Public Diplomacy Literacy Education of Youth
in the Era of New Media Sphere*

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In recent years, public diplomacy experienced a steady and prosperous development in China. The objective of this paper is to map out the role of public diplomacy in China playing in the process of China’s national image construction overseas and the necessity of public diplomacy literacy education of youth especially those college students in higher education institutions. To be aware of these, it is significant and valuable in terms of the public diplomacy literacy education in college teaching in the era of new media sphere.

Keywords: public diplomacy, youth, literacy education, college students

Introduction

When it comes to impression of foreign lands, most people rely on the images constructed in the mass media to form an opinion (Wanta, Golan, & Cheolhan, 2004). Although independent, most developing countries and third-world countries still stand in the long shadow of mainstream western media and culture, and China is with no exception. The western media headed by the US, control the discourse hegemony around the globe. Hence, it is probable that the stereotyping will continue fermenting in it (WANG, 2003).

In such a globalized world, the rise and fall of a country, the development of a country, and a country's strength do not lie in ships and armament, but depend on its political system, social spirit, core values and its international appeal. In one word, it lies in its soft power. In early 1990s, Joseph Samuel Nye, Jr, Harvard University Distinguished Service Professor first coined “soft power” concept. He said, “Hard power is equally important with soft power, but in the information age, soft power is becoming more prominent than ever” (Nye, 2005, p. 157). In recent years, China actively carried out public diplomacy, showing a real China to the outside world, not only to create a favorable international environment for our country, but also for our country to establish a good international image. The convergence of old and new media not only plays an important and irreplaceable role in the process of China’s national image building to the world, but also promotes the development of China’s foreign publicity work.

The portrayal of China in Western media has especially been researched in an Anglo-American context by means of quantitative and qualitative content analyses (PENG, 2004). Most of the studies focus on the changing image of China in the media due to the interaction of many varying factors such as the evolving historical context, political interests and cultural perspectives (CAO, 2007; PENG, 2004). Authors like PENG (2004) and

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Liss (2003) argue that notwithstanding the increasing amount of media messages about China in the past decades, especially negative images of China are represented in Western media.

In XIANG’s research of the national image of China in *Times*, he concluded that in terms of economy, China was depicted as a fast-growing and prosperous country and in the *Times* reports of China, they used largest and biggest frequently. In sharp contrast, from the political perspective, China’s national image was demonized in British media. The Communist Party was still an undemocratic autocratic regime which was so asymmetric with China economic image. From the cultural perspective, China was mystified. In the news coverage of Chinese culture, they use “mystery”, “puzzle”, and “story”, and so on to define China. In the meantime, “exciting”, “fascinating”, and so forth, were used for the readers looking forward to experiencing Chinese culture (XIANG, 2006).

China is a country that the Western world and media especially became interested in after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The potential of the country is more and more acknowledged by Western superpowers in terms of economics, science, and technology. In 2012, China is a developing country and potential superpower in the near future. It is therefore important to know how Western media report on the country. Various authors have researched media output especially in an Anglo-American context, but few of them have focused on the framing of China news.

**Current Development of Public Diplomacy in China**

With China’s rising status in the world, international influence of China and the national image construction overseas are becoming more and more important. In order to shape a good international image on the globalized stage in information age, the most important strategy is to carry out public diplomacy. From the practical point of view, the current international environment for China’s international image construction and the development of Chinese diplomacy is disadvantageous. The media of China in the international media communication is still weak. This makes the international image of China which has been distorted by the mainstream western media. The international environment is not good for China’s overall diplomacy.

China’s diplomatic strategy is comprehensive and three-dimensional. China still adheres to the implementation of a full range of diplomatic strategy. China attaches more importance to the field of diplomacy, especially public diplomacy and cultural exchanges. Youth is the future of world leaders. Catching the youth’s heart will have the initiative in shaping the national image of China. This paper focuses on the sphere of youth audience, and the role that they play in public diplomacy. In such a converged environment of new media and traditional media, youth should pay attention to the content and form of public diplomacy in the process of communication and cultural exchanges, and make full use of the new media and traditional media expertise. In recent years, China actively carried out public diplomacy, made efforts to introduce and illustrate a real China to the outside world. This not only created a good international environment of public opinion for China, but also laid a solid foundation for China to establish a good international image.

The achievements of academic studies on public diplomacy and international communication mainly focus on macro policy, and the principal parts of public diplomacy are subject to national leaders, celebrities, and so on, and paid less attention on the small groups of youth and their potential importance as the current and future main body of China’s public diplomacy. This paper will start from the micro level, and mainly takes the public diplomacy education of college students in the process of specialized courses on campus as an example, to explore role of the college students as a group, as the “ambassador for public diplomacy” playing in
international communication, and the methods and strategies provided for the spread of China’s international communication under the circumstances of the realization of Chinese Dream.

**Public Diplomacy Literacy Education of Youth in Higher Education Institutions in the Era of New Media Sphere**

The terms “media literacy” and “media education” are used synonymously in most English-speaking nations. Many scholars and educators consider media literacy to be an expanded conceptualization of literacy. In 1993, a gathering of the media literacy community in the United States developed a definition of media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a wide variety of forms (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Media_literacy). In the fields of journalism, communication, and other interdisciplinary subjects, the research topic “media literacy” has been conducted from various perspectives. The studies of public diplomacy literacy education in China mainly focused on the process of teaching and learning about public diplomacy, and it is about developing young people’s critical and creative abilities when it comes to public diplomacy.

The main body of public diplomacy is diversified, compared with the Western countries which take considerably the public as objects. Public diplomacy in China depends more widely on the folk strength, social organizations, research institutes, and enterprises, which have the chances, abilities to engage in international communication and cultural exchanges.

College students are the core groups of young intellectuals in China, and they are the knowledge innovation strength not in the development of China in all walks of life but in the international communication in the era of new media sphere. With the increasing number of colleges students studying abroad as either short term exchange students or to do their degrees for further study, public diplomacy literacy education in higher education institutions, both theoretically and practically speaking, is essential and significant. University is the forming period of core group Chinese youth intellectuals’ world outlook and values, and it is an important period of knowledge system construction of thinking methods and cognitive ability construction.

On May 4, 2013, President XI Jin-ping made a speech with the outstanding young representatives of China from all trades and professions. President XI Jin-ping said that Chinese dream is national, ethnic, and also for each Chinese. Chinese dream is ours, and is more of the younger generation. The great renewal of the Chinese nation will come true in the youth’s relay of endeavor. ZHAO Qi-zheng¹ said, “in the long run, the cultural communication of young people is important. The cultural communication between younger generations has just been mature and can maintain for a few decades, so we place hope on the exchange of young people” (personal communication). Each of us Chinese represents the image of the country, and is the principal part of public diplomacy, “China is a book, one billion three hundred million pages long, everyone is a page. Foreigners are unlikely to read the entire book, and they can only read three or five pages, so in their eyes the three or five Chinese may be the whole image of China. Zhao Qi-zheng said, the realization of Chinese dream would be long. The Chinese should be confident and be aware of the responsibility that each person undertake, so as to integrate better into the whole world.

How is the public perception of China formed by foreign audiences? By reading the newspaper, watching TV, reading journals, books, and listening to the speech of some native speakers of their own country. The

¹ ZHAO Qi-zheng, Former Minister of the State Council Information Office from 1998 to 2005 and vice Director and then Director of the Foreign Affairs Committee of CPPCC from 2005 to 2013.
spread of China’s network in the world is not widely covered, and the communication effect is difficult to measure. In recent years, the United States controlled, in fact, over 80% of the global news production and 75% production of television programs. Associated Press, as one of the largest news agency in the world, has 20 thousand media subscribers, reaching as far as 115 countries and regions, and about 1.5 billion people will be exposed to the Associated Press news every day throughout the world (CHEN, 2011).

On February 3, 2015, Chinese Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) released the 35th “Statistical Report of China Internet Development” (hereinafter referred to as the “report”). “Report” shows that, by December 2014, the total number of netizens in China was up to 649 million, and the Internet penetration rate reached 47.9%, which has a 2.1% rise compared with that of the previous year. According to the age group category of Chinese netizens in this “report”, the 10-39 age group accounted for 78.1% of the Internet users in the whole. In the meantime, the 20-29 age group was the largest netizen proportion about 31.5% (http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/).

If taking the number of 50 million audience as an evaluation standard from the perspective of mass media audience, in order to meet this standard, wireless radio took 38 years, television 13 years, and the Internet just 5 years (GUO, 2003). Dating back to the history and status quo of Chinese national image, establishing a good international image needs more power, in which the public diplomacy is one of the most important forces.

With the advent and rapid development of Internet, a country’s diplomatic network started to participate in online discussions, the Internet users may be ordinary people and the professional diplomat as well. The use of Internet technology and network platform, developing international communication and cooperation, publicity and diplomatic participation activities, pay attention to the application of network technology to promote the role of China’s public diplomacy. In fact, Internet has extended the ability of the government in terms of form, space and scope of participation, and so on, diplomacy among different governments, traditional diplomatic mode and means should be adapted to Internet and continuous innovation (LIN, 2012).

ZHAO Qi-zheng in his book Public Diplomacy mentioned, “The popularity of the Internet has been promoting and enriching the connotation of public diplomacy, all kinds of forces made full use of the Internet to express their own points of view, and exerted their own domestic or international influence” (ZHAO, 2011, p. 112). The Vice President of Britain’s 48 Group Club Alistair Michie, suggested Chinese people and people from other countries to establish a website together to make their voiced heard. He said,

What we want to do should not be print media, but the Internet which attracted much more attention of young people. Through newspapers and other print media do international communication of China, I personally think that is not so good communication, but to set up a website to make your own voice heard by people from other countries. (http://finance.people.com.cn/n/2013/0408/c1004-21049320.html)

The famous Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan mentioned in his book Understanding Media that, media culture had condensed communication and cultural into a process of dynamics, each individual would be coerced into it. Living in the ceremony and the landscape which were manufactured by media culture, we must “learn to survive”. The Internet has been a burgeoning mass media, with its strong radiation force to affect people’s way of life, playing an unpredictable role on the formation of modern culture and people’s values.

The youth, especially the college students, as the main body of the potential public diplomacy, if public media literacy education conducted on them, they can have the ability to understand contemporary culture and analyze the network information, which give them good judgment and speculative forces and the skills of
surviving in the era of information, so as to become active Internet users.

In 2002, British government set up a public diplomacy strategy conference. In May, 2003, British government determined the “public diplomacy strategy”. Also being of concern was that the strategy had cleared marked the key objects and fields of public diplomacy. The target audience of the public diplomacy in UK focused on the youth aged from 18 to 35 in countries with certain influence on the internal and external information sensitivity with higher degrees. The young people in the next five to ten years will take the main role in the public diplomacy. Therefore, improving the comprehensive ability of youth people, especially improving the youth public diplomacy literacy is an important mission of current times.

Conclusion

In recent years, public diplomacy experienced a steady and prosperous development in China. The objective of this paper is to map out the role of public diplomacy in China played in the process of China’s national image construction overseas and the necessity of public diplomacy literacy education of youth especially those college students in higher education institutions. To be aware of these, it is significant and valuable in terms of the public diplomacy literacy education in college teaching in the era of new media sphere.

In order to confirm the research subject view, further research will be conducted to select the youth from higher education institutions in Beijing as the main parts of public diplomacy as a case study in the near future. On the one hand, this paper examines the part that the youth especially the college students play and will play in public diplomacy. On the other hand, public diplomacy literacy education should be attached importance to at different levels of educational system in China, especially among college students. Challenges face currently are to what extent the teaching staff and college students themselves deem public diplomacy literacy education to be essential, to what extent will public diplomacy literacy education be addressed in class, to what extent the public diplomacy literacy education training will be applied and improved during interpersonal communication, organizational communication and mass communication in such a digitalized and globalized planet.

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