

The new image of Panda diplomat in the digital age: Innovations of the iPanda Channel in international communication

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Abstract. Nowadays, the giant panda has become a Chinese symbol on the international stage thanks to its uniqueness, positive cultural connotations, and constant effort of "Panda Diplomacy". In the new media era, new possibilities are opened up for the transformation and reconstruction of the novel image of the panda diplomat. As an international communication platform built by CCTV, the iPanda Channel is characterized by its all-media approach, diverse and globalized content. Combining quantitative and qualitative research, this paper discusses and summarizes the tactics and overseas influences of iPanda, and its impact on boosting China's diplomatic activities, promoting official and non-government exchanges, shaping the image of a peacefully rising China, and enhancing China's soft power at the global level.

Keywords: IPanda; Panda Diplomacy; International communication; Public Diplomacy.

1. Literature Review

On the subject of panda diplomacy, Chinese and overseas scholars have mostly focused on the perspectives of its history, symbolism, and contribution to soft power and national-branding. China's panda diplomacy has mainly gone through three stages: giving pandas as diplomatic gifts (1957-1982), leasing pandas for overseas exhibitions (1982-2007) and developing international cooperative researches (2007 -) (Lin He, Yu Li, 2020). The giant panda is not only an animal, but also an "animal diplomat" containing cultural and political connotations (Lan Jianfeng, 2020). Buckingham et al (2013) argue that pandas are more than just a scientific exchange, saying panda conservation operates in a complex, dynamic interplay between politics, markets and conservations strategy.

In terms of influence, existing literature suggests that it serves as a tool for bolstering soft power and promoting national brand, conveying messages of peace, friendship and sense of responsibility for ecological protection (Zhao Lijun, Zheng Weiwei, 2017). China reaches a much wider foreign audience with pandas than with the Confucius Institutes, China Daily, CCTV, or any touring arts group (Falk Harti, 2014). Wildlife Conservation at the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) also praised the Chinese government for its remarkable work in protecting and expanding reserves for giant panda as Giant pandas were downgraded from "critically endangered" to "vulnerable". Efforts of Chinese government on panda conservation is acclaimed by WWF as a considerable success and miracle that set outstanding example for other countries.

But there exist certain controversial views abroad about panda diplomacy. Firstly, renting and keeping pandas increases the financial burden on foreign countries; secondly, some international organisations such as Chris Draper of the Born Free Foundation believes that panda renting and gifting is more of a commercial exchange of goods; and thirdly, the speculation that panda diplomacy serves as a means of global expansion for China. They are no longer just about conservation, but become increasingly bound up with political and economic ambitions. (Henry Nicholls, 2011)

On the subject of China's international communication, the research findings are manifold and extensive. According to the 2019 China National Image Global Survey, the overall impression of China's image continues to improve and China's international status and global influence is believed to grow continuously. However, obstacles cannot be ignored, with 30% of the audience saying that there are no Chinese media with a broad overseas reach and 20% saying that they already have media they are used to using. With regards to communication content, some believes it should focus on traditional culture, global issues and "Chinese wisdom". In terms of communication channels, Beijing

should pay more attention to the innovation utilizing overseas social media to create a multimedia communication. (Guo Hongyu,2022)

In terms of communication strategies, Guo Hongyu suggested that more targeted communication content should be produced, taking into account the characteristics of overseas audience, to enhance communicative influences. (Guo Hongyu,2022). The strategy that China's foreign communication upholds is to tell the Chinese story through news with Chinese characteristics, build and spread Chinese cultural values, and better explain China to the world in a relatively disadvantaged position (Yu Yunquan and Wang Mei, 2014). In the context of post-epidemic era, short-video social reconfigures the way of connection in the digital age. It is a new strategy for international communication to pay more effort on the creation and global development of China's digital platforms. (2021, Kuang Wenbo). According to previous researches, Confucius Institute, CCTV, China Daily, and content related to traditional Chinese culture and values are the mainstream choices for research objects.

However, there are fewer in-depth studies on iPanda. Chinese researchers mainly focused on the field of communication studies, emphasizing the use of cutting-edge technology and the effectiveness of new media communication. For example, Yang Hang and Xu Changling examined six elements such as channel's communication form, audio-visual language characteristics and communication strategy; netizens are keen to watch live broadcasts of iPanda as an attempt to find their own shadows in this specie, which is essentially a form of self-appreciation (Ling Yan, 2013) . There is also a certain academic gap in exploring the linkages between panda diplomacy and Chinese external communication.

2. Methods

Due to the aim to observe and highlight the communication model of the iPanda Channel, this paper combines both qualitative and quantitative research, drawing on interdisciplinary theories and knowledge from communication, diplomacy, sociology and linguistics to conduct research.

1) Literature analysis. This paper collects the classic theoretical views of famous scholars worldwide in the fields of diplomacy, media and communication studies; relevant academic articles and reports from multimedia channels concerning public diplomacy, international communication and panda diplomacy etc, to provide convincing theoretical basis for the research.

2) Case study: Following Harold Lasswell's "5W" model of communication, I've collected a large quantity of communication contents, such as videos, pictures, tweets, so as to summarise and analyse the communication mechanism, strategies and effects of the iPanda channel and provide sufficient information for opinions.

3) Data collection: Using Python to create a web crawling tool, stratifying samples of 2,469 comments from 50 videos on the iPanda official account on YouTube, covering diverse themes, playlists, lengths, etc. I conducted an analysis on the word frequency of comments to create tag cloud, which facilitates a realistic and intuitive representation of overseas audience response.

3. Communication features of the iPanda Channel

3.1 Creating diverse media content based on onimedia tactics

In the era of onmimedia, the user base of mobile devices and social media is constantly expanding, and their functions are also constantly optimizing. The latest report released by Digital 2022 shows that global social media users has reached 4.62 billion in January 2022, accounting for 58.4% of the world's total population, of which Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Tik Tok, and Twitter are at the forefront of the most-used social platforms list, and Facebook's monthly active users reached 2910m.

With the insight into the popularity of social media, iPanda has established official account on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok ever since 2013, with 25m, 22m, 5.5m, 162.3k, and 1.3m subscribers respectively, and has created web and mobile application. According to my

observation, even though all media platforms are operated by iPanda, their contents and forms of expression vary according to different media platforms and users.

The iPanda Channel makes comprehensive use of various expressions such as pictures, texts, videos and animations in order to develop multi-platform and multi-form communication. For example, iPanda publishes panda pictures, memes, fun short videos and tweets in the tone of a panda on Facebook covering panda knowledge, growth stories, etc. The length of the videos is generally less than 2 minutes, which is in line with the communication habits of the platform. And thanks to the powerful community function of Facebook, iPanda's Fun Club has been established as a sub-group of the channel, attracting 57,000 fans, regularly conducting online and offline activities, and providing a platform for interpersonal communication, secondary forwarding and secondary creation. Nevertheless, the content on YouTube is video-based, featuring 24-hour live panda broadcasts and a variety of playlists such as Panda's Toy Story, Loving Parenting Show, etc. The videos are generally around 2-10 minutes in length.

It is worth mentioning that iPanda's most distinctive feature is the 24/7 slow-TV live. Slow TV is the broadcast documentation of ordinary activities over a long period in real time, dating back to a 1963 film titled *Sleep* recording a five-hour fast asleep of the poet John Giorno. In 2009, Norwegian TV station NRK broadcast a 7-hour train journey from Bergen to Oslo as a celebration of 100 years of the Bergen Railway which was watched by over 1 million people in Norway. After, slow TV has been widely used on traditional TV media, and other streaming platforms. In China, however, the most successful slow TV production appeared in 2020, with CCTV broadcasting a program called "24 Hours to defeat Epidemic", a 24/7 documentary on the construction process of Wuhan's Leishenshan hospital, accumulated over 300 million views.

3.2 Conveying the beauty of China from all angles

In addition to content related to pandas, the iPanda Channel also has a number of sections related to Chinese culture, news, for example, its official Facebook account has set up a playlist titled All About China which covers a wide range of content such as the Chinese cultures, Chinese cuisines and Chinese virtues, etc. The top three hits are: Unbelievable! Cutting techniques on the surface, An adorable dancing duo and Real Kung fu show, which received 509,000 views, 169,000 views and 67,000 views respectively. At the same time, it also launched panda calendar posters according to the traditional Chinese 24 solar terms and traditional festivals such as Dragon Boat Festival and Spring Festival. An iPanda News section has been set up on the website page to publish exclusive news related to China's nature conservation, panda diplomacy and international exchanges. Through YouTube, iPanda also presents popular videos on natural and cultural landscapes such as the Great Wall, terraced rice fields etc, and other rare Chinese animals like crested ibis, golden monkeys. This is conducive to building a multi-dimensional and linked platform to showcase the beauty of China, enriching the content of international communication and covering a wider circle of overseas audiences, and it also helps to set China-related media agendas autonomously and enhance discursive power on the global stage.

3.3 Adhering to audience orientation strategy

Creating reader-friendly texts and adopting expressions and discourse systems to which audiences are accustomed are important foundations for effective cross-cultural communication, which can reduce the cultural discounting of contents from heterogeneous culture and the phenomenon of "misalignment". iPanda is aware of the characteristics of the target audience, so that content can be selected and produced in a targeted manner to achieve precise communication. In terms of the communicative form, the majority of its contents are presented in the form of "Silent Movie", with concise introductions or subtitles since using globally understandable audio-visual language is a more vivid way to tell the story of the giant panda, since it avoids language barriers. In terms of content, iPanda has selected high-quality information with global flavors without losing its "Chinese core". For example, one of the latest popular videos is based on a classic American television sitcom *Friends*,

titled Friends In Panda Universe, which has received 131w views. it also launched related videos on special days like International Women's Day, International Friendship Day, etc. The tweets are also distinctive, because Western proverbs such as "A panda a day, keeps your sorrow away" are often used to enhance the understanding and recognition of overseas audiences, in line with international trends.

4. Current communicative strategy and impacts of IPanda Channel

4.1 To bolster the Panda Diplomacy in the new era

Looking around the history of global diplomacy, China's panda diplomacy is a very outstanding case. The highly developed internet and social media networks have now become a principal platform for public diplomacy. Hence, the Chinese government has also explored a new diplomatic path other than gifting and lending pandas, that is, using the iPanda Channel to deepen the "panda symbol" to facilitate foreign exchanges.

4.1.1 To promoting Inter-governmental exchanges

While paying attention to giant pandas in China, the channel has also created a section called Panda Planet, which records the situation of pandas in various countries and regions around the world, such as Europe, United States, Japan, etc., as well as news on panda diplomacy. the Panda Watch subsection of the website, including Today's Focus, aims to spread the voice of China with international perspective, providing foreign audiences with a new window into current affairs in China. The official Facebook account has also launched content related to government exchanges such as the report of the International Conference for the Giant Panda Conservation and Breeding, the video of birthday celebration of panda twins in Belgium, the opening ceremony of the Berlin Zoo Panda Park attended by Chinese President Xi Jinping and former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, agreement on establishing friendship cities between Espelette, a french city and Baoxing County, the hometown of giant pandas.

According to the British scholar Alan James: contact is at the heart of diplomacy and maintaining daily contact with other countries is a necessary task of diplomatic activity. In fact, cultural exchanges are more extensive and frequent than political and military contacts between countries. Strengthening cultural exchanges is of great significance to the development of cultural diplomacy.

4.1.2 To Strengthen people-to-people exchanges

In addition to helping traditional political diplomacy, the Panda Channel also promotes civil exchanges. According to the word frequency data collected from the 2,469 comments, 70% of the users' comments and feedback on iPanda Channel tended to be positive or neutral, with adorable, cheering becoming most-used comment words, and there were a large number of @s and retweets, which generates a wider and more effective spreading among people.

The iPanda Channel also regularly holds online and offline fan activities, such as launching the world's 1st giant panda-themed variety show, Walk with Panda, in which 27 challengers from 9 different countries and regions participated.

In addition to the official interactive activities lead by iPanda, overseas fans also spontaneously held related events. Facebook has now established 156 Giant Panda fan groups. For example, the Panda lovers group has gained 22,000 subscribers, and sells original panda cultural products such as shirts, rings, and keychains. Another Belgian panda enthusiast, Jeroen Jacobs set up GiantPandaGlobal.com in 2016 to introduce knowledge about panda conservation, panda tourism around the world, as well as a global panda archive and an annual award for pandas, staffs and volunteers who have made outstanding contributions to panda conservation.

4.2 To Enhance national soft power

The word Soft Power was initially coined by Joseph S. Nye, Jr, who defines it as an ability of a country to structure a situation so that other countries develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own. This power tends to arise from such resources as cultural and ideological attraction as well as rules and institutions of international regimes. (Nye 1990b, p. 168) . Later, soft power is widely used in political discourses as a one of the criteria to evaluate the overall national power.

4.2.1 To Improve China's international image

Since the 1990s, as China's power grew, some Western media began to spread news reports about the "China Threat theory", creating stereotypes and prejudices among foreign audience. China still has a long way to go to correct and reshape its national image.

The main reasons why China chose the panda as a representative of its national image can be attributed to two reasons. One is that the visual image of pandas with the characteristics of a child evokes a natural response to care for and protect it, while another factor is the animal's unique link to the country of origin. As a national treasure, the panda is a rare animal unique to China, thus 'panda' and 'China' can create a one-way association.

4.2.2 To Achieve soft landing of Chinese culture

Although the iPanda Channel mainly focus on giant pandas, it also has cultural promotion attributes. The channel's content covers a wide range of Chinese history and culture, festivals and customs, traditional architecture, technological development, etc. Through this medium, the beauty of China and cultural confidence can be spread to the world, thus further fostering interest and positive attitudes towards China and Chinese culture, achieving a soft landing and enhancing cultural soft power.

Apart from that, the channel makes good use of the panda's symbolic meaning as a vehicle to promote cultural connotations. It is believed that specific symbols, stereotypes, prejudices and national speech etiquette play an important role in intercultural communication. it is particularly significant to choose a carrier that can be accepted by both parties. In this regard, the iPanda Channel has made exemplary attempts, such as introducing the Mid-Autumn Festival from the making of panda mooncakes, using panda images to design lunar calendar, which are more likely to add interest to cultural communication and fit in with Panda Channel's audience preferences.

These trials have received unprecedented popularity of pandas overseas, which can be seen from the huge amount of subscriptions on the iPanda Channel, the rise of cultural products and industries. Therefore, Chinese elements using pandas as carriers are more likely to go further and gain more overseas lovers.

5. Conclusion

The iPanda Channel has created a novel and distinctive image of the "Panda Diplomat" and has achieved considerable impact in overseas communication arena. In terms of tools, the channel is committed to all-media communication, making full use of the most-used overseas social media to reach a broader audience and speed up institutional communication. In terms of content, the channel is unique in that it uses the panda as a theme to create vertical content. The channel also uses pandas as a carrier to transmit Chinese unique cultural connotations, presenting a real, three-dimensional and charming China to overseas users. In addition, it attaches importance to object awareness in the setting of cross-cultural communication, creating communication content suitable for low-context cultures, reducing cultural loss in the encoding/decoding process, and facilitating the understanding and acceptance among overseas audiences.

As a new platform for "panda diplomacy" in the digital era, iPanda has made a great contribution to China's public diplomacy. It provides a broader stage for official exchanges and cooperation and promotes civil interaction and exchanges amid panda and Chinese culture lovers at home and abroad.

At the same time, it effectively contributes to the enhancement of China's soft power. Panda, a unique symbol with Chinese characteristics, serves for construct a positive image, conveying China's love of peace and contribution in ecological protection. Also, it can also promote deep cultural and value transmission, telling the Chinese story in a gentler and more intimate way to eliminate stereotypes and gain more global acceptance.

The unique communication mode and strategy of the iPanda Channel provides a model reference and innovative ideas for overseas communication. Hopefully, in the future, more media with Chinese characteristics will emerge reaching the hearts of overseas audiences and promoting the further development of China's public diplomacy and international communication.

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