



National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

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**Navigating Change: Chinese Public Diplomacy
from Soft Power (2004-2012) to Smart Power Projection (2013-2022)**

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The rise of China as a global power, from a Western perspective, or as a “major country” from the Chinese perspective, has significantly impacted the international relations landscape since the early 2000s. As China has ascended in this new role, its leaders pursued the projection of a positive image, exploring new international communication instruments. One of these instruments has been public diplomacy, an atypical form of diplomacy focused on engaging foreign audiences (Smith, J., 2021) (White, R., 2021). Conscious of the benefits and importance of this Western instrument and aware of the new international role that it began to build, China developed PD strategies meant to influence the change or, similarly, aid in the creation of a brand-new perspective on China for international audiences.

At country level, Chinese leadership is a transformational type of leadership. It is rooted, culturally, in the Confucianist philosophy that emphasises the importance of virtue and moral character in leaders¹.

Considering the international context in which China is defining its global power role, using new international communication instruments, like public diplomacy and in light of the Chinese transformational leadership rooted in Confucianist principles and values, I raised my research question:

How did the Chinese leadership change influence the public diplomacy strategies and narratives’ shift from a form of soft power projection (2004-2012) to a form of smart power projection (2013-2022)?

The answer to the research question is my study hypothesis. ***The Chinese leaders’ ideas influenced Chinese public diplomacy strategies and narratives shifting from a form of soft power projection, used mainly during Hu Jintao’s era (2004-2012), to public diplomacy as a smart power projection characteristic of Xi Jinping’s mandates (2013-2022).***

The thesis “Navigating Change: Chinese Public Diplomacy from Soft Power (2004-2012) to Smart Power Projection (2013-2022)” aims to analyse the transition of Chinese public diplomacy as a form of soft power to a form of smart power projection, contextualizing it within the broader international relations framework and exploring the influence of Chinese leaders on PD strategies and narratives.

¹ Confucianism also highlights the need for leaders to have a clear vision and sense of direction. Confucius taught that “the leader must guide his people with virtue and regulate them with ritual,” (Confucius, ca. 475 B.C.E., 1998) implying that an effective leader must be able to establish an ethical and moral framework to guide society. The concept of *guanxi*, or interpersonal relationships, is fundamental to Confucian leadership. Leaders who practice a paternalistic style, which is common in the Chinese context, focus on the well-being the ones they lead, establishing relationships of reciprocity and loyalty; thus, leaders must be seen as figures of moral authority.

In my intent to test my research hypothesis, I have structured my thesis in five main chapters.

Firstly, I considered relevant to begin my research with the theoretical perspectives and literature review on public diplomacy as a form of power projection. The theoretical framework included the definitions of the key terms used in my research (public diplomacy, conceptual boundaries of public diplomacy, power and power forms -soft, hard, smart-) (Nye, J.S., 2004, 2011, 2013), (Melissen, J., 2018), (Snow, N., & Cull, N.J., 2020), (Sevin, E., Metzgar, E. & Hayden, C., 2019) from both a Western and Chinese perspective. I advanced in the study trying to understand how power is explained in different international relations theories and how this work could find its place in the academic debate, by exploring public diplomacy as a form of power projection that would change from soft to smart, according to each actor's specific characteristics, taking into consideration their national interest, and/or leaders' ideas influence. The last subchapter presents brief, updated perspectives on the evolution of public diplomacy: the digitalization of public diplomacy and the challenges involved. Thus, after exploring all the above-mentioned, I understood that there is still a gap in the literature between Western and Chinese scholars, and access to original resources in the Chinese language is still a weakness. Consulting both Western and Chinese PD literature I arrived at the conclusion that there are no conceptual differences of the term "public diplomacy". Chinese scholars analyse Chinese PD through the Western conceptualization and adapt it to the Chinese realities. Moreover, when exploring the conceptual boundaries of Chinese public diplomacy, I have found that there are PD-related concepts, like "external propaganda" that are still reflected in the government's budget. This might require a more complex analysis of the Chinese government's PD-related initiatives. Then, when evaluating the opportunity of analysing PD as a form of power wielding, I found reasoning in international relations theories that explain the forms of power. From the perspective of constructivism in international relations, PD can be regarded as a soft power projection that aims to attract foreign publics through the promotion of a country's culture, political values, and principles (Wendt, A., 1999). Constructivism emphasizes that ideational factors, such as collectively held beliefs, shape the interests and identities of actors in international relations. By engaging in PD, countries seek to construct a positive image of themselves and their values in the minds of foreign citizens. The objective of PD actions is to favourably influence foreign publics, and interconnect citizens around the world. This aligns with the constructivist view that identities and interests of actors are socially constructed and changeable through ongoing processes of social practice and interaction. By fostering cultural

exchanges, educational programs, and people-to-people contacts, PD aims to create a shared understanding and a sense of interconnectedness among citizens globally.

Moreover, the theory of complex interdependences (Keohane & Nye, 1977) complements the realist theory in international relations (Donnelly, J., 2000) by interpreting PD actions as forms of smart power projection (a combination of soft and hard power). By engaging with foreign publics directly, PD creates alternative channels of communication and influence alongside traditional state-to-state diplomacy. This allows countries to address a wider range of issues and build relationships with diverse actors, including non-governmental organizations, businesses, and civil society groups. Moreover, PD can help mitigate potential conflicts and foster cooperation in an interconnected world. By promoting shared values and understanding, PD contributes to a peaceful society, where citizens are closer to one another, and have a better understanding of each other. This aligns with the complex interdependence perspective that emphasizes the importance of non-military instruments in managing international relations.

From the perspective of the hard power component of smart power, characterised by coercion, I analysed Chinese PD actions through the perspective of the international relations theory of realism that posits that states act primarily to ensure their own security and maximize their power. In this context, PD can be seen as a tool to strengthen a country's position on the international stage, creating a positive image that can deter potential adversaries and attract allies – in the case of Chinese PD, it counterbalances the negative narratives about China coming from the West. Although PD seeks to influence foreign public opinion through culture and values, realism emphasizes that these actions align with national interests. Therefore, while PD may appear as a form of cooperation and dialogue, it is ultimately designed to serve the strategic objectives of the state.

Considering the conceptual background presented, PD has inherent limitations. It may be effective in building relationships and enhancing public image, but it does not replace a state's military or economic capabilities. In times of crisis or conflict, hard power (military and economic) remains fundamental for the survival and defence of national interests.

All in all, it is observable, in the international relations scenario, especially when looking at the global powers, that PD actions are shifting progressively from soft power projection to smart power projection. It is, therefore, the case of China too.

Following the literature review and theoretical framework, in the second chapter of the thesis I describe the empirical path that I use to test the hypothesis of my research, that *the Chinese leaders' ideas influenced Chinese public diplomacy strategies and narratives*

shifting from a form of soft power projection, used mainly during Hu Jintao's era (2004-2012), to public diplomacy as a smart power projection characteristic of Xi Jinping's mandates (2013-2022).

The use of mixed research methods helped me draw conclusions on the overall study that represent the answers to my research question: *How did the Chinese leadership change influence the public diplomacy strategies and narratives' shift from a form of soft power projection (2004-2012) to a form of smart power projection (2013-2022)?*

I combined qualitative document analysis with qualitative discourse analysis mainly in Chapter III, which explored the Chinese PD reflected in the CPC, the Chinese government's documents related to PD and the leaders' PD-related public statements. Using these instruments, the main objective of the IIIrd Chapter was to analyse PD-related narratives in the most important speeches of Hu Jintao (2004-2012) and Xi Jinping (2013-2022), explore the leaders' influence on PD actions and apply the findings in Chapters IV and V when referring to Chinese public diplomacy in Europe, and in Romania.

To this extent, I firstly presented a brief overview of the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China, focusing on the PD priorities before Xi Jinping and during his mandate (2004-2022), to outline the change of foreign policy priorities with a focus on PD. Then, I considered it valuable for my research to analyse the Chinese PD budget—as it appears on the official website of the Chinese Ministry of Finance—and to compare it with other PD-related budgets (people-to-people exchanges or external propaganda budget) and see the differences in budget allocation by years. By the end of this chapter, I found that in the early 2000s, China's public diplomacy efforts focused on promoting its culture, values, and beliefs to foreign audiences. This soft power approach was initiated by former President Hu Jintao (2002-2012), who argued that culture is a mainstream instrument maintaining domestic cohesion and expanding China's international influence. Thus, he established the preferred form of Chinese PD: cultural diplomacy. Nevertheless, he publicly assumed the power projection of this PD endeavour: "cultural soft power". Part of Hu's PD initiatives was the creation and expansion of the Confucius Institutes, worldwide.

China rapidly expanded its state-owned media outlets, such as Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International, and China Central Television, to tell its story and counteract misconceptions about it.

Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, China's public diplomacy strategy shifted towards a smart power approach, integrating both soft (attractiveness and persuasion) and hard power elements (coercion and payment). Xi emphasized the importance of projecting a positive

image of China while also asserting its interests on the global stage. This transition was driven by China's desire to be part of the international community discourse and the international agenda, aligned with its national interests.

For instance, Xi Jinping's concept of a "community with a shared future for mankind" has become a central theme in China's PD efforts, promoting the idea of win-win cooperation and mutual benefit, assuming China's new role on the international stage, ready to offer "public goods" to the international community. Similarly, the Belt and Road Initiative, launched by Xi in 2013, has been a key component of China's smart power strategy, combining economic incentives with cultural attractiveness.

In the IVth Chapter of the thesis that dealt with the Chinese Public Diplomacy in Europe (2004-2022) I used both qualitative and quantitative documents and discourse analysis related to Chinese PD in Europe. The chapter begins by highlighting the distinctions between EU-China relations and the China-CEEC Cooperation Framework, thereby exposing the different PD strategies and instruments employed by China in these two different cooperation contexts. Understanding the distinction between EU-China relations and the China-Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) Cooperation Framework is important for understanding China's multifaceted approach to public diplomacy in Europe. These two frameworks represent different strategic priorities and methods of engagement by China and reflect the different understandings of China. Eastern European countries, many of which were once part of the Soviet sphere of influence, have a unique historical relationship with China. After the Cold War, these nations transitioned from socialism to market economies, often looking to China as a model of economic growth. This historical legacy has fostered a sense of familiarity and a nuanced understanding of China, which contrasts with the more sceptical and critical views often held in Western Europe and North America. Eastern Europe has engaged with China through initiatives such as the 16+1 format, which aimed to enhance cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. In contrast, Western countries, while also interested in economic relations, have often approached China with caution, focusing on issues of human rights, security, and geopolitical competition. This difference in approach has led to a more complex understanding of China's role in Eastern Europe, where economic pragmatism often outweighs ideological concerns.

China's public diplomacy efforts in Europe have emphasized cultural exchanges, educational programs, and media initiatives aimed at promoting a positive image of China in the region. The strategic use of cultural diplomacy has allowed China to counter negative perceptions and build a more favourable narrative, particularly in the context of its economic

rise and global ambitions. The rise of digital platforms has transformed the landscape of public diplomacy, allowing China to engage with European audiences more directly and effectively. The use of social media and online campaigns has enabled China to disseminate its narratives and counter misinformation, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these efforts, China's public diplomacy in Europe faces significant challenges. The rise of scepticism towards China, particularly regarding human rights issues and geopolitical tensions, has complicated its diplomatic outreach. The so-called "wolf warrior" diplomacy, characterized by aggressive defence of China's interests, has sometimes undermined the softer aspects of its public diplomacy, leading to an additional hard power projection and reflecting the smart power projection characteristic of Xi's era.

Finally, Chapter V, related to the study of the Chinese Public Diplomacy in Romania (2004-2022) I combined both qualitative and quantitative analyses. This chapter embodies the case study of Chinese PD in Romania between 2004 and 2022. It operationalizes all the findings from the previous chapters and applies the research framework for Chinese PD abroad using Romania as a case study. To begin with, I conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of government documents and information from official websites related to the bilateral relationship between China and Romania (Chinese and Romanian government websites, Chinese and Romanian Embassies' websites). Subsequently, when conducting the study on China's digital (public) diplomacy in Romania, using the Embassy of China as one of the principal Chinese PD actors in Romania, I used hybrid data analysis as a quantitative method to extract numerical data from the official website of the Chinese Embassy (e.g. number of PD-related articles and PD dimension/ type of PD-related article) and the Facebook page of the Embassy of China (e.g. number of posts and videos, number of likes & hearts, number of comments, number of Embassy replies to comments/ reactions).

This chapter investigates the Chinese PD efforts in Romania, and how China's "old comrade" relation with Romania is challenged by Romania's membership status within the EU, NATO, and the strategic partnership with the USA. Therefore, my thesis's research proposal becomes even more relevant for the academic debate, as there is a need to look at these sensitive changes in international relations and their impact on the relations between states, as well as on the people-to-people level, and explore how China tries to engage the Romanian public through public diplomacy. Comparing Chinese PD in EU and Chinese PD in Romania, it was found that even though they share some common elements, such as the emphasis on cultural diplomacy and economic engagement, there are some specific differences in their objectives, messages, and instruments, influenced mainly by the bilateral relations between the two

countries, Romania's former communist country experience and its membership in alliances like NATO. China's PD in the EU is more comprehensive and aimed at shaping the overall narrative about China, while its PD in Romania is more focused on bilateral relations and economic cooperation.

Overall, my doctoral thesis might bring both theoretical and practical contributions to the PD research area. Theoretically, the research tried to understand concepts like "public diplomacy" and "power" from both a Western and Chinese perspective and how the Chinese leaders' ideas influenced the shift from soft to smart power projection through PD strategies, throughout 2004-2022. Based on my findings related to characteristics of Chinese public diplomacy, further similar country-based case studies might be conducted to observe the differences and similarities among the ways Chinese public diplomacy strategies, instruments and narratives are being used in different countries.

The evolution of Chinese public diplomacy from soft to smart power reflects China's growing confidence and assertiveness on the global stage. As China's influence continues to rise, its leaders will likely further refine their PD strategies to navigate the complex international relations landscape. Understanding the dynamics of Chinese public diplomacy is crucial for scholars and policymakers seeking to engage with China and anticipate its future actions on the world stage.