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China's public diplomacy in Europe

Abstract

The article examines proactive efforts of the PRC government to boost Chinese soft power in Europe. Based on Nicholas Cull's taxonomy of public diplomacy, the author outlines the main tools adopted by the Chinese government in its pursuit of a more favorable image of China among Europeans. The article concludes that while a number of challenges that prevent China from a successful implementation of its public diplomacy still exist, a shared interest of both parties to engage in a constructive dialogue could be deemed as a good starting point for further promotion of China's public diplomacy.

Keywords: public diplomacy, soft power, PRC, Sino-European relations, cultural diplomacy

Active use of public diplomacy tools aimed at creating a favourable image of the country on the world stage has become one of China’s foreign policy distinctive features of the last decade. In a relatively short period of time People’s Republic of China has not only managed to develop traditional tools of communication with foreign audiences, such as cultural exchanges and humanitarian assistance diplomacy, but work out new areas such as event diplomacy, spreading of language and culture through the Confucius Institutions and so on. Besides, it is possible to track some peculiarities that are characteristic of China’s policy in different regions. While the idea of common destiny and building of a more fair global order is the cornerstone of the China leaders’ policy in relation to developing countries, the ideas of peaceful coexistence of countries with different political and social order, the importance of maintaining uniqueness of various cultures in the globalization era and the need for every country to choose its own way of development are continually and systematically popularised by China in relation to the developed Western countries.

One of the leading public diplomacy scholars, British researcher Nicholas Cull has defined five principal public diplomacy elements: 1. Listening. Search and collection of relevant information is the most important task, because it is the very basis the public diplomacy is built on. 2. Advocacy. Popularization of one’s values, explanation of political steps and other information work allow improving of the public image. 3. Cultural diplomacy. Stimulating interest in the language, literature and art of the country contribute to deeper mutual understanding. 4. Exchange diplomacy. Invitation of international students or specialists allows not only establish scientific ties, but let foreigners get to know life in the country from the inside. 5. International broadcasting. Television and radio broadcasting for foreign public is the most important source of information about the country. Based on this classification the article will examine public diplomacy of PRC

in relation to the European Union and identify peculiarities and challenges the country faces in this area.

**Sino-European relations background**

The first important joint documents to largely determine further development of Sino-European relations were Trade Agreement of 1978 and Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement of 1985. In mid 1990-ties, when increasing political and economical status of China became apparent, the European Union realised the need for expanding not only cooperation in economical aspects, but working out of complex strategy in relation to rapidly developing Asian country as well. In 1995 first such document was adopted "A Long Term Policy for China-Europe Relations". Here it was, in particular, stated that despite serious cool down in relations following the 1989 Tiananmen Square events, Europe needed to redefine its views in the spirit of the "new Asia strategy", develop long-term bilateral relationships that reflected China's political, economic, regional as well as global status, which could become a cornerstone in Europe's external relations, both with Asia and globally².

Not only the importance of China as a trade partner, largest market outlet and goods supplier was stressed in the strategy, but the need for co-operation in a wide spectrum of globally important challenges, ranging from nuclear non-proliferation to economic security was underlined in the strategy as well. The need for active China involvement in international processes and mutual understanding between the parties were also mentioned in this document. But at the same time the strategy firmly stressed the concern about human rights problem in China, because commitment to human rights and freedoms is at the heart of European Union policy worldwide and China is no exception³.

Afterwards, whenever co-operating with China, the European Union has constantly included an agenda item on human rights. For example, accession of China to the WTO in 1998 document titled “Building a Comprehensive Partnership with China” was deemed as a tool to exert pressure on the human rights issue⁴. 1995 saw the beginning of annual bilateral China-EU dialogues on the the human rights issue. Moreover, various educational workshops were conducted for Chinese and European human rights experts under the auspices of the European Commission of Human Rights, where they could exchange their views on the situation. By the way, P.R.C. uses this platform actively to gain advantage to its policy: consistently expressing the will to co-operate on the human rights issue, China persistently stresses the importance of a distinct Chinese development way and the right to pursue this way.

With the beginning of 2000s Chinese leaders recognised the need to form their own strategy in relation to the EU. The first such document appeared in 2003. In this document the Chinese side underlined that despite the fact that both parties had no conflict of interests and they do not pose a threat to each other, the distinctions in historical experience, cultural heritage, political system and level of economical development govern the differences in views on various problems, which is quite natural.

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³ Ibidem.

Should co-operation be in the spirit of bilateral respect and trust, this by no means will affect the relationships. In this paper it was also stressed that the EU should rigorously follow “One China” principle in relation to the Taiwanese issue and do not maintain relations with the Tibet refugee government. The bulk of the document was dedicated to co-operation in various fields: ecology, high technologies, agricultural industry, education, etc.

The level and speed of P.R.C.-EU relations seen in the beginning of the XXI century allowed experts to speak about birth of an example of “exemplary co-operation” between two international entities. This was conditioned not only by strong economic ties, but by absence of such an often problem point as “security issue”. Unlike, for example, in US-China relations, where the security issues play an important role, P.R.C. and EU do not see each other as a direct military threat. However, despite successful and fruitful co-operation in economy, political relations of the two actors remained a weak component.

Hard-line response from the EU to the riots in Tibet in 2008, meetings of some of the European leaders with Dalai Lama, in spite of the reaction of the official China, attempts to boycott the Olympic Games in Beijing resulted in breakdown in relations. Public-opinion polls testified that it was not only China’s public image that was in decline, but Chinese respondents saw European people in a more negative way as well. This lead to clear understanding that in spite of good economics relations (in 2012 trade turnover amounted to €433.6 billion, services – to €49.8 billion), political and cross-cultural dialogue was needed, because the gains achieved could vanish when there is lack of mutual understanding and trust.

Therefore, the primary task of P.R.C. public diplomacy to the EU was establishment of a more trusting partnership and watering-down discussions on domestic issues (the most pressing one being human rights observance).

**China’s public diplomacy strategy: culture and education**

In China’s opinion, the most important factor, preventing true mutual understanding and acceptance of each other by different cultures, is limited information in Europe about China and preconceived interpretation of this information. P.R.C. representatives remind their European counterparts constantly that despite the differences, China and the EU have much in common: both parties stand for multipolar world, guiding role of the UN and addressing global challenges such as terrorism and the environment protection.

In their own turn, European researchers think that the main cause is the system of values in China and in Europe that differs too much. For European people such matters as protection of freedom of speech and human rights, rule of law, etc. are top-priority, these issues are given serious attention. This difference cre-

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ates a serious barrier, which is difficult to overcome by mere increase of awareness of the European people. This point of view is indirectly proved by public opinion polls, which show that European people are concerned greater about human rights as compared to other problems associated with China. For example, when in 2008 European people were asked to name the most important event, 33% of French respondents and 26% of German respondents replied it was the Tibet problem. For reference, in the USA this reply was chosen by only 7% of respondents.

Nevertheless, in its public diplomacy strategy in Europe China sees cultural diplomacy as a core element. In October 2007 China and EU signed joint declaration on cultural co-operation, destined to become a documental base for conducting joint events, sharing experiences in the field of culture and a starting point for development of a policy of promoting inter-cultural dialogue. Within this framework China and the EU conducted first summit on cultural co-operation in 2010, and at the 13th P.R.C.-EU summit 2012 year was declared a year of inter-cultural dialogue. Under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture of China a range of major cultural events was held in European countries: China culture years in various European countries, China Now festival that took place in Great Britain in 2008.

Besides, China took part in the Frankfurt Book Fair (Frankfurter Buchmesse) as a guest of honour in 2009, and in the same 2009 year major culture heritage festival “Europalia” was dedicated to China. It was second time in history of the festival held in Brussels when an Asian country was presented (Japan was the first in 1989). At this festival China presented more than 500 events: exhibitions, concerts, book fairs, etc. Chinese cinematic production has been actively entering the European market. Starting in 2008 CCTB-6 in co-operation with Cannes International Film Festival has been conducting “China’s night”, an event showing Chinese films. Chinese actors visit this event, with traditional Chinese art being demonstrated, accompanied by colourful pyrotechnic show. Chinese cinematic production has lately been more often awarded recognition at the world-renowned international film festivals, conducted in Europe. Filmmaker Jia Zhangke got the highest award for his film “Still Life” at the Venice Film Festival in 2006, and in 2013 he won the award for best screenplay with film “A Touch of Sin”. Film “Black Coal, Thin Ice” directed by Diao Yinan was awarded in two nominations at the 2014 Berlin International Film Festival: “best film” and “best actor” (Liao Fan).

Diverse work in the field of education is being conducted. Along with China’s visit card – Confucius Institutes (with France at the forefront with 14 Institutes, Great Britain – 13, Germany – 11, Italy – 9), bilateral P.R.C-EU co-operation in the field of education was actively formed. In 2007 joint declaration on co-

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10 Ibidem.
operation in the field of higher education and vocational training was signed by the parties. Key role of education in improving mutual understanding and full-fledged strategic partnership was recognised in the declaration. It was as early as 2007, when China launched language exchange programme, aimed at introducing Chinese culture and language to European people. Within the framework of the programme 100 students from the EU countries received educational grants to study in China.

Another large-scale project, EU Window, was launched in 2008. This project, tailored for two years, was designed for teachers of Chinese and directors of schools where Chinese language is taught. In general, about 10,000 students from the EU were taught in China as per various grant programs over the period from 1997 to 2010. The first round of the EU-China high level dialogue took place in Brussels in April 2012. This resulted in signing of a declaration on deepening of the bilateral dialogue to build mutual understanding between the nations through expanding of contacts between citizens. Based on the results, China approved the following projects: increase the number of students from Europe in 2012 – 2016 up to 10000, up to 200 students under the Window in EU program and up to 2000 students and teachers according to Academic Mobility. P.R.C. planned inviting 1000 students from the EU countries to study Chinese language, and 30 civil servants whose job is connected with China. Besides, it was planned to create centres on analysing P.R.C.-EU co-operation.

International broadcasting and communication with European public

In the last few years the number of Chinese journalists in Europe increased considerably: from 5 people in 2001 to 43 in 2012. Xinhua news agency opened its headquarters in Brussels and also 42 offices all over the European countries, broadcasting in 25 world languages. It often happens that Chinese mass media compete with European news agencies; for example Chinese newsmakers were the first to declare victory of the French president Francois Hollande, even faster than their French counterparts. Moreover, Chinese top-level officials use the European mass media as a ground for dialogue with readers from Europe. For example, in advance of his Europe trip in 2011 Premier of the State Council of the P.R.C. Li Keqiang published a range of articles in major European mass media: Spanish newspaper El Pais, German newspaper Siiddeutsche Zeitung, largest English-language newspaper the Financial Times. The last named newspaper
published the article headed “The world should not fear a growing China”. In this article the author reaffirmed China’s commitment to peaceful development way, interest in solving global problems and co-operation with other countries, underlined China’s contribution to overcoming the financial crisis, assistance in peaceful resolution of local conflicts and active participation in the activities of the international organisations. The author concluded that the world and China need each other equally to ensure bright future around the world.  

In 2013 Li published his article in mass media of Central and Eastern Europe titled “Greetings to participants of second meeting of heads of government of China and Central and Eastern European countries”, where among other he stressed historical connection of the counties: “more than 60 years ago countries of Central and Eastern Europe were the first to recognise young People’s Chinese Republic. This opened a new era in our friendly co-operation. Despite natural calamities and economic difficulties, we have always helped each other in most difficult moments. They say “A friend in need is a friend indeed”. It is this friendship, weathered through grief and hardships, that is kept in hearts of China and Central and Eastern Europe countries’ citizens.”

As a result of China’s vigorous activity in Europe a rather contradictory situation formed: on the one hand cultural events enjoyed great success, European people gradually became familiar with the art and traditions of the country with pleasure, but on the other hand the level of trust to the state still remained at lowest points. In other words Chinese people, culture and arts are accepted by the European people, but the attitude to political system, social structure remains generally negative and even becomes worse. Positive is the fact that despite presence of controversial matters, both parties recognise the need and inevitability of maintaining constructive relations. Furthermore, unlike in the USA, the “Chinese threat” theory has not been as widely spread in Europe and the human rights problem remains major controversial point in the relations of the countries. Interest in each other is the fertile ground for further deepening of mutual trust.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of China’s public diplomacy in the European Union, we can conclude that China strives to develop all types of public diplomacy: listening that includes monitoring of opinions and comments on Chinese policy, as well as following up on any scrutiny of it; advocacy that encompasses policy elucidation on inflammatory issues (White Papers of the Government) and creation of information awareness (press conferences); cultural diplomacy that is advanced by Confucius Institutes, cultural events, promotion of Chinese cinema, art and literature; education exchanges that incorporate study abroad programs, as well as research and expert exchange networks; international broadcasting that involves creation of Internet content and production of radio and TV programs in foreign languages.

Yet China faces a number of challenging obstacles in the pursuit of soft power. First of all, it is the profound difference between the West and the East civilizations that determined disparate political and social orders of the countries. Overall European surge
of interest in Chinese culture, art and language cannot transcend suspicious and alarmist stance on China’s political and social systems. Therefore, a lot remains to be done for China to reach one of its main diplomatic goals in the region, i.e., to change the perception of China as a country that does not share “universal” Western values and, consequently, is an ideologically antagonist of the West; and to substitute that public perception with China as a country that follows its own unique, civilization-bound laws. Second of all, Chinese government lacks experience in successful implementation of public diplomacy, especially in Western countries, which might lead to failure or adverse effects of some public diplomacy methods.

Bibliography


The purpose of the article is the analysis how the process of institutionalization in People's Republic of China (PRC) is evolving and how it is being influenced by particular actors.

I assume that the role of single actors for the functioning of the Chinese state is of the utmost importance. Every time a rotation of positions amongst the top authorities takes place soon afterwards political, social, cultural and economic structures are deeply influenced: after Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao or Xi Jinping came to power they had created certain narratives regarding particular ideologies or events, which have greatly shaped state's structures. However, the attitude of each one was different, they were implementing various strategies of “shaping” events, which led to country's different functioning and the process of institutionalization took different forms. Thanks to observation of entanglements between events and structures it is possible to see how China is functioning.

I am analyzing these changes through discourse analysis, carrying out research on daily newspapers. As the press in PRC is dependent upon CPC, its content is to a great extent controlled and manipulated by party's authorities. By analyzing the discourse on central and local levels it is possible to see how particular leaders try to construct narratives around certain events that later on allow them to translate these...