning of the discipline of international relations, the influence of ideas in the context of global political affairs has been widely recognized. Edward H. Carr identifies three fundamental forms of power in the international domain: “military power, economic power, and power over opinion” and states that “power over opinion” is just as crucial for political objectives as economic and military power.¹⁷ In global politics, the significance of influence and the ability to convince, namely “power over opinion”, holds utmost importance as they lay the groundwork for international negotiations and fortify the respective positions of governments in relation to one another.¹⁸ As Lampton argues, states that can impact agendas domestically and internationally, gain support for global policies, influence implementation processes, and achieve successful policy outcomes are the ones that are considered to be powerful.¹⁹ In this framework, with the growing expectation of decline of violence and conflicts since the conclusion of the Cold War, Joseph Nye introduced the notion of “soft power” in 1990²⁰ which is similar to Carr’s power over opinion concept. According to Nye, the transformed dynamics of global interactions following the Cold War’s conclusion and the dangers tied to conventional military force have necessitated a greater significance placed on “intangible power resources such as ideology, institutions and culture” in the realm of international relations.²¹

¹⁷ Edward Hallett Carr, **The Twenty Years 'Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations**, Macmillan & Co. Ltd, London, 1946, p.108.

¹⁸ Judit Trunkos, “Comparing Russian, Chinese and American Soft Power Use: A New Approach”, **Global Society**, Vol: 35, No: 3, 2021, p. 395.

¹⁹ David M. Lampton, **The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money, and Minds**, Berkeley, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2008, p. 9.

²⁰ Joseph S. Nye, **Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power**, Basic Books, New York, 1990, (BTL).

²¹ Nye, BTL, p.167.

Nye states that hard power depends on inducements and payments (“carrots”) or threats of coercion (“sticks”)²², and views it as the ability to influence others to behave in ways that oppose their original preferences and strategies.²³ He defines soft power as the ability to achieve one’s goals through appeal rather than through force or financial incentives.²⁴ Nye’s interpretation of the “power” component in this concept involves the capacity to achieve desired results and, if need be, to modify the behavior of others to accomplish this.²⁵ In other words, soft power means the capacity to influence others using co-optive methods like convincing, encouraging positive attraction and shaping the agenda in order to reach desired results.²⁶

A country’s soft power predominantly has three key resources: its political values, its foreign policies and its culture.²⁷ An effective approach to soft power needs to address all three of these resources²⁸ as these resources complement each other and create the attraction that turn into soft power for a nation.²⁹ In the new post-Cold War era of international relations, countries that have greater appeal are those that actively participate in key matters, have cultures and ideologies that align with the current global norms and enhance their credibility abroad by upholding consistent values and policies.³⁰

However, it is important to understand that Nye does not propose substituting traditional hard power with soft power in international relations.³¹ While political leaders can employ forms of hard power, such as providing economic incentives or leveraging military power, they can also shape the political narrative to influence others’ preferences via their “intangible assets” like appealing culture, innovative

²² Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power”, **The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science**, Vol: 616, No: 1, 2008, (PDS), p. 94.

²³ Joseph S. Nye, **The Future of Power**, NY: Public Affairs, New York, 2011, (FOP), p. 11.

²⁴ Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power and American Foreign Policy”, **Political Science Quarterly**, Vol: 119, No: 2, 2004, (SAF), p. 256.

²⁵ Joseph S. Nye, “The Information Revolution and American Soft Power”, **Asia-Pacific Review**, Vol: 9, No: 1, 2002, p. 61.

²⁶ Nye., FOP, p.13.

²⁷ Nye, “The Information Revolution and Soft Power”, **Current History**, Vol: 113, No: 759, 2014, (IRS), p. 21. Joseph S. Nye, PDS, p. 96.

²⁸ Nye, IRS, p. 22.

²⁹ Nye, PDS, p 95.

³⁰ Nye, BTL, pp. 31-32.

³¹ Jonathan Grix & Donna Lee, “Soft Power, Sports Mega-Events and Emerging States: The Lure of the Politics of Attraction”, **Global Society**, Vol: 27, No: 4, 2013, p. 526.

ideologies and reliable, authorized institutions, values, and strategies.³² Overall, the point is that as there is a mutual reinforcement between hard power and soft power³³, states should significantly increase their utilization of the latter, without replacing the former.³⁴

In 2004, Suzanne Nossel introduced the concept of “smart power” in her article. She emphasized that smart power is distinct from both hard power and soft power. Instead, it is a fusion of the two. The ideal way is to set an agenda that utilizes all available sources of power and applies them both ambitiously and practically to address challenges and take advantage of opportunities.³⁵ She proposes counterproliferation and economic development can prevent threats well before military action is needed.³⁶ In his later work, Nye also proposes that states should increase their utilization of “soft power” while reducing their reliance on “hard power” and simultaneously they should try to integrate these two approaches. He also uses the term “smart power” to label the concept.³⁷ According to Nye, smart power is the ability to integrate aspects of both hard and soft power in a manner that mutually strengthens each other.³⁸ Similarly, in 2007, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)³⁹ introduced a report called the “CSIS Commission on Smart Power”. This report offered a strategic perspective to government decision-makers and outlined a fresh diplomatic framework. It explained that smart power involves creating a comprehensive strategy, resources, and tools to achieve goals, utilizing both soft and hard power. This approach emphasizes the importance of a strong military while also

³² Nye, PDS, p.95.

³³ Giulio M. Gallarotti, “Soft Power: What It Is, Why It’s Important, and the Conditions for Its Effective Use”, **Journal of Political Power**, Vol: 4, No: 1, 2011, p. 27.

³⁴ Grix & Lee, p. 526.

³⁵ Suzanne Nossel, “Smart Power”, **Foreign Affairs**, Vol: 83, No: 2, 2004, p.132.

³⁶ Nossel, p. 138.

³⁷ Nye, FOP, p. 32.

³⁸ Ernest J. Wilson, “Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power”, **The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science**, Vol: 616, No: 1, 2008, p. 115.

³⁹ Founded in 1962, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is a nonprofit policy research organization with headquarters in downtown Washington, DC. CSIS is among the leading public policy institutions focused on foreign policy and national security issues. Source: <https://www.csis.org/about>, (12.09.2023).

placing significant emphasis on building alliances, institutions and partnerships, at various levels.⁴⁰

While Nye presents a well-thought-out argument on the concept of soft power, it is not without its criticisms. Some scholars challenge the concept of soft power by questioning the claim that soft power assets genuinely resonate with external audiences.⁴¹ Layne argues that “international politics is not a popularity contest”. States are concerned with the actions of other states, rather than their words.⁴² Bially Mattern challenges Joseph Nye’s distinction between soft power (attraction) and hard power (coercion). Mattern argues that soft power involves persuasive communication which can contain elements of coercion. She suggests that in global politics, the appeal of a nation is a form of persuasive communication that often includes a coercive aspect which makes soft power “inherently coercive”.⁴³ When examining the concept of soft power, Steve Lukes emphasizes the importance of determining the degree to which, and the methods by which, powerful actors affect others’ interpretations of their own interests and he states that these should be better defined.⁴⁴

The present state of diplomatic communication illustrates that soft power plays a significant role in global politics and its pursuit is a central focus of states’ foreign policy priorities. As Giulio Gallarotti points out, in today’s interconnected world, the spread of democracy and rise of non-state actors have encouraged collaboration and increased the importance of soft power in global affairs.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Eric Li points to the fact that there is increasing censorship of free speech by government, particularly on social media, which can pose a threat to soft power as the free flow of global communication is vital for building soft power.⁴⁶ Besides the academic studies

⁴⁰ Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, “CSIS Commission on Smart Power: a Smarter, More Secure America”, **The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)**, 2007, p. 7, <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/csissmartpowerreport.pdf>, (04.10.2023).

⁴¹ Stephen Collins and Jeff DeWitt, “Words Matter: Presidents Obama and Trump, Twitter, and U.S. Soft Power”, **World Affairs**, Vol: 186, No: 3, 2023, p. 6.

⁴² Christopher Layne, “The Unbearable Lightness of Soft Power”, **Soft Power and US Foreign Policy**, (Ed. I. Parmar, and M. Cox), New York: Routledge, London, 2010, p. 71.

⁴³ Bially Mattern, “Why ‘Soft Power’ Isn’t So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics”, **Millennium Journal of International Studies**, Vol: 33, No: 3, 2005, p. 596.

⁴⁴ Steven Lukes, “Power and the Battle for Hearts and Minds”, **Millennium: Journal of International Studies**, Vol: 33, No: 3, 2005, p. 493.

⁴⁵ Gallarotti, p. 37.

⁴⁶ Eric Li, “The Rise and Fall of Soft Power”, **Foreign Policy**, 20.08.2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/20/the-rise-and-fall-of-soft-power/>, (25.09.2023).

mentioned above, the idea of soft power has become a part of public discussions and can be found in the writings of journalists, politicians, and intellectuals from various countries which already makes it widely accepted concept. To illustrate, China has made the promotion of soft power a key foreign policy objective as President Xi Jinping himself stated China should enhance its soft power, promote a positive Chinese narrative and improve the communication of China's message to the global community in 2014.⁴⁷ The implementation of soft power in diplomacy is achieved through the practice of public diplomacy which will be discussed in the following section.

1.2. EFFECTIVE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

The term "public diplomacy" was initially introduced and defined by Edmund Gullion in 1960s. He defines it as a range of methods that governments use to shape public opinion in other countries and affect how the public views the creation and implementation of foreign policies.⁴⁸ In other words, it is widely understood as an important way to influence the feelings and thoughts of people in other countries to make them believe that they share similar values, goals, and wishes.⁴⁹ It serves as a tool that governments employ to engage with and attract not only other governments but also the public of other nations. Its aim is to charm by highlighting these valuable resources through methods like broadcasting, supporting cultural exports, facilitating exchanges, and more. Countries that are capable of legitimizing their intentions to other nations are likely to be those effectively employing soft power. In this regard, public diplomacy serves as a vital instrument for legitimizing motives in the arena of international politics⁵⁰ and within the realm of soft power, this makes public diplomacy a crucial tool.⁵¹ However, if a country's values, policies and culture lack

⁴⁷ Eleanor Albert, "China's Big Bet on Soft Power. Council on Foreign Relations", **Council on Foreign Relations**, 09.02.2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power>, (25.09.2023).

⁴⁸ Jan Melissen (Ed.), "The New Public Diplomacy: Between Theory and Practice", **The New Public Diplomacy**, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2005, (NPD), p. 6.

⁴⁹ Peter van Ham, "Power, Public Diplomacy, and the Pax Americana", **The New Public Diplomacy**, (Ed. Jan Melissen), Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2005, p. 48.

⁵⁰ Mustafa Yağcı, "Rethinking Soft Power in Light of China's Belt and Road Initiative", **Uluslararası İlişkiler**, Vol: 15, No: 57, 2018, p. 70.

⁵¹ Melissen, NPD, p. 4.

appeal, public diplomacy that “broadcast” them will not generate soft power.⁵² Nye gives the United States’ victory in the Cold War due to the effective implementation of public diplomacy strategies as an example of public diplomacy’s role in advancing a nation's soft power.⁵³ Peter van Ham also agrees that the effective operation of hard power relies on the presence of soft power in which public diplomacy plays a vital role.⁵⁴

Public diplomacy can be described as the method through which a government engages in communication with foreign populations to cultivate understanding and support for its nation’s ideas, values, institutions, culture, as well as its objectives and ongoing policies⁵⁵ whereas the traditional definition of “diplomacy” refers to the management of relationships between independent states in global politics through official representatives by peaceful methods.⁵⁶ The fundamental difference between traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy is that the former involves interactions among state representatives or other international actors, while the latter focuses on engaging the general public of foreign societies, along with non-official groups, organizations, and individuals.⁵⁷ Public diplomacy enhances traditional diplomacy by enabling interactions with broader audiences beyond official channels.⁵⁸ Hence, a simple definition of public diplomacy describes it as establishing direct relations with the people of a country to promote national interests.⁵⁹

Nye identifies three aspects of public diplomacy today, ranging from sharing government information to building long-term cultural connections. The first aspect involves everyday communication to explain policy decisions with a focus on the foreign press. The second is strategic communication, similar to political or advertising campaigns, used to advance government policies through specific themes and events.

⁵² Nye, PDS, p.95.

⁵³ Nye, PDS, p.94.

⁵⁴ van Ham, p. 64.

⁵⁵ Hans N. Tuch, **Communicating with the World: U.S. Public Diplomacy Overseas**, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1990, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Hedley Bull, **The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order In World Politics**, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012, p. 156.

⁵⁷ Melissen, NPD, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Efe Sevin, **Public Diplomacy and the Implementation of Foreign Policy in the US, Sweden and Turkey**, Palgrave MacMillan, 2017, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Paul Sharp, “Revolutionary States, Outlaw Regimes and the Techniques of Public Diplomacy”, **The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations**, (Ed. Jan Melissen, Donna Lee, and Paul Sharp), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p.106.

The third aspect concentrates on creating enduring relationships with key individuals through activities like scholarships, media access and exchanges. These three dimensions work together to enhance a country's soft power, making it more appealing and improving its chances of achieving its goals.⁶⁰ Many states are increasingly investing in diverse forms of public diplomacy such as the establishment of cultural centers overseas, organizing student exchanges and global broadcasting. These efforts aim to directly connect with non-state actors in other countries, not just to build relations or make friends but primarily to manage the international landscape by engaging with foreign audiences.⁶¹

According to Cull, public diplomacy consists of various elements including listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international news broadcasting. Listening, the foremost aspect, involves gathering data on foreign public opinion to inform policy decisions. Advocacy involves promoting specific policies or ideas abroad. Cultural diplomacy aims to showcase a country's culture internationally. Exchange diplomacy helps promote mutual learning experiences through student exchanges and cultural immersion programs. And finally, international news broadcasting utilizes radio, television, and internet technologies to engage foreign audiences with objective news content. Each element has its historical roots and unique characteristics. They all contribute to the broader goal of influencing foreign public opinion.⁶² By actively communicating with and engaging foreign audiences, states can promote their interests. Therefore, public diplomacy projects are a valuable part of diplomatic engagement with other nations, seeking influential outcomes.⁶³

1.2.1. A Brief History of Public Diplomacy

Although Edmund Gullion coined the term "public diplomacy" in 1965, the fundamental practices of public diplomacy, including listening, advocacy, cultural and exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting have significant historical roots

⁶⁰ Nye, PDS, pp. 101-102.

⁶¹ Nicholas J. Cull, "The Long Road to Public Diplomacy 2.0: The Internet in US Public Diplomacy", **International Studies Review**, Vol: 15, No: 1, 2013, (ISR) p. 125.

⁶² Nicholas J. Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories", **The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science**, Vol: 616, 2008, (PDH), pp. 32-34.

⁶³ Ali Fisher and Aurélie Bröckerhoff, **Options for Influence**, British Council, 2008, p. 6.

in the statecraft of both Europe and Asia. The construction of the great library of Alexandria by the Greeks can be viewed as a predecessor to institutions like the British Council or Confucius Institute, both of which are great examples of cultural and exchange diplomacy. Similarly, the newsletters circulated by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II in medieval times can be seen as an early version of a BBC World Service.⁶⁴ The beginning of US public diplomacy can be linked to the actions of the Committee on Public Information (CPI) which was established by President Woodrow Wilson in 1917.⁶⁵ The CPI played a crucial role in garnering support, both domestically and internationally, for the US's entry into the World War I. This effort effectively influenced public opinion in favor of President Wilson's foreign policy. The CPI was frequently likened to modern public diplomacy and represented a comprehensive initiative that combined news, film, and public speaking.⁶⁶

In the late 1930s, the Roosevelt administration believed that the security of America relied on its capability to effectively communicate with and gain the support of people in other countries.⁶⁷ Another illustrative example is evident in American diplomacy during World War II. Following the Pearl Harbor attack, the United States founded Voice of America (VOA)⁶⁸ as its international broadcasting project. Initially focused on German-language broadcasts, VOA rapidly expanded to cover regular programming in about a dozen languages, reaching multiple countries. This public diplomacy initiative complemented traditional diplomacy and wartime efforts by gathering support for American ideals.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Nicholas J. Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Seven Lessons for its Future from its Past", **Place Branding and Public Diplomacy**, Vol:6, No: 1, 2010, (PBD), p. 12.

⁶⁵ Craig Hayden, **The Rhetoric of Soft Power: Public Diplomacy in Global Contexts**, Lexington Books, 2012, p. 228.

⁶⁶ Hayden, p. 229.

⁶⁷ Nye, PDS, p.97.

⁶⁸ Voice of America (VOA) operates under the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), the government agency responsible for overseeing all non-military US international broadcasting. As the largest US international broadcaster, VOA delivers news and information in over 40 languages, reaching an estimated weekly audience of more than 326 million people. Since its establishment in 1942, Voice of America has been a key source of news coverage. Today, Voice of America is accessible through mobile phones, social media and is also distributed via satellite, cable, FM and MW. It reaches audiences through a network of over 3,500 stations. Source: Voice of America Website, <https://www.insidevoa.com/p/5831.html>, (02.11.2023).

⁶⁹ Sevin, p. 4.

As the Cold War intensified, public diplomacy evolved and expanded its reach.⁷⁰ During the Cold War, the US, the former Soviet Union, and the major powers of Europe made substantial investments in their global communications efforts.⁷¹ The US utilized the power of culture as a weapon against its enemy, the former Soviet Union, and its ideology, communism. The US government, including the State Department and other agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), played a key role in dissemination of American ideas and culture worldwide. For instance, the exchanges between Russian and American academics, artists, and authors following Joseph Stalin's death in 1953 tapped into Russian admiration for intellectuals and artistic expression. These exchanges also challenged some fundamental beliefs about both their own societies and American society. Notable figures from both countries, such as John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller and Joyce Carol Oates from the US, and Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Vasily Aksyonov and Aleksander Kushner from the former Soviet Union, gathered to discuss their artwork and the environment in which they were created. American participants recalled that their counterparts were particularly impressed and amazed by the freedom of speech they enjoyed as official representatives of their government.⁷²

Another impactful aspect of public diplomacy in exposing the weaknesses of the communist system and highlighting the freedoms of the West was music, especially jazz and rock 'n' roll. Western music made its way behind the Iron Curtain through programs like Music USA, hosted by Willis Conover from 1955 until his death in 1996.⁷³ Jazz and rock 'n' roll allowed individuals under repressive regimes to feel moments of freedom through music since it served as a unifying force for young people worldwide.⁷⁴ Similar to American efforts, the Soviet Union also employed diverse cultural diplomacy initiatives aligned with the country's national interests. Through entities like the Foreign Assistance Commission-VOKS-SSOD, it collaborated with foreign "progressive" opinion leaders. The promotion of the Russian language was facilitated by the Russian Language Institute named after Alexander

⁷⁰ Nye, PDS, p.98.

⁷¹ Melissen, NPD, p. 4.

⁷² Cynthia P. Schneider, "Culture Communicates: US Diplomacy That Works", **The New Public Diplomacy**, (Ed. Jan Melissen), Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2005, p. 151.

⁷³ Schneider, p. 153.

⁷⁴ Schneider, p. 154.

Sergeyevich Pushkin and the publishing house “Progress”. Dissemination of Soyuzmultfilm cartoons aimed at creating a positive image abroad and hosting film festivals, inviting foreign theaters and organizing world tours for the Bolshoi Theatre and national ensembles showcased the excellence of Soviet culture.⁷⁵

When the Cold War ended in 1990, it did not reduce the importance of public diplomacy, on the contrary, after a short period of optimism, the states continued to apply public diplomacy tools while they were carrying out strong campaigns to implement many important economic, political and ideological transformations. The spread of liberalism and the growth of neoliberal political systems after the Cold War led to a new global order focused on strategic narratives of stability which was supported by diplomatic actors from a “Western” viewpoint.⁷⁶ Interestingly, the emergence of specific powers or regions, particularly India and China, was fueled by the American dedication to a liberal economic system, from which these emerging powers have greatly benefited.⁷⁷ The eastward expansion of entities like the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the strengthening of newer foreign policy frameworks such as the climate change regime and the deepening connections between state and non-state actors reflected a shift in diplomacy and statecraft towards multilateralism. This transformation, driven by increasing interconnectedness, was perceived as the foundation for stability in international politics.⁷⁸ The 9/11 terrorist attacks further sparked a worldwide discussion regarding the significance of public diplomacy due to the fact that the Bush administration’s response to terror extended to a battle for the “hearts and minds” of the Muslim world and for the justification of the war on terror. Following the events of 9/11 attacks, the concept of public diplomacy has become a focal point in foreign ministries worldwide. Many foreign affairs ministries now formulate their own public diplomacy policies.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Anna A. Velikaya, “Soviet Public Diplomacy”, **Place Branding and Public Diplomacy**, Vol: 18, 2022, p. 79.

⁷⁶ Trine Flockhart, “The Coming Multi-Order World”, **Contemporary Security Policy**, Vol: 37, No: 1, 2016, p. 3.

⁷⁷ Andrew F. Hart and Bruce D. Jones, “How Do Rising Powers Rise?”, **Survival**, Vol:52, No: 6, 2010, p. 63.

⁷⁸ Pawel Surowiec-Capell (Ed.) and Ilan Manor (Ed.), **Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Uncertainty**, Palgrave MacMillan, 2020, p. xiii.

⁷⁹ Melissen, NPD, p. 8.

Some European countries have also enthusiastically embraced public diplomacy since they are particularly aspiring to integrate into larger multilateral structures. This perspective helps explain the success stories of European transition countries like Finland after the Cold War and Ireland following a period of relative isolation from mainland Europe. More recently, Poland successfully employed public diplomacy within its strategy for EU and NATO membership. Similarly, during the EU candidacy period of countries such as Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey (still in candidate status), the candidate states heavily invested in public diplomacy to persuade potentially skeptical audiences in Western Europe. Their motivations primarily revolved around the desire to integrate into the European and transatlantic world as they seek the associated benefits of economic prosperity, social stability, and security.⁸⁰

The global political and economic changes following the Cold War have coincided with the Information Revolution, which has played a crucial role in facilitating and promoting further progress. These changes represent a shift away from the transmission-focused approaches of Cold War public diplomacy and strategic communication towards a model that promotes facilitation and engagement. Additionally, the shift towards engagement, away from traditional communication methods, means that non-state actors like non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (such as transnational corporations, media conglomerates, digital media technology organizations, transnational social movements) and citizens now analyze information more critically which makes it easier to distinguish between information and propaganda campaign.⁸¹

As public diplomacy evolves, how states create and share their messages becomes more important. Effective messaging can shape perceptions, foster goodwill, and build soft power. On the other hand, poorly executed communication can have the opposite effect. It can even lead to mistrust or backlash. This dynamic demonstrates the importance of balancing positive and negative messaging in public diplomacy. The following section explores how positive and negative approaches impact a country's image and its ability to achieve its diplomatic goals.

⁸⁰ Melissen, NPD, pp. 9-10.

⁸¹ Hayden, p. 227.

1.2.2. The Positive/Negative Messaging in Public Diplomacy

Nye stresses the importance of public diplomacy when it comes to soft power. He states that in traditional power politics, success often depends on military or economic strength but in the information age, it may come down to whose story or narrative is the most effective.⁸² Soft power involves getting others to share your goals, which requires understanding how they perceive your messages and adjusting them as needed.⁸³ Therefore, policy and communication should be in sync in order to use soft power effectively in the information age.⁸⁴ He further claims that even the best advertising will not make an unpopular product successful. Policies that seem self-serving or are presented arrogantly are likely to harm rather than build soft power.⁸⁵ This highlights how carefully-planned messaging and action are essential for cultivating a nation's influence.

The competition between major powers like China and the US to earn a positive image in global public opinion is becoming more noticeable and will play a crucial role in shaping the future international order.⁸⁶ Goldsmith et al. state that in order to enhance favorable perceptions, states can adopt positive public diplomacy strategies that inspire gratitude, demonstrate acts of compassion, generosity, and positive contributions. They suggest foreign aid, in particular, is viewed as one of the key tools for promoting these types of positive actions and it helps to build a more favorable global image and strengthens their public diplomacy efforts.⁸⁷ Similarly, Mattingly and Sundquist believe emphasizing aid and friendship through positive public diplomacy helps build foreign support which makes positive messaging a significant factor when it comes to building a favorable national image. On the other hand, critiquing geopolitical rivals through negative public diplomacy tends to be ineffective and may even backfire as it can reinforce perceptions of hostility or

⁸² Joseph S. Nye, **Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics**, N.Y.: Public Affairs, New York, 2004, MSW, p. 106.

⁸³ Nye, MSW, p. 111.

⁸⁴ Nye, MSW, p. 113.

⁸⁵ Nye, MSW, p. 110.

⁸⁶ Benjamin E. Goldsmith, Yusaku Horiuchi and Terence Wood, "Doing Well by Doing Good: the Impact of Foreign Aid on Foreign Public Opinion", **Quarterly Journal of Political Science**, Vol: 9 No: 1, 2014, p. 88.

⁸⁷ Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Wood, p. 91.

defensiveness. Positive public diplomacy can be seen when Chinese diplomats highlight the country's aid during the pandemic such as donations of medical supplies and vaccines to struggling nations or its infrastructure projects in developing nations such as roads, ports and etc. These efforts promote bilateral cooperation, strengthen economic partnerships and generate goodwill by addressing development needs. In contrast, negative public diplomacy focuses on criticizing geopolitical rivals, such as when Chinese diplomats use social media to condemn the US or other countries for accusations of hypocrisy or interference in Chinese affairs. Though this approach might resonate with the domestic audience, it is less relevant to the concerns of third-country audiences and fails to build support. Moreover, it often results in adverse effects.⁸⁸ This demonstrates that a nation's choice of public diplomacy strategy significantly impacts how it is viewed internationally.

Hartig also agrees that aggressive campaigns are not effective because they seem to fail in achieving their goals and also weaken other positive public diplomacy efforts. He argues negative messages involves a trade-off between deterrence and attraction. Yet, there is a big challenge in balancing the need to present a positive image of a country to gain support, sympathy and attract tourists and investment, while trying to project a negative image to discourage undesirable individuals or behaviors.⁸⁹ He gives the example of a campaign named "the International Organization for Migration", carried out by Italy in July 2016. It was a media campaign targeting 15 countries in the West and North Africa. The campaign aimed to inform potential migrants about the dangers of crossing the desert and the Mediterranean and it featured stories of suffering and the risks that can be faced during these journeys. While it was a social responsibility project, it also aimed to project Europe less appealing to discourage people from migrating to Europe. Hartig states these sort of negative messages contradict with the mainstream understanding of public diplomacy that aims to create a positive image and win hearts and minds of the international public.⁹⁰ Another similar campaign was carried out by Australia. Australia's public diplomacy

⁸⁸ Daniel C. Mattingly and James Sundquist, "When Does Public Diplomacy Work? Evidence from China's "Wolf Warrior" Diplomats", **Political Science Research and Methods**, Vol: 11, 2023, pp. 921-922.

⁸⁹ Falk Hartig, "Deterrence by Public Diplomacy: The Negative Dimension of International Political Communication", **Journal of Communication Management**, Vol: 21, No: 4, 2017, DPD, p. 343.

⁹⁰ Hartig, DPD, p. 342.

strategy aims to promote itself as a modern, diverse, and successful nation as it frequently highlights values like ethnic diversity, social harmony, democracy, and human rights. However, Australia's tough stance on asylum seekers has been driven global attention, particularly through campaigns like "Operation Sovereign Borders". This campaign aimed to deter illegal boat journeys into Australian waters. The campaign slogan, "No way. You will not make Australia home", was featured in videos and advertisements. It was to target asylum seekers with strong, fear-based messaging. As a result, Australia was criticized and labeled as "cruel" by the New York Times.⁹¹ Borrowing from Ian Hall, Hartig suggests public diplomacy can also be harmful and driven by ill-intentions. The use of these information campaigns showcases the contradiction between promoting values such as human rights while employing fear-based tactics. It also creates a contrast between presenting a positive image of the country to attract things like foreign investment, tourists, or students, while conveying a negative message aimed at discouraging certain groups. It is important to consider how some communication practices may be driven by self-interest or even unethical motivations.⁹² These examples illustrate the complex ethical dilemmas involved in balancing positive and negative approaches within public diplomacy.

Finally, public diplomacy is most effective when it aims to foster dialogue and cooperation rather than division. Evans and Steven state the goal of public diplomacy as to create tools for analysis, encourage discussion, and build partnerships. This takes significant resources. Public diplomats need to find different ways to start, maintain, and expand conversations in order to build a positive image. They need to keep them going until they reach a turning point. However, countries sometimes engage in negative public diplomacy, using harmful strategies against their declared enemies, but only when further discussion is no longer seen as possible. These actions aim to block the opponent, create division, and weaken their support. This is when public diplomacy turns into propaganda or psychological operations. Misleading tactics may be used to confuse and weaken the opponent. Another approach might involve refusing to acknowledge a group's legitimacy, ignoring or belittling them to marginalize

⁹¹ Hartig, DPD, pp. 349, 351.

⁹² Hartig, DPD, p. 350.

them.⁹³ These methods can be placed on a spectrum from “nice” to “nasty.” Nice strategies are cooperative, open, and transparent, while nasty ones are secretive, manipulative, and one-sided. Hostile strategies come with serious consequences and should only be used as a last resort. In today’s interconnected world, working together is usually the most effective approach.⁹⁴ By prioritizing collaboration and mutual understanding, nations can achieve sustainable results in their public diplomacy efforts. The above-mentioned scholarly works on positive and negative messaging in public diplomacy will shed light on the study of the impact of the Chinese “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy in this thesis.

1.3. DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

In the past decade, the new media⁹⁵ has been growing very quickly.⁹⁶ Public diplomacy is now more about diplomacy carried out by the public, rather than diplomacy directed at the public. In this scenario, individuals and groups, fueled by the resources of the digital revolution, especially the internet, play a direct role in influencing international policies.⁹⁷ This has made it harder for official diplomacy to work smoothly. The non-governmental groups are fast and good at getting support and this is a challenge for the bigger and slower foreign policy organizations. Engaging the general public is even tougher for diplomats.⁹⁸ Therefore, such collaborative diplomatic relations with diverse categories of actors often calls for the need of public diplomacy and new media to help cope with the transformed requirements of diplomacy.⁹⁹ As more people communicate online, especially through social media, government administrations have started to integrate these tools into their practices.

⁹³ Alex Evans and David Steven, “Towards a Theory of Influence for Twenty-First-Century Foreign Policy: Public Diplomacy in a Globalised World”, **Engagement: Public Diplomacy in a Globalised World**, (Ed. Jolyon Welsh and Daniel Fearn), Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, 2008, p. 57.

⁹⁴ Evans and Steven, p. 58.

⁹⁵ New media, sometimes referred to as multimedia or digital media, uses digital methods to communicate, contrasting with traditional media such as printed newspapers or television. Source: “What is new media? Definitions, examples and careers”, 16.02.2022, <https://www.phoenix.edu/blog/what-is-new-media.html>, (23.08.2023).

⁹⁶ Melissen, p. 24.

⁹⁷ Brian Hocking, “Rethinking the ‘New’ Public Diplomacy”, **The New Public Diplomacy**, (Ed. Jan Melissen), Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2005, p. 32.

⁹⁸ Melissen, NPD, p. 24.

⁹⁹ Melissen, NPD, p. 5.

This led to the development of “digital diplomacy” which leverages new Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) to assist in achieving diplomatic goals. This new phase of diplomacy will be discussed in this section.

1.3.1. The Emergence and Benefits of Digital Diplomacy

Information and communication technology has become an indispensable tool in the realm of international relations.¹⁰⁰ Joseph Nye argues the developments in the field of Information Technologies have affected the countries’ use of soft power and dynamics of diplomacy. According to Nye, one of the significant trends of the past century which is likely to carry its influence on is the information revolution. This transformation brings about an elevated role for soft power.¹⁰¹ The contemporary information revolution, also referred as the “third industrial revolution”¹⁰², is founded on rapid technological progress in the fields of computers and communications. The expenses of transmission of information has become negligible and the transmission of information worldwide effectively has become effortless. Information has become a key power resource and the number of people that can reach more information is greater than ever before in the history of the world. Consequently, this has resulted in a redistribution of power from governments to a diverse array of non-state actors, including big corporations, non-profit organizations and ad-hoc groups. Although, the states will remain as the biggest actors in international relations, these new and very effective other actors will be crucial in the area of soft power. Nye proposes that the

¹⁰⁰ Constance Duncombe, “Twitter and Transformative Diplomacy: Social Media and Iran–US Relations”, **International Affairs**, Vol:93, No: 3, 2017, p. 561.

¹⁰¹ Nye, IRS, p. 19.

¹⁰² Third Industrial Revolution (Digital Revolution) is the transformation process driven not by a physical force, but by digital technologies such as the Internet, 3D printing and renewable energy. It has deeply influenced various sectors like information communications technology, defense, health, knowledge, advanced manufacturing, education and financial and administrative domains. These sectors will continue to progress through ongoing innovations, discoveries and the introduction of new services and products. Powered by the advancement of fast communication, metadata and the Internet, the Third Industrial Revolution is set to influence all facets of society. The most significant effects are seen in the advancement of technology and the rapid expansion of knowledge. Source: Brian H Roberts, “The Third Industrial Revolution: Implications for Planning Cities and Regions”, **Researchgate**, 2015, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278671121_The_Third_Industrial_Revolution_Implications_for_Planning_Cities_and_Regions, (25.08.2023).

cyber realm serves as a good example for this. He states that while a powerful navy is crucial for controlling maritime routes, it offers limited advantage in the realm of the internet.¹⁰³ With this example, he emphasizes the fact that hard power needs soft power and soft power has to adapt to the latest technological developments. In this modern context, the success of soft power relies on combining traditional diplomatic and negotiation techniques with the capabilities provided by emerging innovative technologies.¹⁰⁴

Over the last ten years, diplomats have increasingly embraced digital technologies, a phenomenon commonly known as “digital diplomacy”. Researchers have proposed various terms to describe diplomats’ utilization of digital technologies in public diplomacy efforts, such as digital diplomacy¹⁰⁵, public diplomacy 2.0¹⁰⁶, virtual diplomacy¹⁰⁷, cyber diplomacy¹⁰⁸ and last but not least twiplomacy¹⁰⁹. At the state level, The State Department of the United States labels it as “21st Century Statecraft”, the United Kingdom Foreign Office terms it as “Digital Diplomacy”, whereas Canadians identify it as “Open Policy”.¹¹⁰ The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs employs the term “Innovative Diplomacy” to describe the integration of digital technologies into its public diplomacy efforts and defines it as a strategy for Russian foreign policy aimed at influencing public opinion through the use of ICTs. President Putin has identified digital diplomacy as one of the most significant tools in today’s foreign policy.¹¹¹

Given its relevance to contemporary state affairs, digital diplomacy has attracted considerable attention from the scholarly community as well. Holmes

¹⁰³ Nye, IRS, p. 20.

¹⁰⁴ Ellen Hallams, “Digital Diplomacy: the Internet, the Battle for Ideas & US Foreign Policy”, **CEU Political Science Journal**, Vol: 541, No: 4, 2010, p. 540.

¹⁰⁵ Corneliu Bjola and M. Holmes (Ed.), **Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice**, 1st Ed., Routledge, London, 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Hallams, pp. 538–574.

¹⁰⁷ Daniel Wehrenfennig, “From an Analog Past to a Digital Future: Information and Communication Technology in Conflict Management.”, **Cyberspace and Global Affairs**, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012, p. 23.

¹⁰⁸ David Mutimer, “Cyber-Diplomacy: Managing Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century”, **Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne De Science Politique**, 2004, Vol: 37, No: 4, pp. 1066-1068.

¹⁰⁹ Radhika Chhabra, “Twitter Diplomacy: A Brief Analysis”, **Observer Research Foundation**, ORF Issue Brief, No: 335, 2020, p. 2.

¹¹⁰ Olubukola S. Adesina, “Foreign Policy in an Era of Digital Diplomacy”, **Cogent Social Sciences**, Abingdon, Vol: 3, No: 1, 2017, p. 5.

¹¹¹ Adesina, p. 8.

characterizes digital diplomacy as a strategy for navigating change by using digital tools and online cooperations.¹¹² Melissen defines digital diplomacy as a tool employed by states to comprehend attitudes, cultures and behaviors; foster and manage relationships; and shape opinions and inspire actions to promote their values and interests.¹¹³ Manor and Segev define digital diplomacy as the expanding use of social media platforms by a state to accomplish its foreign policy objectives and actively shape its reputation and image.¹¹⁴ It can be defined as the use of digital tools and online collaborations to manage international politics effectively as a way for ensuring a strong influence on decision-making and public diplomacy.¹¹⁵ Diplomats have utilized digital platforms for various purposes such as establishing virtual embassies, engaging with national diasporas, interacting with foreign audiences, advocating for a state's foreign policies, gathering domestic support, and shaping the topics diplomats want to address with online communities.¹¹⁶ Social media offers a significant advantage in diplomacy by enabling real-time communication with citizens of other countries. It fosters interaction and engagement. Additionally, its accessibility and cost-effectiveness make it appealing to embassies and government offices facing budget constraints. Social media platforms allow for dynamic content, such as photos and videos which goes beyond traditional methods like pamphlets or lectures. They are also crucial for reaching youth populations, a priority in current public diplomacy efforts. Digital technologies including social media play a crucial role in various aspects of public diplomacy such as information gathering, consular activities, and emergency communications. Successful use of these tools can yield substantial benefits, often without significant financial investment.¹¹⁷

¹¹² Marcus Holmes, "The Future of Digital Diplomacy", **Digital diplomacy: Theory and practice**, (Eds. C. Bjola & M. Holmes), NY: Routledge, New York, 2015, p. 15.

¹¹³ Jan Melissen, "Public Diplomacy", **The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy**, (Eds. Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, (PDP), p. 436.

¹¹⁴ Ilan Manor and Elad Segev, "America's Selfie: How the US Portrays Itself on Its Social Media Accounts", **Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice**, (Ed. Corneliu Bjola and M. Holmes), 1st Ed., Routledge, 2015, p. 94.

¹¹⁵ Fatih Değirmenci and Elifnur Terzioğlu, "A Digital Diplomacy Irony: Donald Trump", **OPUS—Journal of Society Research**, Vol: 19, No: 47, 2022, p. 491.

¹¹⁶ Ilan Manor and Corneliu Bjola, "Public Diplomacy in the Age of 'Post-reality'", **Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Uncertainty**, (Eds. Pawel Surowiec-Capell and Ilan Manor), Palgrave MacMillan, 2020, p 136.

¹¹⁷ Adesina, p. 10.

Ilan Manor points out to four significant events that have influenced the emergence of digital diplomacy. The first one is “countering al-Qaeda’s narrative”. Al-Qaeda’s effective use of social media and the Internet to spread its ideology led to a response from governments. One of the examples of such initiatives is Public Diplomacy 2.0 launched by Karen Hughes, President George W. Bush’s Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. This emphasized the need to move diplomatic efforts online to counter extremist narratives. The second one is “The Arab Spring”. The widespread democratic uprisings in the Middle East in 2011 showcased the power of social media in mobilizing citizens and shaping public discourse. Governments realized the need to monitor and engage with social media platforms for diplomatic purposes. The third one is “the rise of citizen journalists”. The spread of smartphones equipped with cameras empowered individuals to report news in real-time, challenging traditional media narratives. Citizen journalism during events like the Arab Spring provided alternative perspectives that can influence how global events were perceived and framed. And the final one is “the new media ecology”. The evolving media landscape which is driven by ICTs and social media has reshaped diplomacy by encouraging interactive dialogues. Social media’s interactive nature requires a shift in diplomatic culture towards building relationship rather than one-way information transmission.¹¹⁸

Manor explains the uses/benefits of using digital diplomacy in eight categories; practice “new” public diplomacy, engagement and listening, selfie diplomacy, online Q&A sessions, frame the nation, overcome limitations of traditional diplomacy, collaborative and networked approaches and consular aid. “New public diplomacy” emphasizes a shift from traditional one-way communication towards two-way engagement with foreign populations. This new approach involves forming relationships and dialogue rather than just information dissemination. The emergence of social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Facebook, is facilitating this transition, enabling organizations to interact directly with online users. The second benefit he mentions is “engagement, listening and tailoring”. The practice of “engagement” involves interacting with online audiences, while “listening” involves

¹¹⁸ Ilan Manor, **Are We There Yet: Have MFAs Realized the Potential of Digital Diplomacy?**, Brill Research Perspectives, Leiden, 2016, (AWT), pp. 6-7.

using social networking sites to understand foreign populations and shape foreign policy accordingly. Facilitated by digital platforms, “tailoring” foreign policy messages to the cultural and linguistic preferences of target audiences improves audience engagement and helps nations manage their image more effectively. “Selfie diplomacy” refers to nation branding that involves actively managing a country’s image to enhance its reputation among international audiences. It is characterized as a nation's attempt to portray itself positively, like a self-portrait. This concept extends to social media platforms, where nation branding is referred to as “selfie diplomacy.” “Practicing dialogue” through Q&A sessions is another point Manor emphasizes. Many diplomatic organizations use social media Q&A sessions to discuss specific topics and interact with audiences. These sessions highlight the potential of digital diplomacy to facilitate interactive communication between diplomatic bodies and online audiences. Additionally, such online interactions can strengthen the credibility of diplomatic institutions by promoting transparency and willingness to address criticism. “Framing the nation” by the help of digital world is another aspect that matters. Social media like Twitter and Facebook has become an important source for news for many. This means governments can give their own views on events through social media which might be different from what news outlets say. This process of shaping views is known as framing, where certain aspects of an event are highlighted to suggest a specific understanding or viewpoint. “Overcoming limitations of traditional diplomacy” is another significant advantage of digital diplomacy that involves utilizing social networking sites alongside traditional foreign policy instruments in order to address the limitations of conventional diplomacy. Manor also emphasizes the concept of “networked diplomacy” which suggests that in today’s globalized world, the need for collaboration among nations has led to networks becoming the dominant structure in societies. This shift has transferred power from nation-states to other network actors, such as individuals and NGOs. While networks have been present in diplomacy for some time, what's new is the current multi-stakeholder landscape in which network diplomacy operates. In this environment various actors such as journalists, civil society, NGOs, and individuals play key roles. Building partnerships and nurturing connections with these stakeholders can be facilitated through interactive dialogue enabled by social networking sites (SNS). The

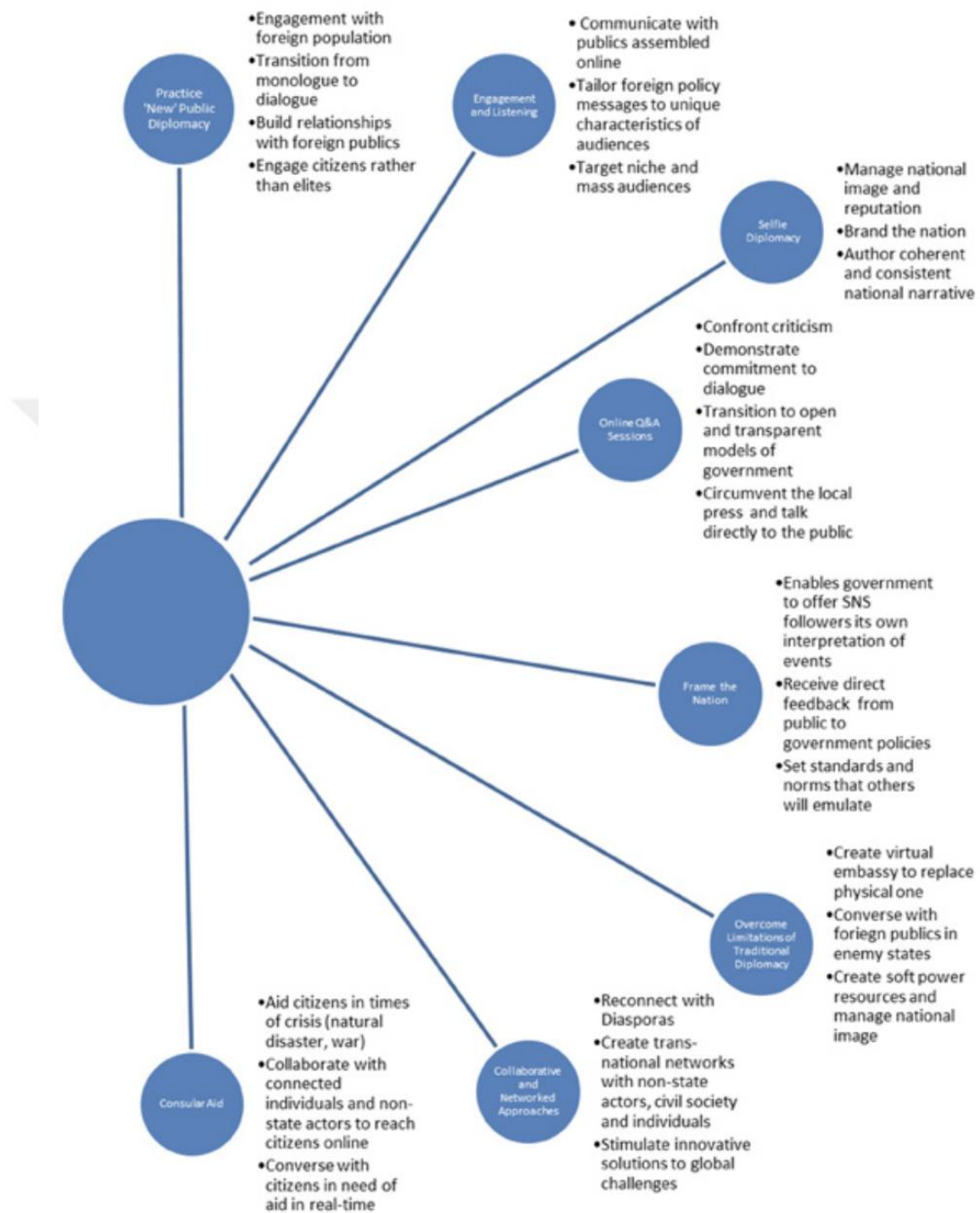
final use/benefit Manor explains is the “consular aid”. The consular assistance is of great significance in demonstrating the relevance of ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) to their domestic populations. The use of social media for crisis management has proven effective as it allows for real-time exchange of information between organizations and individuals. Therefore, online and offline diplomacy work together rather than replacing each other. In the end, this combination enhances diplomatic effectiveness without completely replacing traditional methods.¹¹⁹

The potential benefits/uses of digital diplomacy are summarized by Manor (2016) in the figure below:



¹¹⁹ Manor, AWT, pp. 7-16.

Figure 1: The Benefits/Uses of Digital Diplomacy



The benefits of digital diplomacy.

Source: Manor, AWT, p. 16.

1.3.2. Digital Diplomacy in Practice

Diplomatic services have explored various ways to adapt to the needs of digital diplomacy, such as setting up virtual embassies, engaging foreign populations through social media platforms, introducing smartphone applications, forming digital task forces, establishing big data teams, modernizing communication processes within multilateral organizations, and even developing their algorithms.¹²⁰ With all these advancements making rapid changes in many different fields, social media has become a pivotal aspect of diplomacy. It encompasses everything from “digital diplomacy”, which serves as modern public diplomacy, to cyberspace being recognized as a new arena for conflicts. To illustrate, today X (formerly Twitter) is recognized as a crucial platform for public diplomacy¹²¹ with its 335.7 million users worldwide.¹²² X offers an alternative channel for communication between states, particularly when in-person diplomatic engagements are restricted.¹²³ Moreover, tweets that directly or indirectly highlight positive qualities, ideas, or behavior and are shared in a diplomatic manner can help produce soft power.¹²⁴ We can observe how policymakers are increasingly using X in addition to official meetings to directly and openly communicate with their counterparts and to engage interactively with international audiences.¹²⁵

There are many actions taken by states to be present in the digital realm. As early as 2012, the US State Department was overseeing an extensive social media presence, including 288 Facebook pages, around 200 X accounts, and 125 YouTube channels.¹²⁶ In 2014, Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt gathered diplomats and digital diplomacy practitioners worldwide in Stockholm to collaborate with experts from academia, research, business, and the media. Their goal was to generate practical solutions for the future of diplomacy, resulting in the “Stockholm Initiative for Digital

¹²⁰ Corneliu Bjola and Ilan Manor, “The Rise of Hybrid Diplomacy: From Digital Adaptation to Digital Adoption”, **International Affairs**, Vol: 98, No: 2, 2022, (RHD), p. 473.

¹²¹ Collins and DeWitt, p. 3.

¹²² Statista.com, “Number of Twitter Users Worldwide from 2019 to 2024”, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/303681/twitter-users-worldwide/>, (28.08.2023).

¹²³ Duncombe, p. 562.

¹²⁴ Collins and DeWitt, p. 3.

¹²⁵ Duncombe, pp. 554, 549.

¹²⁶ Craig Hayden, “Social Media at State: Power, Practice, and Conceptual Limits for US Public Diplomacy”, **Global Media Journal**, Vol: 11, No: 21, 2012, p. 10.

Diplomacy”.¹²⁷ On March 30, 2016, the Israeli Foreign Ministry and the Partner Institute at Tel Aviv University jointly organized Israel’s first Digital Diplomacy Conference. With participation from 50 diplomats representing 20 countries and scholars from 25 universities, the conference sought to explore the broader effects of digitalization on diplomacy and its specific impact on diplomats.¹²⁸ Utilizing social media platforms like X and Facebook for digital outreach expands the scope of communication campaigns.¹²⁹ At this point Brian Hocking takes it even further and claims the digital platforms are no longer just tools for governments’ communication strategies, but it can now actually shape foreign policy decisions.¹³⁰ As online networks provide the public with greater insights into foreign policy decisions, their influence has grown. This enhanced their capacity to both acknowledge the authority of various actors and participate in spreading communicative power.¹³¹

Digital diplomacy can be implemented by diplomatic entities like foreign ministries, embassies, international organizations (such as the United Nations (UN) and NATO), and NGOs.¹³² Digital technologies enable NGOs to rapidly gather feedback from supporters, mobilize them effectively, and coordinate new forms of collective action. This networked power acts as a force multiplier, boosting support for campaign causes and enhancing their legitimacy by broadening the range of actions taken by both staff and supporters. This approach is particularly promising for both broad and narrow campaign goals, such as raising awareness about climate change or advocating for specific policy changes like lifting the driving ban for women in Saudi Arabia. By utilizing digitally-enabled/distributed campaigning, NGOs expand their range of strategies and this creates more avenues for channeling citizens’ concerns into international and supranational organizations.¹³³ To give an example, in 2016,

¹²⁷ Andreas Sandre, “Diplomacy 3.0 Starts in Stockholm”, **HuffPost**, 17.03.2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/digital-diplomacy-stockholm_b_4592691, (28.08.2023).

¹²⁸ Ilan Manor, “Digital Diplomacy Conference Summary”, **Digdipblog**, 18.04.2017, (DPC), <https://digdipblog.com/2017/04/18/digital-diplomacy-conference-summary/>, (28.08.2023).

¹²⁹ Duncombe, p.551.

¹³⁰ Hocking, p. 30.

¹³¹ Sarah Ellen Graham, “Emotion and Public Diplomacy: Dispositions in International Communications, Dialogue, and Persuasion”, **International Studies Review**, Vol:16, No: 4, 2014, p. 522.

¹³² Manor, AWT, p. 3.

¹³³ Jen Steffek, Ralf Bendrath, Simon Dalfert, Kristina Hahn, Martina Piewitt and Meike Rodekamp, “Assessing the Democratic Legitimacy of Transnational CSOs: Five Criteria”, **In Evaluating Transnational NGOs: Legitimacy, Accountability, Representation**, (Eds. Jens Steffek and Kristina Hahn), Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010, p. 120.

Amnesty International's "Decode Darfur" campaign rallied over twenty-six thousand volunteers to analyze satellite images in search of evidence regarding government assaults on villages in Darfur. Digital tools have the potential to ease access in regions where state authority is limited.¹³⁴ Amnesty International supporters analyzed satellite imagery in remote areas of Darfur, where bombings and suspected chemical weapons attacks occurred. The organization aimed to use the evidence to urge the Sudanese government to stop human rights violations and strengthen its case with the UN, the African Union, and other international bodies.¹³⁵

Social media has quickly gained popularity among MFAs as these platforms allow them to carry out public diplomacy and crisis communication strategies more effectively than traditional methods. In addition, digital strategic communication has supported embassy efforts in addressing or disputing negative narratives shared through print media.¹³⁶ As an example, in 2011, the US State Department introduced Virtual Embassy Iran, an online platform designed to function as the American embassy for Iran. Likewise, in July 2013, Israel established a X embassy dedicated to the Gulf Cooperation Council¹³⁷ which has allowed communication with the populations of six Gulf States despite the absence of official diplomatic relations.¹³⁸ And finally, with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, all MFAs were forced to quickly shift to the online medium almost overnight¹³⁹ as their role involves customizing communications to suit the needs of foreign audiences, enhancing connections, and helping their followers to comprehend the world around them.¹⁴⁰ In July 2015, countries at the UN headquarters in Geneva passed a resolution concerning

¹³⁴ Nina Hall, Hanz Peter Schmitz and J. Michael Dedmon, "Transnational Advocacy and NGOs in the Digital Era: New Forms of Networked Power", **International Studies Quarterly**, Vol: 64, 2020, p. 116.

¹³⁵ Amnesty International Official Website, "Digital Volunteers to Expose Darfur Human Rights Violations in Revolutionary Crowdsourcing Project", 13.10.2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2016/10/digital-volunteers-to-expose-darfur-human-rights-violations/>, (17.12.2023).

¹³⁶ Manor and Bjola, p. 117.

¹³⁷ Founded on 25th May 1981, the Gulf Cooperation Council is a cooperative framework joining the six states of The United Arab Emirates, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sultanate of Oman, State of Bahrain, State of Qatar and State of Kuwait. Source: Gulf Cooperation Council Official Website, <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/AboutGCC/Pages/StartingPointsAndGoals.aspx>, (29.08.2023).

¹³⁸ Efe Sevin and Ilan Manor, "From Embassy Ties to Twitter Links: Comparing Offline and Online Diplomatic Networks", **Policy & Internet**, Volume: 11, No: 3, 2019, pp. 325-326.

¹³⁹ Bjola and Manor, RHD, p. 478.

¹⁴⁰ Ilan Manor, **The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy**, 1st Edition, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, (DPD), p. 291.

human rights violations in Palestine. Instead of publicly revealing each nation's individual vote, the UN's social media team simply posted a tweet to announce the results. This event showcased 21st-century diplomacy which is characterized by the use of using social media, real-time global information sharing, transparent diplomacy and an informed online public space.¹⁴¹ The US Digital Outreach Team is another example of an effort aiming to interact directly with citizens in the Middle East by sharing messages about US foreign policy on internet forums. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had a team of bloggers who posted a blog and X updates in English about her actions. In 2010, the State Department website introduced Opinion Space, an online initiative that encourages visitors to share their views on various topics, from politics to the economy. It also allows them to quickly determine where their opinions stand in relation to others worldwide.¹⁴²

The number of examples are vast, yet the conclusion that can be derived is that in its core, diplomacy serves as the communication mechanism within the international community¹⁴³ and within this community, technology has offered additional means to convey a nation's intentions and policies.¹⁴⁴ Therefore, most of the government leaders, officials, and agencies have quickly adopted the use of emerging social media platforms to enable faster and wider communication through extensive networks of actively engaged information consumers.¹⁴⁵

As explained in this chapter, there is a close connection between soft power and public diplomacy, both of which form the basis of digital diplomacy. Since the primary focus of this work is China's digital diplomacy strategy and its role in soft power capabilities, the next chapter will discuss Chinese soft power and public diplomacy.

¹⁴¹ Manor, AWT, pp. 2-3.

¹⁴² Lina Khatib, William Dutton and Michael Thelwall, "Public Diplomacy 2.0: A Case Study of the US Digital Outreach Team", **Middle East Journal**, Vol: 66, No: 3, 2012, pp. 453-454.

¹⁴³ James Alan, "Diplomacy and International Society", **International Relations**, Vol: 6, No: 6, 1980, p. 942.

¹⁴⁴ Sevin and Manor, p. 328.

¹⁴⁵ Collins and DeWitt, p. 7.

CHAPTER TWO

CHINESE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER

2.1. SOFT POWER OF CHINA AS A RISING GLOBAL POWER

As a rising power, the Chinese model of economic development has been a key component of its soft power strategy. Due to its inefficiency, China has shifted from an Soviet-style planned economy to a market-oriented structure since the late 1970s. In just 25 years, this transformation has turned China into an economic powerhouse, creating an image of prosperity and growth. China's rapid economic growth has even led to the introduction of the concept of the "Beijing Consensus"¹⁴⁶ as an alternative to the "Washington Consensus". This model emphasizes tailored development strategies rather than one-size-fits-all approaches. It advocates for innovation and experimentation within a country's own context. Despite China not officially endorsing this term, its remarkable progress prompts reconsideration of development economics and the link between economic and political liberties. Comparisons between China and Russia suggest that autocracy may foster economic freedom, challenging previous assumptions about its inseparability from political freedom. This shift in perspective influences various countries' development trajectories, with leaders like Putin in Russia and policymakers in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America exploring aspects of the Chinese model to address economic challenges and maintain political control.¹⁴⁷

Initially unfamiliar with multilateralism during its reform and opening up, China has gradually embraced and actively participated in multilateral organizations established by Western countries. Beijing's approach to multilateralism evolved from passive response to active participation and even initiation, making it a core part of Chinese foreign policy. This shift is a natural outcome of China's deeper integration

¹⁴⁶ Beijing Consensus: China's extraordinary economic growth is often linked to robust government intervention, capable of deploying vast resources to overcome obstacles to growth or institutional reform. This strategy, known as the Beijing Consensus, contrasts with the Washington Consensus, which advocates neoliberal and market-oriented policies. Source: Yang Yao, "Beijing Consensus Or Washington Consensus What Explains China's Economic Success?", **Development Outreach**, Vol: 13, No: 1, 2011, pp. 26-31.

¹⁴⁷ Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang, "Sources and Limits of Chinese 'Soft Power'", **Survival**, Vol: 48, No: 2, 2006, p. 20.

into the international community and serves its foreign policy goals by counterbalancing the US unilateralism and promoting its global influence in a less threatening manner. China has joined over 130 intergovernmental organizations and committed to 267 multilateral treaties. Some of the initiatives include building institutions like ASEAN Plus China (10+1), ASEAN Plus Three (10+3), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Six-Party Talks on North Korea, the China-Arab Cooperation Forum, and the Forum on China-African Cooperation. China's expanding economic power boosts its economic diplomacy.¹⁴⁸ For instance, China successfully expanded into Central Asia through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, addressing issues such as drug trafficking and religious extremism, and ultimately encouraged significant investment from Chinese companies. Over time, Chinese investors became strong competitors to Russian and American companies, establishing China as the largest trade partner for Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, the second-largest for Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and the third-largest for Tajikistan.¹⁴⁹

After the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis, China's international stature increased as it became a key member of the G20. To address the severe global economic setback, G20 expanded beyond the economically developed circle of G8 and G7 countries, positioning China as a reliable actor of the international order.¹⁵⁰ Beijing's substantial aid and investment in Asia, Africa and other regions are part of a long-term strategy to enhance China's global influence through economic means. For instance, China has provided an average of \$38 billion annually in foreign aid via export credits and loans. This economic soft power also extends to major infrastructure projects worldwide, solidifying China as the leading trading partner for countries like Peru in Latin America. Following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, China's continued investment abroad contrasted with the struggles of many Western nations, boosting its

¹⁴⁸ Yongnian Zheng and Chi Zhang, "Introduction: the Soft Power Concept and a Rising China", **China's Soft Power and International Relations**, (Ed. Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu), Routledge, London, 2012, p. 31.

¹⁴⁹ Antara Ghosal Singh, "China's Soft Power Projection Across the Oceans", **Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India**, Vol: 12, No: 1, 2016, p. 27.

¹⁵⁰ Jacques deLisle, "Foreign Policy through Other Means: Hard Power, Soft Power, and China's Turn to Political Warfare to Influence the United States", **Orbis**, Vol: 64, No: 2, 2020, p. 11.

position as a key economic player promising growth beyond what Western liberal democracies have achieved.¹⁵¹

While working hard on its economic attractiveness, China tries to portray itself as a responsible international actor by contributing to international stability and peace through various initiatives and commitments. As one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council with veto power, China holds a significant role in international security. It supports the principle of collective security and recognizes the Security Council as the central body for maintaining global security.¹⁵² China has been the leading contributor of peacekeeping personnel and the sixth largest contributor of funds among the member countries of the Security Council. China has also diversified the types of staff it sends for UN missions, expanding from medical, transportation, engineering and military observers to include entire infantry divisions, as seen in South Sudan. It will establish a permanent peacekeeping force of 8000 troops and join the UN capability readiness system. Furthermore, China will provide \$100 million in aid to the African Union to assist in building an emergency response/quick-response force and an African standby force.¹⁵³ One of the latest foreign aid programs is “China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era” which was released in the White Paper on Foreign Aid in early 2021. It details China’s motivations for participating in humanitarianism and internationalism spirit, international development cooperation, support for other developing countries in their struggles for liberation and independence, encouragement for cooperation and long-term friendship through social and economic development, implementing the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and addressing global development issues. All these efforts are to emphasize China’s role as a responsible international actor and highlight the mutual benefits of such cooperation. This is considered as one of the core motivations behind Chinese development aid. Therefore, it helps China to portray itself as “a major country with a sense of responsibility”.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Judit Trunkos, “Comparing Russian, Chinese and American Soft Power Use: A New Approach”, **Global Society**, Vol: 35, No: 3, 2021, pp. 402-403.

¹⁵² Xin Li and Verner Worm, “Building China’s Soft Power for a Peaceful Rise”, **Journal of Chinese Political Science**, Vol: 16, No: 1, 2011, pp. 82-83.

¹⁵³ Singh, p. 31.

¹⁵⁴ Anna Kobierecka, “Post-Covid China: ‘Vaccine Diplomacy’ and the New Developments of Chinese Foreign Policy”, **Place Branding and Public Diplomacy**, Vol: 19, 2023, pp. 284-285.

Likewise, Chinese-made technological products are gaining better reputation around the globe. Chinese products have historically been perceived as cheaper and of lower quality compared to those from OECD countries. However, Chinese-made products offering similar quality and functionality at a lower price can improve the international image of China among foreign consumers. The quality of these products is crucial for building a positive international reputation. Lately, more and more high-quality Chinese products are appearing in global markets, including TCL TVs, Lenovo computers, Galanz microwave ovens and Haier refrigerators.¹⁵⁵ China's cultural expressions also captivate audiences beyond the Western world, especially drawing interest from South-East Asian youths who are charmed by Chinese pop music, fashion, and films. Moreover, Chinese brands have gained popularity in the region, alongside an increased enthusiasm for studying the Chinese language. This surge in China's soft power in South-East Asia is linked to the rise of ethnic Chinese communities in the region. Previously skeptical or critical of Beijing, these groups now view China as modernizing and prosperous.¹⁵⁶

According to Li and Worm, internationally, China has actively committed to the principles of peaceful coexistence and respect for non-interference in the internal matters of other nations. This has helped it cultivate a positive and peaceful reputation in numerous countries.¹⁵⁷ In its neighboring regions, China has pursued a policy of fostering good relations with its neighbors. It has made significant efforts to resolve longstanding border disputes with countries like Vietnam, Central Asian nations and Russia, making concessions previously unheard of. Moreover, China has shown greater flexibility in addressing territorial disagreements, such as those in the South China Sea and along the Sino-Indian border. Likewise, China has embarked on a charm offensive in Southeast Asia, where China's rising influence has raised concerns. This involves high-level diplomatic visits, economic assistance to countries like Cambodia, Burma, and Laos, negotiations for Free Trade Agreements with ASEAN, active engagement in regional multilateral organizations, and cooperation initiatives

¹⁵⁵ Li and Worm, pp 84-85.

¹⁵⁶ Ingrid d'Hooghe, "Public Diplomacy in the People's Republic of China", **The New Public Diplomacy**, (Ed. Jan Melissen), Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2005, (PDC), p. 95.

¹⁵⁷ Li and Worm, p. 78.

on various transnational issues like health, drug trafficking, and the environment.¹⁵⁸ A key demonstration of China's environmental commitment occurred on December 19, 2022, at the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15) in Montreal, Canada. The event was hosted by Canada and chaired by China; and ended with a groundbreaking agreement, Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, to guide global actions on biodiversity until 2030.¹⁵⁹ China had a significant role in the "Kunming Declaration" which was endorsed by over 100 countries, and the conference took place in Kunming, Yunnan, a region known for its diverse ecosystems from jungles to glaciers. This event allowed China to highlight its commitment to global environmental leadership under the theme of "ecological civilization", emphasizing sustainable growth. Unlike the US, which is not part of the UN's Convention on Biodiversity due to Senate reluctance, China leads this initiative, reinforcing its position in international environmental efforts.¹⁶⁰ As being one of the five permanent members of UN, China has also committed to supporting values such as poverty reduction, global health, and women's empowerment by pledging \$10 million to UN Women and \$2 million to the World Health Organization (WHO). Additionally, it plans to train half a million technical personnel, with a focus on women from developing countries.¹⁶¹

As China's influence grows, the government has increasingly emphasized public diplomacy as a strategic priority. The establishment of the Seminar on China's Public Diplomacy in 2004 marked the beginning of a new strategy to shape China's global image and promote its soft power. This strategy serves dual purposes: strategically advancing China's interests and addressing concerns about its rise. To achieve its goals of peaceful development, China aims to reshape international

¹⁵⁸ Hongying Wang and Yeh-Chung Lu, "The Conception of Soft Power and its Policy Implications: a Comparative Study of China and Taiwan", **Journal of Contemporary China**, Vol: 17, No: 56, 2008, p. 441.

¹⁵⁹ UN Environment Programme, "COP15 Ends with Landmark Biodiversity Agreement", 20.12.2022, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/cop15-ends-landmark-biodiversity-agreement>, (20.04.2024).

¹⁶⁰ "China is trying to become a champion of biodiversity", **The Economist**, 17.02.2022, https://www.economist.com/china/2022/02/17/china-is-trying-to-become-a-champion-of-biodiversity?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=18151738051&ppcadID=&utm_campaign=a.22brand_pmax&utm_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwjeuyBhBuEiwAJ3vuof2vf8Lq8JCIFmfb1ZpQNhBhHCsysT2Der0ZMDCL51ROQpH90jDk8RoCxx8QAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds, (12.03.2024).

¹⁶¹ Singh, p. 31.

perceptions, counter the “China threat” narrative, and engage with foreign civil society. With this approach, China tries to signify a shift away from traditional government-centric diplomacy towards a more inclusive and proactive engagement with global audiences.¹⁶² As Wang points out enhancing China’s soft power is the responsibility of public diplomacy¹⁶³ which will be discussed in detail in the next sections.

2.2. THE EVOLUTION OF CHINESE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: FROM THE 1950s TO THE EARLY XI JINPING ERA

A nation’s image plays a vital role in international relations. As China ascends as a global power, it is placing more and more emphasis on its image which results in increased investment in public diplomacy. This form of diplomacy involves engaging and communicating with foreign audiences, and it has become a key aspect of China’s overall diplomatic strategy.¹⁶⁴ For this reason, each year, while the United States designates over \$2 billion to public diplomacy, China commits an estimated \$8 billion.¹⁶⁵ China shares land border with 14 countries, the most of any nation and this fact significantly impacts its public diplomacy strategies. According to Qingan and Jinwei, there are three main principles which guide China’s approach. First, China aims to improve public relations with major powers like the US, Russia, and Western countries to create a positive image in the international arena. Second, there is a focus on stabilizing relations with neighboring countries. Third, China seeks to enhance its positive image in developing countries across Latin America, Africa, and Asia.¹⁶⁶ In its public diplomacy efforts, China aims to be perceived as a nation that meticulously works to provide a better future for its people, acts as a reliable, stable and responsible economic partner, and serves as a trustworthy and accountable member of the

¹⁶² Yiwei Wang, “Public Diplomacy and the Rise of Chinese Soft Power”, **The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science**, Vol: 616, 2008, p. 263.

¹⁶³ Wang, p. 267.

¹⁶⁴ Falk Hartig, “How China Understands Public Diplomacy: The Importance of National Image for National Interests”, **International Studies Review**, Vol: 18, No: 4, 2016, (HCU), p. 655.

¹⁶⁵ Daniel C. Mattingly and James Sundquist, “When Does Public Diplomacy Work? Evidence from China’s “Wolf Warrior” Diplomats”, **Political Science Research and Methods**, Vol: 11, 2023, p. 921.

¹⁶⁶ Zhou Qingan and Mo Jinwei, “How 21st-Century China Sees Public Diplomacy As a Path to Soft Power”, **Global Asia**, Vol: 7, No: 3, 2012, p. 19.

international community. Additionally, China seeks recognition and respect as an ancient yet rich culture.¹⁶⁷

In order to better understand the public diplomacy efforts, it is vital to first understand the “Grand Strategy” of China. Goldstein defines “grand strategy” as the way a country combines its political, diplomatic, economic, and military resources to protect its key interests and achieve its objectives, most importantly, ensuring its survival in a potentially threatening world.¹⁶⁸ Between 1949-1989 the main purpose of the Chinese grand strategy was to deal with existential threats to the Chinese regime. During the Cold War, both Mao and Deng regimes, between 1949 and 1976 and 1978 and 1989, respectively, sought military backing and economic assistance/cooperation. Yet, with end of the Cold War era in the 1990s, Chinese grand strategy became “rejuvenation” which had and still has the ultimate goal of regaining standing as a developed country and a major power. The main approach of Deng Xiaoping era was “hide and bide,” the aim of which was to gain wealth and power by laying low and joining the existing order. During Jiang Zemin (1993-2003), and Hu Jintao (2003-2013) periods, the main approach was changed into “peaceful rise” by reassuring others and adapting to the existing order. Finally in Xi Jinping era, the approach has become “Chinese dream,” aiming to shape the world for China’s rise by providing reassurance, reshaping the current order, and resistance to threats to its core interests.¹⁶⁹ Each approach of each era has effected the public diplomacy efforts of the Chinese government which will be discussed further in the following sections.

2.2.1. The Era of Cold War: 1950-1990

Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China’s public diplomacy primarily focused on external propaganda, addressing the socialist bloc and developing nations in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, aiming to gain support against “American imperialism”. This effort included the establishment of Xinhua News Agency branches worldwide and the publication of magazines in

¹⁶⁷ Ingrid d’Hooghe, “The Expansion of Chinese System”, **Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication**, (Ed. Jian Wang), Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011, (ECS), p. 24.

¹⁶⁸ Avery Goldstein, “China’s Grand Strategy under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, Reform, and Resistance”, **International Security**, Vol: 45, No: 1, 2020, p. 166.

¹⁶⁹ Goldstein, p. 169.

multiple languages such as English, Japanese, Russian and French, including People's China in 1950, China Construction in 1951 and Beijing Review in 1958, with the latter continuing to be a key platform for disseminating cultural, economic and political news and introducing Chinese government positions. Over the years, through these publications China has been depicted in a variety of ways, including as a nation of peace, a victim of foreign aggression, a socialist stronghold, an anti-hegemonic force, and a developing country with a noticeable turn towards cooperation.¹⁷⁰

During Mao's era (1949-1976), Chinese foreign policy aimed at exporting revolution to the Third World, often leading to controversial and aggressive actions such as burning down the British Embassy and clashing with Soviet diplomats in Beijing, which reinforced the perception of a threatening China. However, post-Mao leadership, also referred as China's Reform Era¹⁷¹ adopted a more pragmatic and cooperative approach, prioritizing stability for domestic development, reassuring neighbors, and fostering constructive relations with major powers, particularly the United States. This new foreign policy strategy emphasized adherence to international norms, peaceful dispute resolution, economic cooperation, combating non-traditional security threats, and effective disarmament¹⁷² aiming to counteract the perception of "China threat" and strengthen Chinese soft power.

In order to break its international isolation in the 1970s, China's public diplomacy efforts included initiatives like "ping-pong diplomacy"¹⁷³ and "panda

¹⁷⁰ Wang, p. 267.

¹⁷¹ China's Reform Era, initiated in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernizations, aimed to strengthen agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology. Deng's strategy had three key components: (1) ideologically breaking away from the restrictive communist thinking of the Maoist era, particularly the Cultural Revolution; (2) economically modernizing China through reform-oriented policies; and (3) politically creating a foreign policy that ensured a supportive regional environment in East and Southeast Asia to foster stronger economic engagement with these regions. In brief, China's foreign policy from 1978 to 1989 sought to establish a peaceful external environment to enable the Beijing regime to prioritize internal economic reform. Source: K. S. Nathan, "China's Reform Era Under Deng Xiaoping, 1978–1989: Impacts on China-ASEAN Relations", **Chinese Economic Statecraft from 1978 to 1989**, (Ed. P. Roberts), Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2022, p. 235.

¹⁷² Gill and Huang, p. 21.

¹⁷³ In April 1971, a group of ping pong players made history as the first Americans to travel to Communist China. This trip is known for playing a critical role in softening the diplomatic tensions between the two countries, which had been nonexistent for over two decades. Following the success of "ping pong diplomacy", less than a year later, in 1972, Richard Nixon made a groundbreaking visit to Beijing, marking him as the first US president to set foot in the People's Republic of China. Source: BBC, "How 'Ping Pong Diplomacy' Brought Nixon to China, **BBC**, 23.01.2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/magazine-25836922>, (07.03.2024).

diplomacy”, aiming to create a more globally engaged image. The pandas are culturally significant symbols and China’s use of “panda diplomacy”, which dates back to the Tang Dynasty (624–705), continues to play a role in its international relations.¹⁷⁴ During the Tang dynasty, two pandas were gifted to Japan which marked the beginning of panda diplomacy. In the Mao era, recognizing the the diplomatic importance of pandas and their popularity, China continued to give pandas as gifts to strengthen strategic friendships. Pandas were given in 1965 to Soviet President Nikita Khrushchev and Kim Il-Sung, leader of North Korea.¹⁷⁵ Panda diplomacy aims to improve China’s image and foster goodwill, reflecting its broader strategy of using cultural and natural symbols to gain international respect and admiration. This practice, where pandas are sent as diplomatic gifts, was notably revived in 1972 and 1974 when China gifted a pair of pandas to the United States following President Nixon’s historic visit.¹⁷⁶ The same gesture was also made towards to Mexico, Germany, Spain, France, the United Kingdom (UK), and Japan. The political message of panda diplomacy became particularly clear when China sought rapprochement with the US in 1972. In other cases, pandas were sent as a symbol of goodwill and to strengthen China’s image abroad.¹⁷⁷ After Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978, the gifts shifted to loan agreements, adopting a capitalist lease model. Panda loans were given to countries that would provide China with valuable resources and technology. They also represented China’s intent to build strong trade relationships based on trust, mutual benefit, loyalty, and long-term cooperation. In total, 24 pandas were gifted to nine different countries between 1957-1983 as “goodwill ambassadors”.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Mia Taylo, “A Brief History of Panda Diplomacy - With New Additions to Global Zoos”, **BBC**, 26.06.2024, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240226-a-brief-history-of-panda-diplomacy---with-new-additions-to-global-zoos>, (14.04.2024).

¹⁷⁵ Kathleen Carmel Buckingham, Jonathan Neil William David, and Paul Jepson, “Environmental Reviews and Case Studies: Diplomats and Refugees: Panda Diplomacy, Soft ‘Cuddly’ Power, and the New Trajectory in Panda Conservation”, **Environmental Practice**, Vol: 15, No:3, 2013, p. 262.

¹⁷⁶ Taylo.

¹⁷⁷ Hak Yin Li and Seanon Wong, “The Evolution of Chinese Public Diplomacy and the Rise of think Tanks”, **Place Brand Public Diplomacy**, Vol: 14, 2018, pp. 37-38.

¹⁷⁸ Buckingham, David and Jepson, pp. 262-263.

In the late 1970s it was Deng Xiaoping (1978-1989)'s introduction of the "open-door policy"¹⁷⁹ and economic reforms that truly transformed China's image. Deng's pragmatic strategy was well-received worldwide and was supported by consistent attempts to modernize China which attracted international investment and visitors. Deng's designation as "Man of the Year" by TIME Magazine in 1985 served as more evidence of his successful public diplomacy and resulted in a major change in global opinion of China.¹⁸⁰ Deng advised the country to keep a low profile internationally and focus on domestic development. In the early 1990s, Deng gave several speeches on how China should navigate the global situation. This was summarized in the "20-character strategic policy" and included "calm observation", "steady positioning", "calmly dealing with challenges", "hiding capabilities and biding time" and "achieving some successes". The aim of this low-profile approach was to create and maintain a friendly international environment for China's development.¹⁸¹ However, following the Tiananmen Square crisis in 1989¹⁸², China's positive global reputation took a severe hit and the iconic image of a lone protester facing down a line of tanks became the face of the country. Being preoccupied with stabilizing the country, Chinese leaders paid little attention to foreign opinions at first. However, recognizing the need to recover its image and overcome the isolation, China sought the help of one of the world's biggest public relations firms, Hill & Knowlton.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ In 1978, the Chinese government implemented a new policy which is referred as the "open door policy" by the West and it shifted China's development strategy from self-sufficiency to active participation in the global market. As a result, China's foreign trade has increased rapidly. Source: Guocang Huan, "China's Open Door Policy, 1978-1984", **Journal of International Affairs**, Vol: 39, No: 2, 1986, p. 1.

¹⁸⁰ d'Hooghe, PDC, pp. 91-92.

¹⁸¹ Goldstein, p. 165.

¹⁸² In 1989, unarmed, peaceful pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square of Beijing were killed, and thousands of people were arrested in other cities. Against the protesters who were calling for political and economic reform, military units were deployed, leading to mass killings of unarmed protesters and onlookers. The PRC has not officially acknowledged the Tiananmen massacre, and any mention of the protest remains banned in China today. Source: Amnesty International UK, "What Really Happened in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests", 18.05.2023, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/china-1989-tiananmen-square-protests-demonstration-massacre>, (20.04.2024).

¹⁸³ d'Hooghe, PDC, pp. 91-92.

2.2.2. The Era of Post-Cold War Revival: 1990-2013

Chinese public diplomacy has had five key goals since the end of the Cold War: more effectively promoting the Chinese government's views to the global audience, shaping a positive image of the country, countering misleading foreign reports about China, enhancing the international environment in which China operates, and influencing the policy decisions of other nations.¹⁸⁴ By the early 1990s, China increased its efforts to improve its international standing once the internal situation due to the Tiananmen Square crisis had stabilized under the leadership of Jiang Zemin (1993-2003). This included interacting with foreign audiences to promote trade, investment, and enhance China's global influence.¹⁸⁵ Since the 1990s, China's diplomacy has increasingly moved away from Deng's low-profile approach. During Jiang Zemin's presidency, as China's economy grew rapidly, the country became more active globally and took actions that other nations saw as assertive in defending its sovereign interests. For instance, in 1995, China occupied and strengthened its position on the Mischief Reef in the South China Sea, a disputed area also claimed by the Philippines. In the 1990s, the MFA began describing China as a "major country" in its diplomatic statements. However, at that time, China's approach to major-country diplomacy was more about managing its relationships with the United States, European Union, Russia, and other major powers, rather than actively pursuing a foreign policy as a major power.¹⁸⁶

Chinese scholars began working on the concept of public diplomacy during Zemin era, when it first appeared in the Chinese academic sphere. However, the practice of public diplomacy in China started to take shape earlier in 1983 during the "open and reform" period. This initiative began with the appointment of Qian Qicheng as the head of the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who established a system of Chinese news spokesmen. Other government bodies began adopting similar practices and the establishment of a State Council Information Office in January 1991 elevated the news spokesman system to the national level. By June

¹⁸⁴ Wang, p. 268.

¹⁸⁵ d'Hooghe, PDC, pp. 91-92.

¹⁸⁶ Yaoyao Dai and Luwei Rose Luqiu, "Wolf Warriors and Diplomacy in the New Era", **China Review**, Vol: 22, No: 2, 2022, pp. 257-258.

2003, Shanghai introduced its own local news spokesperson system and set an example for others to follow. Since then, numerous provinces, State Council institutions, and Central Communist Party (CCP) organs have established their own spokesperson systems, totaling seven CCP Central organs, seventy-four State Council institutions and thirty-one provinces. Beijing has even expended its efforts by creating a local system to represent each district within the city. However, the Chinese government did not begin to give serious attention to public diplomacy until after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.¹⁸⁷ Additionally, the outbreak of the SARS virus in China in 2003 sparked intense international criticism of China and the number of people expressing concerns about the so-called “China threat” was on the rise. Therefore, Chinese officials decided to increase their efforts in public diplomacy as a result of these accusations.¹⁸⁸

During Hu Jintao's leadership (2003-2013), China continued its rapid domestic growth and further integrated into the international community. Hu's diplomacy aimed to counter the China threat theory and present China as a nation that follows international rules, rather than one seeking to change them.¹⁸⁹ Beijing aimed to raise its global profile and build the image of a responsible “major country” by joining international and regional cooperation efforts and hosting important international conferences and events.¹⁹⁰ Since the 2000s, the Chinese government has increasingly focused on public diplomacy through initiatives such as establishing Confucius Institutes, offering scholarships for higher education in China, globalizing its media presence and organizing cultural events and exhibitions, aiming to rebrand China's global role.¹⁹¹ The concept of Confucius Institutes was first proposed by Lu Qiutian, a Chinese Ambassador to Germany, and was well received by the MFA. The primary purpose of Confucius Institutes is to promote Chinese culture and language among foreign publics. They are also seen as a tool to balance and challenge American

¹⁸⁷ Wang, pp. 259-260.

¹⁸⁸ Kejin Zhao, “The China Model of Public Diplomacy and Its Future”, **The Hague Journal of Diplomacy**, Vol: 14, No: 1-2, 2019, (CMP), p. 170.

¹⁸⁹ Dai and Luqiu, p. 257.

¹⁹⁰ Jean-Marc F. Blanchard, “Harmonious World and China's Foreign Economic Policy: Features, Implications, and Challenges”, **Journal of Chinese Political Science**, Vol: 13, No: 2, 2008, p. 169.

¹⁹¹ Motoko Shuto, “Patterns and views of China's Public Diplomacy in ASEAN Countries: Focusing on Confucius Institutes”, **Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies**, 2018, p. 1.

cultural influence.¹⁹² In March 2004, in order to catch up with the United States, China decided to form a Division for Public Diplomacy under the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁹³

China possesses significant potential in the realm of soft power in the cultural sphere. With its vast cultural resources, the country stands as a cultural powerhouse on the global stage. China's rich history spanning 5,000 years has contributed to a wealth of cultural assets, including its language with its characters and calligraphy, philosophical traditions, cinema, music, arts, architectural heritage, cuisine, traditional medicine, and martial arts.¹⁹⁴ Recognizing the importance of language in boosting cultural attractiveness, China has aggressively promoted the study of Chinese worldwide. The China National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language launched a program aimed at increasing the number of foreigners studying Chinese to 100 million by 2010. An annual budget of \$200 million was allocated for this initiative. By late 2005, the Chinese Ministry of Education had established 32 Confucius Institutes in 23 countries, providing cultural and language resources similar to the British Council, the Goethe Institut, and the Institut Français, all with the political agenda of presenting a more favorable image of China to the world.¹⁹⁵ By the early 2000s, Confucius Institutes began to appear at prestigious US research universities, offering programs on a wide range of China-related subjects, some of which were relevant to foreign policy. The number of American students studying Chinese culture and Chinese language has significantly increased. College enrollments in Chinese language courses have exceeded 50,000, making it the sixth-most-taught foreign language at US higher education institutions.¹⁹⁶ By the year 2008, China had already established 326 Confucius Institutes in 81 countries and regions, aimed at promoting Chinese language and culture. Additionally, China conducts over 1,300 cultural exchanges annually, including sponsoring events like the Chinese New Year celebrations, "Chinese Cultural Festival" and "Year of Chinese Culture".¹⁹⁷

¹⁹² Falk Hartig, **Chinese Public Diplomacy: The Rise of the Confucius Institute**, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2016, (RCI), pp. 99-102.

¹⁹³ Wang, p. 260.

¹⁹⁴ Li and Worm, p. 75.

¹⁹⁵ Gill and Huang, p. 18.

¹⁹⁶ deLisle, pp. 12-13.

¹⁹⁷ Li and Worm, p. 75.

Additionally, Chinese visiting students and scholars overseas play a role in shaping China's international image. Similarly, as more foreigners visit China for business, tourism, and study their impressions of the Chinese people will gradually influence global perceptions.¹⁹⁸ The images and behaviors of a country's citizens significantly contribute to its international reputation.

Another one of the most direct efforts to influence foreign audiences in 2000s is the state media's "outreach" strategy. A key example is China Central Television (CCTV), which has gained greater international reach since 2000. This includes the addition of a 24-hour English-language channel, as well as Spanish and French-language channels in 2004, and Russian and Arabic-language channels in 2009.¹⁹⁹ Having seen the success of American counterparts, Beijing revealed ambitions in 2009 to invest billions in developing global media giants to compete with Viacom Time Warner, and Bloomberg. The objective was to gain allies overseas by employing soft power instead of military might.²⁰⁰

China's soft power in the US and the West grew significantly in areas such as culture, sports, and education. Chinese cinema, particularly movies by directors like Zhang Yimou, received exceptional admiration from US audiences and critics. NBA star Yao Ming became a soft power ambassador for China through his on-court performance and endorsements. Similarly, the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics marked a major recovery for China's reputation after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. Chinese authorities aimed to showcase a modern and impressive China, with Zhang Yimou, choreographing the opening ceremonies, which were broadcast by NBC.²⁰¹ The 29th Olympic Games held in Beijing in 2008, was a unique public diplomacy opportunity for China to present itself and the games offered the country with rare exposure to Western media and public opinion. The significance of the games for the Chinese people was even heightened due to the fact that the games coincided with the 30th anniversary of China's reform and opening-up policy. During the opening ceremonies, traditional Chinese cultural symbols were highlighted as national symbols contrasting to the usual Western media portrayal of China which often

¹⁹⁸ Li and Worm, p. 85.

¹⁹⁹ Li and Wong, p. 38.

²⁰⁰ Nye, IRS, p. 22.

²⁰¹ deLisle, pp. 11-12.

emphasizes symbols of authority such as images of armed police at the Palace Museum in Tiananmen Square. Also, there was an emphasis on majestic icons and structures, which are seen as symbols of modernity and are often associated with nationalism. Constructed over 2,000 years ago, The Great Wall of China and the ancient grand palaces are prime examples of majestic aesthetic values in Chinese culture. Global events such as Shanghai World Expo, the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games and the Beijing Olympics displayed China's majestic symbols even further. These events helped shape Chinese symbols, create a cultural identity and introduce the elements of Chinese culture to a worldwide audience through their striking visual impact.²⁰²

In the following years, senior Chinese officials have continued to show attention to the concept of public diplomacy. Notably, in early 2010, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference introduced the magazine *Public Diplomacy Quarterly* to offer a platform for various social and functional groups in China. Furthermore, around August 2010, the first research center on public diplomacy, aiming to function as a think tank and provide intellectual support for China's public diplomacy efforts, was established at Beijing Foreign Studies University. This center organized the first International Forum on Public Diplomacy in Beijing in September 2010.²⁰³ Another significant event occurred when President Hu Jintao attended the 11th meeting for Chinese diplomats in Beijing in 2009. He urged Chinese diplomats to protect national security and sovereignty, adhere to the one-China policy, promote global economic growth and maintain stability. The first top Chinese leader to recognize the importance of public diplomacy was President Hu. He placed a strong emphasis on strategic goals of strengthening China's political influence, competitive economic might, positive image, and moral standards. This marked the clearest expression of China's public diplomacy strategy. Since then, the importance of public diplomacy for China has started to be mentioned by other high-level officials such as State Councillors Dai Bingguo, Yang Jiechi, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi on various occasions. All the efforts put in by Chinese officials showcase that as a means to boost China's international influence and

²⁰² Qingan and Jinwei, pp. 22-23.

²⁰³ Hongyi Lai, "Introduction: the Soft Power Concept and a Rising China", **China's Soft Power and International Relations**, (Ed. Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu), Routledge, London, 2012, (ISP), p. 12.

cultivate a friendly global image, public diplomacy has become a crucial aspect of China's foreign policy strategy.²⁰⁴

One of China's early international public relations efforts was the "People Chapter" of the China National Image Film which was a part of the "Experience China" campaign. It was produced by the State Council Information Office and was displayed on six large screens in New York's Times Square during President Hu Jintao's visit to the United States in January 2011. The 1-minute video was shown about 300 times daily, aired approximately 8,400 times and featured significant Chinese figures before it ended on February 14, 2011. Additionally, a 30-second commercial and a 30-minute documentary were broadcast on US televisions. From then on, national image films have been created by public and commercial organizations and distributed internationally on a variety of platforms.²⁰⁵

2.2.3. The Era of National Renaissance: Early Xi Jinping Period (2013-2020)

Since President Xi Jinping (2013-present) took office in 2013, the new government has intensified efforts in public diplomacy. Xi focused heavily on foreign relations soon after taking office. In the second year of his presidency, he introduced the idea of a distinctive Chinese major-country diplomacy. This approach shifted away from only managing relationships with other major powers. It aims to develop a diplomatic strategy that reflects China's status as a major global power.²⁰⁶ Following President Xi Jinping's call to modernize China's governance and establish new think tanks with Chinese characteristics, Chinese think tanks started a intense globalization campaign with the goal of updating China's political structure and becoming prestigious research organizations with significant international influence.²⁰⁷ In December 2015, the Chinese central government initiated the "National High-Level

²⁰⁴ Kejin Zhao, "The Motivation Behind China's Public Diplomacy", **The Chinese Journal of International Politics**, 2015, (MBC), p 4.

²⁰⁵ Yifan Yang, "Looking Inward: How Does Chinese Public Diplomacy Work at Home?", **The British Journal of Politics and International Relations**, Vol: 22, No: 3, 2020, p. 380.

²⁰⁶ Dai and Luqiu, p. 258.

²⁰⁷ Silvia Menegazzi, "Chinese Think Tanks and Public Diplomacy in the Xi Jinping Era", **Global Society**, Vol: 35, 2020, p. 2.

Think Tank Pilot Project” in order to develop such new types of think tanks. The “New Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics” aimed to establish think tanks that differ from traditional, ministry-affiliated ones of the past and to enhance China’s public diplomacy efforts.²⁰⁸ Eventually, think tanks have become crucial to China’s diplomatic strategy, as they establish policy networks to represent Chinese interests abroad. To illustrate, institutionalized events like the ChinaAfrica Think Tanks Forum promote cooperation and opinion exchange on strategic matters. Also, similar initiatives have been successful in Central America and the West Indies through the China-LAC Think Tanks Forum. These initiatives have improved China’s diplomatic relations and global image. Notably, China had the highest representation at the T20 “Ideas Bank”²⁰⁹ among Asian countries at the 2015 G20 summit. Chinese think tanks also promote multilateral projects such as the BRICS New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, provide policy advice and act as negotiators and channels of communication in diplomatic activities.²¹⁰

According to Chinese government, think tanks are expected to enhance Chinese soft power²¹¹ and to fulfill several responsibilities such as constructing a positive image of Socialist China, promoting Chinese values and culture globally, voicing Chinese concerns on different international platforms, and increasing China’s international influence and communicative power.²¹² From a Chinese point of view, think tank networks have been created to assist government officials and state-owned businesses in adapting China’s development model to align with international norms, procedures and standards. These networks focus on areas such as environmental standards, sustainable development and infrastructure building. To aid China’s public diplomacy, Chinese think tank networks promote initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI or B&R) which is portrayed as non-aggressive, highly inclusive, and

²⁰⁸ Menegazzi, p. 8.

²⁰⁹ The official G20 engagement group, Think20 (T20), brings together the world's top research centers and think tanks. It acts as the G20's “ideas bank” and seeks to give the leaders of the G20 research-based policy recommendations. Source: “T20 Policy Briefs”, 05.07.2023, <https://www.sei.org/features/t20-policy-briefs/>, (18.03.2024).

²¹⁰ Menegazzi, pp. 11-12.

²¹¹ Li and Wong, p. 40.

²¹² Li and Wong, p. 44.

environmentally friendly. These networks highlight the BRI as a central pillar of China's global diplomatic agenda.²¹³

In September 2013, China's BRI, alternatively referred to as the One Belt One Road (OBOR) in China, also known as the "Silk Road", was introduced by President Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan. By referencing the historical Silk Road, China seeks to portray the BRI initiative in a positive light, aiming to foster trust and goodwill among participating countries. The BRI initiative, while expanding its reach to new countries, offers economic benefits to those involved, leading to its widespread adoption across nearly the entire Asian continent and half of Europe. This initiative effectively positions China as a neighbor to the EU and aims to establish a sustainable economic zone bridging Asia and Europe, thus reshaping the global economy within a Eurasia-centered framework. Overall, the BRI project represents the concept of "soft power" as it seeks to exert influence through economic cooperation and historical narratives.²¹⁴

To many scholars, there is a strong relation between China's expanding economic ties and favorable public opinion about China. Essentially, regions where China has significant investments or presence tend to have a more positive view of the country.²¹⁵ One of the most prominent examples, without a doubt, is African continent. China's influence is particularly strong in Africa²¹⁶, where it has used development aid, investments, and training programs for African leaders as key tools of soft power. China has significantly increased its trade and economic investments with Africa, often supported by favorable loans from the China Ex-Im Bank, and has maintained a trade balance that benefits Africa. Today, China reports having completed over 1,000 projects in Africa, including the construction of thousands of kilometers of railways and roads. It is highly active in important sectors such as aviation, highways, railways, telecommunications, and power projects. Some of the important investments include the 1,402-km coastal railway in Nigeria, the Mombasa–Nairobi railway in Kenya, and

²¹³ Menegazzi, pp. 16-17.

²¹⁴ Murat Kağan Kozanhan, "China's One Belt One Road Project and Its Effects on Mediterranean Security", **International Journal of Politics and Security (IJPS)**, Vol: 4, No: 3, 2022, pp. 251-252.

²¹⁵ Singh, p. 28.

²¹⁶ Laura Silver, Christine Huang and Laura Clancy, "Report: China's Approach to Foreign Policy Gets Largely Negative Reviews", **Pew Research Center**, 27.07.2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/27/views-of-china/>, (04.09.2024).

the Addis Ababa–Djibouti rail project in East Africa.²¹⁷ Despite regional conflicts like those in the South China Sea²¹⁸, China’s effective use of economic soft power has significantly increased its global influence. This heavy dependence on economic tools gives validity to the idea that China’s foreign policy has been using economic soft power tools increasingly.²¹⁹

Chinese scholars point to the Chinese economic development model as a major source of soft power in this area, while Nye highlights the appeal of American political institutions and principles like democracy and human rights.²²⁰ China’s rapid economic growth and development have appealed to many developing countries seeking alternatives to Western liberal democracy. The “China model”, which features strong state control alongside market-oriented reforms, attracts leaders and policymakers in these countries who aim to achieve economic growth without adopting Western values/political systems. It has attracted significant attention, especially in Latin America and Africa, where left-leaning governments prioritize economic development over extensive liberalization. This trend increases China’s appeal in these regions²²¹ and displays Chinese values successfully. BRI as an economy-oriented resource for China to demonstrate its core values can attract the global audience. BRI initiative, rooted in the historical Silk Road legacy, embodies principles of peace, cooperation, openness, and development, as emphasized by President Xi Jinping. Through BRI, China aims to foster dialogue, partnership, and inclusive globalization, steering away from confrontation, and alliances. With an investment of approximately \$1 trillion, BRI aims to build infrastructure across Eurasia, Europe, and Africa, positioning China as a key player in global development. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank serves as a pivotal financing instrument for BRI, elevating China’s influence in global politics and economics. By exporting its

²¹⁷ Singh, pp. 27-28.

²¹⁸ The South China Sea dispute is one of the most complex geopolitical issues of the twenty-first century, involving over 20 countries and regions. The main issue is the maritime boundaries and rights to potentially vast fishing and oil reserves. In the center of the conflict is China’s claim of the “nine-dash line,” which constitutes more than 80 percent of the South China Sea. Rival claimants include Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Brunei and Vietnam. Additionally, countries like the United States, despite having no direct claims, have engaged in efforts to resolve the dispute as part of their broader global strategy. Source: Lei Guo, Kate Mays and Jianing Wang, “Whose Story Wins on Twitter?”, *Journalism Studies*, Vol: 20, No: 4, 2019, p. 563.

²¹⁹ Trunkos, p. 403.

²²⁰ Wang and Lu, p. 431.

²²¹ Wang and Lu, p. 440.

development model through BRI, China seeks to enhance its soft power, leveraging its economic strength and infrastructure expertise to enhance its soft power, expand its international appeal and increase market access.²²²

In the Xi era, cultural self-confidence has also become a focal point for China's public diplomacy. Chinese leaders have shifted away from using the Western term "public diplomacy" and instead use local concepts like "cultural diplomacy" and "people-to-people exchange". Since 2012, there has been a stronger emphasis on promoting China's traditional culture through creative transformation and innovative development. President Xi stressed the need for cultural exchange among civilizations and also put an emphasis on China's confidence in its own cultural heritage, advocating for the revitalization and adaptation of traditional cultural values to the modern era. As a key element of demonstrating China's cultural self-confidence, public diplomacy is tasked with actively "explaining China to the world", improving its international communication capabilities, and giving China a stronger voice globally. President Xi Jinping has stressed the importance of building cultural self-confidence, telling Chinese stories, and enhancing Chinese voices on the world stage. On October 25, 2013, at the Central Working Conference on Neighborhood Diplomacy, Xi pointed out the importance of strengthening public diplomacy, people-to-people exchanges and non-governmental diplomacy, particularly with neighboring countries. For the goals of a better life and regional development in neighboring countries, creating the basis for the concept of "a community of shared future for mankind", he highlighted the importance of forming friendships and promoting the "Chinese Dream" replicating the idea of the "American dream".²²³ Xi Jinping took the idea of a "community of shared future for mankind" one step further through initiatives like the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. While China continued to adopt many Western norms, it has also started to develop alternative approaches in areas like conflict mediation and post-conflict peace-building. This concept aligns with Xi's vision of achieving the "Chinese dream" and the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." The idea is that as globalization and multilateralism face challenges,

²²² Gülşen Aydın and Müge Yüce, "China's Hard Power versus Soft Power in Central Asia: An Analysis of the 'One Belt-One Road Initiative' as a Soft Power Instrument", **Caucasus International**, Vol: 8, No: 2, 2018, pp. 71-73.

²²³ Zhao, CMP, pp, 175-176.

China should actively work to revive these trends. With the rising trend of China, it is seen as necessary and suitable for China to take on a leadership position on the global stage.²²⁴

During Xi Jinping's presidency, China has continued to emphasize the role of media in enhancing its soft power. In 2014, Xi stated that China's soft power could be bolstered through global media presence and by improving communication infrastructure. Xinhua, the official news agency, has introduced various editions tailored to international audiences, available online in multiple languages such as French, Arabic, Japanese, and Russian. Additionally, CCTV has launched a French-language version broadcast in West African countries. This strategic media expansion aims to portray China as a dependable nation with a rich cultural heritage, aligning with the government's broader diplomatic goals.²²⁵

At the Central Working Conference on Foreign Affairs in November 2014, Xi declared that China would never give up its interests and legitimate rights or permit its fundamental interests to be compromised, and promoted a "dare-to-fight" spirit. Xi reaffirmed the need to strengthen China's soft power, communicate Chinese stories better, and improve its capacity to share these stories internationally. In order to realize this strategy, in June 2015, PRC and Russia committed to promoting media cooperation to counteract misinterpretations of the Western media. Liu Qibao, Head of the Publicity Department of the CCP Central Committee, underlined the necessity for both countries' media to boost their international communication capabilities during a China-Russia Media Forum. Additionally, Lu Xinning, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of People's Daily, the CCP's official newspaper, suggested the media to present a full national image to the world, pointing out the fact that Western media frequently portray negative international images of China and Russia.²²⁶ In a 2019 speech to the Central Party School, Xi reinforced his message that party cadres should be bold and "dare to fight". Following Xi's speech, Foreign Minister Wang Yi encouraged MFA officials to demonstrate a stronger "fighting spirit". In response, Chinese diplomats

²²⁴ Dai and Luqiu, p. 259.

²²⁵ Aydın and Yüce, p. 66.

²²⁶ Hartig, HCU, p.655.

started using international platforms like X (formerly Twitter) to actively work on reshaping and improving China's image abroad.²²⁷

China has long been criticized for the lack of initiatives regarding environmental problems and climate change. Beijing adopted a stance on climate change under Xi's direction that would enhance China's reputation as a responsible nation, ready to work with others on global challenges. This effort was manifested in the September 2016 G20 summit in Hangzhou, where President Xi and Obama announced they had resolved their disagreements and both countries would join the Paris Agreement on climate change. The meeting marked a change in China's position, which had been noticeable since 2015. Partly due to growing concerns at home about air pollution, Beijing's more cooperative attitude was important in gaining the support of other major polluters like India who worried that stricter environmental rules would hurt their economic growth. China's cooperation under Xi was a big contrast to its criticized behavior at the 2009 Copenhagen climate talks, where it was seen as acting in its own self-interest during Hu's last years in office.²²⁸ Xi also became the first Chinese leader to attend the well-publicized World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in 2017. In his speech, Xi emphasized China's support for the core principles of an open economic order and stated that Beijing was ready to take on the challenges of contributing to the shared prosperity that this system could create. The timing of Xi's speech was fortunate as it was well-received by those concerned about the future of the open international economic order. However, some observers noted that China's own policies still had significant shortcomings, such as weak protection of intellectual property rights, discriminatory treatment of foreign companies in its domestic market and the requirement for technology transfers as a condition for doing business in China.²²⁹

Another significant moment in Chinese public diplomacy was the COVID-19 epidemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most significant global crises in decades. Since its emergence in January 2020, the virus has spread worldwide,

²²⁷ Dai and Luqiu, p. 261.

²²⁸ Goldstein, pp. 181-182.

²²⁹ Goldstein, pp. 183-184.

infecting over 251 million people and causing 5 million deaths.²³⁰ After having a certain level of control of COVID-19 at home, China started a public diplomacy campaign in April 2020 to present itself as a global health leader. As part of this effort, China sent masks, medical teams, and test kits to other countries.²³¹ By March 2021, Beijing had provided millions of free vaccine doses to 69 countries and commercially exported many more to 28 others which made the vaccine diplomacy an attractive tool for public diplomacy and projecting soft power.²³² Chinese vaccines were notable for their accessibility and flexibility. President Xi Jinping referred to them as “public goods”.²³³

Pakistan was the first and largest recipient of China’s vaccine aid, receiving 5 million doses on February 1, 2021, with more shipments following. Of the 13 countries that received the first batch of aid, five were ASEAN members, and four shared borders with China. Between February and March 2021, China donated vaccines to 20 African countries, some of which received their first vaccines from China. Nations like Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Senegal began their vaccination campaigns with Chinese vaccines, often with national leaders receiving the first shots. Many of these countries also placed commercial orders. Another example can be Moldova purchasing 100,000 doses of CoronaVac and receiving 150,000 doses of BBIBP-CorV as a donation. The Philippines, the first to receive commercial shipments from China, also received 1 million donated doses on top of a 26.4 million-dose contract.²³⁴ Spain was also one of the countries that faced severe outbreaks but also it was one of the recipients of Chinese aid. This assistance was intended to have lasting effects. Chinese leader Xi Jinping emphasized to Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez that the two nations should maintain their trade and cooperation even after the pandemic.²³⁵

The grand strategy of “reassurance, reshaping, resistance” and the call for “fighting spirit” surely had significant effects on Chinese public diplomacy in the early

²³⁰ Mao Suzuki and Shiming Yang, “Political Economy of Vaccine Diplomacy: Explaining Varying Strategies of China, India, and Russia’s COVID-19 Vaccine Diplomacy”, **Review of International Political Economy**, Vol: 30, No: 3, 2023, p. 865.

²³¹ Seow Ting Lee, “Vaccine Diplomacy: Nation Branding and China’s COVID-19 Soft Power Play”, **Place Branding and Public Diplomacy**, Vol: 19, 2023, p. 65.

²³² Lee, p. 64.

²³³ Suzuki and Yang, p. 872

²³⁴ Suzuki and Yang, p. 873.

²³⁵ Kobierecka, pp. 284-285.

years of the Xi era. These ideas have shaped how China presented itself to the world and influenced its efforts to gain more global influence. COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges as it has created an unprecedented environment that the state officials had to manage. The fast adoption of internet technologies by the Chinese officials in the recent years have also brought about some further changes. These recent developments that led to a significant change in the tone of Chinese public diplomacy will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.



CHAPTER THREE

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY, WOLF WARRIORS AND SOFT POWER

3.1. NEW TRENDS IN THE LATER XI ERA: DIGITAL DIPLOMACY AND THE EMERGENCE OF WOLF WARRIORS

In the early 2000s, the Chinese government aimed to project a positive image of China as a trustworthy, cooperative, and peace-loving developing country. However, under Xi Jinping, the diplomatic language has shifted from the cautious and bureaucratic, “keeping a low profile” style of the 1990s, and became more aggressive and emotional. This shift has been called “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy (WWD) by mainstream foreign media and academia which refers to the assertive and sometimes confrontational communications and actions of Chinese officials.²³⁶

After Xi’s call for a “fighting spirit” in international discourse, Chinese diplomats began aggressively defending China’s image. They adopted strong language to counter negative narratives and criticism.²³⁷ Following the footsteps of Xi, in October 2019, Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged officials at a foreign ministry gathering to show a stronger “fighting spirit” when facing international challenges and X (formerly Twitter) became one of the main platforms for Chinese diplomats to showcase this assertive stance. WWD on social media can be categorized as a significant part of China’s digital diplomacy²³⁸ and this assertive approach led to Chinese diplomats being labeled as “wolf warriors”.²³⁹

²³⁶ Linjiang Guo and Qian Qin, “Wolf Warrior Spreads Superior: The Narrative and Effectiveness of Chinese Public Diplomacy Behaviours on Twitter”, **Journal of Chinese Political Science**, 2024, p. 6.

²³⁷ Yaoyao Dai and Luwei Rose Luqiu, “Wolf Warriors and Diplomacy in the New Era”, **China Review**, Vol: 22, No: 2, 2022, p. 263.

²³⁸ Ellison Shumba, “An investigation into ‘Wolf Warrior’ diplomacy in Africa via Twitter and Facebook at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic”, **South African Journal of International Affairs**, Vol: 28, No: 3, 2021, p. 473.

²³⁹ Dai and Luqiu, p. 263.

3.1.1. The Definition, Triggers and Early Examples of WWD

The term “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy was coined by the Western media to describe Beijing’s assertive and confrontational diplomatic and media stance. Though, initially Chinese officials dismissed the term “Wolf Warrior”, believing it to be a part of the “China threat theory”, later some diplomats adopted and tried to popularize it as well. The name “Wolf Warrior” is derived from the film *Wolf Warrior II* made in 2017 and it became the first Chinese film to enter the global top 100 box office rankings. The movie tells the story of a former Chinese special forces soldier who intervenes in an African conflict to protect Chinese citizens, symbolizing China’s active global role and international responsibility. The film’s patriotic slogan, “whoever offends the Chinese will be wiped out, no matter how far away”, echoes Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream” and reflects a rise in nationalist sentiment in China.²⁴⁰

According to Cheng, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has undoubtedly transformed China’s global image and made it far more “prominent and assertive”.²⁴¹ Although Chinese diplomats have adopted the assertive approach encouraged by Xi, earning the label “Wolf Warrior” as mentioned before, reactions to the term among Chinese diplomats and media have been mixed. Some see it as a positive label. For instance, the Chinese ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, expressed pride in being called a “Wolf Warrior”. He stated that he was defending China against numerous “mad dogs” attacking the country. He described himself as a soldier protecting China from hostile foreign governments and media. Additionally, he encouraged Chinese scholars and media to join the effort and some scholars in China supported his views.²⁴²

Although there is no official WWD on paper, Chang-Liao claims the assertive behavior of Chinese diplomats comes from the loyalty to Xi Jinping, showing their readiness to risk relationships with other countries to serve him. The more resistance they face, the stronger their loyalty appears at home. In authoritarian systems, leaders

²⁴⁰ Zhao Alexandre Huang, “Wolf Warrior” and China’s Digital Public Diplomacy During the COVID-19 Crisis”, **Place Branding and Public Diplomacy**, Vol: 18, 2022, pp. 37–38.

²⁴¹ Dean Cheng, “Challenging China’s ‘Wolf Warrior’ Diplomats”, **Heritage Foundation Backgrounder**, No. 3504, 2020, pp.1-2.

²⁴² Yusha Zhao, “Chinese Envoy Proud of ‘Wolf Warrior’ Title to Safeguard National Interest, as China Presents Respectable Image,” **Global Times**, 18.06.2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202106/1226499.shtml>, (21.08.2024).

often favor loyal subordinates over capable ones to consolidate power. In China, loyalty has always been key for career progression, but this has intensified under Xi's personalist rule. Xi has centralized control, reducing the influence of the Foreign Ministry and other foreign affairs institutions, aligning them closely with his diplomatic agenda. In 2017, Xi ordered Chinese diplomats to be "absolutely loyal" to the Party, the people, and the country, and to strictly follow political discipline. In a similar manner, just before Yang Jiechi joined the Political Bureau (Politburo) of the CCP Central Committee, he urged diplomats to deeply study Xi's views on diplomacy. Many young Chinese diplomats, including then Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao, have embraced Xi's call for a "fighting spirit" in support of a national renaissance with "fighting spirit".²⁴³

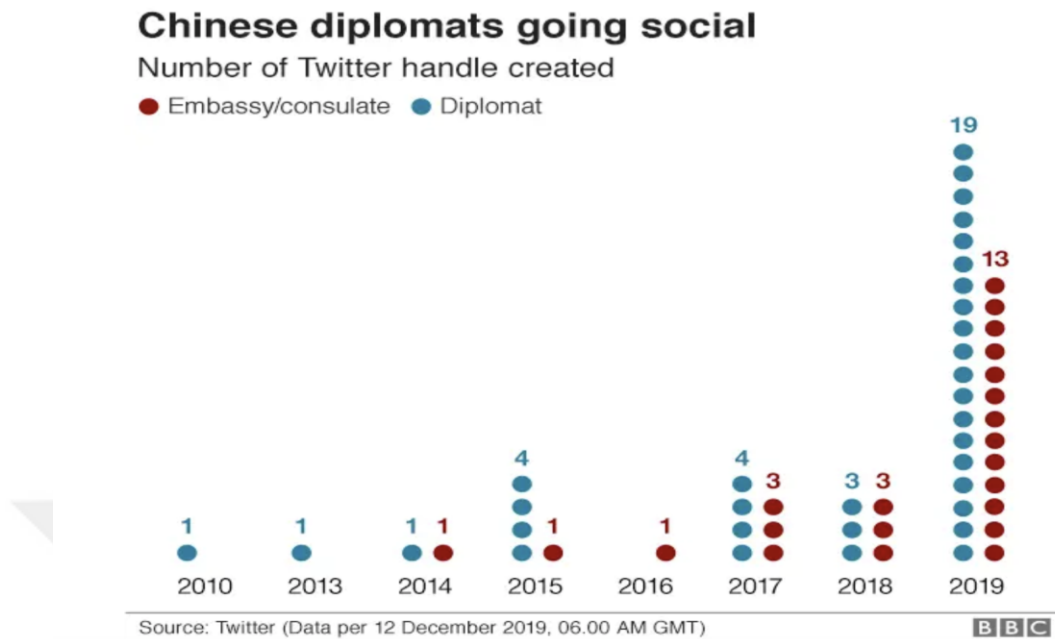
Since late 2019, China's new approach, WWD, has drawn attention from around the world due to its strong and confrontational manner. Through direct participation on digital channels like X, a platform banned in China, this strategy seeks to engage international audiences and shape opinions worldwide.²⁴⁴ Feng claims that in 2019, a new trend began among the Chinese ministries and high-ranking diplomats. They started to join X officially and post tweets with an "undiplomatic tone" using emojis and internet slang like LOL, along with short videos and shareable images. As of December, 2019 the BBC found 55 X accounts managed by Chinese diplomats, consulates and embassies, with 32 of them created in 2019.²⁴⁵ The drastic change in numbers of X handles created between 2010-2019 is shown in the diagram below:

²⁴³ Nien-chung Chang-Liao, "Why Have Chinese Diplomats Become So Aggressive?", **Survival**, Vol: 64, No: 1, 2022, pp. 183-184.

²⁴⁴ Yu-Chin Tseng, "China's Twitter Diplomacy in Germany: Practices, Reactions, and Discrepancies", **Journal of Contemporary China**, Vol: 33, No: 146, 2024, pp. 295-296.

²⁴⁵ Zhaoyin Feng, "China and Twitter: The Year China Got Louder on Social Media", **BBC**, 29.12.2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-50832915>, (21.06.2024).

Figure 2: The Number of X (formerly Twitter) Handles Created Between 2010-2019



Source: Zhaoyin Feng, “China and Twitter: The Year China Got Louder on Social Media”, **BBC**, 29.12.2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-50832915>, (21.06.2024).

Initially, Chinese diplomats had few followers. The first to gain a large audience was Zhao Lijian, a former MFA spokesperson and former diplomat in Pakistan. His success on social media showed the foreign ministry how powerful these platforms could be for engaging with Western elites and the public. With the widespread use of X in recent years, diplomats who might have been unnoticed can now engage with their foreign counterparts. Thus, X has become a key tool for WWD.²⁴⁶

Alden and Chan state that China’s active use of X for public diplomacy has three main reasons, which are all focused on managing public opinion. The first reason is “targeted outreach”. Use of hashtags on X allows China to quickly reach a global audience by linking posts to broader discussions. Thus, users can find its messages even without following Chinese accounts. Second reason is “monitoring public opinion”. X enables China to both share its views and observe international reactions.

²⁴⁶ The National Bureau of Asian Research, “Understanding Chinese ‘Wolf Warrior Diplomacy’”, 22.10.2021, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/understanding-chinese-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>, (23.04.2024).

Events like the Arab Spring and China's censorship of its own social media demonstrate that Chinese policymakers are aware of the influence digital platforms have in shaping public opinion. Third reason is "responding to criticism". Chinese leaders now recognize X's role in countering criticism.²⁴⁷ An example is Zhao Lijian, who used the platform to shift focus from Xinjiang issues to US racial issues.²⁴⁸ He later became the spokesperson for the MFA showing X's value in China's global messaging.²⁴⁹

According to Sullivan and Wang, the main triggers for "Wolf Warrior" communication are usually twofold. The first is when a foreign government, company, journalist, or public figure criticizes China's positions, policies, or actions. The second is when there is interference in China's internal affairs, especially regarding core issues like security, territory, sovereignty and the government's control over its own country.²⁵⁰ Although there is no consensus on the exact date and the starting point of WWD among the scholars, according to Kelter, the first signs of WWD began with escalating tensions in the South China Sea following a 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague that China's broad maritime claims lacked legal foundation. In this context, WWD aimed to show determination to both international and domestic audiences and to state that the PRC was serious about defending its interests. This approach also aligned with the CCP's promotion of a stronger sense of Chinese nationalism which included strong ethnic and cultural elements.²⁵¹ According to Shumba, WWD began to show itself in Africa, before the increase in COVID-19 cases outside China. Chinese diplomats in Africa like Lin Songtian had already begun pushing back against narratives promoted by Western media about the unrest in Hong

²⁴⁷ Alden and Chan, p. 6.

²⁴⁸ Ayaz Gul, "Chinese Diplomat Uses Twitter to Counter Allegations of Xinjiang-Related Rights Abuses", **VOA**, 16.10.2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/chinese-diplomat-twitter-allegations-xinjiang-related-rights-abuses/4616109.html>, (09.09.2024).

²⁴⁹ Alden and Chan, p. 6.

²⁵⁰ Jonathan Sullivan and Weixiang Wang, "China's "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy": The Interaction of Formal Diplomacy and Cyber- Nationalism", **Journal of Current Chinese Affairs**, Vol: 52, No: 1, 2023, p. 71.

²⁵¹ Frederik Kelter, "China Looks for the Diplomatic 'Sweet Spot ' Between Panda and Wolf", **Aljazeera**, 26.12.2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/26/china-looks-for-the-diplomatic-sweet-spot-between-panda-and-wolf>, (05.04.2024).

Kong²⁵². On December 14, 2019, on X Songtian accused the US and other Western countries of causing the disturbances in Hong Kong and claimed that they had stirred up the situation. Songtian even escalated the matter further by describing the unrest as “brutal interventions by the US”.²⁵³ Similar to Songtian case, diplomats from China’s embassies in Kenya, Uganda, and Chad were also actively posting about issues like Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Chinese diplomats started to embrace a more assertive approach in their diplomacy to challenge Western narratives with strong responses. Despite the fact that platforms like X are inaccessible within China without a Virtual Private Network (VPN), Chinese diplomats continue to use them to state their viewpoints. Even though Songtian was based in South Africa, many of his X posts focused on the US. Therefore, Shumba claims WWD aims to spread China’s narrative globally, supporting its foreign policy goals and position in challenging the US. Although, Chinese diplomats in Africa directed their tweets mainly toward African audiences, they often responded to global narratives and broader audiences as well.²⁵⁴ Another pre-COVID-19 example can be the case in 2019 when Lu Shaye, then the Chinese ambassador to Canada, accused the Canadian government of “white supremacy” after detaining of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou. Wanzhou was charged with violating US sanctions against Iran.²⁵⁵ On December 5, 2019, another high profile Chinese ambassador, Cui Tiankai in Washington, tried to discredit global media coverage of events of the anti-government protests in Hong Kong and Uyghur camps in Xinjiang. In a series of five tweets on X, Cui stated that “rumormongers” had spread “fake news” that “seriously distorted” the situations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.²⁵⁶

Between 2019 and early 2020, China’s political reputation took a hit in US and the West due to the fact that some significant events underscored China’s actions

²⁵² In February 2019, Hong Kong authorities suggested legal changes that would allow criminal suspects to be sent to mainland China. It is believed that due process rights are often violated under Chinese administration. This led to large, mostly peaceful protests starting in June. While the authorities withdrew the proposal, they ignored other demands, such as an investigation into police use of excessive force, and instead introduced new restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly. Source: Human Rights Watch, “Hong Kong Protests”, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/blog-feed/hong-kong-protests>, (02.07.2024).

²⁵³ Shumba, p. 475.

²⁵⁴ Shumba, pp. 475-476.

²⁵⁵ Chang-Liao, p. 181.

²⁵⁶ Feng.

contradicting the western values, including heightened pressure on democratic Taiwan, attempts to isolate it internationally, and efforts to sway Taiwan's democratic elections through social media manipulation. Additionally, Beijing's firm stance on the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, reminiscent of Tiananmen Square crisis, raised concerns. The mass detention of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and the perceived mishandling of the coronavirus outbreak have hurt China's image. These issues raised concerns about China's democracy, human rights, and transparency. The authoritarian government and alleged pressure on international organizations like the WHO have added to these worries.²⁵⁷ All these negative criticisms of China contributed to escalation of the defensive, aggressive tone of the "Wolf Warrior" diplomats. Later, during the peak of COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese diplomats felt both attacked and proud of their country's handling of the crisis. This mix of confidence and insecurity led to the latest form of what we now call WWD.²⁵⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound global impact which affected nearly every aspect of life. Undoubtedly, diplomacy is one of these aspects that experienced substantial changes. The following section will examine the impact of COVID-19 on WWD.

3.1.2. COVID-19 and the Crystallization of WWD

The COVID-19 crisis, was the turning point that heightened the assertive stance of Chinese diplomats to a new level. Beijing's representatives in Sweden, Venezuela and France have all released statements and papers that carry a tone of imperial authority.²⁵⁹ Likewise, Liu agrees China's WWD started to grow quickly in April 2020.²⁶⁰ According to Financial Times, the year 2020 was marked by the term "wolf fighter" as Chinese diplomats defended themselves against accusations from the West.²⁶¹ Yang states the criticism related to the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan and

²⁵⁷ deLisle, p. 14.

²⁵⁸ The National Bureau of Asian Research, "Understanding Chinese 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy'", 22.10.2021, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/understanding-chinese-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>, (23.04.2024).

²⁵⁹ Cheng, p.5.

²⁶⁰ Kerry Liu, "China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy (Narrative): Development, Causes, and Political Effects", *Diplomatica*, 2022, p. 3.

²⁶¹ "Year in a Word: Wolf Warrior", *Financial Times*, 28.11.2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/89ddfb0d-422c-463d-bfe5-656251af0384?63bac0e6-3d28-36b1-7417-423982f6079>, (05.09.2024).

also the support from US officials for unverified theories about the origin of the virus help explain the rise of WWD in spring 2020.²⁶² According to Wei and Davis, China's WWD has attracted the highest global attention on March 19, 2021, during the US-China summit in Alaska, when Yang Jiechi, China's top diplomat, delivered a 16-minute speech addressing America's racial problems and shortcomings in its democracy.²⁶³ During his lecture, Yang made a statement that would stay in the Chinese media and online discussions for weeks: "Chinese people won't swallow this crap". The event was portrayed by The Washington Post and other US media outlets as a clear example of WWD.²⁶⁴ A few days later, on March 23, 2021, China imposed sanctions on 10 EU citizens and 4 EU entities in response to the EU's sanctions on Chinese officials for alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang province.²⁶⁵

When a different way of communication is needed, Chinese communicators often use several rhetorical strategies to defend China's position and avoid criticism. These include refuting claims, redirecting the conversation, and reframing issues. They may use sarcasm or irony to dismiss opposing views, support their arguments with evidence, often from Chinese sources which may not always be accurate, refer to public support, or point out logical errors and contradictions in others' statements. While these techniques are not unique to China and are common in digital communication, what is unusual is China's willingness to use them openly and directly against foreign governments. For example, when the US criticized China's human rights record in Hong Kong, Hua Chunying, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, responded publicly in May 2020 with a tweet quoting the final words of George Floyd: "I can't breathe".²⁶⁶

The emergence of coronavirus in China and its global spread sparked a heated debate on both traditional and social media. As part of its digital diplomacy strategy, top Chinese diplomats were encouraged to use X to influence views on COVID-19's

²⁶² Dali Yang, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Estrangement of US-China Relations", **Asian Perspective**, Vol: 45, No: 10, 2021, p. 7.

²⁶³ Lingling Wei and Bob Davis, "China's Message to America: We're an Equal Now", **Wall Street Journal**, 12.04.2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-china-policy-biden-xi-11617896117>, (17.09.2024).

²⁶⁴ Sullivan and Wang, p. 69.

²⁶⁵ Reuters, "China Hits back at EU with Sanctions on 10 People, Four Entities over Xinjiang", **Reuters**, 22.03.2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-china-sanctions-ministry-idUSKBN2BE1WB/>, (15.09.2024).

²⁶⁶ Sullivan and Wang, p. 73.

origins. X became a key “crisis messaging tool” for quickly sending out responses to a global audience.²⁶⁷ This assertive campaign, namely WWD, aimed to deflect blame from Beijing and point out the mistakes of other governments, making China appear as a model and ideal partner. The focus was on promoting positive stories about the CCP and minimizing negative information.²⁶⁸

On February 11, 2020, the WHO recommended that media use the terms “COVID-19” or “coronavirus” when referring to the virus. However, in March, American Republican officials like Paul Gosar and Mike Pompeo, along with conservative media outlets, began using language that linked the virus to China. On March 8, there was a 650% increase in X retweets using terms like “Chinese virus”. By March 9, the usage of these phrases in news articles increased by 800%. Throughout the month, conservative social media and news outlets continued to use phrases like “China virus” and “Wuhan virus” extensively.²⁶⁹ US President of the time, Donald Trump also blamed China for the virus on X repeatedly calling it the “Chinese virus”. The president used the term “Chinese virus” more than 20 times between March 16 and March 30, 2020.²⁷⁰

In response to harsh criticism and stigmatization from the US and other critics, Chinese diplomats launched an offensive on social media platforms to promote their own narrative of the unfolding of COVID-19 pandemic. Former Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian, one of China’s most outspoken wolf warrior diplomats, responded with a series of tweets on 12 March, 2020, insinuating the possibility of the US military bringing the COVID-19 virus to Wuhan²⁷¹:

²⁶⁷ Alden and Chan, p. 10.

²⁶⁸ Laura Rosenberger, “China’s Coronavirus Information Offensive Beijing Is Using New Methods to Spin the Pandemic to Its Advantage”, **Foreign Affairs**, 22.04.2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-coronavirus-information-offensive?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=fatoday&utm_campaign=When%2525252520the%2525252520System%2525252520Fails&utm_content=20200615&utm_term=FA%2525252520Today%2525252520-%2525252520112017, (06.09.2024).

²⁶⁹ Sean Darling-Hammond, Eli K Michaels, Amani M Allen, David H Chae, Marilyn D Thomas, Thu T Nguyen, Mahasin M Mujahid, Rucker C Johnson, “After “The China Virus” Went Viral: Racially Charged Coronavirus Coverage and Trends in Bias Against Asian Americans”, **Health Education and Behaviour**, Vol: 6, 2020, p. 870.

²⁷⁰ Jérôme Viala-Gaudefroy and Dana Lindaman, “Donald Trump’s ‘Chinese Virus’: the Politics of Naming”, **The Conversation**, 21.04.2020, <https://theconversation.com/donald-trumps-chinese-virus-the-politics-of-naming-136796>, (12.04.2024).

²⁷¹ Kelter.

Figure 3: Zhao Lijian’s Tweet No. 1



Source: Zhao Lijian’s Official X Account, <https://x.com/zlj517/status/1238111898828066823>, (27.07.2024).

Zhao has taken advantage of X’s global platform to promote the conspiracy theory that the US is responsible for COVID-19. His tweet implying the US military might have intentionally spread the disease, sparked a significant global response and drew widespread media attention.²⁷² Similarly, the head of the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s Information Department, Hua Chunying responded to criticisms by posting a tweet on X. He stated that calling it the “Chinese coronavirus” was “absolutely wrong and inappropriate”.²⁷³ Another example WWD is when the Chinese embassy in Caracas tweeted “put on a face mask and shut up” after Venezuelan officials referred to COVID-19 as the “Wuhan virus”.²⁷⁴ The Swedish government called in Gui Chongyou, the Chinese ambassador to Sweden at the time, to explain his comment he

²⁷² Cheng, p.5.

²⁷³ Ben Westcott and Steven Jiang, “Chinese Diplomat Promotes Conspiracy Theory that US Military Brought Coronavirus to Wuhan”, **CNN**, 13.03.2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/13/asia/china-coronavirus-us-lijian-zhao-intl-hnk/index.html>, (21.09.2024), (CPD).

²⁷⁴ Cheng, p.5.

made on April 25, 2020, where he compared Swedish media coverage of China to a lightweight boxer that “provokes a feud” with a heavyweight.²⁷⁵

In November, 2020 Lijian Zhao posted a fake image showing an Australian soldier with a bloody knife next to a child holding a lamb. The image seemed to refer to past allegations that Australian soldiers killed two 14-year-old Afghan boys with knives. Zhao’s tweet said, “Shocked by the murder of Afghan civilians and prisoners by Australian soldiers. We strongly condemn such acts and call for holding them accountable”. Australia asked X to remove the post, calling it “disinformation”. Prime Minister Scott Morrison described the post as inappropriate, offensive and very disrespectful. He further stated that the Chinese government ought to be ashamed of the post, as it damages their reputation on the global stage. The tweet had gone too far he added. But China remained unapologetic. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying countered by saying that Australia should be the one feeling ashamed, not China. The situation further increased political tensions between the two nations.²⁷⁶

Another one of Zhao’s provocative comments on X was when he tweeted “Racism against ethnic minorities in the US is a chronic disease of American society” on June 1, 2020, aiming to deflect the criticism China was receiving during the pandemic. Despite the strong disapproval from Western diplomats, Zhao’s aggressive rhetoric attracted a large audience on social media platform X, where he gained over 1.9 million followers.²⁷⁷ In a series of tweets, Zhao claimed the US had no right to criticize China on human rights issues given its own problems with gun violence, income inequality and racism. He asserted there were areas in Washington DC where “the white people” never go. He continued to use a harsh tone with controversial word choices such as blaming the US for “massacring” 174,000 people in Afghanistan accompanied with graphic images:

²⁷⁵ Zhuang Pinghui, “China’s Ambassador to Sweden Summoned After He Hit Out at ‘Smears’ in Latest Outburst Against Beijing Critics,” **South China Morning Post**, 18.01.2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3046689/chinas-ambassador-sweden-hits-out-smears-latest-outburst>, (12.10.2024).

²⁷⁶ BBC, “Australia Demands China Apologise for Posting ‘Repugnant’ Fake Image”, 30.11.2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-55126569>, (16.10.2024).

²⁷⁷ Kelter.

Figure 4: Zhao Lijian's Tweet No. 2



Source: Zhao Lijian's Official X Account, <https://x.com/zlj517/status/1559530276077707264>, (27.07.2024).

Being one of the most outspoken wolf warriors, Zhao tweeted about NATO as well, ironically criticizing NATO-led military campaigns:

Figure 5: Zhao Lijian’s Tweet No. 3



Source: Zhao Lijian’s Official X Account, <https://x.com/zlj517/status/1542774878184427520>, (10.10.2024).

In a similar manner, Chinese diplomats worldwide have started to adopt aggressive tactics similar to Zhao’s on X. Zhao’s superior, Hua Chunying, the Director General of the Foreign Ministry’s Department of Information, also frequently reacted strongly to critics on her X account, which she started in October 2019. Then China’s ambassador to the UK, Liu Xiaoming, has been active as a “Wolf Warrior”, too. He frequently used X to counter critics of Beijing in Europe. Although he characterized China’s foreign policy as an “independent foreign policy of peace”, he also

acknowledged the necessity of assertiveness at times. Liu commented about the critical need of being a “Wolf Warrior” in a post on his X account²⁷⁸:

Figure 6: Liu Xiaoming’s Tweet



Source: Liu Xiaoming’s Official X Account, <https://x.com/AmbLiuXiaoMing/status/1266441617193553926>, (28.07.2024).

In Botswana, the Chinese Embassy used a Facebook post to criticize the US. The post stated that although the US had promised over \$100 million in COVID-19 aid, it had not donated even \$1 million.²⁷⁹ China’s Ambassador to France, Lu Shaye is another “Wolf Warrior” diplomat and also known for his assertive diplomatic style. During the pandemic, Lu praised China’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic while

²⁷⁸ Ben Westcott and Steven Jiang, “China is Embracing a New Brand of Foreign Policy. Here’s What Wolf Warrior Diplomacy Means”, *CNN*, 29.05.2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/28/asia/china-wolf-warrior-diplomacy-intl-hnk/index.html>, (09.05.2024), (CIE).

²⁷⁹ Shumba, p. 478.

criticizing Western approaches to combating the virus. He also repeatedly criticized French media, scholars, and lawmakers for their supportive stance towards Taiwan.²⁸⁰

Lately, China's approach to public diplomacy has evolved as digital platforms have become a central tool in its strategy. China has recognized the power of digital media to extend its influence beyond traditional channels. Through these platforms, it has developed new ways to communicate its values and perspectives to wide array of audiences. While focusing on the global audience which is the subject of foreign policy, domestic dimensions of WWD must not be disregarded. WWD also serves as a laboratory to understand the intertwined nature of domestic and foreign policies. The domestic aspects of China's digital diplomacy and WWD will be discussed in the next section.

3.1.3. The Domestic Dimension of WWD

Recently, social media has become a key tool for public diplomacy, with over 200 Ministries of Foreign Affairs and foreign ministers active on X. The focus of public diplomacy has also changed significantly. Now, it's not only aimed at influencing foreign audiences but also includes reaching the domestic public²⁸¹ and in Chinese case it is no different.

With Western platforms like X, Google, Facebook, and WhatsApp blocked in China, the country relies on homegrown alternatives for its domestic public diplomacy, including such platforms as Sina Weibo, similar to X; Baidu, China's version of Google; and WeChat, which is like WhatsApp.²⁸² In China's digital diplomacy, state-owned media also have a significant role in shaping political messages and sharing them on social media. They package and send out diplomatic messages to guide the digital public's discussions, reflecting a top-down approach to nationalism. Even though Western social media platforms are restricted in China, state-owned media

²⁸⁰ Duan Xiaolin and Liu Yitong, "The Rise and Fall of China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy", **The Diplomat**, 22.09.2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/the-rise-and-fall-of-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>, (17.05.2024).

²⁸¹ Parama Sinha Palit, "Public Diplomacy Through Social Media: the Chinese Way", **China Research Center**, Vol: 23, No: 1, 2024, <https://www.chinacenter.net/2024/china-currents/23-1/public-diplomacy-through-social-media-the-chinese-way/>, (28.09.2024).

²⁸² Palit.

bring the assertive statements of Chinese diplomats from X to Weibo to reach the Chinese audience and encourage nationalist feelings. They also post about diplomatic events, like MFA press conferences and US-China meetings, such as the one in Anchorage, Alaska, on Weibo to show the “fighting spirit” of Chinese diplomats. In this way, messages on platforms like X and Weibo are directed by state-run media.²⁸³

Although WWD has faced widespread criticism abroad, it has been well-received by audiences within China.²⁸⁴ A nationalist discourse is used to legitimize the state, which is a common practice in many authoritarian regimes. President Xi Jinping’s “China dream” of “national rejuvenation” and glory has helped him gain more power, but it has also increased nationalism among the public who demand to see real results. These nationalists, consisting of citizens who strongly support the idea of China’s resurgence, started to use the same nationalistic language used by the government to pressure the CCP to take action.²⁸⁵ Some scholars believe that the latest “Wolf Warrior” approach of the Chinese officials is driven by these nationalist sentiments. Zhu states that WWD is part of the Chinese government’s effort to “tell the China story” and reflect President Xi Jinping’s “fighting spirit”, all of which are driven by “soaring nationalism”.²⁸⁶ Chang-Liao states that Chinese diplomats might be taking a tougher stance with foreign counterparts due to concerns at home, especially with rising nationalism in China. They may fear that showing moderation could be seen by the public as a sign of weakness or cooperation, and this could risk their political standing. In fact, China’s diplomatic officials have faced criticism at home for being “too conservative” or “timid” on global issues and not strong enough in asserting China’s sovereignty.²⁸⁷ Similarly, Huang believes China’s foreign policy cannot be separated from its domestic goals, with a strong focus on showing loyalty to Xi Jinping and supporting his agenda. At its core, Xi’s foreign policy aims to strengthen citizens’ confidence in the state by showcasing national power. She even

²⁸³ Keyu Alexander Chen, “Digital Nationalism: How do the Chinese Diplomats and Digital Public View “Wolf Warrior” Diplomacy?”, **Global Media and China**, Vol: 8, No: 2, 2023, p. 140.

²⁸⁴ Dai and Luqiu, p. 254.

²⁸⁵ Peter Gries and Yi Wang, “Proscribing the “Spiritually Japanese”: Nationalist Indignation, Authoritarian Responsiveness and Regime Legitimation in China Today”, **The China Quarterly**, Vol: 245, 2020, p. 6.

²⁸⁶ Zhiqun Zhu, “Interpreting China’s Wolf Warrior Diplomacy: What explains the sharper tone to China’s overseas conduct recently?” **The Diplomat**, 15.05.2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/interpreting-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>, (04.09.2024).

²⁸⁷ Chang-Liao, p. 181.

further claims that China's foreign policy primarily targets a domestic audience rather than an international one. Xi's diplomatic approach reflects the idea of the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", a concept that goes hand in hand with domestic patriotic sentiment.²⁸⁸ Sullivan and Wang also agree that there is a mutual influence between "Wolf Warrior" diplomats and popular nationalism, which generates bottom-up incentives to adopt this approach alongside the top-down pressures to accurately represent China's "confident rise".²⁸⁹ By abandoning traditional diplomatic politeness, ambiguity, and nuance, "Wolf Warrior" communication serves as a clear signal to both foreign counterparts and nationalist groups within China. By echoing the harsh tone of nationalism, it legitimizes, encourages, and reassures the part of the nationalist public that wants the government to take a tougher stance in international relations.²⁹⁰ Chang-Liao defines nationalism as "double-edged sword" as it satisfies domestic audiences but restricts diplomatic maneuverability.²⁹¹ Palit also agrees that assertive nationalism restricts Beijing's ability to make compromises. The desire of Chinese diplomats to show their loyalty to Xi may harm China's relationships with other countries in the long run as China's aggressive diplomatic approach worries an increasing number of foreign leaders.²⁹²

China's leadership is aware of the information and communication revolution and therefore, has put the public at the heart of diplomatic efforts. Online platforms have made both global and local audiences active participants in diplomacy and Beijing has tried to adopt social media for better communication and outreach. However, because of China's political system, these efforts to improve its global image are often viewed as propaganda. This assertive approach, using new tools and technology, suggests a mix of propaganda and censorship in order to control negative opinions about China. Fake accounts, false stories, and the rise of "Wolf Warriors" have complicated the online media environment which has caused companies like X to increase their monitoring of Chinese media. China is largely viewed as a

²⁸⁸ Kathy Huang, "China Is Locked Into Xi Jinping's Aggressive Diplomacy: "Xiplomacy" is a Political Inevitability", **Foreign Policy**, 02.12.2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/02/china-xi-jinping-aggressive-diplomacy/>, (23.08.2024).

²⁸⁹ Sullivan and Wang, p. 69.

²⁹⁰ Sullivan and Wang, p. 72.

²⁹¹ Chang-Liao, p. 182.

²⁹² Chang-Liao, p. 185.

“surveillance state” working to strengthen its influence both locally and globally by using social media tools to shape public opinion at home and abroad.²⁹³ Sullivan and Wang believe that China’s assertive stance shares similarities with political figures like Putin, Trump and Modi who also create cynicism, uncertainty, and confusion due to their communication strategies. At times some aspects of “Wolf Warrior” communication is even regarded as direct propaganda and misinformation such as Zhao’s tweet claiming that COVID-19 originated in a US military laboratory.²⁹⁴

However, it should be noted that due to the nature of social media, it is not completely possible to have total control over the online circulation of information by the CCP. During the first chaotic months of the COVID-19 pandemic, China’s initial attempts to hide information about the coronavirus outbreak sparked considerable public anger, and Chinese internet users rushed to save the accounts that were sharing factual information before Beijing’s censors could remove them. Chinese public pushed back for months against the government’s efforts to control the story around the virus. The government sent many journalists to the worst-affected areas to highlight the work of those fighting the outbreak. However, three Chinese citizen journalists went missing after sharing videos on YouTube and X that showed a more critical view of the situation in Wuhan which caused further skepticism in the Chinese government. Even state media showed anger over how the authorities handled the virus at the start of the pandemic, which revealed how weak the party’s control over information had become.²⁹⁵ With foreign criticisms on one side, this domestic frustration has heightened the need to appear strong and confident in the eyes of the Chinese people. Therefore, when many Chinese people were upset by government cover-ups and the punishment of whistle-blowers in the early days of the pandemic, the Party may have deliberately tried to focus people’s anger on outside targets.²⁹⁶ Chinese officials’ efforts to highlight the political disorder and poor handling of COVID-19 in Western countries might be thus interpreted as an attempt to build

²⁹³ Palit.

²⁹⁴ Sullivan and Wang, p. 72.

²⁹⁵ Jane Li, “Martian Language, Emoji, and Braille: How China is Rallying to Save a Coronavirus Story Online”, **Quartz**, 11.03.2020, , <https://qz.com/1816219/chinese-internet-rallied-to-save-a-censored-coronavirus-story>, (05.10.2024).

²⁹⁶ Yun Jiang, “The Rise and Fall of the Wolf Warriors”, **Crisis**, (Ed. Jane Golley, Linda Jaivin and Sharon Strange), ANU Press, 2021, p. 37.

foreign as well as domestic confidence in China's development, political system, principles and culture. Zhao Lijian, for instance, criticized the United States and blamed the country for its high number of COVID-19 cases/fatalities. Zhao also took this opportunity to redirect criticism back at the US:

Figure 7: Zhao Lijian's Tweet No. 4



Source: Zhao Lijian's Official X Account, <https://x.com/zlj517/status/1381962444684238854>, (09.10.2024).

However, overemphasizing nationalism in such a tragic event that impacted the international community as a whole, had its risks. After China managed to control the pandemic domestically while it continued to spread abroad, Chinese elites and media exhibited a sense of triumph, feeling that China's strict control measures had proven effective compared to the West's more flexible approach. This led to

propaganda campaigns highlighting China's role in the global fight against COVID-19, which ultimately backfired diplomatically, as it appeared Beijing was using the struggles of Western peoples to enhance its own image.²⁹⁷

As Nye states, it is important to remember that the same words and images that work well for a domestic audience can have a negative impact on a foreign one.²⁹⁸ Nye's words explain the backlash China has been receiving in the past few years very well. Adopted with domestic goals in mind, the aggressive diplomacy style has hurt China's global image and soft power internationally. Although WWD is driven by nationalist sentiment, efforts to build soft power are hindered by negative reactions from other countries. This approach risks alienating potential allies and negatively impacts the prospects for global cooperation and stability.²⁹⁹ The following section will discuss the negative effects of assertive aggressiveness on China's global image.

3.2. THE IMPACT OF ASSERTIVE AGGRESSIVENESS ON CHINESE SOFT POWER

Lately, China's assertive WWD, has been facing backlash globally. As Chinese diplomats have taken a more combative stance in defending China's policies and shown less tolerance for foreign criticism, Chang-Liao states that, China's international popularity has declined to its lowest point since the 1989 Tiananmen Square crisis,³⁰⁰ based on a report shared by the Chinese Ministry of State Security with top Beijing leaders including President Xi Jinping in April 2020.³⁰¹ China's international image is negatively affected by WWD as it highlights a hostile and aggressive side of China that digital public diplomacy is meant to soften. This approach also gives foreign countries reasons to implement anti-China policies. Chen also argues that the assertive rhetoric employed by China has not improved China's

²⁹⁷ Chang-Liao, pp. 181-182.

²⁹⁸ Joseph S. Nye, **Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics**, N.Y.: Public Affairs, New York, 2004, MSW, p. 112.

²⁹⁹ Simon Namwandi Indongo, "The Emergence of "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy": A New and Assertive Brand of Chinese Diplomacy", **International Relations and Diplomacy**, Vol: 11, No: 3, 2023, p. 137.

³⁰⁰ Chang-Liao, p. 185.

³⁰¹ Reuters, 'Exclusive: Internal Chinese Report Warns Beijing Faces Tiananmen-like Global Backlash over Virus', **Reuters**, 04.05.2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-sentiment-ex-idUSKBN22G19C>, (10.11.2024).

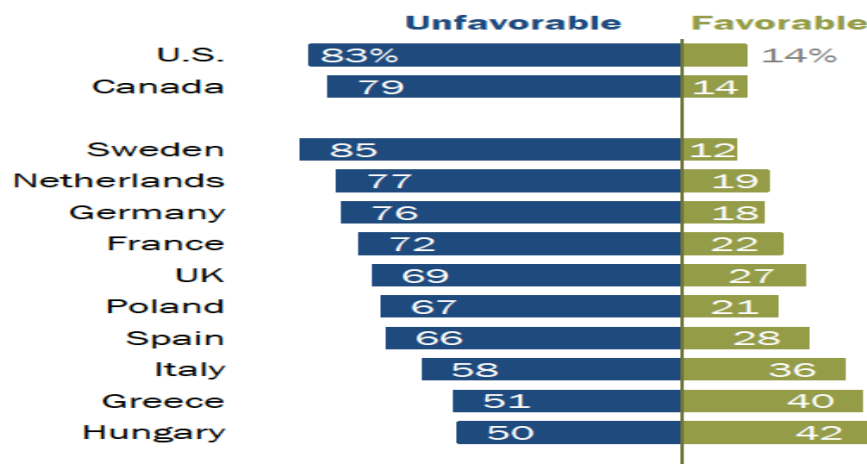
national image, and negative views of China have significantly increased to record levels in several countries. Global opinion polls, including the latest survey by the Pew Research Center, also reveal the same result that negative opinions of China are at an all-time high worldwide.³⁰²

The analysis released in 2023 by the Pew Research Center examines public opinion of China and President Xi Jinping across 24 countries in North America, Europe, the Middle East, the Asia-Pacific, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. The report looks at views on China's global role, including its economic influence and perceptions of its soft power. According to the report, across 24 countries surveyed, attitudes toward China are mostly negative. About two-thirds, on average, hold an unfavorable view of China, with only 28% having a positive view. In North America and Europe, half or more in each country see China unfavorably. Especially Sweden, the US, Canada, the Netherlands, and Germany have high negative ratings.³⁰³

Figure 8: Global Perceptions of China 2023 Part 1

China seen unfavorably in North America, Europe, and Asia but more favorably in Africa and Latin America

% who have a(n) ___ opinion of China



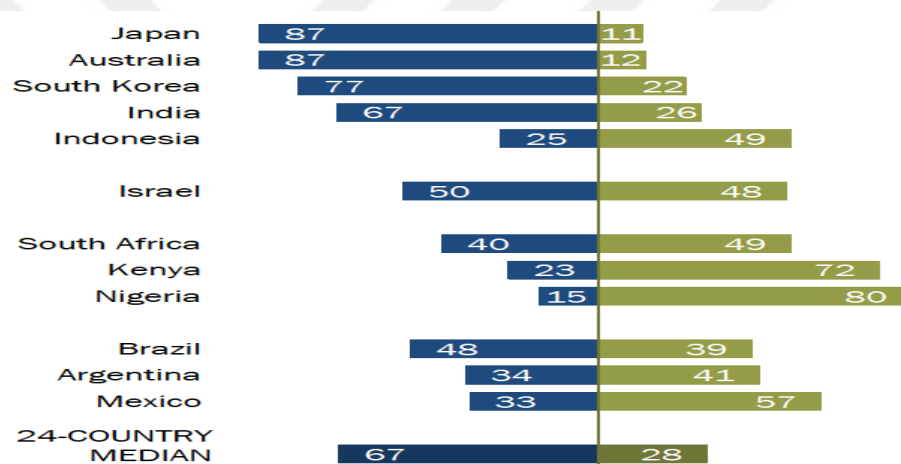
Source: Silver, Huang and Clancy.

³⁰² Huang, Katty.

³⁰³ Laura Silver, Christine Huang and Laura Clancy, "Report: China's Approach to Foreign Policy Gets Largely Negative Reviews", **Pew Research Center**, 27.07.2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/27/views-of-china/>, (04.09.2024).

In the Asia-Pacific region, opinions vary widely. Japan and Australia have the highest unfavorable ratings at 87% each whereas only a quarter of Indonesians view China negatively. In India, two-thirds have a negative view, with half holding very unfavorable opinions which is the largest share across all countries surveyed. In Latin America, opinions are more mixed. While a slight majority of Mexicans view China positively, a plurality of Brazilians have negative views and in Argentina opinions are divided. Sub-Saharan Africa shows some of the most favorable opinions of China. Nigeria and Kenya have high positive ratings (80% and 72%, respectively) and a plurality of South Africans also view China favorably.³⁰⁴

Figure 9: Global Perceptions of China 2023 Part 2



Note: Those who did not answer not shown.
Source: Spring 2023 Global Attitudes Survey. Q3b.
"China's Approach to Foreign Policy Gets Largely Negative Reviews
in 24-Country Survey"
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Silver, Huang and Clancy.

In order to better understand the impact of the recent diplomatic strategy of China, it is necessary to examine the global opinion survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2019, right before the crystallization of WWD and COVID-19 pandemic, and compare the results with those of 2023 survey. According to the 2019 data, global opinions about China were divided, with 40% having a favorable view and 41% an unfavorable view across 34 countries. The most positive opinions were

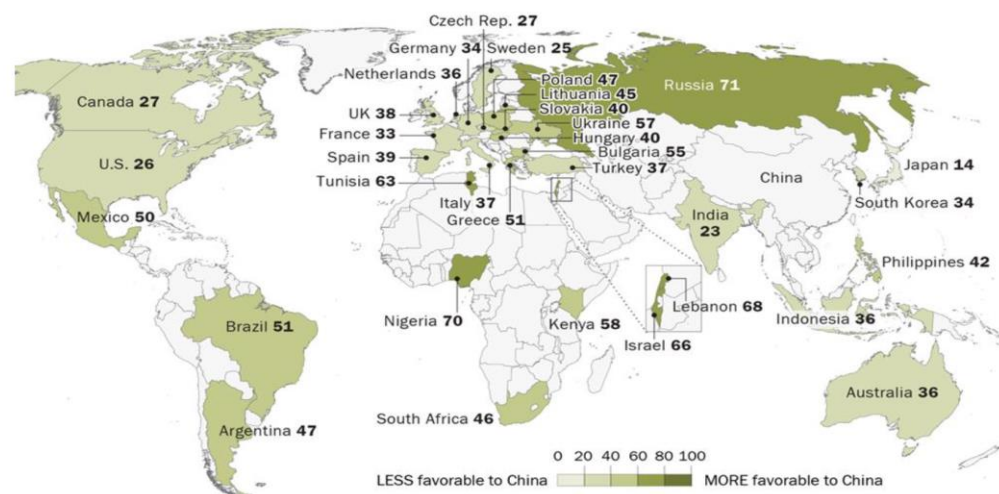
³⁰⁴ Silver, Huang and Clancy.

seen in Russia (71% favorable), Nigeria (70%) and Lebanon (68%), showing strong support in some regions. On the other hand, the most negative views came from Japan (86% unfavorable), Sweden (75%), Canada (73%), and the United States (74%), showing doubt and criticism in Western countries. In Europe, countries like Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands had some of the highest unfavorable views. In the Asia-Pacific region, Japan stood out as the most negative. In contrast, Sub-Saharan Africa showed strong support for China, especially in Nigeria and Kenya, while in Latin America, opinions were mixed, with countries like Mexico and Brazil evenly split.³⁰⁵ The findings of the survey are summarized in the table below:

Figure 10: Global Perceptions of China 2019

Mixed views of China around the globe

% who have a favorable view of China



Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Q8b.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, “China’s Economic Growth Mostly Welcomed In Emerging Markets, but Neighbors Wary of its Influence”, **Pew Research Center**, 05.12.2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/12/05/attitudes-toward-china-2019/>, (10.01.2025).

³⁰⁵ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, “China’s Economic Growth Mostly Welcomed In Emerging Markets, but Neighbors Wary of its Influence”, **Pew Research Center**, 05.12.2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/12/05/attitudes-toward-china-2019/>, (10.01.2025).

The comparison of the data sets from 2019 and 2023 clearly shows that in recent years, global perceptions of China have become more negative. The surveys reveal that from 2019 to 2023, favorable opinions regarding China dropped sharply by 12 points while unfavorable views increased by 25 points. Countries, such as Japan, Australia, the US, Canada and many in Europe, have the most negative views of China and the negative sentiment grew even higher in these regions. However, Sub-Saharan Africa remains a strong supporter. Especially countries like Nigeria and Kenya show growing positive opinions. Latin America and parts of Asia-Pacific show mixed views which demonstrates regional variations in the perception of China's influence.

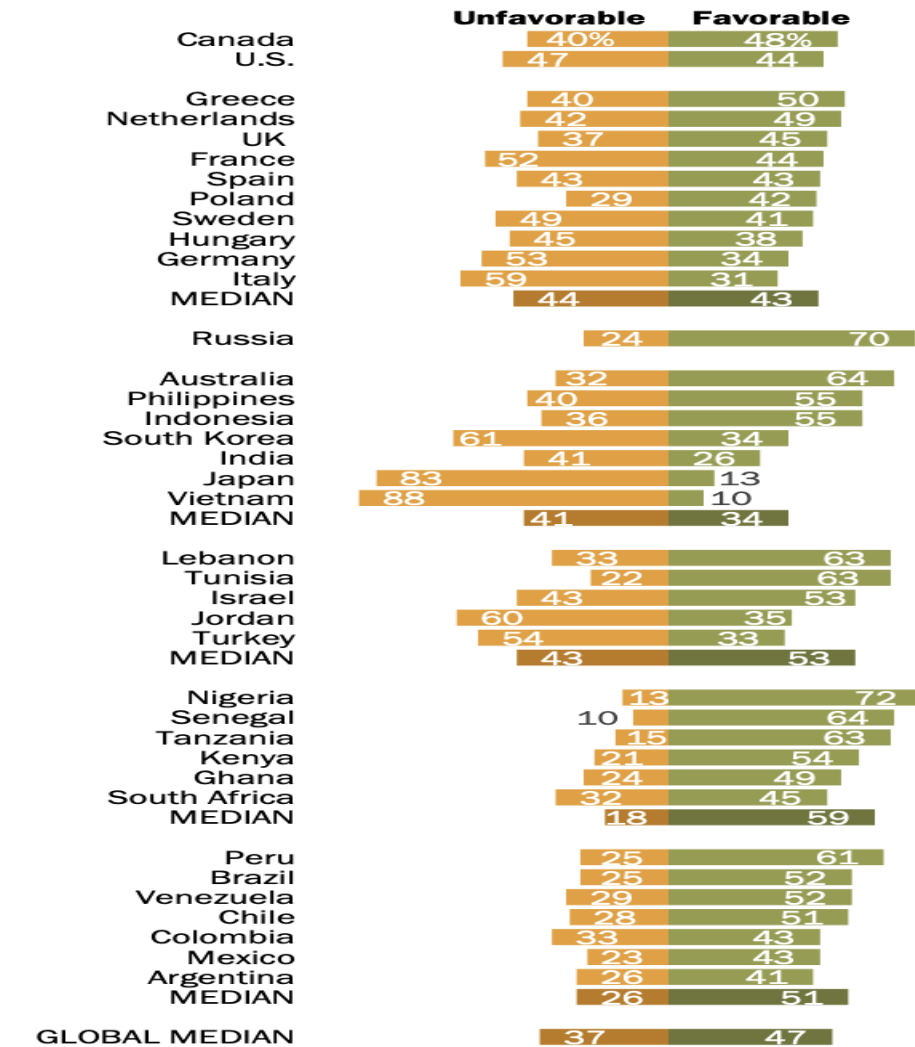
Additionally, Pew Research Center also conducted a global opinion survey in 2017 which occurred before the first appearance of WWD. In 2017, global sentiment was relatively positive, with 47% expressing favorable opinions and 37% unfavorable. Across 38 surveyed countries the Sub-Saharan Africa holds the most favorable views. Countries like Nigeria, Senegal, and Tanzania show more than a four-to-one ratio of positive to negative opinions. Russians also tend to view China positively, with 70% expressing favorable opinions, which places Russia second in positive sentiment after Nigeria (72%). In Latin America, Peru has the highest favorable sentiment (61% favorable). With about half of the populations in Brazil, Venezuela, and Chile also view China positively. In North America, Canadian opinions are more favorable (48% positive vs. 40% negative), while American views are more divided (47% unfavorable vs. 44% favorable). In Europe Germany (53% unfavorable), Netherlands (42%) and Sweden (49%) are the most negative towards China. In the Asia/Pacific region, opinions vary widely, from 64% positive in Australia to just 10% in Vietnam and 13% in Japan.³⁰⁶ The 2017 data is summarized in the table below:

³⁰⁶ Richard Wike, Jacob Poushter, Laura Silver and Caldwell Bishop, "Globally, More Name U.S. Than China as World's Leading Economic Power", **Pew Research Center**, 13.07.2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/07/13/more-name-u-s-than-china-as-worlds-leading-economic-power/>, (10.01.2025).

Figure 11: Global Perceptions of China 2017

Views of China vary across regions

Views of China



Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q12c.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Richard Wike, Jacob Poushter, Laura Silver and Caldwell Bishop, “Globally, More Name U.S. Than China as World’s Leading Economic Power”, **Pew Research Center**, 13.07.2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/07/13/more-name-u-s-than-china-as-worlds-leading-economic-power/>, (10.01.2025).

The survey data from 2017, 2019, and 2023 reveal a significant decline in global perceptions of China, with unfavorable views increasing significantly over time. In 2017, global perceptions of China were relatively positive, across 38 countries 47% expressed favorable opinions and 37% unfavorable. However, by 2019, opinions became more polarized, with favorable and unfavorable views nearly equal at 40% and 41%, respectively. By 2023, attitudes had shifted sharply negative, with 66% holding unfavorable views and only 28% viewing China positively. Between 2017 and 2023, positive perceptions of China fell dramatically by 19 percentage points, decreasing from 47% to 28%, while negative perceptions climbed steeply by 29 percentage points, from 37% to 66%. The decline is most evident in North America and Europe, where unfavorable perceptions have intensified. In the Asia-Pacific region, countries like Japan and Australia (except 2017) consistently exhibit high levels of negativity, with unfavorable views peaking at 87% in 2023. India has also seen a significant rise in negative sentiment. In contrast, Sub-Saharan Africa consistently demonstrates strong support for China, with countries like Nigeria and Kenya maintaining high favorable ratings. Latin America presents a mixed picture, with opinions divided and fluctuating over the years. In the period of six years, global attitudes toward China have become increasingly negative, with unfavorable views rising sharply and favorable perceptions dropping significantly.

Overall, these trends suggest that China faces serious challenges in improving its global image, particularly in Western nations. Although “Wolf Warrior” approach worked to a certain extent domestically, the controversial rhetoric has not been well-received outside of China and led to negative perceptions of the PRC and decreased China’s soft power appeal, especially in the West. Even an internal report from the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, a think tank linked to the Ministry of State Security, cautioned about growing anti-China hostility.³⁰⁷ As China trying to gain more soft power worldwide, an aggressive approach hurts its global reputation even more.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁷ Jiang, p. 36.

³⁰⁸ Zhu.

Being a state that works hard on its global image and soft power capabilities, it seems that the assertive aggressiveness has not really paid off or produced favorable results for China in the global arena. However, China might be aware of the negativity towards itself and recently, there have been signals of change in the diplomacy approach which will be evaluated in the next section.

3.3. SIGNALS OF CHANGE IN CHINESE DIPLOMACY

In the information age how states project themselves carries great importance when it comes to soft power. Soft power involves persuading others to share your goals and this requires understanding their perspectives and aligning communication with policy.³⁰⁹ As mentioned in the first chapter, positive public diplomacy, such as providing aid or supporting infrastructure projects, helps build goodwill and foreign support. In contrast, negative public diplomacy, such as criticizing geopolitical rivals, tends to be ineffective as it fails to address third-country concerns and can lead to backlash³¹⁰ which eventually weakens a country's soft power.

Due to the severe criticism and unproductive results, lately, there has been signals of change in Chinese diplomacy. It seems that the combative WWD that has been employed since 2017 is being abandoned by the Chinese government. Xi now aims to position China as a global peacemaker and is exploring new ways to create alliances with the West and in Asia. However, maintaining this new international image contradicts the aggressive stance of WWD, especially in relations with Europe and in broader global contexts. Therefore, Xi put his new diplomacy strategy in motion. The biggest sign of change is that some of the most notable "Wolf Warriors" have been reassigned to roles outside of foreign affairs. For example, the most prominent "Wolf Warrior" diplomat, former Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao

³⁰⁹ Nye, MSW, p. 111.

³¹⁰ Daniel C. Mattingly and James Sundquist, "When Does Public Diplomacy Work? Evidence from China's "Wolf Warrior" Diplomats", **Political Science Research and Methods**, Vol: 11, 2023, pp. 921-922.

Lijian was moved to the Department of Boundaries and Ocean Affairs in January 2023 and he has been silent ever since. Others, like Qin Gang, were dismissed entirely.³¹¹

November 2023 marked two significant events that further show the softening of the Chinese diplomacy. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who became the first Australian leader to visit China since 2016, arrived in Shanghai. The four-day state visit is viewed as a crucial moment in warming relations.³¹² Albanese received a grand welcome in Beijing, with a smiling President Xi Jinping. Xi assured that China and Australia could cooperate on issues ranging from regional security to climate change as “trusted partners”. It marked a high point in relations, especially when compared to four years ago, when China’s WWD was at its peak, with Zhao Lijian tweeting a staged image of a man disguised as an Australian soldier holding a bloody knife to an Afghan child’s throat. China’s warm reception of Albanese provided a glimpse into Beijing’s changing approach to international diplomacy.

China is also seeking to strengthen its relationship with the US. In November, 2023, Xi visited the US which marked his first trip there in over six years. He met with President Joe Biden and attended an Asia-Pacific leaders’ summit. Xi told US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer that there are a thousand reasons to strengthen China-US relations, but not a single reason to damage them.³¹³ The 2023 visit of the UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly to Beijing may also signal China’s new, gentler diplomatic approach, along with Emmanuel Macron’s visit to China, where the French president was warmly received.³¹⁴

Another important indicator of softening diplomacy is the return of panda loans. With the recent addition of pandas at the San Diego Zoo, it is clear that “panda diplomacy” also is coming back. Their arrival in the US in late June 2024 signals a renewed use of pandas as a tool in China’s international relations.³¹⁵ Following the

³¹¹ Tom Harper, “China is Switching Away from Its Aggressive ‘Wolf Warrior’ Foreign Policy – Here’s Why”, **The Conversation**, 06.09.2023, <https://theconversation.com/china-is-switching-away-from-its-aggressive-wolf-warrior-foreign-policy-heres-why-212658>, (04.04.2024).

³¹² Hannah Ritchie and Simon Fraser, “Australian PM Albanese Hails Progress with China After Xi Talks”, **BBC**, 06.11.2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-67329892>, (20.10.2024.).

³¹³ France24, “China’s Diplomacy Shifts from ‘Wolf Warrior’ to ‘Handsome Boy’”, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231108-china-s-diplomacy-shifts-from-wolf-warrior-to-handsome-boy>, (20.20.2024).

³¹⁴ Harper.

³¹⁵ Mia Taylo, “A Brief History of ‘Panda Diplomacy’ with New Additions to Global Zoos”, **BBC**, 26.06.2024, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240226-a-brief-history-of-panda-diplomacy---with-new-additions-to-global-zoos>, (14.04.2024).

agreement to send pandas to the San Diego Zoo, Chinese Pre-minister Li Qiang also proposed sending pandas to Australia as the two countries mended their relations.³¹⁶ Pandas can be seen as a type of diplomatic thermometer in bilateral relations between states. Their use demonstrates the changes in China's diplomacy³¹⁷ and this revival of panda diplomacy aligns with China's pursuit of soft power³¹⁸.

China's move away from WWD is part of a broader effort to reshape its deteriorated global image. Beijing now tries to portray itself differently. Assuming the role of a peacemaker through its mediation efforts in conflicts such as between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its proposed peace plan for the Ukraine conflict, China is willing to create a positive image for itself once again. This strategy has resulted in some diplomatic achievements, such as the recent BRICS summit. It has witnessed the bloc's largest expansion since its creation.³¹⁹ During one of the recent meetings of the Political Bureau of the CCP, Xi emphasized the importance of adopting a narrative that is open and confident, yet also reflects modesty and humility.³²⁰ This shift aims to create a respectable, admirable, and reliable image of China. All these efforts suggest a shift in China's foreign policy toward softer language and a reduction in its combative diplomatic and media tone. Beijing is cautious not to let its foreign policies disrupt relations with other countries.³²¹

As Nye points out, soft power is about getting others to desire the same outcomes, which requires understanding how they receive your messages and adjusting them accordingly.³²² With the latest shifts in its diplomacy, that is abandoning the WWD and emphasizing modesty and friendship, it seems that this is exactly what China is trying to do in order to improve its global image and gain more soft power in the international arena. In recent years, moving "Wolf Warriors" to less visible roles and moving away from assertive "Wolf Warrior" language to a more traditional approach may show a change in China's foreign policy trajectory. China now faces the challenge of improving its image after years of controversial rhetoric.

³¹⁶ Lipika Pelham, "Beijing Offers Pandas as Ties with Australia Thaw", **BBC**, 16.06.2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2vv2v6v4vvo>, (19.10.2024).

³¹⁷ Kelter.

³¹⁸ Pelham.

³¹⁹ Harper.

³²⁰ Xiaolin and Yitong.

³²¹ Xiaolin and Yitong.

³²² Nye, *MSW*, p. 111.

Chinese foreign policy has long aimed to present the country as a responsible, stabilizing force and a trusted partner on the world stage.³²³ To achieve lasting soft power, China needs to find a balance between assertiveness and diplomacy.³²⁴ Therefore, in the beginning of 2024, Beijing explained its goals as to strengthen friendship, build mutual trust, and increase integration with its neighboring countries and other major powers such as EU, US and Russia.³²⁵ Although the future remains uncertain, it appears that Chinese diplomacy is returning to its cooperative and peaceful trajectory. Ultimately, whether these efforts translate into lasting soft power will depend on China's ability to maintain a consistent and transparent approach, build trust, and adapt to an ever-changing global landscape.

³²³ Rosie Levine, Andrew Scobell and Adam Gallagher, "What Does Qin Gang's Removal Mean for China's Foreign Policy?", **United States Institute of Peace**, 27.07.2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/07/what-does-qin-gangs-removal-mean-chinas-foreign-policy>, (03.11.2024).

³²⁴ Indongo, p 137.

³²⁵ Zhang Yunbi, "Nation Sets Diplomatic Goals for 2024", **China Daily Global**, 10.01.2024, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202401/10/WS659dd0c5a3105f21a507b6cc.html>, (03.11.2024).

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the relationship between WWD and China's soft power within the context of China's public diplomacy strategies. The study was guided by two primary research questions: "How does China's "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy impact its soft power in the digital age, particularly through social media platforms like X?" and "Does the assertive tone of "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy influence global perceptions of China?". The literature on soft power, public diplomacy, and particularly the role of positive versus negative messaging have provided a framework for analyzing how China's changing diplomatic approach influences its global image and soft power goals. Particularly the works of Goldsmith et al., Mattingly and Sundquist, Harting, Evans and Steven, and Joseph Nye have been instrumental in building the foundation for this work as they offered valuable insights that helped understand the role of positive versus negative messaging in public diplomacy.

Over the years, China has worked hard to improve its image on the world stage. As discussed in the second chapter of the thesis, it has used cultural diplomacy, educational programs and developmental initiatives to present itself as a peaceful, cooperative, and culturally rich nation. However, the emergence of WWD has introduced a new twist into this strategy as it has challenged the traditional notions of soft power and raised important questions whether a more aggressive style of diplomacy can truly win over global audiences.

Known for its aggressive language and firm defense of China's national interests, WWD reflects a significant departure from China's traditionally cautious and cooperative diplomatic approach. For instance, China's former Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian's controversial tweet stating "Racism against ethnic minorities in the US is a chronic disease of American society" is one of the clear examples of WWD which demonstrates the sharp departure. Both domestic and international factors have driven this transformation. At home, the Chinese government's emphasis on national pride and sovereignty has encouraged a more assertive approach to foreign relations in order to appeal to the domestic audiences and strengthen state legitimacy. Internationally, the growing tensions between China and Western nations have necessitated a stronger and more visible defense of China's

policies and global image. Especially, the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic amplified the role of “Wolf Warrior” diplomats, as they actively defended China’s handling of the crisis. While attacking critics, they often escalated international tensions. Moreover, due to the restrictions that came along with the pandemic, social media platforms like X have become even more critical arenas for states’ communication strategies and they suit well for “Wolf Warrior” style of diplomacy as they have the power to enable Chinese diplomats to connect directly with foreign publics. While WWD has succeeded in making China’s voice heard on the global stage, its effect on the country’s soft power is more complex. Soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye, relies on attraction rather than coercion with its key resources being culture, political values, and foreign policy. In this context, WWD presents a paradox. On the one hand, it allows China to actively counter criticisms, defend its policies, and project strength. On the other hand, its aggressive tone risks alienating international audiences and creates an image of hostility which can weaken the appeal that soft power aims to create.

One of the key findings of this study is that while WWD may seem effective in gathering domestic support and countering negative narratives to a certain extent, it falls short in achieving lasting international appeal. Three data sets obtained from global opinion surveys conducted by Pew Research Center were examined. The comparison of the data from 2017, 2019 and 2023 clearly indicates that global views of China have turned more negative in recent years. Between 2017 and 2023, favorable views declined significantly by 19 percentage points (from 47% to 28%) and unfavorable views rose sharply by 29 percentage points (from 37% to 66%). The combative tone of WWD often clashes with the cultural and collaborative messages at the heart of soft power. For instance, while China’s promotion of its rich cultural heritage, technological innovations, and contributions to global development can inspire admiration, these efforts are at the risk of being overshadowed by the negative perceptions due to the confrontational rhetoric. This contradiction creates a fragmented image of China and makes it harder to position itself as a harmonious and appealing global leader. Therefore, this work has also found out that in recent years, China has made significant efforts to shift its diplomatic approach and improve its global image. Moving away from the aggressive WWD, China is now focusing on portraying itself

as a global peacemaker, working to strengthen relationships with the West and other regions. The most significant indication of change is the reassignment of some of the most prominent “Wolf Warriors” such as Zhao Lijian, to positions outside the realm of foreign affairs. Additionally, high-profile diplomatic events, such as the visits of leaders from Australia, the US, and the UK, signal a softer approach. China is also using symbolic gestures like “panda diplomacy” to improve bilateral relations. These changes are part of a broader strategy to enhance China’s soft power, presenting the country as a reliable and cooperative global partner once again.

Moreover, the findings in this study also suggest that the reception of China’s WWD may vary significantly depending on regional geopolitical contexts. However, this claim cannot be fully supported by the current data. In regions with high geopolitical tensions with China, such as the US and Europe, the assertiveness of WWD is often viewed as aggressive and counterproductive. In contrast, in regions where China’s influence is less contested, such as parts of Africa and Latin America, this assertiveness may be received as a demonstration of strength. To better understand these dynamics, future research could include comparative case studies to explore how different regions understand and react to both positive and negative public diplomacy strategies. Additionally, further studies could investigate the broader effects of these diplomatic strategies on soft power and focus on various factors such as local political culture, historical context, and economic relationships. These approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how China’s public diplomacy and positive versus negative messaging influence its global soft power.

In addition to the previous findings, this study also highlights the importance of alignment between a nation’s diplomatic strategies and its soft power objectives. For China, the ultimate goal of public diplomacy is to strengthen its global influence by fostering goodwill and understanding among foreign publics. However, the confrontational style of WWD risks undermining these objectives since it often contradicts the principles of attraction and persuasion that are essential to soft power. This misalignment suggests that China’s diplomatic approach may benefit from recalibration, prioritizing consistency and cultural sensitivity to better support its soft power goals.

Looking ahead, China's ability to adapt its public diplomacy strategies will be key to shaping its future soft power. As the findings of this thesis suggest, a more balanced approach that integrates assertiveness with cultural promotion and cooperation may prove more effective in order to enhance the global appeal. For instance, emphasizing cultural exchange, artistic collaborations, and educational initiatives while adopting a more moderate tone in diplomatic communications could help reduce the negative perceptions linked to WWD. Additionally, paying closer attention to regional and cultural differences in diplomatic messaging could enhance the effectiveness of China's soft power efforts. Therefore, tailoring its approach to the specific needs and values of different audiences could prove more beneficial for China in the long run. As China continues to develop its diplomatic strategies, the lessons from WWD offer valuable implications for both scholars and practitioners of public diplomacy. This study concludes by emphasizing the need for a complex and well-tuned approach to diplomacy which can work well within the principles of soft power in an ever-changing geopolitical environment.

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