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MPD in China 2013: The Four Schools of Chinese PD ^[1]

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One of the most vivid moments from our time in China came over dinner with a group of academics from a prominent think tank on public diplomacy. Over fried rice and stewed pork, our hosts mentioned that they may be able to help us with our plans to go out for a Beijing specialty – Peking duck – for dinner the following night. One of the most famous duck restaurants in town, it seems, had placed a special request for a stack of publications on public diplomacy, and owed them a favor. While I know public diplomats are fans of hyphenated diplomacy, this form of duck diplomacy was taking it a step too far.

Yet this episode was completely illustrative of the popularity public diplomacy has gained in China over the past few years – because it is “in”, everybody, even restaurateurs, wants to participate in it. With the advancement of the concept by the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and governmental bodies, there is an impetus from the powers that be for China to focus on developing more effective public diplomacy as an element of China’s peaceful rise. Yet upon deeper reflection, because the very notion of public diplomacy is still in its nascence, how to implement an effective public diplomacy strategy remains highly debated.

One of the best depictions of the contrasting views on public diplomacy in China came from Professor Zhao Kejin of the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, who classifies the study and practice of public diplomacy into four schools: the ‘Soft Rise School,’ who see public diplomacy as a means of advancing China’s soft power abroad and as an alternative to Western norms, the ‘National Image School,’ who see the main goal of public diplomacy as advancing China’s national image and countering Western biases, the ‘National Interest School,’ who feel that public diplomacy won’t be able to help solve the real problems of conflicting national interest and thus it doesn’t deserve much investment, and the ‘Discursive Power School,’ which seeks to advance Chinese discursive power to offset the “China threat theory” and to give China greater voice in world affairs.



MPD delegates attend a meeting with students and scholars at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy

Throughout our meetings we found each of these views represented, indicating a real lack of consensus about the role of Chinese public diplomacy that can be seen in its actions: the Confucius Institutes advance one view of China, while the Made in China advertisements and representation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs advance markedly different views. The added pressure of representing Chinese foreign policy to the domestic public, perhaps the dominant focus of Chinese public diplomacy at the moment, means that attention is limited and resources stretched in attempting to improve China's global image.

Yet these discrepancies over how to conceptualize and practice effective public diplomacy mean there is an opportunity for students and academics, particularly those embedded in China, to be innovative in their research and delve deeper into how public diplomacy can function in the Chinese context. Defining a public diplomacy with Chinese characteristics is the next great project for scholars of Chinese politics, made ever more important alongside China's rise on the world stage.

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