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Backpack Diplomacy ^[1]

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Before travelling to Beijing, United States Ambassador Gary Locke bought coffee at a Seattle airport Starbucks while carrying his backpack. Several days later, United States Vice President Joe Biden had lunch at a small Beijing eatery after talks with high-level Chinese leaders. The two scenes seemed ordinary to Americans, but they were so unusual for the Chinese people that stories about the two American officials went viral. The mainstream media grouped the two stories together as they both represented informality and down-to-earth behaviors of the U.S. officials. Some Chinese netizens even compared them with Chinese officials' lavish behaviors. The most quoted article was Chen Weihua's writing in China Daily that "in China even a township chief, which is not really that high up in the hierarchy, will have a chauffeur and a secretary to carry his bag." However, close scrutiny of the two stories reveals that it caused different reactions among Chinese netizens, as Ambassador Locke received overwhelmingly positive comments, while public opinion of Mr. Biden's lunch was negative.

Both political figures were "advertising" America since the two stories caused online buzz, but Ambassador Locke definitely brought a more desirable outcome with his "backpack diplomacy". Prior to the "backpack" incident, the discussion surrounding the appointment of Ambassador Locke was the advantage his Chinese heritage would provide him in reaching out to the Chinese public. In fact, the first ethnically Chinese U.S. ambassador to China had already enjoyed an advantage of attracting Chinese public attention, even before he stepped onto this country. This was a perfect starting point for U.S. public diplomacy in China because the hard work of introducing the new ambassador to the public has already been accomplished. So when the photo of him buying a coffee at Starbucks was posted online, the spotlight immediately focused on him. Media coverage followed and the online community gossiped about his family and Chinese background. The fact that he is the first Chinese-American Ambassador to China and orders coffee himself while carrying his backpack amazed Chinese people.

Five days after Gary Locke's arrival to Beijing, U.S. Vice President Biden paid a visit to China. Biden's visit to China received large public attention because of his high political position and the economic agenda he was going to address. After high-level talks with Chinese leaders, he ate noodles and dumplings at a family owned restaurant. China's state media captured his low-key visit to the small restaurant, and it subsequently aroused wide online discussion. Chinese netizens called it "noodle diplomacy". However, instead of praising him as another practical and informal American politician, Chinese netizens focused more on how much he paid for the meal. Biden and his entourage ordered a hearty meal, but it cost them just over \$12 or 79 Renminbi. Frequent customers pointed out that such a large meal would have cost more if it was not Biden. Suspicion developed toward Biden's "Noodle Diplomacy", which may exemplify an under-valued RMB, a common American criticism. Hence, a newly created image: "Biden eats noodle"-- meaning "using less money to gain things worth much more"

became popular in China's blogosphere overnight. Many netizens used it to mock unrealistic efforts, such as winning Chinese minds and hearts through a single lunch. An article on China.org.cn claimed that Biden's 'Noodle Diplomacy' is "a tiny example of America's sheer brilliance when it comes to public relations", but it was not as "brilliant" as it seemed. Many Chinese could tell it was a contrived political show, deliberately designed to feed the press and create a positive image.

The contrast of two distinct reactions to the American politicians sets an excellent model for public diplomacy analysis. Public diplomacy practitioners, students and scholars are aware that one of the critical obstacles for public diplomacy is resource deficiency, which includes the lack of funding and personnel. In other words, the scope of influence is a problem. We have seen U.S. cultural events and dialogues targeting Chinese audiences, such as the U.S. Embassy in Beijing organizing a meeting with Chinese bloggers to discuss current issues. The meeting was broadcast online, but not many viewed the conversation. Many similar examples could prove that the most critical issue every country should tackle in public diplomacy is getting the attention of the foreign audience. Celebrities, especially political celebrities can produce cost-effective public diplomacy by taking advantage of their fame. The beauty of celebrity diplomacy is that celebrities are able to attract public attention effortlessly. Both Biden and Locke successfully attracted Chinese attention, with which any diplomatic approaches can be magnified.

However, the final goal of public diplomacy is not attraction. It is winning the hearts and minds of the foreign public, changing foreign negative perceptions to positive ones, and pressing a foreign government by influencing their public. Therefore, getting everyone to listen is just step one. Ultimately, the content of your speech determines its effectiveness. But, do not hasten into designing your message just yet. Let us go back to Gary Locke's "backpack diplomacy" and Joe Biden's "noodle diplomacy". As pointed out earlier, Locke enjoyed mostly positive comments, while Biden's were controversial. One of the obvious reasons behind the different feedbacks is that while Locke's visit to Starbucks was authentic, Biden's visit to the small restaurant was intentional. Genuine behaviors have better effects because audiences are not favorable to contrived plots. More specifically, the Chinese public is familiar and even tired with political shows conducted by Chinese leaders. It is not rare to see Chinese leaders going to small villages and having simple lunches with villagers. Biden's lunch only added one more example to that list. On the contrary, seeing a high-level official with his family at an airport is unusual, let alone seeing him order coffee by himself. Furthermore, as Locke later said to the press, buying himself coffee and carrying his own bags is common for him. This genuineness earned him praise. Now the challenge for Locke and his team would be how to sustain his down-to-earth image.

Lastly, social networking sites as media channels are critical to successful public diplomacy. Biden's "noodle diplomacy" was first picked up by Chinese state media, but Locke's backpack photo was taken and posted onto Weibo (China's version of Twitter) by a Chinese entrepreneur. His intention was not to show the down-to-earth side of Locke. His original microblog post says he saw the Ambassador at the Seattle airport and wished him good luck. People tend to trust their friends more than traditional media, especially in a country with information censorship. In such countries, projecting information through traditional media may weaken the effectiveness of the message, while people-to-people communication can be more powerful. Moreover, the twitter-like microblogging sites are perfect tools to create buzz and make the message viral, so public diplomacy should make full use of social networking sites and design campaigns and activities tailored to online platforms.

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