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U.S. Public Diplomacy Towards China

Exercising Discretion in Educational and
Exchange Programs

Di Wu



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PREFACE

This book is an examination of US public diplomacy towards China. It looks at the practice of public diplomacy as policy implementation in order to explain whether and how implementation affected the meaning of “public diplomacy.” It identifies the gaps between what public diplomacy should be as defined by policy goals and what it is when practiced on the ground. The gaps between these suggest implementation discretion that strays from the original objective, which eventually changes not only public diplomacy practice but also its purposes. As a result, public diplomacy can become something else during its implementation.

I started this project with a vague idea. Knowing that the field of public diplomacy was full of research relying on theoretical traditions of communication, I wanted to examine public diplomacy from a different angle. One area that I really wanted to pursue was the practice of public diplomacy. Scholars have focused on public diplomacy’s national strategies and prescriptive recommendations of what public diplomacy should be in order to achieve its ideal impact. After all, public diplomacy has been considered a practical field. However, less attention has been paid to the meaning of public diplomacy and the impact of its practice.

With the help of my committee members, especially my dissertation chair, I explored the implementation theory in public policy. Scholars and practitioners of public diplomacy have been calling on the policy approach to analyze public diplomacy, but this has not been the subject of much focus in the literature. Recognizing this value, I placed public diplomacy against the backdrop of foreign policy. Public diplomacy is primarily a tool of foreign policy. Its official goal also points to the priorities of foreign

policies, though the latter is difficult to depict with an absolute language. I chose to focus on Barack Obama's Pivot to Asia policy and his presidency as the timeframe for the research in this book. However, connecting the policy with public diplomacy practice was a difficult task. I ended up starting from the endpoint and tracing backward.

Another big challenge was the scope of public diplomacy. In order to examine implementation factors, especially organizational culture and interests that affected public diplomacy, I needed to include multiple actors. Those who are familiar with public diplomacy will know that the concept of public diplomacy is fluid. Public diplomacy actors expanded from government agencies to non-state actors to individuals. In the US government, there is no doubt that the Department of State is a primary public diplomacy actor. Other agencies, such as the Department of Defense and the Department of Education, also practice public diplomacy, but they are seldom recognized as public diplomacy actors. The Department of Defense even refuses to admit its active role in public diplomacy. I argue in this book that the Department of Defense practices public diplomacy because its communicative programs are consonant with the public diplomacy definition of the US government. Its refusal to be called a public diplomacy actor is something that this book tries to explain.

Activities that can be considered public diplomacy are also fuzzy due to the development of new communication tools such as the internet. It seems that all information can be accessed cross-border, even those not addressed to a foreign audience. The line between traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy is blurred, and diplomacy is becoming more open to the general public. Bruce Gregory used the term "public aspect of diplomacy" in *The Paradox of US Public Diplomacy: Its Rise and "Demise"* to describe this transformation, indicating that diplomacy and public diplomacy may merge into one. Acknowledging the new developments in the field of public diplomacy, I decided not to engage in this conversation directly. Instead, I followed the official definitions of public diplomacy in the US government and analyzed programs that fit this definition.

The cases analyzed in this book were mostly US public diplomacy towards China. This is for three reasons. First, China is seen as a US competitor, so the analysis of US public diplomacy towards China can shed light on the conduct of public diplomacy in adversary relationships. Second, the US–China relationship has been regarded as one of the most important bilateral relations in global politics. Third, while most public diplomacy after 9/11 focused on the Middle East and the problem of

terrorism, less attention was given to other parts of the world. China was chosen as an example of US routine public diplomacy that was part of the US global practice. However, I encountered challenges when examining public diplomacy cases in the Department of Defense. The organization tends to exclude China from many of its key public diplomacy programs, such as International Military Education and Training. My solution was to include these important programs despite their exclusion of China and explore why they did so. The underlying rationale was that China should be included as a participant and the prohibition was implementation discretion exemplified through American public diplomacy practices.

It took me almost four years to finish this research project. During my prospectus defense, my committee members warned me that data collection could be challenging as it might be difficult to make contact with public diplomacy practitioners in these organizations. While I carried out a few interviews with those who worked at the Department of State, it was almost impossible to talk to anyone in the military. Obtaining the general information was easy, but the details of on-the-ground implementation required much more clearance. In the end, I used secondary data for my analysis, such as official reports, press articles, and public speeches. With the information from these sources, I was able to sketch a general picture of how public diplomacy was practiced in the Department of Defense, although more work is still needed. I plan to develop my data analysis by including more first-hand data for future works.

In this book, the reader will see an effort to employ implementation theory to explain public diplomacy. It will not be a traditional public diplomacy study that focuses on communicative effects such as persuasion or relationship building. It is about what public diplomacy was practiced on the ground and why it was conducted this way. The book emphasizes the goal of public diplomacy, which has been overlooked by current public diplomacy literature. It also pays considerable attention to the agency of practitioners, including managers and frontline operators, as well as other factors such as organizational culture, the measurability of goals, and resources. There are many dynamics in the practice of public diplomacy, and this book aims to unveil its implementation process, which ultimately gives meaning to public diplomacy.

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My special thanks go to Sharon Weiner, my dissertation chair, from whom I have learned so much about implementation and developed my skills in analytical thinking. She was extremely supportive and set a higher bar to stimulate critical analysis. She held my hand from developing this research topic to finishing the project. Without her, this book would never have been possible. My dissertation committee members Carole Gallagher and Philip Seib gave me steadfast encouragement and insightful advice to move forward. I am immensely grateful for their guidance.

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My mentor R. S. Zaharna was very enthusiastic about my research topic and urged me to pursue the practical aspect of public diplomacy. When I was lost during research, she encouraged me to finish it. I greatly appreciate her support in both my academic and personal life. Craig Hayden helped me to develop my idea to a research topic. We had numerous conversations about the field of public diplomacy and how my research could help me to find a place in this field.

Robert Kelley offered me advice about the practice of public diplomacy. I happened to be connected to an interviewee through him. I spoke to Bruce Gregory during the very early stages of my research when I was puzzled by the scope of public diplomacy. His words and the term “public aspect of diplomacy” enlightened me. Katherine Brown gave me very helpful recommendations about public diplomacy research. Jay Wang, a

very good friend and professor of mine, also provided helpful suggestions to my research project. Ni Shixiong, a retired professor of Fudan University and also the founding father of Western international relations theory in China, was very generous in helping me to reach out to some of my interviewees in China.

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Praise for *U.S. Public Diplomacy Towards China*

“The US-China relationship is the critical driving force of contemporary world order, and public diplomacy is a vital tool for creating better understanding and reducing tensions between the two powers. Based on original research, this book is not only an important contribution to the academic literature on public diplomacy, but also an invaluable guide for analysts and policymakers in explaining why US cultural and education programs have had limited success, and how to improve them.”

—Amitav Acharya, Distinguished Professor, *American University, USA*

“In this path-breaking book, Di Wu pulls back the curtain of public diplomacy-as-theory to reveal how public diplomacy-as-practice is actually implemented on the ground. Her extensive documentation and innovative analysis of the two major public diplomacy players in the US pivot to Asia—the US State Department and US Defense Department—vividly demonstrate how different organizational cultures, measurable goals, and resource constraints shape the practice and, ultimately, the meaning of public diplomacy.”

—R. S. Zaharna, Professor, *American University, USA*, and author, *Boundary Spanners of Humanity*

“Exploring public diplomacy strategy and impact from an implementation standpoint, this book offers a fresh perspective on one of the most endemic challenges facing the field.”

—Jay Wang, Associate Professor and Director, *Center on Public Diplomacy, University of Southern California, USA*

“This book is a comprehensive and compelling study of American engagement with the PRC. Detailed in research and insightful in commentary, this book offers a unique approach to one of the most critical relationships of the modern age. A fascinating, important, and timely contribution to public diplomacy scholarship.”

—Gary Rawnsley, Professor, *University of Nottingham Ningbo China*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABBREVIATIONS

BBG	Broadcasting Board of Governors
COIN	Counterinsurgency
CSO	Civil Service Officer
DIY	Do It Yourself
DoD	Department of Defense
DoS	Department of State
ECA	Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
ECE	Educational and Cultural Exchange
EU	European Union
FM 3-16	Counterinsurgency Operations FM 31-16
FM 3-24	Counterinsurgency Field Manual in 2006 FM 3-24
FSO	Foreign Service Officer
Game Plan	Game Plan for 1999 US–Sino Defense Exchanges
GAO	General Accountability Office or General Accounting Office
HA/DR	Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief
IIE	Institute of International Education
IIP	Bureau of International Information Programs
IMET	International Military Education and Training
IVLP	International Visitor Leadership Program
MISOs	Military Information Support Operations
MPEP	Military Personnel Exchange Program
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCIV	National Council for International Visitors
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
NDU	National Defense University
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PEP	Personnel Exchange Program

PLA	People's Liberation Army
PPP	Public–Private Partnership
PRC	People's Republic of China
REAC	Regional Educational Advising Coordinator
RIMPAC	Exercise Rim of the Pacific
TRMI	Trans-regional Magazine Initiative
TRWI	Trans-regional Web Initiative
UN	United Nations
USAID	US Agency for International Development
USIA	US Information Agency
USSOCOM	US Special Operations Command

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Implementation Discretion in Public Diplomacy: An Introduction

The US government has been outsourcing foreign policy to the private sector at least since the Cold War. Contractors not only implement government-sponsored programs and activities on the ground, but they also become “a permanent feature of what used to be called governance, both at home and abroad.”¹ This is also true of public diplomacy. For instance, the US Department of State (DoS) partners with the Institute of International Education (IIE) at the global level in more than 180 countries for its educational exchange programs, including EducationUSA, which aims to promote US higher education to foreign markets.² The majority of these programs are sponsored by the DoS and administered by IIE. There is a special case in this respect: China. American educational exchange programs in China started a long time ago and have been the emphasis of US public diplomacy in China. In the beginning, EducationUSA’s activities in China were managed by IIE. In around 2009, the DoS stopped its partnership with IIE in China and took over the program. EducationUSA has been operated by the US embassies and

¹[30].

²IIE, “Fulbright U.S. Student Program,” *IIE*, <https://www.iie.org/Programs/Fulbright-US-Student-Program>; EducationUSA, “The EducationUSA Network,” *US Department of State*, <https://educationusa.state.gov/us-higher-education-professionals/educationusa-network>.

consulates since then. The reason for this adjustment was because IIE delegated the EducationUSA brand as well as the endorsement of the US government to 40–50 study abroad agencies in China. This was considered to be unacceptable, as endorsing any corporations in China damages the government’s reputation and image.

This change of management seems a minor incident in American public diplomacy practice in China, but it reveals one important yet widely neglected impact of outsourcing foreign policy, which is the discretion bias induced by implementation. Contractors have organizational interests and cultures that are different from those of the DoS, so they adopt different strategies and prioritize different tasks. In the case of EducationUSA China, IIE was more interested in increasing the number of Chinese students studying in the US, while representing the US as a country was not its duty. In addition, IIE’s education network relies on the participation of study abroad agencies, so maintaining a good relationship with these organizations forms part of IIE’s priorities. It is not only contractors but also government agencies that implement programs by themselves which tend to be affected by various forces that induce biases. Therefore, public diplomacy is at risk of creating biases by implementation that lead the program in a different direction. As a result, public diplomacy may stray from its original objectives and become something else.

The issue of public diplomacy implementation has not been the subject of much investigation by the current literature. Public diplomacy is generally defined as an instrument used by states to communicate with foreign publics, build and manage relationships with them, and influence their perspectives to advance national interests and values, and especially to achieve foreign policy objectives.³ Public diplomacy scholarship has traditionally focused on two broad areas: national public diplomacy strategies and public diplomacy programs. The former area includes discussions on how public diplomacy goals are decided, while the latter contains analyses of the target audience and the impact of public diplomacy. However, few efforts have been made to examine the process of translating a public diplomacy policy goal—the specific order given to a governmental institution so as to achieve the general foreign policy goal—into public diplomacy practice and results, impacts, and organizational practice change.⁴ This middle stage of implementation is important for two reasons. First, it puts public diplomacy back into the political realm. After all, it is primarily

³[14, 34].

⁴The specifications of each concept will be discussed in the following sections.

a tool of foreign policy. Second, it challenges the assumption that public diplomacy is carried out the same as it is in foreign policy orders. In reality, the implementation of public diplomacy induces discretion that changes its meaning.

This book aims to find out whether, in what ways, and to what extent implementation affected the meaning of public diplomacy as it is practiced. In other words, it discovers the meanings applied to public diplomacy through implementation. According to theories of implementation, discretion between the policy goal and practice exists in all forms of policy implementation. This is also true of public diplomacy. The gap between public diplomacy's policy objectives and the programs implemented on the ground indicates that implementation can influence and apply meaning to public diplomacy. As a result, public diplomacy results in different practices following the discretion exercised in its implementation.

This book presents the result of my research that utilizes US public diplomacy towards China as a case study to understand public diplomacy implementation, and I focus on two US government agencies: the DoS and the Department of Defense (DoD). Few studies have focused on US public diplomacy towards China. Needless to say, the US–China relationship is perhaps the most important bilateral relationship between great powers. American policy-makers have been viewing China as a strategic competitor. Although the term strategic competitor was officially used by former US President Donald Trump, this rivalrous relationship was formed during China's rise to the status of a world power. The bilateral relationship is neither a new Cold War nor purely cooperative; it is complex yet unique. Therefore, there is value in understanding how the US has been engaging with China—its competitor—through public diplomacy. Interestingly, while the US–China relationship is unique, US public diplomacy towards China is a part of its global network. Many US public diplomacy programs in China are similar to those in place in other countries. Therefore, US public diplomacy towards China is both regular and unique: it not only reveals the interactions between world powers, but also applies to other countries and regions.

In this book, I argue that implementation largely explains the existence of discretion exercised in public diplomacy by the DoS and the DoD, though there are a few exceptions. Factors such as organizational culture, measurable goals, and resource constraints have largely shaped public diplomacy as practiced by the DoS and the DoD. Ultimately, the meaning of public diplomacy was changed by these implementation biases. Public diplomacy became something that signified the status of the US–China

relationship rather than a means to amend or improve it. Public diplomacy also tends to focus on short-term and measurable returns, as opposed to long-term impacts, which may be difficult to assess. It was also hijacked by conflicting interests, such as the agendas of private organizations, domestic considerations, and legislative restrictions to exclude certain countries and certain public diplomacy activities. The absence of proper evaluation mechanisms also indicates that public diplomacy became an unimportant and underused tool by the DoS and the DoD. In general, I find that efforts to leverage cooperation in order to foster more positive views of the US are more likely to be found in the DoD—an agency that goes to great lengths to claim it does not perform public diplomacy.

A FOCUS ON US-CHINA RELATIONS

This book chooses to focus on US public diplomacy towards China and is based on two major considerations: the competitive relationship between the US and China, and the routine nature of US public diplomacy programs that aim to influence the Chinese. China's rapid economic growth has raised concerns in the US, as it is seen as a challenger to US hegemony and the American liberal order.⁵ Some even say that no relationship will be as important in the twenty-first century as the one between the US, the world's pre-eminent power, and China, the world's fastest-rising power.⁶ In addition, the different cultures and political systems of the US and China have also generated a lack of trust between the two nations.⁷ Due to the strategic importance of China in US foreign relations and the distrust between the two countries, effective ways to build trust and understanding between the two nations seem imperative. US public diplomacy towards China not only recognizes China's strategic position in American foreign policy, but is also considered one of the official approaches to improve and sustain long-term confidence in this bilateral relationship. This study addresses something specific about China: the role of public diplomacy in adversarial relationships.

This volume also chooses to focus on the US–China relationship because of the routine nature of US public diplomacy towards China. It makes US public diplomacy towards China a good source to gain a better

⁵[1].

⁶[17].

⁷[21].

understanding of American public diplomacy on a global scale. In the literature on public diplomacy, much attention has been paid to US practices in the Middle East or towards Arab populations, especially the efforts to combat terrorism. This assumed a new urgency after 9/11, which identified the new priorities of US foreign policy.⁸ Those public diplomacy programs presently operating in many other countries have been the subject of fewer studies. These programs and activities constitute the routine and standard practice of American public diplomacy globally. While it is valuable to understand public diplomacy in the Middle East to address the strategic concern of terrorism, depicting a general picture of US public diplomacy requires a broader vision. The cases of US public diplomacy in China are part of a network of American global engagement, which operates not only in China but also in many other countries. Therefore, studying such cases in China can shed light on US public diplomacy in other regions.

It is worth noting that the relationship between the US and China has been unstable, and its competitive nature has resulted in restrictions on public diplomacy programs, especially in the DoD. While theoretically the lack of trust between the two countries makes public diplomacy a vital means of reducing misunderstanding and improving the relationship, in practice US public diplomacy towards China is usually restricted or forbidden in order to avoid undermining US national security, as claimed by members of US Congress. As a result, many public diplomacy programs in the DoD excluded China as a participant. For instance, the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program has omitted China due to the restriction contained in the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, which prohibits US foreign aid from promoting or assisting the projects or activities of any communist country.⁹ In order to provide a better understanding of the impact of implementation on public diplomacy, this book also includes major public diplomacy programs that exclude China, especially in the DoD, and examines exclusion as an example of implementation discretion.

⁸[13].

⁹[18].