

## **Cyber Public Diplomacy as China's Smart Power Strategy in an Information Age: Case Study of Anti-Carrefour Incident in 2008**

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### **Abstract**

The Internet and related technologies have played a decisive role in both enhancing productivity in business and facilitating the sociopolitical development of the last decade of the twentieth century. The increase in use of these highly networked modern technologies is also leading to the rise of many new global issues. In the case of China, the government is attempting to use this new technology to bridge the digital divide with the developed world and leapfrog into the advanced information industry. At the same time it is also developing information policies to suit its political interests. This article argues that China's promotion of information is by its nature a "soft power" strategy, and further that this strategy has become one of China's most important governing mechanisms in the modern Information Age.

This article begins with a general literature review on notions of soft power, smart power, and public diplomacy, laying the foundation for the subsequent discussion on China's application of these tools into its governance. It further focuses on China's emerging state-society relations in the Internet Age, focusing largely from citizens' online participation. To approach this issue, a case study of the "Anti-Carrefour Incident" is examined to show China's smart power strategy as incorporating both soft power and public diplomacy. Along with the rising power of citizens' discourse power, the effectiveness and constraint of China's smart power in the modern era of globalisation are also discussed.

**Keywords:** *soft power, smart power, public diplomacy, cyber public diplomacy, anti-Carrefour incident*

**JEL classification:** *F51, F59, N45*

## 1. Introduction: Understanding Soft Power, Smart Power and Public Diplomacy

In 1990 Joseph Nye proposed the idea of “soft power” with the publication of *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.<sup>1</sup> This book led to a wave of discussion on soft power in the field of international relations. Nye classified soft power as the ability to affect others behaviour and accomplish individual aims. Hard power on the other hand aims to achieve goals through the use or threat of force. The soft power resources of a nation lie in its culture (their appeal to others), political values (when they are consistent both home and abroad), and its diplomacy (when it is legal, and has moral authority). Nye and Melissen indicated that soft power should be promoted through the use of “public diplomacy”, while Mark Leonard showed how soft power and public diplomacy are intricately linked with his three dimensions of public diplomacy in news management, strategic communications, and relationship building, all being forms of soft power as described by Nye. Nye further argued that countries should not depend solely on either hard power or soft power; instead they should integrate both of these forms of power to create “smart power”<sup>2</sup> as the new tool of public diplomacy.<sup>3</sup>

Public diplomacy as a tool of governance was first proposed by Murrow, the former minister of the US Information Agency (USIA), commonly considered to be the propaganda mouthpiece of the government. In a 1963 speech, Murrow stated that the difference between public diplomacy and traditional diplomacy was that the actors are not merely the government, but also non-governmental individuals or organizations. Following from this, Manheim re-classified diplomacy as having four distinct forms in government to government, diplomat to diplomat, people to people, and government to people, and emphasized that public diplomacy should be treated as an important part of foreign affairs.

Evan Potter indicated that, “Public diplomacy<sup>4</sup> is the behaviour through which a government attempts to affect the opinion of people or elites from other countries, aiming to make the actions of the target country favourable for the concerned government. To promote their national objectives and gain benefits for the public, governments use several methods such as international broadcasting, cultivation of foreign reporters and scholars, cultural activities, educational exchanges and scholarships, planned visits and meetings, and publications”.<sup>5</sup> In recent years, the differences between strategic needs, research approaches, and practical applications among various countries have created four distinct types of public diplomacy, namely Public Diplomacy, Media Diplomacy, Informal Diplomacy, and Digital Diplomacy. Despite the differences among the four types of public diplomacy, Fisher and Bröckerhoff argued that they all share the key objective of gaining “influence”.

Based on the above literature review on “soft power”, “smart power”, and “public diplomacy”, the key point of this study has been established. This study will regard the hard power of China in the form of its military and economy as a known factor, with the soft power of public diplomacy being the area of interest. In the digital information era, China’s diplomatic resources are no longer restricted to the hard power of its military and economy; with a new emphasis on soft power through public diplomacy, taking China closer to Nye’s idea of “smart power”. Under such a framework, this study will focus on New Media and further explain the meaning, forms, and factors of the Chinese government’s cyber public diplomacy during the “2008 Anti-Carrefour Incident”.

## 2. The Development of Public Diplomacy in China

In December 2003, the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, made a speech at Harvard University entitled “Rediscover China”. In this speech he for the first time comprehensively outlined the strategic thinking behind “China’s Peaceful Rise”, a theory based on the “Harmonious Society”<sup>6</sup> idea raised in China’s sixteenth plenary session in October 2006. Following this speech Hu Angang stated that “harmony has become the largest soft power resource in China.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite China’s attempt to focus on soft power, its newfound economic and military power gained from being the “World Factory” meant that an image of negative hard power still hung over the country. This negative image led to the rise of the “China Threat Theory” in international public opinion and made the government realize the importance of “discourse power”.<sup>8</sup> The government realized that, in alongside the development of its hard power, soft power diplomacy should be used to rebuild the image of the country so as to achieve its strategic objective of “China’s Peaceful Rise”.<sup>9</sup>

Not until recent years did the practice of “public diplomacy” and “soft power” appear in China. However, the conceptual thinking behind the practice has existed for a long time.<sup>10</sup> During China’s formative years, the importance of controlling public opinion abroad to strengthen domestic governance was understood by the party leadership. They knew that in order to maintain support from farmers and labourers, while at the same time continuing to develop the economy so as to negate the threat of the USA, they needed to influence public opinion both at home and abroad. Indeed, before the establishment of the Chinese government, Edgar Snow, an American journalist, once interviewed Mao Zedong and published *Red Star over China*, in which Mao was modelled as a hero for liberating the Chinese, leading to initial support for Mao from international public opinion. This trend continued after the establishment of the Chinese government, with the 1957 Panda Diplomacy with Russia being used to symbolize the friendly relationship

between the two countries. This act was later repeated with Pandas also being gifted to the USA, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> A further significant act of soft power was the 1971 Ping-Pong Diplomacy which led directly to the restoration of diplomatic flights between China and the USA during the Cold War.<sup>12</sup> The positive international public opinion was seen to have direct benefits for China, with Deng Xiaoping in 1979 declaring that the success of China's reform and opening to the world was directly related to an increase of support from international public opinion.

This positive image was disrupted with the political transformation of Eastern Europe in 1989, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, which made China the leader of the remaining socialistic communist countries. This position saw China become the focus of criticism from the west, with the development of critical theories such as "China Threat Theory"<sup>13</sup> and "Peace Progress".<sup>14</sup> In response to these, Deng began promoting China's new policy of "Against Peace Progress"<sup>15</sup>, while continuing China's process of reform and opening up through the 1990s.

The arduous international environment further led to China emphasizing the necessity of using public diplomacy to remodel its image, and counter unfavourable international public opinion. This recognition led to a focus on "soft power" and the development of the "peaceful rise" theory. This focus was evident during the national conference on publicizing China overseas in 1999, with the General Secretary of the CPC's Central Committee, Jiang Zemin, indicating that "we should stand at a high start-point and review the situation, size up the events, and improve our overseas publicity; we should generate a positive image proportional to our status as a leading nation, as well as work towards reform, opening, and modernization".<sup>16</sup>

The core of leadership for public diplomacy in China is the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, while the governmental organizations responsible for overseas publicity are the Information Office of the State Council of China, and the Central Office for Overseas Publicity, CPC. The two organizations are led by the Secretariat of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council, and manage the overseas publicity of the country, while promoting the domestic media to illustrate China to the world.<sup>17</sup>

In his research of 2004, Hu Angang revealed that China's media competence, a combination of several key indicators on media development, was about 47 per cent of the USA, but their score for international communication was only 14 per cent of the USA. These figures show that China's media competence is strong but uneven, with the domestic media being strong, while the international media and the economic capability of the media being relatively weak. Owing to this weakness, the western major news organizations such as Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters, and Agence France Press, have dominated international discourse. Responding

to this weakness, the Chinese government has attempted to improve its international media power in order to influence international public opinion.

China has acknowledged that the possession of international discourse power is just as important as having a large military and developed economy. If China is to address the "adverse balance of power", it needs to integrate its hard power with soft power and make use of smart power. In the "international public opinion arena", which, as seen above, is currently controlled by the western media, the "adverse balance of soft power" means that the image of the Chinese government is tarnished, its policies distorted, and its culture and values marginalized. This adverse balance of soft power has led to China attempting to address international public opinion.

In order to eliminate the above stated adverse media balance, China has created a series of strategies such as "Step out, welcome in". The aim of these policies is to brand "China" through the creation of English language websites, the establishment of Confucius Institutes, the export of its cultural industry, and the hosting of large-scale international events such as the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo. These strategies have helped to establish China's image and move its policies from the domestic to the international, helping to increase the foreign understanding and thus empathy of China.

### **3. The Internet, Public Participation and Public Opinion in Current China**

In 2008 the number of netizens in China rose to 284 million, overtaking the USA to become the largest Internet market with a popularity rate of 22.6 per cent, exceeding the global average of 21.9 per cent. In the same year, the usage rate of online news in China broke through 80 per cent, and the number of bloggers reached 162 million.<sup>18</sup> Cyber space came to be regarded by the Chinese media and the publicity department as "a public opinion battlefield that cannot be neglected".<sup>19</sup> By June, 2010, the number of netizens in China reached 420 million, with the popularity rate rising to 31.8 per cent. Although the speed of uptake had slowed down, the growth of netizens still grew at a rate of around 20 per cent yearly.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, based on the statistics of China media consumption in the first quarter of 2009,<sup>21</sup> the Internet had become the most popular source of media consumption with an audience of 83.2 per cent, a figure 30 per cent higher than that of China's official Central Television (49.2 per cent; with messages from relatives, friends, and colleagues at 66.7 per cent). This shows that the Internet in China now has a high level of influence.

During the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003, the Chinese government reacted by censoring the facts from the public. Based on the political guideline of "maintaining stability as the top priority"

Table 1 Present Situation of the Network and Telecommunications Technology Development in China

	2007	2008	Meaning
Number of netizens	162 million	298 million	Surpassing the USA in 2008 and becoming the largest Internet market in the world. <b>The netizens reached 384 million in 2009, but with slow growth rate. The netizens reached 485 million in June, 2011.</b>
Popularity rate of network	12.3%	22.6%	Surpassing the global average of 21.9% in 2008, <b>rising to 36.2% in June, 2011.</b>
Proportion of the netizens utilizing the search engine of online news	76.3%	81.3%	Cyber space being regarded as “the public opinion publicity battlefield which cannot be neglected” by China media and the publicity department.
Population of bloggers	–	162 million	

Source: China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC).<sup>22</sup>

and the principle that the China media “report only the good but not the bad”, there was little public reporting on the epidemic. The publicity departments in *Nanfang Daily*, *Nanfang City News*, *Finance*, and the *21st Century Global Report* disputed this policy and insisted instead that eventually news would leak out and the populace would criticise the government censorship which would lead to social and political instability. This proved to be correct with gossip bypassing the official censorship and spreading through the phone network and the Internet, raising a nationwide panic.

Li Xinde, the founder of *www.yuluncn.com*, declared in 2004 that information transparency on the Internet had resulted in public opinion becoming a source of pressure for the government and its officials. At the end of 2007, another sensational event occurred that forced officials to admit fault and be punished, proving Li’s declaration. In this case, netizens questioned the authenticity of pictures of a “*Panthera tigris amoyensis*” that were uploaded by the Department of Forestry in Shaanxi Province. To test the photo’s authenticity, a “cyber manhunt”<sup>23</sup> was launched which found that the tigers in the pictures were actually portraits. The “Shaanxi Province *Panthera tigris amoyensis*”<sup>24</sup> incident in 2007 was considered to be a case of corruption with

the officials involved being forced to step down. This was a clear case of an individual using new media and public opinion to expose corruption and gain justice, showing that civil discourse not only enabled freedom of expression, but also that it could act as a form of bottom-up supervision.

The year 2008 saw a large amount of significant online news events in China including the unrest in Tibet, the anti-Carrefour Incident, the group event in Gansu's prefecture-level city of Longnan, the Wenchuan Earthquake in Sichuan Province, the Weng'an Incident, the Beijing Olympics, and the Sanlu poisonous milk scandal. All of these news events witnessed a high participation from netizens as described in Table 2. These cases, along with the earlier SARS and Shaanxi incidents, show that the civil discourse power and public participation enabled by the Internet had helped to develop a vibrant Chinese civil society, with citizens now viewing the protection of their rights through the Internet as a matter of utmost importance.<sup>25</sup>

Table 2 Classification of Recent Cyber Incidents in China

Incident type	Year	Case
Natural disaster	2005	Flood in Shalan Town Elementary School in Heilongjiang Province
	2008	Wenchuan Earthquake in Sichuan Province, snow disaster in southern China
Accidental Disaster	2005	Water body pollution of Songhua River
	2008	Risk of paraxylene (PX) in Xiamen, dam-break in Xiangfen, Shanxi Province
Public safety	2003	Risk of SARS, event of Sun Zhigang
	2008	Poisoned dumplings exporting to Japan, Sanlu poisonous milk scandal
	2009	Hide and Seek event
Social safety	2007	The shady brick kiln in Shanxi Province, Panthera tigris amoyensis in Shaanxi Province, Nail household in Chongqing
	2008	Unrest in Tibet, Beijing Olympics, anti-Carrefour Incident, Weng'an Incident
	2009	Network stop in Xinjiang, Deng Yujiao and wronged people

Source: Compiled by the author.

With New Media developing alongside political society in China, it is wondered if public participation in policy making will be embraced, changing the traditional diplomacy model from one of confidential exchange to direct public participation, or whether the same new media tools will instead be used by the government as a means of top down control for maintaining a desired national image.

#### **4. Cyber Public Diplomacy in China: Case Study of Anti-Carrefour Incident in 2008**

Generally speaking, most examples of Chinese citizens interfering in foreign affairs are related to either nationalism<sup>26</sup> or controversial historical issues. Both the Chinese Exclusion Movement in Indonesia of May 1998 and the Chinese embassy bombing in Yugoslavia by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1999 led to netizens participating in foreign affairs. Further examples include the Diaoyutai event between China and Japan, the sovereignty issue in the South China Sea, the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and the 2010 Shanghai Expo. With the popularity of New Media and the application of network information technology, personal thinking and social group actions are enhanced, leading to a new role for public participation. Based on the Anti-Carrefour Incident in 2008, this study analyzes the subjective and objective forms of diplomacy in China to verify the smart power strategy of the new diplomacy model with a focus on digital media, the emergence of cyber public diplomacy, and the governing of the Chinese government in the globalization.

##### ***4.1. Anti-Carrefour Incident: Background and Overview***

When French media reported on the unrest in Tibet and the failure of the Beijing Olympic Flame relay in Paris on 9th April 2008, the Chinese people launched several online attacks on Carrefour<sup>27</sup>; expressing their dissatisfaction with the state of affairs and protesting against the distorted French reporting about “Tibetan Independence”. This section will look at the statements made by the Chinese people, Carrefour, the French government, and the Chinese government, with Table 3 reviewing and analyzing the meaning of these statements.

During the unrest in Tibet<sup>28</sup> on 14th March 2008, the western media supported the Independence movement and largely criticized the actions of the Chinese government, leading to some Chinese netizens posting texts or editing various reports from the BBC and CNN to evoke a reaction from the wider public.<sup>29</sup> On 24th March 2008, the Beijing Olympic Flame was lit in Greece and relayed to cities around the world. When the Flame arrived in

Table 3 Overview of 2008 Anti-Carrefour Incident

2008	Events	Meaning
March 14th	Unrest in Tibet	The background and the fuse of Anti-Carrefour Incident
March 24th	Beijing Olympic Flame lit in Greece to relay to various cities	
March 25th	The French Foreign Minister decried the behaviour of China “suppressing” Tibet; Nicolas Paul Stéphane Sarközy de Nagy-Bocsa claimed “the possibility of boycotting the Beijing Olympics”.	
April 7th	The Flame arrived in Paris and was seized by a Tibetan activist.	
April 9th	Chinese netizens launched a campaign to “boycott French products”.	Cyber activism from virtual to reality: First step of the online propagation leading to social actions. Citizens launched diplomatic communication with the French government and Carrefour.
April 10th	Sheiying, a Chinese netizen, wrote an article titled “Boycott French Products, from Carrefour” and posted on a net community, MOP. More than 5,000 forums responded.	
April 13th	Kittysshelly, a netizen from Beijing, took a national flag and posters to the front of Carrefour in Baishiqiao and protested the improper actions of the French government. That was the first step of cyber forums turning to social actions.	
April 14th	The netizens continuously passed the message “Do not shop in Carrefour on May 1st”.	Beginning of the boycott; citizens utilized the propagation of New Media.
	In addition to the Internet, many citizens received other messages through mobile text, MSN, QQ, and BBS, prolonging the boycott from 1 day to 2 weeks.	
April 15th	Jiang Yu, the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, considered the boycott as an act of “Chinese people expressing their	To some extent, the Chinese government used the civil discourse

Table 3 (continued)

2008	Events	Meaning
	opinions and moods that the French government should rethink their actions. I believe that Chinese people should legally express their appeal.”	power as a tool of diplomatic strategy, but did not “directly” control the behaviour of netizens.
April 16th	The Carrefour Group authorized Carrefour (China) to clarify the untruthful allegations made about its support for Tibet.	The public opinion of Chinese people has led to a response from Carrefour.
	Suho, the French ambassador in China, was interviewed and stressed that the French government supported the Beijing Olympics, and further had an unchanged policy on China with no question about China’s sovereignty in Tibet.	The attitude of the French government changed, as did their diplomatic behaviour.
April 18th	Zhao Jinjun, the former ambassador to France, visited France in private and exchanged opinions about the China-France relationship.	The diplomacy turned from citizen-citizen (non-governmental organization, Carrefour) to government-government with France sending its ambassador to China twice, and China presenting its hard power.
April 20th	Consumer numbers in Carrefour dropped tremendously; some of them were closed with the official reason being “maintenance and renewal”.	The boycott from the netizens had a significant effect.
April 21st	Christian Poncelet, the chairman of the French senate, arrived in Shanghai.	The French government sincerely thanked the Chinese government for beginning to “directly” control its netizens. This was partly done to
April 22nd	China Ministry of Commerce first issued the declaration on Anti-Carrefour Incident.	
April 23rd	Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the former president of France, and two other envoys arrived in Beijing.	

Table 3 (continued)

2008	Events	Meaning
April 26th	“Carrefour” was temporarily blocked by several online search engines, like Baidu, Google (China), and Yahoo (China).	improve China’s image before the Beijing Olympics.

Source: Compiled by the Author.

Paris on April 7th, a Tibetan activist seized the torch from the bearer and extinguished the flame four times. Afterwards, the Agence France Press, Le Figaro and La Liberation all reported that “the torch failed in Paris” delivering “a slap to the face of China”. This incident further angered already enraged Chinese netizens, causing them to launch a campaign to “boycott French products” on April 9th, including famous brands such as Louis Vuitton (LV). Carrefour became the main target of the boycott as LV was its largest shareholder and was suspected of donating money to the Independence of Tibet movement.<sup>30</sup> The boycotts were a direct result of the Tibetan hampering of the Beijing Olympic Flame relay and the subsequent unfriendly reporting by the French media.<sup>31</sup>

**4.2. Public Participation in China: The Effect of Boycotting French Companies on Diplomacy**

On 10th April 2008 a Chinese netizen named Sheiyang wrote an article titled “Boycott French products from Carrefour”<sup>32</sup> and posted it first to a net community, MOP, and later to other forums such as “skyline”, “Cisco”, and “Sohu”. More than 5,000 forums, including “YorkBBS” and “Huaren” responded to this post.<sup>33</sup> On April 14th many netizens started transferring the message, “Do not shop in Carrefour on May 1st”, in reaction to a Carrefour plan to reduce prices to beat the boycott.

In addition to Internet campaigns, other forms of electronic communication such as mobile text, MSN, QQ, and BBS, were used to relay messages prolonging the boycott from 1 day to 2 weeks.<sup>34</sup> This message stated “from May 8th to 24th, three months before the Beijing Olympics, no one should shop in Carrefour because its largest shareholder donated money to the Dalai Lama and supported the independence of Tibet; while the president of France called for a boycott of the Beijing Olympics. Owing to this, we will boycott Carrefour for 17 days, a period equal to that of the Beijing Olympics, to disrupt French businesses.”

Simultaneously, a second text message was spread<sup>35</sup> stating, “one of my friends works in Carrefour and I sent him the message about the boycott. He told me that he has already received the order to respond. They will largely reduce the price on May 1st. Once the price is dropped more than 10 per cent, people will crowd in.” This message pushed the netizens who had not previously remained neutral to join the actions and further spread the messages, ensuring that the online spread of propaganda evolved into offline social action.

On April 13th, Kittysshelly, a Beijing netizen, took a national flag and nationalist posters to the front of Carrefour in Baishiqiao and protested against the statements of the French government. This was the first sign of cyber protests evolving into social actions. Later, the Chinghua Sheimu BBS Community announced a plan “to spread red over China”, intending to “let the French know that we know what you are doing”. Not many people supported the speech,<sup>36</sup> a netizen indicated, “I will not propagate the boycott of Carrefour or any other French products; I don’t even think it will help. However, when all of us refuse to shop in Carrefour at the same time, i.e., May 1st, and let the French government understand our attitude, the purpose will be achieved”. About the same period, several places in China, like Qingdao, Xuzhou, Zhengzhou, Wuhan, Xian, Shenzhen, Kunming, and Anhui, appeared the protest, boycott, and demonstration against Carrefour. The online boycott had turned into real offline actions.<sup>37</sup> The event resulted in tremendous drop of consumers in Carrefour that, started from April 20th, some of them temporarily closed with the reason of “maintenance and renewal”.<sup>38</sup>

#### ***4.3. Crisis Intervention of Carrefour***

On 16th April 2008, the Carrefour Group authorized Carrefour China to clarify their standing on Tibet. They stated, “as a transnational company with more than 500-thousand employees and sites in over 20 countries, Carrefour always aims to promote economic and social development. Carrefour Group has never, and will not, harm the feelings of Chinese people. The news about the Carrefour Group supporting individual non-governmental organizations was fabricated out of nothing, and Carrefour will retain the legal right to sue the organization or individual who spread the malicious rumours. The Carrefour Group has always supported the 2008 Beijing Olympics and has created several supporting activities with the French Advocates. At this moment, Carrefour branches in Beijing are actively preparing for the coming of the Olympics; and, as the legal advisor to Beijing International Business, Carrefour sincerely wishes the success of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The president of the Carrefour Group and the chief executive of Carrefour (China) would be honoured to witness the historic event that is the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics”.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to denying support for the Tibetan Independence movement, and expressing support for the Beijing Olympics, Carrefour relayed its anger about the Olympic Flame relay being obstructed; urgently communicating its sincerity with China's Ministry of Commerce. These actions led to the Chinese government attempting to calm the protesting crowd by banning searches for Carrefour, and advertising Carrefour's price reductions.<sup>40</sup>

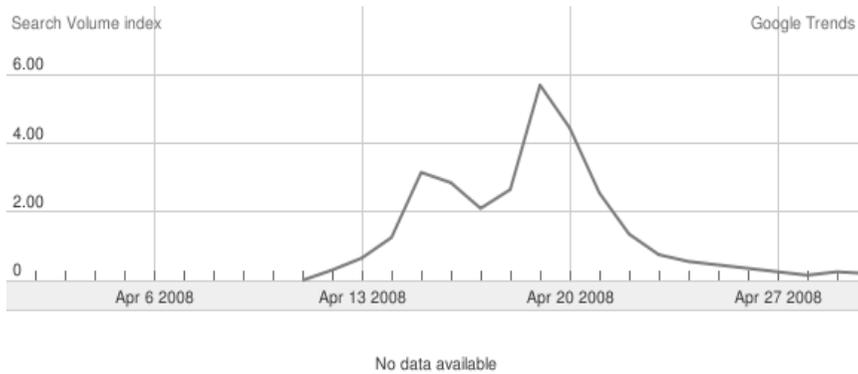
#### ***4.4. The Diplomatic Behaviour and Attitude of the French Government: The Victory of Boycott?***

In order to appease the feelings of anti-French and anti-Carrefour protestors, the French government had the French ambassador in China stress their support for the Beijing Olympics, their unchanged policy on China, and their unquestioned support for China's sovereignty in Tibet.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Christian Poncelet, the chairman of the French senate, arrived in Shanghai on April 21st to visit Chin Ching, the disabled athlete who was hurt in the Olympic Flame relay in Paris, and passed on a letter from Nicolas Paul Stéphane Sarközy de Nagy-Bocsa. Following the visit, Chin Ching appealed to citizens to end the boycott of Carrefour.<sup>42</sup> On April 23rd, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the former president of France, arrived in Beijing and again emphasized the French understanding of the feelings of Chinese people, but did not agree that boycott was an appropriate action. He insisted on the friendship between the two countries and invited Chinese netizens to visit his blog, so as to appease the feelings of the Chinese citizens.<sup>43</sup> These actions are in stark contrast to France's earlier behaviour, which saw Dominique de Villepin referring to Chinese "suppression" in Tibet, Nicolas Paul Stéphane Sarközy de Nagy-Bocsa claiming "the possibility of boycotting the Beijing Olympics" on March 25th,<sup>44</sup> and the French City Council declaring the "Dalai Lama to be an honorary citizen of Paris" on April 21st.<sup>45</sup>

#### ***4.5. The Rationale of the Chinese Government and the End Result: Signs of a Smart Power Strategy?***

Jiang Yu, China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman indicated on April 15th that the boycott by the netizens in China was a case of "Chinese people expressing their opinion that the French government should rethink their actions. I believe that Chinese people should instead legally express their appeal".<sup>46</sup> At the same time, the Chinese government appealed to citizens to calm down and turn their anger into strength for the cause of economic development.<sup>47</sup> Xinhua News Agency and the *People's Daily* published articles, such as "Patriotic passion should turn into rationality", "Transforming patriotism into devotion to the nation", and "How can patriotism become more powerful?".<sup>48</sup> Hu Jintao

Figure 1 The Word “Anti-Carrefour” Appearing on Google in April 2008



Source: Google Trends.

became concerned about the passion of nationalism becoming unmanageable and forbade students joining in the demonstrations.<sup>49</sup> China’s Ministry of Commerce first issued a declaration regarding the Anti-Carrefour Incident on April 22nd, stating “We welcome Carrefour’s declared opposition of Independence in Tibet and their support of the Beijing Olympics”.<sup>50</sup> Words related to the Anti-Carrefour Incident, such as “Carrefour”, “France-China relationship”, and “Independence of Tibet”, were temporarily blocked by several online search engines, like Baidu, Google (China), and Yahoo (China), as shown in Figure 1. After the incident, words like “anti-Carrefour” returned to the search engines in China.<sup>51</sup> However, messages and articles about the boycott on May 1st were censored by the Chinese government, resulting in a small turnout; with only a few hundred people appearing in front of Carrefour in a few cities, while some of the activists were arrested.<sup>52</sup> As a whole, due to interference by the Chinese government, the boycott was reduced in significance, showing that government control measures had a significant effect on the cool-down.

## 5. Cyber Public Diplomacy as China’s Smart Power Strategy?

The 2008 Anti-Carrefour case provides a comprehensive illustration of the relationship between China’s New Media, public diplomacy, and smart power. In this incident the Chinese government first temporarily indulged free cyber speech, then later set the agenda, and finally took the lead in directing domestic public opinion by utilizing nationalism. It combined the above actions with the use of hard power in the form of secret diplomacy to set the agenda for international discourse and gain the support of world public opinion.

### **5.1. Government-led Public Diplomacy in China?**

As indicated by Jiang Yu, the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, there was a reason for the Anti-Carrefour Incident. The Chinese government considered the “Unrest in Tibet”<sup>53</sup> to be a domestic issue, with the “failure of the flame relay” being a case of the Tibetans seeking to gain support from the western media. This attempt proved to be successful with western news agencies subsequently giving support for Tibet, demonizing China, and criticizing the upcoming Beijing Olympics. The Chinese government understood that in order to counter this negative campaign, they would need to make use of the new media to seize the international discourse. This was done through the generation of the “Step out, welcome in” policy. China’s actions in this case complied with Potter’s earlier quoted definition that public diplomacy is the behaviour through which a government attempts to affect the opinions of people or elites from other countries, with the aim of generating favourable policy for the home country.

### **5.2. Cyber Actions and Public Diplomacy: The Inside-out Civil Discourse Power of China?**

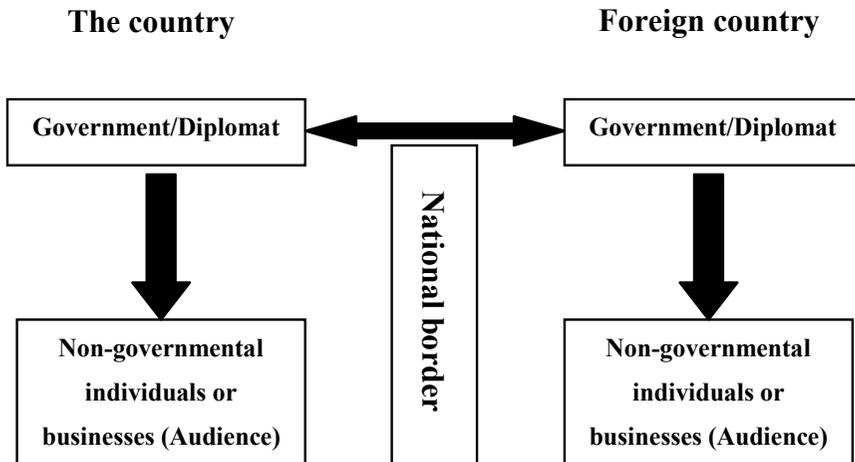
With the popularity and continued development of network information technology in China, concerned netizens could easily use this technology to appeal for citizens to boycott Carrefour. The technology meant that a small fight between domestic citizens and a foreign enterprise was turned into a diplomatic problem between China and France. Since the public diplomacy in this case was not restricted to the government, but featured citizens participating and interfering directly with foreign affairs, it complied with the description of public diplomacy given by Murrow and the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy. As earlier mentioned, they both called for expanding public diplomacy to allow dialogues between non-governmental organizations and individuals. The digital era has enabled the development of a 5th type of diplomacy outside of Manheim’s 1994 classifications; that is of people to government.

In the case of the Anti-Carrefour Incident, the Internet provided citizens with a cheap and fast method to interact with citizens from other countries (along with their governments, and non-governmental organizations). Once the media received foreign information, people could obtain the message from local newspapers, radio stations, or television news reports. If traditional press was the only media in the country, the citizens might have had less opportunity to find foreign information or directly communicate with the netizens of other countries proving that New Media has gradually broken through information restrictions. The application of New Media allows individuals to lead and

participate in activities; no longer leaving them as passive observers in transnational exchanges. The netizens in China directly spread their message through cyber space, through both BBS and net community forums, and other tools such as mobile text messages; placing pressure on both Carrefour and the Chinese government, and leading to direct diplomatic negotiations. In that respect it proved true Kittyshelly’s declaration that “the boycott is being held to let the French government know our anger”. It also proved the statement of Fisher and Bröckerhoff that in spite of the complexity of the definition and the name of public diplomacy, the key was the objective of “influence”.

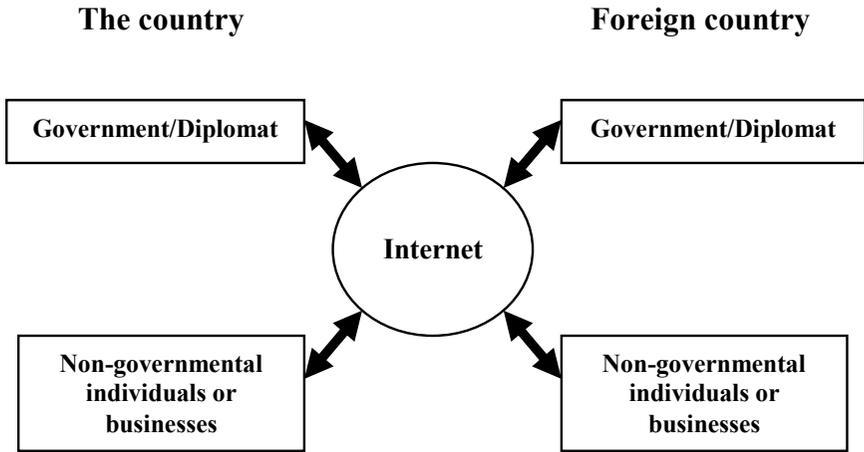
Diplomatic negotiations in the globalized digital age are not simply closed negotiations between diplomats; foreign affairs are no longer only the domain of diplomats (referring to the comparison between Figure 2 and Figure 3). With the tool, skills, and “channels” created by New Media, everyone shares the opportunity to be involved, discuss, and participate in foreign affairs, proving the civil discourse power of the Internet. The public participation enabled by the Internet does not only impact domestic affairs, but also allows citizens to get involved in foreign affairs. The involvement of citizens through New Media is considered to be the grassroots movement of cyber activism.<sup>54</sup> It departs from the traditional model of government to government diplomacy, and allows for people to non-governmental organizations (Carrefour), and citizen to government (France); both models that were not included in Manheim’s original description of diplomacy, as seen in Figure 4.

Figure 2 Traditional Diplomacy Model: Government-to-Government, Diplomat-to-Diplomat



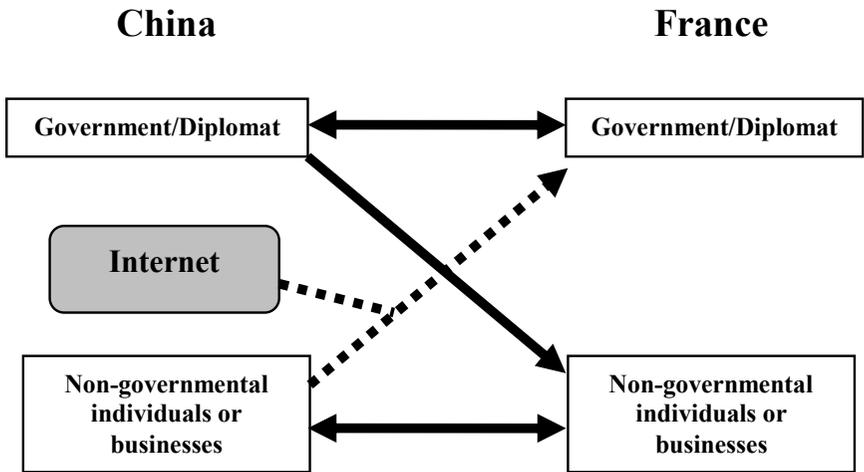
Source: Compiled by the author.

Figure 3 The Ideal Model of Cyber Public Diplomacy



Source: Constructed by the author.

Figure 4 “Citizen-to-Government” Model Appeared in 2008 Anti-Carrefour Incident



Source: Constructed by the author.

### **5.3. Acquiescence of the Chinese Government in Anti-Carrefour Incident? Public Pressure or Strategy Oriented?**

Xu Wu indicated that network technology could lead to more subversive power from the government than the traditional media society, with less freedom of information flow. Network information technology built a space for the growth and exchange of ideas between non-mainstream and non-governmental organizations that appeared in countries with high levels of nationalism or authoritarianism. People in mature democratic societies could introduce the function of democracy to their networks; while in immature democratic societies or authoritarian nations, the Internet and its organizational functions could be used as a tool for nationalist goals. Examples include the B92 station in Serbia, the Zapatistas revolution in Mexico, and the hikers in China,<sup>55</sup> along with the Anti-Carrefour Incident in China.

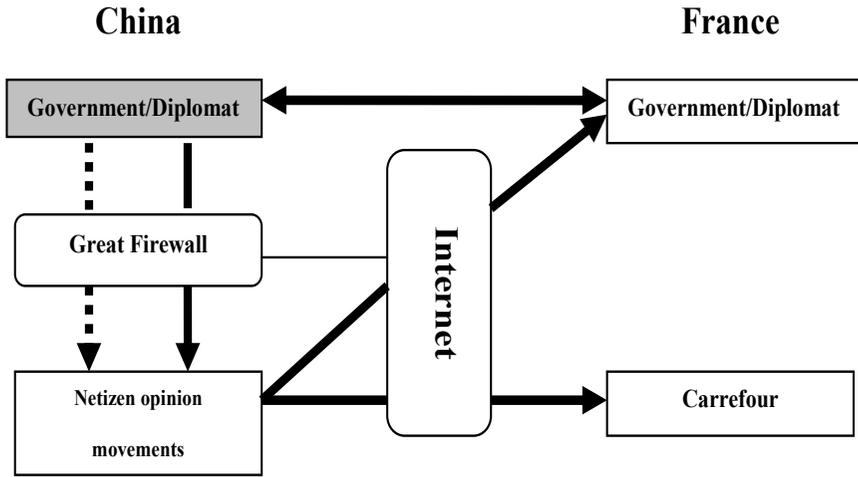
After the outbreak of SARS in 2003, the incidence of cyber news events in China and the subsequent public participation was gradually increased. The Chinese government understood the potential impact of New Media on political stability, but at the same time it also realized the importance of the Internet as a tool of public diplomacy and top down discourse power.

At the time of the Anti-Carrefour Incident, the reporting of the western media towards Tibet largely supported the Tibetan Independence movement and blamed the Chinese government for the unrest, with the French President Nicolas Paul Stéphane Sarközy de Nagy-Bocsa publicly considering “the possibility of boycotting the Beijing Olympics”. The negative reporting of western media caused the Chinese government to embrace a public diplomacy strategy aimed at increasing “overseas publicity”. This was done by “opening” up media freedom, including letting citizens post articles freely on the net and copy images from western reports, with the goal of evoking nationalist ideology in its citizens. The Chinese government, always aware of the importance of social control, realised that the cyber nationalism could get out of their control; but, it did not expect it to damage the relationship between China and France.

The 13-day “Boycott French products, Anti-Carrefour” actions were not controlled until the Chinese Ministry of Commerce declared, “We welcome Carrefour’s stance on the Independence of Tibet and their support for the Beijing Olympics”. Although the Chinese government appealed through both the Xinhua News Agency and the *People’s Daily* for citizens to calm down, China’s Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu betrayed China’s true position by stating “the Chinese people are expressing their personal opinion, and the French government should rethink their position”.

Zhao Jinjun, the former Chinese ambassador to France, visited France as Hu Jintao’s envoy from April 18th to April 22nd. On this trip Zhao

Figure 5 The Process of Anti-Carrefour Incident in China



Source: Constructed by the author.

met Nicolas Paul Stéphane Sarközy de Nagy-Bocsa, Christian Poncelet, the chairman of the French senate, and Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the former president, and passed a letter from Hu to Sarközy, in which the opinions about the relationship between China and France were exchanged.<sup>56</sup> This trip saw the French authorities respond by densely visiting China during the period April 21st-27th.

While the Chinese government was aware of the amicable relationship between France and Tibet, the Chinese government still expected the French government and related enterprises to appease the Anti-Carrefour Incident. Only when Carrefour claimed to be “against the Independence of Tibet” and the French government declared both “no question about China’s sovereignty of Tibet” and “support for the Beijing Olympics” would the Chinese government attempt to control Chinese netizens (This process is shown in Figure 5). The purpose of this stance was to emphasize that the problems in Tibet were an internal affair of China, preserve the face of the nation, and to successfully promote the Beijing Olympics. The Chinese government could have utilized control methods to keep the amicable relationship with France at an early stage, but instead it chose to allow its citizens to use the new media and public diplomacy to build grassroots nationalism. In other words, the allowing of free speech and public participation for Chinese citizens was a tool for implementing the Chinese government’s soft power diplomacy strategy.

#### ***5.4. The Effectiveness of the Chinese Government's Soft Power Strategy of Cyber Public Diplomacy***

In the highlighted case-study, the Chinese government temporarily indulged free cyber speech at first; utilizing nationalist passion to guide domestic public opinion with pre-set objectives. They then used their hard power of secret diplomacy to force the French government to soften their stance, so as to seize the discourse power and counter negative global public opinion. To some extent, China can be said to have used the diplomatic strategy of smart power, which is the integration of both soft and hard power. While Nye proposed the promotion of soft power with “public diplomacy” and the integration of soft and hard power, the application of public diplomacy to generate soft power still required an understanding of credibility, self-criticism, and civil society from the government.

In the information era, media is no longer limited to newspapers, broadcasters, or television; the emergence of New Media has led to the rise of public diplomacy globally. The academic world used to consider the Chinese government and the media as having a vertically subordinate relationship with the government controlling and affecting the development of the media through various political and economic means, including both systematic and non-systematic governing. This form of “mouthpiece” media<sup>57</sup> was supposed to serve the government’s interests by correctly guiding public opinion, and thus enhancing political, societal and economic stability.<sup>58</sup> Essentially it was argued that the Chinese government utilized the media to censor international public opinion or cover up the truth (public opinion), and further import the government’s core ideology on the populace. Unfortunately this model still resonates in China, with the closed nature of the Chinese media meaning that the “soft power” tool of public diplomacy is still guided by the government, meaning that the motivation and effectiveness of Chinese netizens actions are constantly questioned abroad.

To this date, several key media agencies in China remain controlled by the government, meaning mouthpiece propagation still exists. While the emergence of the cyber communication media has made public participation an important channel for public opinion, the Chinese government still tries to control society through measures such as establishing a network examination system. They have further instituted the Great Firewall of China (GFC), which “administratively interferes”<sup>59</sup>, blocks, or remove any “unhealthy” information, requiring self-censorship and self-regulation<sup>60</sup> by netizens. An example of this censorship was given during the Anti-Carrefour Incident, with the Chinese government blocking key words so that the online “flowing space” was obstructed.

The continued control by the Chinese government of Chinese cyberspace meant that the western media constantly questioned the authenticity of

Chinese netizens' actions, and continued to "demonize China". To date, the Chinese government still does not appear strong enough to accept external criticism and thus continues to restrain the development of its domestic civil society through measures such as the GFC. The current situation in China is representative of Nye's statement that "the best advertisement does not guarantee the most popular product", in that China's claims on embracing an open new media has not been met by real action.<sup>61</sup>

Similar to Nye's idea, Fisher and Bröckerhoff proposed that "the attraction or consumption of any culture does not necessarily benefit its soft power".<sup>62</sup> While China's soft power campaign has attempted to promote a positive national image, the ongoing censorship in China has meant that the success of this campaign is reduced. Looking at the example of the Chinese government stating that new media was connecting the world, while foreigners could obtain an increased amount of information through China-authorized media (in English), people were still doubting the credibility of the information owing to China's continued guidance and control of its own public opinion.

Even though China is continuously pursuing its soft power diplomacy strategy, it has still not done enough to overcome negative western public opinion. Instead, during the Anti-Carrefour incident, the friendly attitude and relationship between France and Tibet, alongside questions of "reliability" of the Chinese government went against China's strategy. With only a limited amount of soft power at its disposal, it is questioned whether the Chinese government can fully integrate hard power to become smart power. It appears the only way to fully achieve this result is to relax the central control of the media to make for "real" public diplomacy and allow netizens to freely "influence" international public opinion. After all, genuine soft power should be generated from society and non-governmental organizations, not simply by the government.

## 6. Conclusion

The information society of the digital era has allowed increases in transmission speed, increases in convenience, and reductions of cost. These effects of the new communication networks have effectively shrunk the world and are leading to the development of a global village.<sup>63</sup> In the 1990s, any criticism of China by US programmes would see the news censored inside China. Now, with the increased flow of information that came with economic growth in China, its citizens are capable of consuming and utilizing New Media so that the power of the cyber community cannot be neglected. Cyber public participation has gradually emerged in authoritarian China.

Based on the account of China's soft power public diplomacy in the case of the 2008 Anti-Carrefour Incident, this study analyzes public diplomacy

from the aspect of both the government and the citizens (non-governmental organizations or individuals) in China's international relations. The key findings are shown as below.

1. The public participation by Chinese citizens through the Internet is not limited to domestic issues; citizens have used the New Media to generate public opinion and become directly involved in foreign affairs. Furthermore this was not a simple "grassroots movement" but a "public expansion of power" that highlighted the potential of cyber public opinion and the ignored fifth attribute of diplomacy in citizens-to-government (Chinese-French). In other words, through the tools provided by the New Media, everyone has the opportunity to get involved in, discuss, and participate in foreign affairs in the digital era. This is the so called "cyber public diplomacy" mentioned in this study.
2. With the active cyber community forums in Chinese society, the government utilizes tools such as the GFC to "administratively interfere", censor, and remove "unhealthy" information and websites, thus ensuring that public opinion does not impact sensitive issues. This form of cyber control obstructs the online "flowing space". China needs to understand that if it expects to promote active public diplomacy, it needs to ensure that both the government and the citizens share the same ideology. After all, real soft power diplomacy should be generated from the society and non-governmental organizations rather than the government.
3. The guiding of public diplomacy by the Chinese government has created a wide audience, and allowed the government to set the agenda through utilizing the centralized mass media. This has enabled China to eliminate the adverse balance of soft power, thus allowing the government to rebuild the national image, and reduce negative opinion created by the China Threat Theory. It can therefore be seen that the government, to some extent, has achieved the objective of creating a smart power strategy.
4. A smart power strategy of Chinese public diplomacy has been formed, but the synergy needs further observation. In recent years, China has worked hard to eliminate the adverse balance of soft power with western governments through policies such as "Step out, welcome in". These have helped China to change from a strategy of traditional diplomacy using hard power, force, and secret negotiations, to a new strategy of public diplomacy utilizing the media and its citizens. In the included case-study, it can be seen that the soft power of envoy diplomacy and cyber public diplomacy, was aided by the hard power of secret diplomacy, forcing the French government and its enterprises to make a declaration that would be favourable to China. However the supportive attitude of western media

towards Tibet could still not be overcome, leading westerners to continue to criticise the actions of the Chinese government. In other words, China's soft power is still not significant enough to allow the creation of true smart power.

Owing to its model of authoritarianism, the leading of public opinion by the Chinese government is still apparent to western academics who criticize the lack of a citizen diplomatic body, the autonomous international dialogues, and the continued spin and manipulation of the government.<sup>64</sup> If the Chinese government can further open up the media, reform its governance model, reinforce self-criticism, listen to the western media, and promote "reliability" in its domestic media, it will allow the development of true smart power that will enable the government to eliminate the adverse balance of soft power.

## Notes

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1. Please refer to Nye (2004).
  2. The term Smart Power first appeared here. After the September 11 attacks, Nossel proposed that to resist terrorism the US government should use new tools and forms of diplomacy.
  3. Please refer to Joseph S. Nye, "Think Again: Soft Power", *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2006. <[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2006/02/22/think\\_again\\_soft\\_power](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2006/02/22/think_again_soft_power)> Nye (2008: 94-109). Melissen (2007: 3-27)
  4. Quoted from Pu (2009: 37). Please refer to Snow and Taylor (2009) or USIA website: <<http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/1.htm>>
  5. Please refer to Potter (2003: 43-64) or Leonard (2002: 1)
  6. Decision of Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the major issues of constructing the harmonic society in socialism, *Xinhua net*, October 18th, 2006. <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-10/18/content\\_5218639.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-10/18/content_5218639.htm)>
  7. An-gang Hu 胡鞍鋼, Harmony is a hard truth which has become the major soft power of China, *People's Daily Online*, 13th October 2006. <<http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/4916604.html>>
  8. The study will look at two aspects of discourse power. (A) It will seek to understand whether Chinese citizens could have complete freedom of speech for public participation, so that it could become a tool for Chinese government to implement diplomatic strategies (gaining power); (B) It will seek to understand how the Chinese government, with international discourse power, constructs the

strategies to acquire the power for leading the international public opinion from the high ground.

9. Please refer to Kurlantzick (2007). This book states how China utilizes the soft power of support, trade, and investment to ease the doubt of developing countries towards economic development in China, particularly to retain bilateral amicable relations with the countries of Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America.
10. Regarding the discussions about the rising of China, the role of China internationally, and the opinions of the international towards China, please refer to: Scott (2007).
11. Early in 1941, Mei-ling Song 宋美齡, representing the KMT government, gifted the USA with a pair of pandas for giving relief to Chinese refugees. It was the first Panda Diplomacy in modern history. Please refer to “Panda Dance” implication of Chinese diplomacy trend, *People’s Daily Online*, 5th December 2009. <<http://world.people.com.cn/BIG5/10518452.html>>
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13. Please refer to Huntington (1998: 20-21).
14. Peaceful Evolution refers to the western values of human rights and democratization being imported to Chinese society from European countries and the USA, expecting to replace the Chinese socialism strategies with capitalism.
15. Please refer to Zhao (1997: 6-24).
16. An important announcement of the general secretary, Ze-min Jiang 江澤民 in national conference on publicizing China overseas, *People’s Daily*, 27th February 1999, p. 1.
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21. *2009 Q1 China Internet Audience Measurement Data*, Data Center of China Internet, April 2009. <<http://www.dcci.com.cn/List/2009jidu/2.htm>>
22. Sorted from the *20th, 23rd, and 25th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*. Please refer to China Internet network Information Center. <<http://research.cnnic.cn/>>
23. People Search is a tool in which information searches are undertaken by netizens. In a famous Internet incident in 2007, the netizens discovered the name, address, working place, and telephone number of the persons involved and publishing them online.

24. The investigation of Huanan tigers: The late truth, *People's Daily Online*, 1st July 2008. <<http://society.people.com.cn/BIG5/8217/106495/106496/index.html>>
25. Regarding the discussions of civil society in China, please refer to: Heberer (2008: 87-104).
26. Studies on nationalism are regarded as “terminological jungles” or “terminological chaos”. Please refer to Akzin (1964: 7-10) and Connor (1994: 89). This study does not attempt to sort the various definitions of nationalism, but simply applies this general concept to the analysis of emerging network public diplomacy. In other words, Patriotism, Populism, or Racism could be generalized as a part of nationalism which is the group consciousness or the emotional manifestation derived from identity.
27. Established in 1959, Carrefour is the largest hypermarket group in Europe. The first store was opened in France in 1963. Having merged with Promodes in 1999, it became the largest retailer in Europe and the second largest in the world. Presently, there are more than 11,000 stores in 29 countries around the world; the major management contains Super-Hypermarket, Hypermarket, and Discount Stores.
28. Please refer to “Western Media are giving us a lecture,” *CCTV.COM* (English), 29th April 2008, <<http://www.cctv.com/english/20080429/107405.shtml>> and “76 people sentenced in the 314 incident in Tibet”, *Southern Weekly*, 11th February 2009. <<http://www.infzm.com/content/23499>>
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51. It refers to Tibetans demanding self-government of Tibet with the Dalai Lama demanding that the Chinese government provide Tibet with freedom of politics, religion, and speech, stops violating human rights in Tibet, does not

- migrate citizens to Tibet, and stops nuclear tests and the dumping of nuclear waste in Tibet.
52. The network community in this study is regarded as online blogs, websites, or various virtual communities. For more definitions of network community and virtual community, please refer to Holmes (2005). For example, the establishment of Anti-CNN is a new forum applying the mistake or distorting reports of CNN on Tibet riots. One of the famous songs popular among Chinese networks is "Don't be too CNN". In fact, the original business access website (such as China BBS) or "patriotic" forums (like Powerful Country BBS on *People's Daily Online*) have become hotbeds of nationalism.
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  54. "Present the diplomacy: The envoy of Jin-tao Hu stabilizes China-France relations", *Asia Times*, 24th April 2008. <[http://www.atchinese.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=49139&catid=189%3A2009-03-19-06-15-48&Itemid=90](http://www.atchinese.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=49139&catid=189%3A2009-03-19-06-15-48&Itemid=90)>
  55. Four major media in China: China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI), Xinhua News Agency, and *China Daily*.
  56. Regarding the discussions, please refer to Liu (1971), Lee (1990), Lee (2001), Zhao (1998), Lynch (1999), and Pei (1994).
  57. Such administrative intervention mainly comes from Publicity Department, the Ministry of Public Security (cyber police), and Ministry of Industry and Information Technology.
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  63. Regarding the discussions of globalization, informatization, and social movement, please refer to Castells (2000: 88-109).
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