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China's public diplomacy. Between old propaganda and civil participation

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China's public diplomacy.
Between old propaganda and civil participation

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Abstract

The ongoing debate on the development of China's public diplomacy (*gonggong waijiao* 公共外交) is part of the reshaping of China's international image as a global power.

After discussing the definition of public diplomacy, a concept not yet well defined but adaptable to China's foreign policy tradition, we present a preliminary analysis of the institutional framework, political background and main instruments of China's public diplomacy. We take into account the criticisms and perplexities expressed in Western literature about the contradictions between China's international communication through public diplomacy and its domestic and international political behavior. The aim of this article is to provide new insights and propose a preliminary analysis of Chinese academic literature on public diplomacy. The analysis demonstrates that, although the concept of public diplomacy tends to be linked to considerations on the enhancement of soft power and the building up of comprehensive national strength, the search for an effective and original pattern does not consist simply in importing Western models of communication, but implies evolutions in Chinese society, especially in terms of major openness and participation in the political life of the country.

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1. Introduction

In recent years public diplomacy (*gonggong waijiao*) has evolved from a unfamiliar concept to a hot topic in China.

From 2007, the term has been increasingly used in official speeches¹ and today it seems to have become the filter through which evaluate every kind of diplomatic activity.²

The growing awareness among China's policy makers of the centrality of public diplomacy echoes the major attention paid by the academic world. (Figure 3) Evidence in this regard is the recent establishment of China's first public diplomacy research center in Beijing,³ and of a specialized journal,⁴ as well as the increasing number of public forums on the theme.⁵

Nowadays more and more Chinese students choose public diplomacy as a thesis topic.⁶ (Figure 1). Most of them are studies on US public diplomacy, but the number of theses analyzing the relation between public diplomacy and the building of the national image is increasing. (Figure 2)

¹ In 2007 premier Wen Jiabao explicitly said "We should conduct public diplomacy in a more effective way". *People's Daily*, February 27, 2007. In July 2009, President Hu Jintao openly urged for "strengthening public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy (*renwen waijiao*)". In March 2010, the concept is mentioned twice in the report of Gu Qingli at the annual session of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Wu Qimin 吴绮敏 2007.

Even before, when public diplomacy had been never mentioned, top leaders already pointed out the need for striving for "an objective and friendly public opinion environment" (Xu Xinghan 徐星瀚 2004) and for enhancing China's "soft power", *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Waijiaobu Zhengce Yanjiu Si* 2007; *People's Daily* 2007, October 15) both declared objectives of public diplomacy.

² During a press conference on his visit to Europe in 2010, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi stressed the importance of public speeches as tools of public diplomacy: "These activities encourage people from different countries to see China and its development in a right perspective and enhance mutual trust." PRC Foreign Ministry 2010.

³ The Public Diplomacy Research Centre has been established in August by the Beijing University for Foreign Studies.

⁴ The *Public Diplomacy Quarterly* (*Gonggong Waijiao Tongxun* 公共外交通讯) aims to analyze national and international trends, and facilitate the development of China's public diplomacy. Yuan Jie 袁洁 2010

⁵ On Sept. 11, 2010 the Public Diplomacy Research Centre organized the First International Forum of Public Diplomacy, also known as the Third Diplomats Forum, centred on "Communication, Participation, Responsibility and Action". Yan Meng 2010.

In October the Chahar Forum on Public Diplomacy was held in Shanghai. The forum addressed the theme "Spread the National Image of China" with particular attention towards the role of media and multinational corporations. Although sponsored by government institutions, these initiatives involve prominent scholars and academics from major national universities, besides exponents of the political, economic and media sectors. Cui Dong 崔东 2010. *Zhongguowang* 中国网 China.com 2010.

Figure 1: Number of masters’ theses on public diplomacy per year

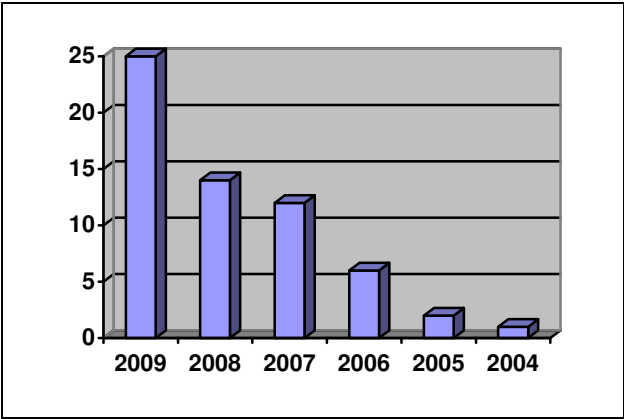
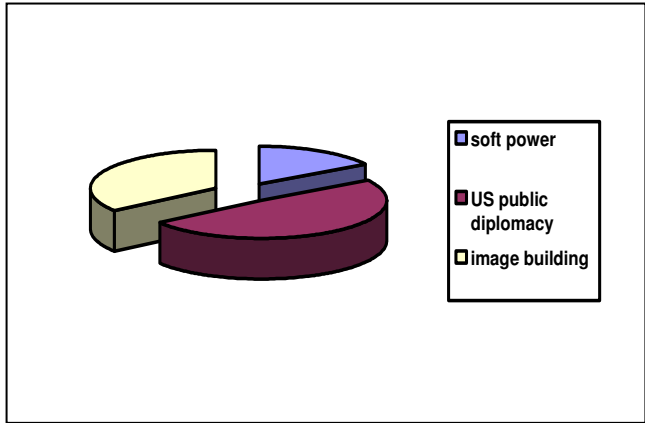
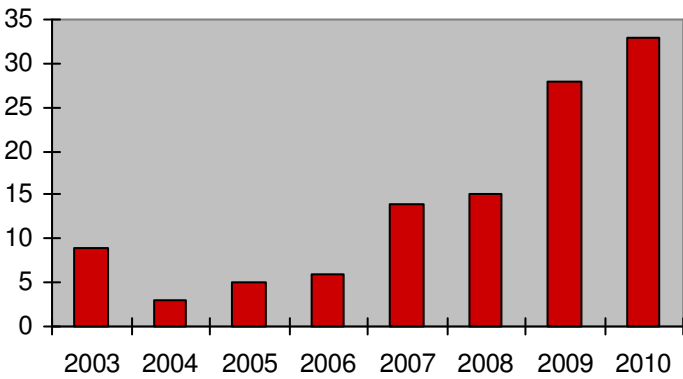


Figure 2: Main topics of masters’ thesis



Source: China Masters’ Theses Full-text Database, powered by China National knowledge infrastructure

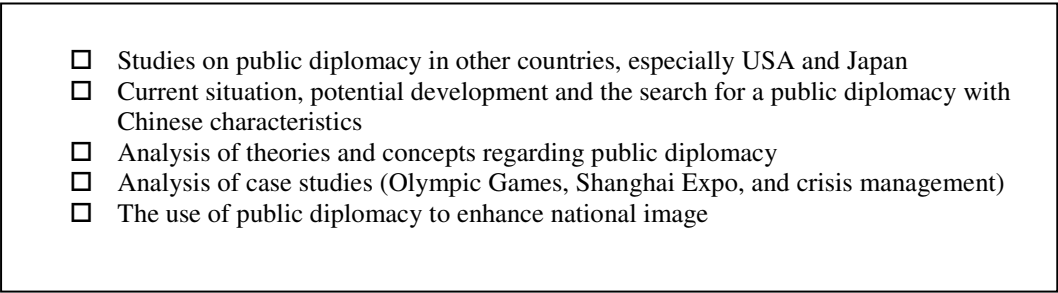
Figure 3: Number of Chinese academic articles on public diplomacy per year



Source: China Academic Journals Full-text Database

The realization by China’s leaders and academics of the potential impact of public diplomacy on foreign policy and national development deserves special attention for its notable social and political implications.

Figure 4: Main topics of academic articles on public diplomacy (sorted by occurrence)



Most scholars date the first usage of the term "public diplomacy" to 1965 when Edmund Gullion, dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and retired foreign service officer, established the Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy.⁷

Fletcher's definition was the first of a long series, as the debate on a clear description of the term still continues today.⁸ The term has for long been strictly associated with US foreign policy, especially the activities of the US Information Agency (USIA). In 1997, the Planning Group for Integration of USIA into the Department of State, defined public diplomacy as follows: "Public Diplomacy seeks to promote the national interest of the United States through understanding, informing and influencing foreign audiences."⁹

Since Joseph Nye Jr. first introduced the concept of soft power¹⁰ in 1990, public diplomacy has been being often defined as "one of soft power's key instruments".¹¹

In China, the term "public diplomacy" has a foreign origin (*bolaici*); its first translation (*gonggong waijiao*) appeared in 1990 in the book *Diplomacy abroad* (*Guowai waijiaoxue*) edited by Zhou Qipeng, who translated the entry from the *International Public Law Encyclopedia*. Zhou's translation has become the most commonly used, but a considerable number of authors have either translated the term in different ways¹² or associated it to a tangle of similar concepts.¹³

One could say that Chinese scholars – as their foreign counterparts – are still searching for an unequivocal definition of public diplomacy. However, a closer look at Chinese attempts to define it can provide hints about Chinese perception of the concept.

According to Ren Jingjing, the definition of public diplomacy mainly accepted among Chinese intellectuals is the following: "A new form of diplomacy which, under the guide of the government, addresses social masses; its main tools are communication and exchanges; its main objectives are strengthening national soft power, defending and promoting national interest".¹⁴

In a domestic perspective, Zhang Weiwei points out three main characteristics of China's public diplomacy: it arises as a reaction to Western "discourse power" and "China's threat theory"; it is led by governments (but gathers other economic and human resources, especially on the occasion of great events); its main purpose is to build friendship through cultural exchanges.¹⁵

Both Ren's and Zhang's definitions convey a peculiar meaning to public diplomacy: they center the Chinese understanding of public diplomacy on cultural exchange, much more than on the media. This point is certainly linked to the attractiveness of the millennia-long Chinese culture.

⁷ An early Murrow Centre brochure describes the concept as follows: "Public diplomacy (...) deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications." Cull 2009, 19

⁸ Recently the Wilton Park Conference concluded that: "Public diplomacy has entered the lexicon of 21st century diplomacy without clear definition of what it is or how the tools it offers might best be used". Kelley 2009, 73.

⁹ Public Diplomacy Alumni Association 2008.

¹⁰ Nye 2004

¹¹ Jan 2005, 3.

¹² For instance, in 2004, in his *General Introduction to Diplomacy*, Yi Lu translates the term "public diplomacy" as *gongzhong waijiao* (mass diplomacy). Wang 2008, 259.

Translation problems are not uncommon in China. The translation of the concept of soft power is still quite disputed. In academic texts is commonly used the expression 软实力 *ruan shili*, but translation as 软力量 *ruan lilang*, 软权力 *ruan quanli*, 软国力 *ruan guoli* still abound. Guo Jun 2009.

¹³ Li Zhiyong tries to clarify some concepts related to public diplomacy. He provides a detailed analysis of the origin and evolution of four terms, still often confused: public diplomacy, 公共外交 *gonggong waijiao*; civil or civilian diplomacy, 公民外交 *gongmin waijiao*; people diplomacy, 人民外交 *renmin waijiao*; people to people diplomacy, 民间外交 *minjian waijiao*; mass diplomacy 公众外交 *gongzhong waijiao*. 李志永, 2009

¹⁴ Ren Jingjing 任晶晶 2010.

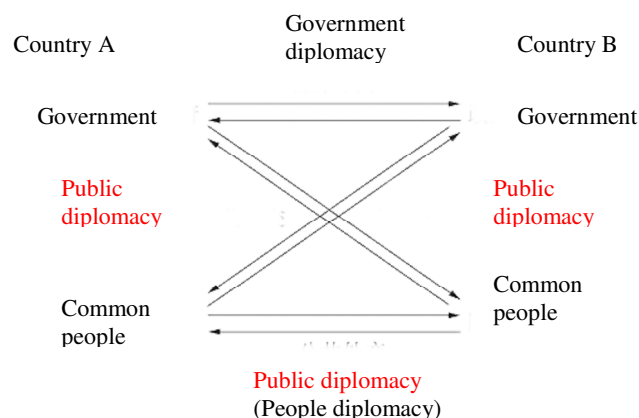
¹⁵ Zhang Weiwei 张薇薇 2009, 13.

After all – Li Zhiyong argues¹⁶ – “the original form of public diplomacy in China is not international propaganda – as other scholars claim –, but cultural diplomacy”. However this culture-oriented definition of public diplomacy is derived also from the acknowledgement of the lower presence and scarce influence of Chinese media overseas if compared to Western advanced economies. Only recently has China shown to be more aware of the significance of an effective and capillary media network abroad.¹⁷

In other words, China tends to understand public diplomacy in terms of *minjian waijiao* (people-to-people diplomacy),¹⁸ taking a firm grasp on China’s foreign policy tradition. Zhao Qizheng, a key figure in China’s public diplomacy,¹⁹ defines it as a “new form of people diplomacy”, which, compared to the traditional one, appears to be multifaceted and enriched with every form of dialogue, direct bilateral and multilateral relations such as official-official, people-people and official-people exchanges.

In an attempt to clarify the definition of public diplomacy and to show where to place this new concept with respect to traditional government diplomacy and people diplomacy, Zhao provides the following chart, elaborated inside the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).²⁰

Figure 4: graphic representation of collocation of public diplomacy with respect to government diplomacy and traditional people diplomacy



¹⁶ Li Zhiyong 李志永 2009, 58.

¹⁷ Central government invested 45 billion Yuan for the expansion of the main media organizations overseas. Wu Vivian, and Chen Adam 2009. In June 2008 Hu Jintao gave a speech about news media and their role in a changing China. Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 2008. In December 20, 2008, Li Changchun, member of the politburo standing committee in charge of ideology, said “Enhancing our communication capacity domestically and internationally is a direct consequence of China’s increasing international influence”, Li Changchun 李长春 2008.

On January 16th, Liu Yunshan, director of the Publicity Department of the Central Committee since 2002 and a member of the Politburo since 2007, declares in a statement published in Party Magazine Qiu Shi (Seeking Truth): “It has become an urgent strategic task for us to make our communication capability match our international status”. Quoted in Harding Robin, and Hille, Kathrin 2009.

¹⁸ The term “*minjian waijiao*”, people-to-people diplomacy refers to activities of cultural exchange and informal ties realized through the work of mass organizations and friendship associations, and targeted at the people of foreign countries. Since its foundation in 1949 the People’s Republic of China has resorted to this form of foreign relations also to compensate for its relative diplomatic isolation. The most famous success of people diplomacy was the American-Chinese ping-pong exchange in 1971 which started normalization between the two states. The two institutes in charge for this aspect of Chinese diplomacy are the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs, both affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs .

¹⁹ In 1998 Zhao was double-hatted as director of both State Council Information Office (SCIO) and of the International Communication Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. In 2005 he moved to his role as a member and later standing member of CPPCC National Committee, as well as chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Since 2009 he has been editor-in-chief of the Public Diplomacy Quarterly. Cull Nicholas J. 2009 “China’s....”. Shambaugh 2007.

²⁰ Zhao Qizheng 赵启正 2009, 2.

3. The practice of public diplomacy. Searching for the roots

The search for a “public diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” (*Zhongguo tese de gonggong waijiao*), namely in continuity with the traditional concept of China’s foreign policy, find a correspondence in the debate on the practice of public diplomacy in China and it seems to have preceded the discussion. Some scholars trace it back even to dynastic China and Qing Cao points out that “Centuries before Joseph Nye, Confucius himself spoke of “attracting by virtue” (*yide laizhi*) and argued that an image of virtue and morality was the foundation of a stable state”.²¹ Andrew Scobell describes how dynastic China practiced public diplomacy within the tribute system, adding a cultural dimension to the engagement with foreign powers, through the Chinese self belief in *Zhongguo*, the middle kingdom, the centre of the civilized world.²²

However, most Chinese scholars track down elements referable of public diplomacy in traditional external propaganda (*waixuan*).²³

Tang Xiaosong stresses that, even if one cannot equate propaganda and public diplomacy – as public diplomacy has deeper strategic implications – propaganda instruments are the main expressions of public diplomacy. Therefore, although China lacks a developed public diplomacy system, it can count on an experienced and original mode of international communication.²⁴

Similarly Zhang Weiwei notices that today’s practice of public diplomacy is grounded on the national broadcasting system (radio stations, newspapers, publications in foreign languages etc), which was founded shortly after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (1949) and before China’s Reform and Open Policy (1978). This communication network, which in the past was mainly devoted to ideological goals with little interaction with the outside world, is nowadays the “hardware” through which China enacts a more sophisticated diplomacy.²⁵

4. Evolution of China’s diplomacy: the institutional framework and political background

Therefore, to some extent, scholars interpret China’s public diplomacy as a mature evolution of external propaganda. In particular, the institutional framework of today’s public diplomacy was built in the Eighties, the early period of the reform era which brought China to the international stage. Between the Eighties and Nineties, Chinese international communication abandoned Soviet-style rhetoric, aiming at ideological indoctrination and agitation of the masses, in favor of new communicative models and a more reassuring image of a peaceful state – the ideal destination of foreign investments.²⁶ China’s international communication loosed or adjusted some ideological connotations of the past, especially those linked to the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention.²⁷

In 1983, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs founded an Information Department. In the same year the creation of a system of Chinese news spokesmen²⁸ and, shortly after, the launch of regular press conferences improved China’s ability to address foreign media.

In 1989, when the brutal repression of the protests in Tiananmen Square sent China’s international reputation plummeting, Beijing withdrew in silence and violent choices, but was already well aware

²¹ Qing Cao 2001.

²² Scobell, 2007.

²³ Chinese tradition distinguishes between two levels of propaganda (*xuanchuan* 宣传): *nei xuan* 内宣 (internal propaganda, addressed to the domestic public) and *wai xuan* 外宣 (external propaganda, addressed to the foreign public). Unlike its western equivalent, the term *xuanchuan* (propaganda) has a positive connotation in Chinese.

²⁴ Tang Xiaosong 唐小松 2006, 44.

²⁵ Zhang Weiwei 张薇薇 2009, 13.

²⁶ Zhang Juyan 2009.

²⁷ D’Hooghe 2007, 11.

²⁸ The first was Qian Qichen, who ran the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The first local news spokesperson system was established only in June 2003 in Shanghai. In 2009, thirty-one provinces, seventy-four State Council institutions, and seven central organs of the CCP launched their own news spokesman systems.

that it was necessary to restore a positive international image, minimize economic and political damage, and preserve the possibility to access foreign expertise to obtain economic results.²⁹

In 1991, the State Council Information Office (*guowuyuan xinwen bangongshi*) was founded. The Office formally takes the place of CCP (Chinese Communist Party) Department of Publicity in dealing with the foreign press corps, as an “operational side” in the work of external propaganda.³⁰ Its main duties are: to illustrate China through compilation and publication of government White Papers,³¹ organization of conferences and production of videos,³² correct misperceptions and mistakes in foreign media reports on China, promote an objective and fair image of the country among foreigners resident in China and short-term visitors such as tourists and businessmen. The present director of the office is Cai Mingzhao. He represents a perfect example of “one organ and two signs” (*yi ge jigou, liang ge paizi*),³³ due to his concomitant role as Deputy Director in the CCP Publicity Department.

Zhang Guizhen argues that the foundation of the Office – besides the decision of changing the English translation of the term “*xuanchuan*”³⁴ – symbolizes the beginning of gradual passage from traditional propaganda to the modern idea of public diplomacy.³⁵

Over the years, old and new institutions have shaped the Information Office in the task of outlining main strategies of China’s public diplomacy.³⁶

In more general terms, since the Nineties, the evolution in public diplomacy seems to be accompanied by a more modern and sophisticated approach to foreign policy.

By mid-1990s the good neighbor diplomacy (*mulin waijiao*),³⁷ which greatly improved China’s relations with ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) and developing countries at the beginning of the decade, hands on the baton to a great power diplomacy (*daguo waijiao*),

²⁹ In the aftermath of the crisis, Beijing engaged the international public relations firm Hill and Knowlton to begin the process of rebuilding China’s image abroad.

³⁰ Shambaugh 2007, 48.

³¹ Nowadays China distributes every year around three white papers. They range from human rights, minorities policy, national defense to food safety and other international sensitive issues.

³² The 30-second TV commercial “China’s National Image Promotional Film” *Zhongguo guojia xingxiang xuanchuan pian* 中国国家形象宣传片, broadcast in Times Square before Hu Jintao’s official visit to the US, is one of the most recent example. The Film, sponsored by the Information Office of the State Council, consists of two parts. The one broadcasted in New York is an advertisement, introducing Chinese common people and celebrities from business, entertainment, academic, science and technology circles, representing China’s positive national image. The second part is a 15-minute TV special named “Perspectives.” Before that, in 2009, another promotional movie of 30 seconds, titled “Made in China. Made with the world”, was broadcasted on CNN Asia. The movie, sponsored in an effort to lift the reputation of Chinese-made goods after safety scandals, is currently running on the news network in Asia, and it is believed that the advertisement will be screened (放映) in other markets, including North America. People’s Daily Online 2010.

³³ The Chinese expression “one organ and two signs” (*yige jigou, liang ge paizi*) refers to frequent overlappings of State and Party posts filled by the same person. Broadly speaking, the phenomenon is determined by the minor influence of some offices in State hierarchy compared to their Party counterparts.

³⁴ In 1991, worried about the negative connotation that the west gave to the term “propaganda,” China’s government dropped the English translation of “*xuanchuan*” in favour of the more neutral and benign “publicity”.

³⁵ “The office has the function of illustrating and explaining China to foreign countries and no more to propagandise China abroad”. Zhang Guizhen 张桂珍 2010, 40.

³⁶ In late 2009 the Public Diplomacy Division - established in 2004 under the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - was upgraded to Public Diplomacy Office. Naturally, the Foreign Ministry, the Education Ministry, the International Liaison Department of CCP to National Tourism Administration and other important State and Party institutions actively participated in delineating China’s public diplomacy. A range of exchange organizations also contributes to public diplomacy work, such as the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs (Foreign Ministry), China Association for International Understanding (CCP), China Association for International Friendly Contact (PLA), China Institute of International Strategic Studies (PLA), Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences etc.

³⁷ Since the Nineties China has normalized bilateral relations with neighboring states; economic and security partnership doubled in mid-nineties as well as access to regional multilateral institution.

refocused on the big powers.³⁸ Particularly after the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks against the US, a more critical vision of the international system, supported by two decades of economic successes, arose in the debate about the role and identity China should take on the international stage and in the transition from "victim mentality" of the past (*shouhaizhe xintai*) to great power behavior (*daguo xintai*). After decades during which the grand strategy was dominated by Deng Xiaoping's mottos "be good at maintaining a low profile" (*shangyu shoutou*) and "never claim leadership" (*juebu dangtou*), directed at shaping a quiet environment for long-term economic modernization, China turned to a "proactive diplomacy" (*zhudong shi waijiao*)³⁹ and choose not to adopt a challenging approach for hegemony and world order – as many authors supposed during the Nineties⁴⁰ – but to respond to the international call to share global responsibilities.⁴¹

Main symbols of the adoption of this new perspective in the global system are the acceptance into World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and the cooperation within G8 and G20 forum as "dialog member" in 2009, after China's brilliant performance in contrasting the global economic downturn.⁴²

China's behavior as a responsible stakeholder is clearly evident in a series of political actions such as major involvement in UN peacekeeping operations (Darfur, East Timor, the Middle East), discussions on nuclear proliferation and arms control, peaceful solutions of territorial disputes (especially with former USSR states), the multiplication of economic (ASEAN+1) and security (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) partnerships, assumption of a leading role in multilateral regional institutions and an intermediate role in sensitive international issues (Six Party Talks).

5. Instruments of China's public diplomacy

The practice of public diplomacy has without doubt to be set in the context of "China's new diplomacy",⁴³ more pragmatic, constructive and sophisticated than old propaganda. In the words of Wang Yiwei, public diplomacy is a "soft diplomacy", an integral parcel of a new grand strategy, which, in the era of economic globalization, new technology revolution and economic interdependence when the "greatest strategic threat is national image",⁴⁴ successfully contributes to building a positive international image.⁴⁵

In this light we have to interpret the search for and application of always new and sophisticated tools of public diplomacy. Among them currently the most developed are:

- **cultural diplomacy**, to increase the influence and attractiveness of China's ancient culture and traditional value system, relying upon the most mature products of China public diplomacy, namely China's culture year and the Confucius Institute;⁴⁶
- **economic diplomacy**, based on the undeniable success of China as an economic and commercial power, and cultivates the positive impact of "Beijing consensus" in developing countries;

³⁸ Exchange of visits in 1997-1998 between President Jiang Zemin and President Bill Clinton was the most apparent result of this shift.

³⁹ Wu Jianmin 2004, quoted in Zhiqun Zhu 2010, 30.

⁴⁰ In the Nineties Michael D. Swaine pointed out the predominance of conventional realpolitik in China's foreign policy. (Swaine, 1995); Michael Pillsbury hypothesized that in 2010-2030 China would turn back to a form of competition for hegemony, comparable to the Warring States Period (Pillsbury, 2000); Avery Goldstein interpreted China's new strategy in the Nineties as an attempt to forge new rules in the international system (Goldstein, 2001). For a overview of western literature on the future of China's foreign policy see Lynch 2009.

⁴¹ Zoellik 2005.

⁴² With over \$2 trillion of foreign reserve in 2009, China plays an important role in the current economic crisis (buying national debts of European countries), as it did during the Asian economic crises in 1997 (maintaining currency stability in the area).

⁴³ Zhu Zhiqun 2010.

⁴⁴ Cooper Ramo 2007, 12.

⁴⁵ Chen Haosu 陈昊苏 2009.

⁴⁶ Ren Jingjing 任晶晶 2010.

- **exchange diplomacy**, in terms of both bilateral agreements with other countries and people exchanges, such as the recruitment of international students;⁴⁷
- **development aid**, such as conscious use of foreign investments and development aids, especially in less developed regions;⁴⁸
- **celebrity diplomacy**, namely the identification of Chinese celebrities with China's national success or current international aid effort⁴⁹;
- **hosting** of international events and conferences;⁵⁰
- **media expansion abroad** and employment of internet resources addressed to foreign audiences;⁵¹
- major interaction **with foreign media**;⁵²
- **search for a "leader diplomacy with Chinese characteristics"** (*zhongguo tese de shounao waijiao*);⁵³
- **professionalization and age-lowering** of career diplomats;⁵⁴
- shortening of distances between ordinary people and Chinese diplomats;⁵⁵
- adoption of methods of mass persuasion, mass communication, public relations and advertising theories and techniques;⁵⁶
- search for a **new rhetoric**.⁵⁷

⁴⁷ China's Ministry of Education reports that the number of foreign students in the country reached a record high of more than 260,000 in 2010. New York Times 2011.

⁴⁸ Between 2000 and 2007 China donated to Africa an estimated \$5.4 billion and cancelled more than \$10 billion of debt. In 2002, Beijing pledged \$5 million to Afghanistan, and donated \$2.6 million to the victims of the December 2004 tsunami. It also contributed \$2 million in cash as aid and despatched a 44-member team of experts following the earthquake in Java, May 2006. China even pledged \$5 million of aid and over almost \$620,000 in emergency supplies to those parts of the US hit by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Nowadays China is Africa's main commercial partner: Chinese investments amounts to about \$13 billion. Cucino 2012.

⁴⁹ As in the cases of basketball-player Yao Ming and actress Zhang Ziyi who are both goodwill ambassadors for the Special Olympics.

⁵⁰ For instance, from November to December 2006 China hosted the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China-Africa Forum, China-Asean Summit, and a multilateral conference on energy. China has become an eager organizer of cultural events, and informal forums, among them the Boao Forum is the most well known example.

⁵¹ The already strong Chinese media apparatus, including traditional propaganda media such as *China's Daily*, *Radio Beijing*, *Beijing Review* and other publications addressed to foreign readers, has been recently consolidated through the expansion of Central China TV (new channels in Spanish and French will be launched shortly) and the construction of pro-government websites which attract and guide public opinion on given topics. Brady 2006.

Additionally, the Xinhua Agency is working on transforming itself into a multi-media world news agency. It started to provide multi-media services in English in July 2009. News pieces in French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic and Russian will also be broadcast in the future in the Asia-Pacific region and some European countries. Tang Anne 2009.

⁵² The foreign press is used as a source of public diplomacy. Chinese leaders are no longer reluctant to give press conferences during foreign visits and, from October 2008, a new regulation on foreign journalists (*waiguo changzhu xinwen jigou he waiguo jizhe caifang tiaoli* 外国常驻新闻机构和外国记者采访条例) facilitates their activities in China. From early the 2000s the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the International Press Centre, which arranges media forums where foreign media professionals can meet their Chinese counterparts and officials.

⁵³ Chinese leaders in recent years have taken every chance to practice public diplomacy personally. In his visit to the US Hu Jintao surprised American public opinion by kissing a young girl instead of shaking her hand during a meeting with the public. During his journey to Japan and Korea, Wen Jiabao always did morning exercise with people, chatting with them.

⁵⁴ For a detailed description of the evolution of China's diplomats' profile see Kishan 2005.

⁵⁵ For example, from 2003 the Foreign Ministry has been holding regular "open days" (*gongzhong kaifangri*), when citizens are invited to visit the Ministry and take part in lectures, conferences and online debates.

The new generation of Chinese diplomats abroad is freer to get involved with foreign people and the press. A notable example is the one-week-long diary written in a major national newspaper by China's ambassador to the Netherlands, Mrs Xue Hanqin. D'Hooghe 2007, 24.

⁵⁶ Refer to the enlistment of international PR and marketing companies (i.e. during 2008 Olympic Games' bid)

⁵⁷ The search for a new rhetoric reaches the official cornerstone in the launch of the theories of China's "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi* - Zheng Bijian 2003) and "harmonious world" (*hexie shijie* - Hu Jintao 2005).

China uses these tools to project a variety of images of China: a responsible, stable, trustworthy, cooperative, peace-loving developing country, which is building a “harmonious society” domestically and contributes to a “harmonious world” internationally; a responsible economic partner that rises without threatening other countries, but is able to maintain its regional leadership; an ancient and vibrant culture.⁵⁸

During the years and through symbolic events such as the Olympic Games in 2008, the Shanghai World Expo in 2010, and the Asian Games in Guangzhou, China has proved to have a mature command of these tools.

6. China's contradictions and the criticisms of Western scholars

The growing effectiveness of China's public diplomacy has not gone unnoticed by Western scholars. They generally agree on recognizing a relevant progress in its use by both Chinese propagandists and diplomats.

Part of the existing literature tends to interpret the successful Chinese search for an integration of hard power and soft power in terms of the decline of Western influence. The expression “Charm Offensive” used by Joshua Kurlantzick to dub China's recent foreign policies seems to put out a call for Western world not to overlook the potential consequences of Beijing's major influence in the world, especially in terms of damaging longstanding US initiatives towards democratization, environment protection and good governance.⁵⁹

However almost every Western study on China's public diplomacy brings out its limits and contradictions.

The state-command of public diplomacy is indicated as a cause of public cynicism and skepticism which makes official messages never fully trusted.

The **lack of transparency** and **openness** of China's society are seen as factors of suspicion regarding future intentions. In Western eyes, the country's image as a responsible world power is compromised by the Chinese government's **association with repressive regimes** (such as Sudan), maintenance of **aggressive behavior** (i.e. policies toward Taiwan) and **violation of human rights and environment protection policy**. Part of the international community still worries about China's economic, political and military rise, as well as its hunger for raw materials and energy.

Joshua Cooper Ramo notices that, in contradiction with Zheng Bijian's intention, adding the positive adjective “peaceful” to the well known concept of “China's rise” made the “theory of China's peaceful rise” sounds unsincere. Despite a few studies show that people in many countries have a positive view of China as a trustworthy, dynamic and friendly nation,⁶⁰ more sophisticated researches reveal a great deal of underlying uncertainty,⁶¹ especially in Western countries.⁶²

In other words, the undeniable achievements of China's public diplomacy do not seem enough to convince the liberal democratic community to accept China as a credible political power. The Western world discusses China's economic success keeping an eye on the contradictions of its foreign policy that, on the one hand, has shown a major engagement in the international community but, on the other hand, continues to be ruled by a one-party system determined to maintain its authoritarian role. Most Western scholars recognize the signs of a slow evolution within the Chinese political system, but the image perceived abroad does not correspond to the image that China would like to project. Furthermore, Western scholars express doubts about the correspondence between China's external representation in the international system and China's perception of itself.

⁵⁸ Wang Hongying 2005.

⁵⁹ Kurlantzick Joshua. 2007.

⁶⁰ Global BAV All Adults: China 1997-2005.

⁶¹ Cooper Ramo, 2007

⁶² A survey conducted by GlobeScan for BBC World Service in 22 countries between 2004-2005 showed that Central Asian, African and Latin American countries tend to nourish positive feelings toward China, due to admiration for its successful economic model and to traditional cultural ties. Huang Yanzhong, and Sheng Ding 2006.

Plenty of Western scholars are still ready to assert that the US and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition⁶³ and that China's major involvement on the international scenario is motivated exclusively by the awareness that being a stakeholder implies obtaining rights in shaping the rules of the system.⁶⁴

Despite of the unquestionable reasonableness of some arguments of pessimistic observers, it would be a mistake to brand the efforts to build a positive international image simply as a willful deception, an attempt to disguise old propaganda with the new clothes of public diplomacy. Indeed, the search for an effective use of public diplomacy implies an evolution of China's perception of its national image and public participation.

7. The academic debate about public diplomacy in China

In late Nineties some authors foresaw the collapse of the propaganda state in China.⁶⁵ On the contrary, – as mentioned before – Chinese propaganda went through ideological and institutional renovation through the 1990s and early 2000s.

Since the events of June 1989, the gradual decline of political ideology has led the CCP to a conscious adoption of Western methods of social control and domestic persuasion.⁶⁶

At an international level, an evolution began from external propaganda, demanding blind devotion, to public diplomacy aimed at convincing and persuading. As Zhang Guizhen points out, this transformation “is not just a word shift, but a creative transition in conceptual and strategic terms”.⁶⁷

Adopting an effective public diplomacy implies an approach open to innovations and partly critical to past and present communication mistakes. China's leadership must recognize deficiencies of China's approach to international communication and make choices that inevitably transform China external and self perception.

The stakes are high: in the metaphors of Su Shumin a positive national image is an “intangible capital” (*wuxing zichan*), a “special pass” (*tebie tongxing zheng*) to the world, a “special lubricant” (*teshu de runhuaji*)⁶⁸ for international exchanges, which enhance the country's capability to achieve its short-term and long-term goals.

That is the reason why inputs to the construction of a public diplomacy “with Chinese characteristics”, from officials, businessmen and academics are all welcomed by government.

The academic debate on public diplomacy has a central role, but unfortunately has gone unnoticed or been ignored in Western literature and deserves a more attentive analysis. The study of Chinese direct sources is always essential to understand contemporary China, which is especially true in the field of public diplomacy which focuses on external representation and national identity and implies interaction between “us” and “others”. In particular the investigation of studies conducted by Chinese academics is able to provide a peculiar viewpoint: they are not government spokesmen, constrained by strategic considerations. Their analysis aims at clarifying concepts, interpreting phenomena, as well as building theoretical and behavioral patterns; by doing so they unveil the intellectual bustle – and the potential social impact – hidden under the hat of “China's public diplomacy”.

The analysis of Chinese academic debate on public diplomacy is relevant also for the potential bi-directional linkage existing between the academic community and foreign policy decision-making process.⁶⁹ In fact, on the one hand discourse on public diplomacy arises from

⁶³ See for instance Mearsheimer 2005.

⁶⁴ Scott 2010.

⁶⁵ Lynch 1999.

⁶⁶ Brady 2006.

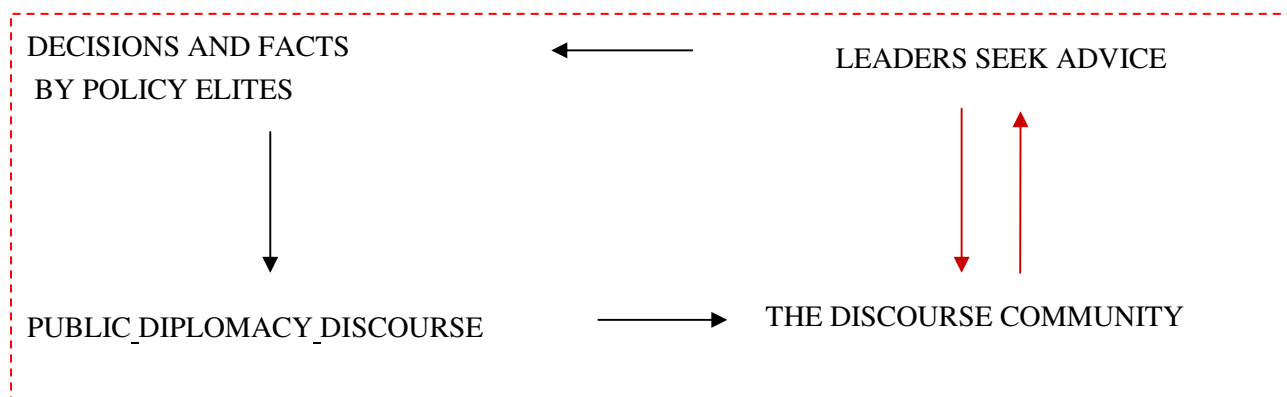
⁶⁷ Zhang Guizhen 张桂珍 2010, 40.

⁶⁸ “无形资产”, “特别通行证”, “特殊的润滑剂” Su Shumin 苏淑民 2008, 76.

⁶⁹ Wuthnow 2008, 3.

decisions and facts determined by policy elites, but on the other hand, leaders increasingly seek more advice from academic experts during their policy making-process. (see figure 5)

Figure 5: bi-directional linkage between leadership and academics



8. Criticisms on government propaganda in China's academic literature

Not only Western observers, but also Chinese contributors do not skimp on criticisms on China's current public diplomacy.

Zhang Weiwei⁷⁰ cites Taiwan questions and the pro-Tibet protest in 2008, on the occasion of Olympic Games, as clear examples of the failure of public diplomacy in protecting national interests.⁷¹ He points out that the improvement of China's position in public opinion is mainly caused by China greater soft power, especially in term of economic development, not by public diplomacy.

According to Tang Xiaosong,⁷² public diplomacy is quite passive, and China's investments insufficient to respond to US and Japanese competitive diplomacy (*jingzhengxing waijiao*).⁷³

8.1 Shortage of coordination

Many scholars insist on increasing coordination in public diplomacy. Zhao Xuebo⁷⁴ points out that only a joint effort can build systematic and original public diplomacy thinking and transmit an organic message, contributing to a long-term strategy.⁷⁵ That does not only concerns institutional organs dealing with international issues, but also media and people groups (Zhao cites the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, the Chinese Red Cross, among others).

⁷⁰ Zhang Weiwei 张薇薇 is a research assistant at the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS; *Zhongguo Guoji Wenti Yanjiusuo*), a think tank of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He conducts research on a wide range of foreign policy issues, such as public diplomacy and the Asia-Pacific region

⁷¹ Zhang Weiwei 张薇薇 2009, 13.

⁷² Tang Xiaosong 唐小松 is the dean of the School of Foreign Affairs (*Waijiaoxue Xi*) of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (*Guangdong Waiyu Waimao Daxue*). Tang's main academic interests mainly deal with China-US relations and IR theory. He studied at Hunan Normal University and Fudan University and worked as official interpreter for the municipal government of Zhongshang (Guangdong). In 2007—2008 he was visiting scholar at Harvard University.

⁷³ Tang distinguishes between "competitive diplomacy", consisting in "denigrating others while boasting themselves", and "cooperative diplomacy" (*hezuoxing waijiao*). China already effectively enforces the latter with countries which have similar interests (in Asia and Russia). Instead, public diplomacy is much too weak. Tang Xiaosong 唐小松 2007, 43.

⁷⁴ Zhao Xuebo 赵雪波 is associate professor at the Communication University of China. He got MA in law and PhD degree in literature. He academic research has focused on mass communication and international relations. He has been visiting scholar at the University of Westminster.

⁷⁵ Zhao Xuebo 赵雪波 and Zhang Jian 张键 2010, 59.

Contributions from research centers – and in general the adoption of a more scientific approach to public diplomacy – should be welcomed.⁷⁶

Due to its relative lack of experience and capital, and existing cultural gaps, China should learn from foreign experience and theory.⁷⁷

Tang Xiaosong stresses the lack of a well defined goal. China's diplomacy has been promoting a friendly international environment, learning from the lesson *he wei gui*, "harmony is noble". But, in the globalization era public diplomacy must address more specific objectives.

8.2 Scarce attractiveness of public diplomacy's messages

The criticisms on the predominance of political contents and old propaganda tones in Chinese media are not uncommon in academic discourse. Wang Yiwei⁷⁸ seems worried about the lack of competitiveness of Chinese mass media, which is caused by strict government restrictions.⁷⁹ Su Shumin⁸⁰ denounces the scarce skills of the Chinese media to build public interest⁸¹ in a world of commercialized media, where government messages have to compete with a wider, more diversified and pluralistic range of information available.⁸²

Su and other authors point out the importance of spreading punctual, exhaustive and reliable information to create credible and viable messages and make China's voice be heard abroad on foreign media. They urge that, while ideology is the main content of propaganda indoctrination, public diplomacy must be based on well-known facts. According to Zhang, that is the real turning point from propaganda to public diplomacy.⁸³

The experiences of the confidence crisis during the obscure SARS information campaign and, on the other hand, the successful outcome of open communication during the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, are lessons that have already been learned. This would inevitably imply a change on press control and news circulation by government censorship.

8.3 Demands for openness and interaction

Not only are sincerity and authenticity two keywords of public diplomacy – as Tang points out – but even openness and democratization are often considered as "inevitable".⁸⁴ Zhang Guizhen⁸⁵ notices how, in the era of globalization, non governmental organizations and individuals are called to take interest and take a stand in international issues, under the stimulus of a

⁷⁶ Ren Jingjing 任晶晶 2010.

⁷⁷ Tang Xiaosong 唐小松 2007, 44.

⁷⁸ Wang Yiwei 王义桅 is associate professor of the Center for American Studies (*Meiguo Yanjiu Zhongxin*) of Fudan University (*Fudan Daxue*). He got his Phd degree in 2001 from the Department of International Politics of Fudan University. He was adjunct deputy director of the Department of American Studies of Shanghai Institute for International Studies (*Shanghai Guoji Wenti Yanjiuyuan*, SIIS, 2004) and a fellow of the Yale Center for International and Area Studies (2000-2001). He has published six books and several articles in foreign academic journals such as *The Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, *Asia Perspective*.

⁷⁹ Wang Yiwei 2008.

⁸⁰ Su Shumin 苏淑民 is associate professor at the School of Law and Politics (*Fa Zheng Xueyuan*) of the Beijing International Studies University (BISU, the former Beijing Second Foreign Languages Institute, *Beijing Di Er Waiguoyu Xueyuan*). She got her Phd degree at the Department of international relations (*Guoji Guangxi Xi*) of People University (*Renmin Daxue*).

⁸¹ Su suggests, for instance, to adopt different approaches according to the psychological connotations of the addressed foreign public: more direct and open for a western public, more subtle and indirect for an Asian public. Su Shumin 苏淑民 2008, 46.

After all, Wen Jiabao in person in February 2007 declared to The People's Daily: "We should inform the outside world of the achievements we have made in reform, opening-up and modernization in a comprehensive, accurate and timely manner. At the same time, we should be frank about the problems we have." Wen Jiabao 2007.

⁸² Shambaugh 2007.

⁸³ Zhang Weiwei 张薇薇 2009, 13.

⁸⁴ Tang Xiaosong 唐小松 2007, 42.

better information system. He regards the Olympic Games experience as the starting point of a relentless transition in communication tactics: the simple governmental communication has been transformed into cultural (*renwen*) communication, inspired by both people and officials, caught as an unique entity (*guangmin yi ti*).⁸⁶

According to Su Shumin, China needs to move away from the one-way public information mechanisms to adopt a two-way communications model. Zhao Xuebo urges that China should develop an omnidirectional and multilevel diplomacy able to bravely “come out” (*zou chuqu*), exploiting every form of international dynamic exchange activities and completing the practice of public diplomacy with the active contribution of state leaders, elites and civil society organizations.⁸⁷

8.4 Pluralization of public diplomacy’s action and the role of *huaqiao*

The call for new practitioners of public diplomacy comes primarily from the leadership. Zhao Qizheng speaks of “three aspects” of public diplomacy (government, social elite and common public) and identifies in the mass of foreigners present in China (24,000,000) and the bigger Chinese masses abroad (46,000,000) important voices that must responsibly join the international discourse and increase China’s “discourse power” (*huayuquan*). He cites universities, research centres, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the media and influential persons as “assistants” of government public diplomacy who more properly interject with their international counterparts.⁸⁸

However, while Zhao inexorably indicates the government as the leader of this discourse (the elite occupies the middle ground, with the public at the base), Chinese academics often demand weaker government identity and ask for a smoother presence in public diplomacy; its messages are labeled as tendentious and lacking of persuasive power on the foreign public.⁸⁹ Government should encourage exchanges among individuals, to find a Chinese communicative style also inside global popular culture, like Japanese *manga* and US music. More in general, non-governmental entities such as NGOs, academics, professionals, and Chinese people abroad (exchange students, tourists etc) should play a relevant role alongside the traditional state actors.

Furthermore, in order to successfully achieve its main purpose of illustrating to the world the “real” China, public diplomacy should better understand the public and its visions of the world. Opinion polls and diplomatic envoys abroad could be efficient alleys to gather useful information, but the main challenge is to understand reasons beyond the formation of different opinions, taking into due account cultural and traditional elements (such as different visions of democracy). In this regard, the contribution of overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) is considered potentially of great help. Having lived abroad for a long time, *huaqiao* could better understand the foreign mentality. *Huaqiao* could be China’s voice abroad, clarify age-old problems (such as the Taiwan and Tibet questions) adopting an intermediate vision.

It is evident that *huaqiao* participation in China’s public diplomacy cannot be asymmetric, the two parties have to meet halfway. China’s government would need to balance the message it wants to transmit through *huaqiao*, adapting it not only to the final target (the foreign public), but also to the intermediate target (*huaqiao*); *huaqiao*, in their turn, would be called to contribute to the

⁸⁵ Zhang Guizhen 张桂珍 is professor at the Department of International Communication of the Communication University of China (CUC, *Zhongguo Chuanmei Daxue*), formerly a training center for technicians of the Central Broadcasting Bureau. Zhang is permanent member of the Beijing Federation of Social Science Circles (*Beijingshi Shehui Kexuejiejie Lianhehui*), and a member of the China Institute of Scientific Socialism (*Zhongguo Kexue Shehuizhuyi Xuehui*) and the Institute of World Socialism (*Shijie Shehuizhuyi Zhuangye Weiyuanhui*).

⁸⁶ Zhang Guizhen 张桂珍 2010, 40.

⁸⁷ Zhao Xuebo 赵雪波, and Zhang Jian 张键 2010, 59.

⁸⁸ Zhao Qizheng 赵启正 2009, 2.

⁸⁹ Tang Xiaosong 唐小松 2007, 43.

definition of the message itself and its transmission methods, mediating between their cultural roots and their broad, foreign-oriented mind set.⁹⁰

8.5 Evolution of the concept of public diplomacy in academic circles

The discussion around the new sources of foreign policy and the engagement of non-state actors could be situated in the context of the gradual evolution of the concept of public diplomacy in China. It coincides with the traditional state-centered approach, but while some authors explicitly differentiate public diplomacy (diplomatic action of a governments towards foreign audiences) from people to people diplomacy (the interaction between people and civil societies of various countries), others merge the two definitions into a single concept of public diplomacy. The latter opinion could be interpreted as a willingness to enclose within the concept of public diplomacy that of civil participation. In this case, it would be very close to the concept of “new public diplomacy” as defined by Paul Sharp: “the process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented”.⁹¹ In other words, a communication that involves public, not only addresses it.

According to Ren Jingjing⁹² China’s diplomacy must face a new epochal mission: promoting public diplomacy, following the global tendencies toward a closer relationship between domestic and international situations and toward pluralization of foreign relations. Therefore government must promote a “national public diplomacy” (*quanmin gonggong waijiao*), involving every layer of society.⁹³

Wang Yiwei makes the wish that China’s government, traditionally strong, can become good at using “weak” social resources – such as non governmental organizations and transnational companies – to carry out an integrated public diplomacy.

Zhao Xuebo explicitly talks of changes in the number and type of public diplomacy practitioners. He describes the evolutionary chain as follows:

from governmental diplomatic departments to other government departments ; from government to people (*minjian*); from groups and organizations to individuals.⁹⁴

8.6 The experience of big international events and the conscious representation of national image

The Beijing Olympic Games are commonly considered as the first experience of society’s active participation in public diplomacy. Ordinary people (*laobaixing*) warmly contributed to the preparation of the event, while 2 million volunteers assisted the realization of the event in August 2008, coming in contact with a various international public: not only athletes but also people from every professional sector (tourists, trainers, journalists etc.).

Hu Xianzhang and Zhou Qing'an⁹⁵ summarize four main factors of success of public diplomacy during the Olympics: renovation and use of traditional symbols with attention to media

⁹⁰ This point is deeply linked to the debate on the involvement of China’s civil society in the foreign policy making process. The first studies appeared in the West at the beginning of the new millennium (Lampton 2001), but the analysis is still ongoing (Jakibson, and Knox 2010).

⁹¹ Sharp 2007, 106.

⁹² Ren Jingjing 任晶晶 is a research assistant at the Institute of Contemporary China Studies (*Dangdai Zhongguo Yanjiusuo*, ICCS), a think tank administratively managed by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (*Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan*, CASS), which conduct research in the field of PRC history under the “political guidance” of the CCP Central Secretariat. Ren’s main research interests deal with China diplomatic strategy and IR theory.

⁹³ Ren Jingjing 任晶晶 2010.

⁹⁴ Zhao Xuebo 赵雪波, and Zhang Jian 张键 2010, 60.

⁹⁵ Hu Xianzhang 胡显章 is the director of the Center for Sino-Russian cultural exchanges. He used to be secretary of the party committee of Qinghua University. He is member of the leading small groups for national education. Zhou Qing'an 周庆安 is a researcher at the Center for International Communication Studies of Tsinghua University.

effectiveness; exhibition of spectacular beauty on the stage; national mobilization of volunteers and operators; participation of famous artists.⁹⁶

Jian Wang⁹⁷ finds in national pride, civic culture, public confidence and participation the main elements of a new image of China that was positively projected during the Games.

Even more relevant was the Shanghai Expo experience. Better-off and longer than the Olympics, the Expo involved more people and produced complex relations among officials, individuals, firms and masses (*minzhong*). Young volunteers – often coming from Macao, Taiwan or overseas – and the Chinese public interacted with foreign people and representations of their own countries. Even superficially, they met other countries' models, histories, economies and ways of life. They tasted, individually, the experience of representing their culture and their country, mediating through different cultures.

According to Zhang, their unprecedented participation is a point of no return in the development of China's public diplomacy. Zhang speaks of a "transition from an Olympics to an Expo public diplomacy", whose main characteristics are major participation of the Chinese public (*gongzhong*) and the evolution of China's communication skills.

Choosing the theme "better city, better life", China has shown a mature knowledge of communication strategy. Such topic – that links the Expo to China's economic development – can be shared by developing and developed countries, gathers people with different cultural backgrounds, and attracts attention to the universal issue of the relationship between nature and human civilization. The slogan also goes with the Chinese concept of economic development "with priority to the people (*yi ren wei ben*)".

Big international events have contributed to the transition of China's perception of public diplomacy from a realistic viewpoint – through which diplomatic activity becomes a form of propaganda exclusively used to promote national interests, as it was in the West on the eve of World War II and during the Cold War—, to a constructive one, that sees public diplomacy mostly grounded on social reasons, able to foster the acceptance of widely shared norms.⁹⁸

9. Conclusions

The evolution of China's external propaganda, in terms of both message and actions, is a fact that cannot be neglected or overlooked. Its transaction to the public diplomacy model is currently subject of analysis by both officials and academics.

Despite the concept was previously unfamiliar in China, the definition of public diplomacy is becoming increasingly clear and detailed. It is generally considered to be an inextricable instrument of China's grand strategy, the only means of winning the comprehension and support of the foreign masses,⁹⁹ create the power of cultural attractions and inspire feelings of identification in the foreign public.¹⁰⁰ It breaches the rigid wall of official diplomacy and surpasses the weak traditional people-to-people diplomacy, which lacks authority.

As shown in previous papers,

"The preliminary analysis of the current academic debate on public diplomacy highlights an internal debate embedded in an evolving and complex reality. Besides considerations on soft power and comprehensive national strength, it calls for more openness and reveals a dynamicity that refers to the future of Chinese society and its major participation in the political life of the country.

⁹⁶ Hu Xianzhang 胡显章, and Zhou Qing'an 周庆安 2009.

⁹⁷ Jian "Jay" Wang, a scholar and consultant in the fields of international corporate communication and public diplomacy, is an associate professor of public relations at USC Annenberg's School of Journalism. He is the author of *Foreign Advertising in China: Becoming Global, Becoming Local* and co-author of *China's Window on the World: TV News, Social Knowledge and International Spectacles*.

⁹⁸ Acuto 2010.

⁹⁹ Shan Chengxian 单成现 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Su Shumin 苏淑民 2008.

It shows signs of a slow but gradual domestic transformation, sometimes overlooked from the static viewpoint of China as an ultra-conservative country, full of contradictions.

The declared intention of making the news more true and respondent to the demands of China's public, the new approach to press control and to international communication that acknowledges the new social and market realities of the media, the role of people commonly accepted – at least at a theoretical level – in public diplomacy practice,¹⁰¹ the involvement of the overseas Chinese and the efforts of readjusting the message for the mindset of democratic societies, the inevitable major interaction between foreign cultures and people practicing public diplomacy, all these conditions are new elements in China's foreign policy, bringing innovation to a still – developing system that is striving to achieve perfection.”¹⁰²

Although Chinese civil society is far from enjoying a level of independence comparable to that of more industrialized countries, China's new public diplomacy strategy seems to have taken careful note of how to strengthen the country's image abroad through cultural relations and people's participation.

Naturally one could point out the elements of control in this process of change. The ongoing talks about changing media in China, for instance, could be interpreted as focusing on elements of control, such as the idea of a “new pattern of public opinion guidance” (*yulun yindao xin geju*), expressed by Hu Jintao.¹⁰³

More questions could arise from this preliminary analytic frame: to what extent the public diplomacy strategies recurring in the debate can be useful by themselves in shaping an international environment conducive to China's long-term growth? How much could communicative strategies, instead of political facts, persuade public opinion of the peaceful nature of Chinese development? And to what extent does China's external representation correspond to China's self image and self perception?

Adopting a balanced approach is the only way to try to find answers to these questions, instead of narrowly focusing on change or control, overlooking the evolution of real Chinese media and society.

In the words of Joshua Cooper Ramo: “China is perhaps the most dynamic part of the international order at the moment, and that, to many people, makes it the most frightening. Changing the impression could be China's biggest challenge.”¹⁰⁴

But searching for a truly Chinese perception of China's role in the international scenarios is the biggest challenges for scholars of China studies.

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¹⁰¹ In 2010 Foreign Ministry Yang Jiechi during a press conference at Renda said “The essence of public diplomacy comes from people.(...) I'd like to thank the whole population for its support to public diplomacy”. Yan Feng 2010.

¹⁰² Zappone 2012, 24.

¹⁰³ Bandurski 2008.

¹⁰⁴ Joshua Cooper Ramo. 2007. “China's..”.

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