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Panda seems like a new “cat” * : China’s digital panda public diplomacy on Twitter: affective sign, image promotion, and the permanent Chinese diplomat

Keywords: public diplomacy, public relations, social media, panda, affect

Introduction

The giant panda has become once again the public diplomacy business card of China at the closing ceremony of the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. As China’s “national treasure,” China has used panda’s image to promote the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. In fact, showing pandas and their images have long been one of the “big ideas” of China’s public diplomacy for endorsing its international perception. From Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to China, panda diplomacy practice has entered on the stage of the contemporary Chinese diplomacy. China’s panda diplomacy has gone through four 4 modalities so far: 1) giving giant pandas to foreign governments for diplomatic relations building; 2) sending giant pandas abroad for short-term exhibitions; 3) “leasing” giant pandas to foreign governments; 4) sending giant pandas abroad in the form of scientific research and cooperation.

In the new millennium, the web has been questioned more and more like the “configuration” (Rebillard, 2007) that a large number of actors intend to produce different models (political, economic, statistical, technical, sociological) for exploiting the potential overtures by the network and its applications. Meanwhile, the social media have been seen as a medium within which social relations are conducted (Hirsch & Silverstone,1992) that all urban people live in a mediatized environment, they adopt and combine diverse converging communication technologies and communicative modalities to “perpetually” (Katz & Aakhus,

* A metaphor to show that the panda has become a new favorite in social media.

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2002) and “multimodally” (Schroeder, 2010) stay connected in their networks. The connectivity and interactivity of social media reinforce the circulation of information and emotion. In fact, emotional signals are elicited by the information should become embedded in the individual’s associative memory and thus serve as persisting guides for the future (Mackuen, Miller, & Marcus, 2018). The rapid transmission of social media enables the frequency of transmission of emotional signals. The Chinese government has also discovered the new blue ocean of its traditional animal diplomacy: using social media to display giant pandas in various forms and to reinforce the interaction with the target audience for stimulating public interest. In fact, on social media platform, such as Twitter, the Chinese state-owned media have advanced to mobilize the cute image and videos of pandas and to adopt a more proactive digital strategy for enhancing the positive perception of “China” among Internet users in the world as well as circulating information which encapsulated political implications. This achievement could be considered as an attempt by Chinese diplomats to combine its animal diplomacy and public diplomacy with the social network for the sake of the expansion of its international influence and attractiveness.

This paper assesses how China’s state-owned media use the image of the panda to serve its public diplomacy. Besides, the Chinese public diplomacy will also be examined in the affective capitalism lenses. In the first part, by using different approaches, we propose a conceptual framework articulating public diplomacy, affective theory as well as capitalism and aiming to guide our field approaches to question China’s online panda diplomacy practice. Second, through the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, this study attempts to underline the specific practice of Chinese national media in the implementation of Panda diplomacy on Twitter, and its techniques, contents, and strategies will also be demonstrated.

Literature Review: what is China’s digital panda public diplomacy?

The concept of public diplomacy is commonly found in the textbooks of political science, international relations, public relations and articles in the media. However, the effort of conceptualization stumbles on the diversity of the practices supposedly covered by these terms and the ideological dimension of their content. In the political science lenses, the public diplomacy, described as “one of the most salient political communication issues”(Snow & Taylor, 2009, p. ix), which participates in the Nation-State’s soft power consolidation (Keohane

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& Nye, 2012; Melissen, 2008; van Ham, 2008) and is regarded as “an instrument that governments use to mobilize soft power resources for communicating with and attracting the foreign publics” (Nye, 2008, p. 95). Since the achievement of public diplomacy missions often needs to be supported by media frameworks or non-governmental communication campaigns, Desmoulin and Huang detected its “track-II diplomacy” feature, namely: “all non-diplomatic contacts and activities which unofficially bring citizens or organizations together” (Desmoulin & Huang, 2017; Diamond & McDonald, 1991, p. 1) in order to communicate political or diplomatic positions, to establish transnational dialogue, even to exert influence.

Public relations theorists mobilize strategic communication, country image and relation management approaches to refine the primary purpose of public diplomacy. The public diplomacy is considered as a “national communication practice to seek to affect, in a very gentle and hidden way, the foreign public opinions; to manage the nation’s diplomatic environment; to construct a positive national image on the international arena; as well as to build a mutual transcultural and transnational understanding” (Huang & Arifon, 2018). Signitzer and Coombs (1992) identify that both public diplomacy and public relations have similar aims and tools for affecting public opinion. According to Zhong and Lu (2013), public diplomacy “involves relationship management and public relations tactics intended to effect change in foreign publics” (p. 543). Besides, Gilboa underlines, in a “post-truth” society, public diplomacy as “people to people engagement on common or conflicting national and global interests” (2015).

The term of “public diplomacy” is generally replaced by “*wai xuan*”(our translation: external propaganda) or “international public relations” in Chinese political and academic discourses. Although western scholars critic the “propaganda” practice as the lack of pluralism of information sources for citizens, the truncated or misleading introduction of political facts and governmental disinformation and censorship (Ollivier-Yaniv, 2010), in China’s social dimension, the propaganda refers to the practice of “publicity” or “promotion”, and the external propaganda deals with “a positive connotation associated with such essentially benign activities as the release of news, general shaping of ideology, or even advertisement or publicity” (Wang, 2008, p. 259). It serves to China’s global image promotion, defends Chinese national positions in various issues, and circulates Chinese narratives about its national dream. In a network communication approach, at the social media age, public diplomacy

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focuses more and more on the information exchange and public-centric communication (Zaharna, 2018). Chinese public relations scholars (Chen & Liu, 2015; Zhou, 2010) also recognize this new trend and underline the essential role of international grass-roots level for increasing the government’s global perception. They also suggest using social media platforms to establish a direct communication model with target audiences to enhance the effectiveness and coverage of information delivery.

In recent years, some scholars highlight “two revolutionary impulses” in public diplomacy, which are the decisive role of public opinion and the use of digital communication technologies (Balzacq & Ramel, 2013; Pahlavi, 2015, pp. 553–565). Indeed, like Britain diplomat Tom Fletcher’s metaphor: the “diplomacy is Darwinian” (Fletcher, 2016), particularly it’s changing in the digital age. In a co-creational perspective, the public diplomacy has already developed from the simple “top-down” to a “two-way dialogic model” (Fitzpatrick, 2007, p. 203) so that publics are seen as “co-creators of meaning and communication as what makes it possible to agree to shared meanings, interpretations, and goals” (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 652).

H1. The Chinese government integrates the traditional “panda diplomacy” into the “public diplomacy” practice in social media; this attempt facilitates to enhance the cognitive influence of China’s national treasure and to soften China’s image in the social network.

The exercise of “animal diplomacy” which, has a long history, is seen as “*the use of live native fauna (...) for diplomatic purposes*”(Cushing & Markwell, 2009, p. 255). Three fundamental conditions are requested for the success of the animal diplomacy: the animal’s visual recognition, its natural distribution, and its introduction to the audiences (Hartig, 2013, p. 55; Xing, 2010, p. 20). However, the most important hallmark of successful animal diplomacy is the animal’s image recognition. The more attractive the animal, the more the public exposure in order to arouse the public’s positive response, the more successful the animal diplomacy.

The ethologist Lorenz has shown a schema of childlike characteristics (*Kindchenschema*) in the visual recognition (Lorenz, 1943). According to him, human beings have feelings for animals with these “juvenile physical configurations”: high and slightly

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bulging forehead, large head, big eyes, round faces, short or stubby limbs. These characteristics trigger the “innate releasing mechanisms” for emotion and nurturance in adults (Jay Gould, 1979, p. 34). When people see an animal which has babyish characteristics, just like pandas which have “a round, rather at face, large black eye patches and a cuddly and clumsy appearance”(Schaller, 1994, p. xvi), people will have some universal reactions: disarming tenderness automatically, desiring to hug, kiss and protect this innocent animal.

Emotions are “an essential part of the human experience, and they can convey significant messages”(Seaton & Wu, 2018, p. 3). Emotions could be considered as a necessary part of human experience. They can also transmit clear messages. Like Ng and Kidder argued, the emotion is an inseparable component of human’s social life, because it organizes the experience of creating and forming cultural meaning (Ng & Kidder, 2010). Social media, such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, has not only speed up organizational and institutional communication due to its flexibility and convenience of communication as long as its limited cost of communication. It has also reinforced symmetrical interaction, dialogues, and engagements in order to shape and alter realities by using the message and emotion. Beijing is also fully enjoying the conveniences offered by social networks, through Twitter, China operates its official media’s accounts for “panda diplomacy.” Panda is becoming not only the Chinese tourism, natural, and cultural business card, but also become China’s unofficial international political communication medium.

H2. The affective fragments on social media could be capitalized for serving to public diplomacy achieving

The use of social networks faces the balance between the systems that manage devices and the “cognitive systems” of designers and users. Because the Internet can be regarded as a cognitive mechanism that combines different aspects such as attention, information processing, influence, and ideological connections (Pierre & Alloing, 2015, p. 4). According to Martin-Juchat, affects include impulses, emotions, and feelings, the communication is the main channel and the dynamic of objectification and circulation of affects (Martin-Juchat, 2014a, 2014b).

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In the business community, the two significant aspects of influence and emotion have long been combined with the economy. Like the attention economy, the image of emotional life will be objectified so as to make it a saleable commodity. As Krappi and *al.* put it, sentiment and capitalism are interrelated and interacted. “In other words, affective capitalism is a broad infrastructure in which the emotional culture and its classed history merge with value production and everyday life” (Karppi, Kähkönen, Manneuvo, Pajala, & Sihvonen, 2016, p. 5). Being a transversal form, the affective capitalism is described as “the ability of affect to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself means that affect is itself a real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late-capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory”(Massumi, 2002, p. 45). In affective capitalism system, the production and modulation of emotions, feelings, and reactions are vital for the creating profit (Graeber, 2016, p. 145). This system absorbs and mobilizes the emotional resources of target audiences, because these “inner” resources are not seen as actions, but are inherent in the economically exploited behavior (Hochschild, 2010). The actions evoked by emotional appeals can often go beyond rationality.

The use of affective capitalism could also be mobilized in a variety of ways in the public diplomacy practice, especially for nation branding and place branding. In reality, place branding is linked to nation branding efforts. If the nation branding focuses on using brand-building tools to positively alter, confirm or change a country’s behavior, attitude, identity or image, the place branding aims at the government’s desire to marketing the area and sector in order to achieve economic or political value. Both of these practices in the public diplomacy rely on the persuasive power and attraction. Regarding China’s panda digital public diplomacy, if a well-known and loved animal is widely used in different forms (image, gif and video) to circulate diverse information, these practices could create an emotional infrastructure that attracts people and stimulates them.

Method

This paper intends to highlight Chinese State-owned media’s panda public diplomacy efforts on Twitter. Our primary research question focuses on Chinese smart practice of public diplomacy by mobilizing the image of pandas on Twitter, to enhance friendly relations with

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foreign political leaders and people as long as to establish a warm, peaceful and lovely image on international social media.

Concerning the quantitative study, in this paper, the platform Crimson Hexagon (CH) has been mobilized to collect data. CH is a social media analysis tool that provides researchers with access to the full Twitter firehose. By using CH, researchers can set “Buzz Monitors” and “Social Account Monitors” for data monitor and collection from specific topics or social media accounts.

First, we set a “Buzz Monitor” to monitor and analyze the data about China’s panda diplomacy. We utilize the keyword “panda” and apply the authors as the three Chinese mainstream media outlets: Xinhua News Agency (@XHNews), China Global Television Network, or CGTN (@CGTNOfficial), and the People’s Daily (@PDChina). The query was established as the following:

*“panda AND ((author:(@XHNews OR @PDChina OR CGTNOfficial))
OR (“RT @XHNews” OR “RT @PDChina” OR “RT @CGTNOfficial”))”*

By adopting this query, we collected all tweets that include the term “panda” posted by these three Chinese mainstream media organizations and their retweets. A total of 63,434 tweets posted between January 1, 2017, and December 31, 2017, were saved for analysis.

Second, we set three “Social Account Monitors” for observing the three most influential Chinese mainstream media groups (@XHNews, @CGTNOfficial, @PDChina) on Twitter. The social account monitor allows gathering tweets are corresponding to each specific social media account. By using the filter function, we can receive the original tweets including the word and image of “panda.”

The quantitative study is based on a comparative methodology. This observation intends to underline the different subjective attitudes and sentiments of the Chinese government on the panda topic comparing to other hot issues in 2017. Therefore, in this analysis, we chose the “overall opinion of China,” the “BRI (Belt and Road Initiative)” and the “19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China” as the references for this analysis:

For examining the overall opinion of China on Twitter, we set a buzz monitor in CH by inserting the query “China OR Chinese” with the time frame of the complete year of 2017 (January 1st, 2017, to December 31, 2017). The data collection yielded 100,823,799 tweets.

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For the BRI topic, we use the dataset created by Luo and Wang (2017), which collected tweets relating to the “Belt and Road Initiative” that posted between May 7 and May 22, 2017. This time frame corresponds to the stage for China’s Belt and Road Forum in May 2017. A total of 184,687 tweets have been collected¹.

For the issue of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, we mobilize the dataset created by Luo and Wang (2018), which collected tweets relating to 19th CPC National Congress that posted between October 11 and October 31, 2017.² The tweets amassed total 110,690 posts.

This study based on the CH’s sentiment analysis and emotion analysis. As an application of natural language processing, computational linguistics, and text analytics, the sentiment analysis identifies and extracts subjective attitudes of words (positive, neutral, or negative) from the source materials. “*It is the computational study of people’s opinions, appraisals, attitudes, and emotions toward entities, individuals, issues, events, topics and their attributes*” (Kharde & Sonawane, 2016; Ray & Chakrabarti, 2017) for discovering the attitude of information publishers. In fact, all tweets gathered were coded by the computer-assisted training algorithm in the analysis tool CH. This tool has already installed the pre-defined sentiment dictionary. By training over 500,000 posts, various linguistic terms have been hand-labeled as positive, negative or neutral in the dictionary. In the quantitative observation, we use these labeled terms to “calculate the frequency of distribution of each word, negated word, emoticon, etc. present in those documents across the positive, negative and neutral categories. These frequency distributions are then used to construct a model that analyzes each new post and classifies it by sentiment” (Crimson Hexagon, 2018).

Based on the six emotional characteristics distinguished by Ekman in *An argument for basic emotions* published in 1992 (p. 180), the emotion analysis of CH allows categorizing all verbatims into one of the following six basic human emotions: anger, fear, disgust, joy, surprise, and sadness. This study provides an additional layer of contextual analysis for discovering China national media’s communicational attitude on panda topics.

¹ The query of the BRI issue was set as the following: “Belt and Road” OR “One Belt One Road” OR “One Belt and One Road” OR #BeltandRoad OR #OneBeltOneRoad OR #OneBeltandOneRoad OR “#OBOR”

² The query was set as the following: “((China OR China’s OR Chinese) AND (“National Congress” OR “Party Congress” OR “19th Communist Party” OR “7 men” OR “19th CCP” OR “19th CPC” OR “19th Congress” OR “19th National Communist Party Congress”)) OR (#19thCPC OR #19thCPCCongress OR #19thNationalCongress OR #19thPartyCongress)”.

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To complete the quantitative research, we adopt a qualitative study in order to observe the discourses, images, videos published by China’s national media on Twitter. We focused principally on the top 10 most frequent retweets and the top 10 hashtags as the primary case study for this paper. The qualitative analysis will show the specific practices and strategies of China in digital panda public diplomacy.

Quantitative finding:

Panda related tweets have the highest proportion of positive (14%) and the lowest percentage of negative (1%) in sentiment analysis than other China-related topics studied on Twitter.

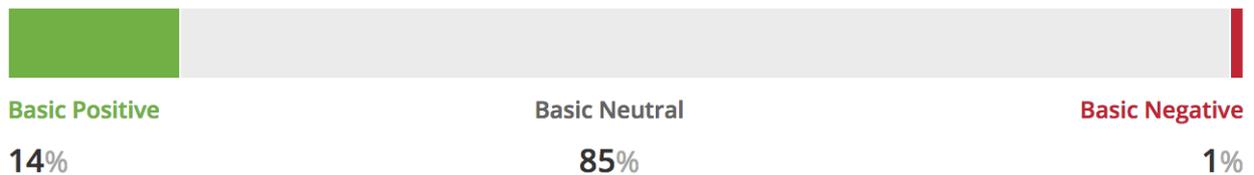


Figure 1. Sentiment analysis of panda tweets.

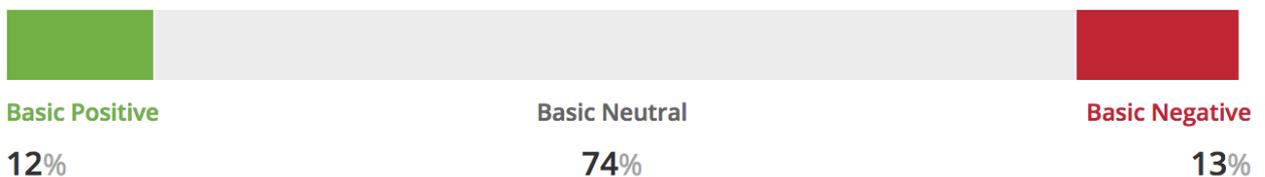


Figure 2. Sentiment analysis of overall China-related tweets.

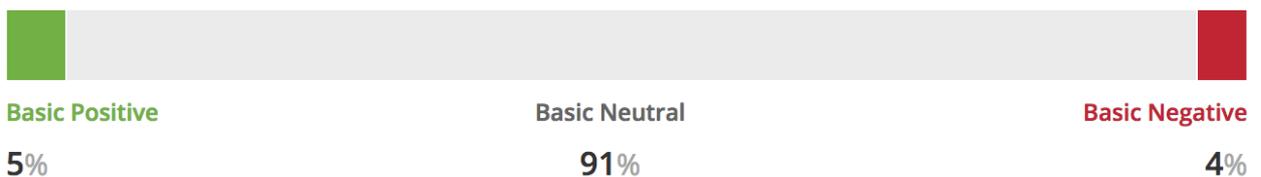


Figure 3. Sentiment analysis of Belt and Road tweets.

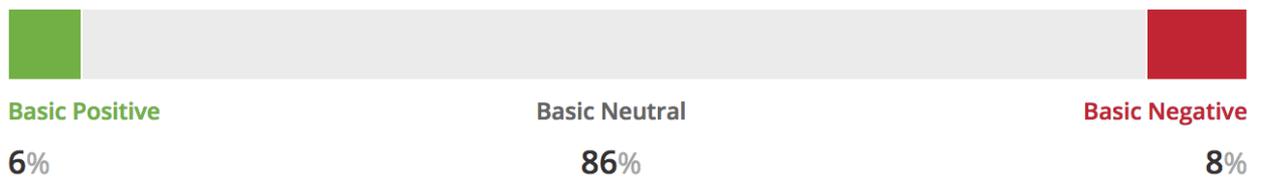


Figure 4. Sentiment analysis of 19th National Congress of CPC tweets.

According to the emotion analysis, panda related tweets have the highest proportion of joy and positive emotion than other Chinese hot issues on Twitter. The high percentage of

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90% indicates that the Chinese mainstream media subjectively attempt to spread a positive feeling through the panda theme tweets in order to attract the audience.

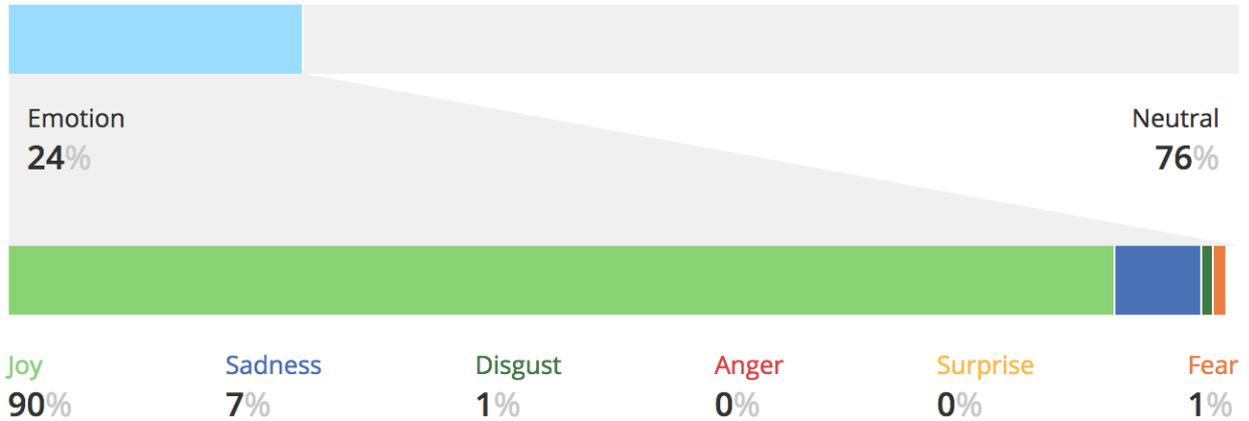


Figure 5. Emotion analysis of panda tweets.

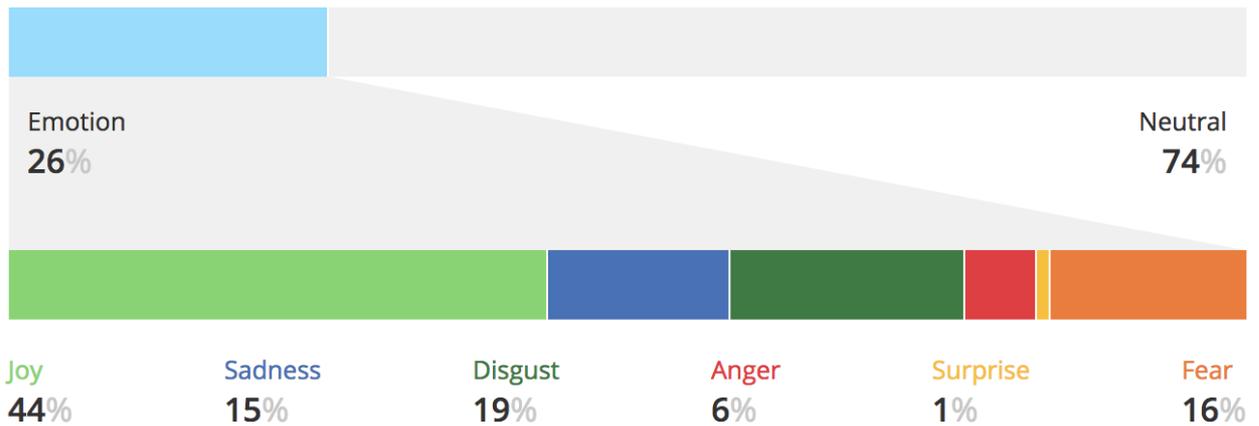


Figure 6. Emotion analysis of overall China-related tweets.

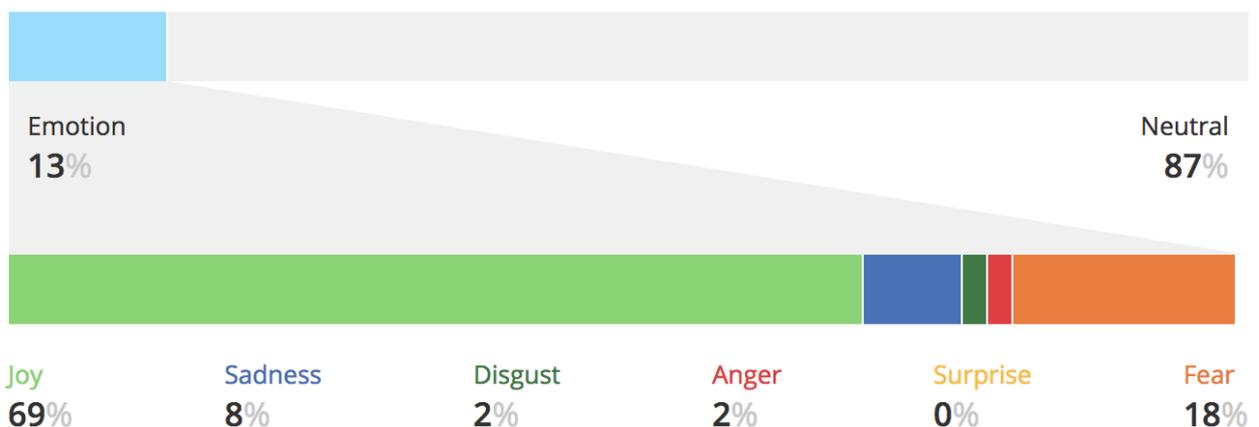


Figure 7. Emotion analysis of Belt and Road tweets.

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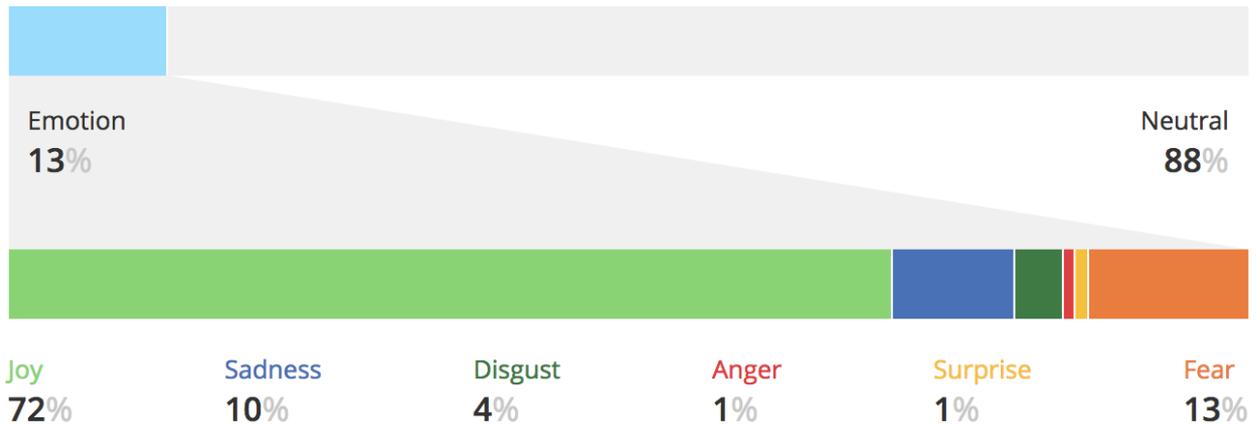


Figure 8. Emotion analysis of 19th National Congress of CPC tweets.

Qualitative finding: panda image embedded in a pluralistic discourse system for attracting different publics and accomplishing multiple goals

Although this qualitative observation only based on the study of the top 10 retweeted tweets and top 10 hashtags published by Chinese media on Twitter on panda diplomacy, it is evident that the panda image has been embedded in a pluralistic discourse system. In this section, by coding and analyzing the verbatims of tweets as well as interpreting the videos and pictures in the tweets, we intend to categorize and summarize different tweets and underline their typologies.

Result: at least four modalities of China’s panda diplomacy were discovered during this preliminary study:

- 1) **To publish videos of pandas’ daily life, especially some short entertainment videos to show the lovely and cute side of pandas.**

Half of the observed tweets use this method to attract more audiences and followers of China’s news agencies on Twitter on the one hand, on the other, retweeting these videos by a large number of users allows increasing the influence of these para-diplomatic accounts. For instance, the most retweeted tweet is the video published by People’s Daily (@PDChina) on October 28, 2017: “A clumsy attempt to escape a panda daycare.”

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(Figure 9. The image of panda on China’s national media’s Twitter)

In the short 54-second video, the little pandas tried to climb from their proper suitcases to other panda’s boxes. Their awkward movements and fascinating interactions between them have attracted at least 206,000 times of viewing. This tweet was retweeted over 3,200 times and received at least 6,190 likes. Besides, in these videos, the intimate interactions between pandas and human beings have been discovered as well, pandas play games with their breeders, or pandas are petting breeders. These images also record the pious and friendly character of the panda in the daily life which have attracted the attention of many netizens.

2) To use panda’s image for serving to China’s brand building

The panda diplomacy encompasses the “affective capitalism”(Martin-Juchat, 2014b; Pierre & Alloing, 2015) for the Chinese brand building: on the one hand, China’s news agencies add an intro caption for highlighting the support China Conservation and Research Center for Giant Panda at the end of each video, this effort intends to promote this Panda Conservation Center based in Sichuan province for attracting more international tourists; on the other hand, the panda’s image has been used to show China’s achievements in different fields. Two tweets have been found for China’s brand building. The tweet published by China Xinhua News (@XHNews) on May 3, 2017 has shown the test operation of the world’s 1st new-energy suspension train in China, and the train looks like a panda³. Another tweet sent on December

³ Tweet : “World’s 1st new-energy suspension train has run for 10,000km in test operation. The futuristic train resembles panda <https://t.co/yEIXwpRPA4>” (05/02/2017 20:04 @XHNews)

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6th which promotes the new high-speed train service from Xi’an to Chengdu,⁴ in this tweet, China’s news agency invited the world’s tourists to choose this service to visit the Giant Panda hometown – Chengdu – by experiencing China’s high-speed train and service.

Through the above analysis, the image of panda has already been widely mobilized by the Chinese government in its industrial promotion and national brands. Beijing’s media are also trying to use the panda’s image to create the added value of communication.

3) Panda is as an “animal diplomat”

In order to enrich the case study, by analyzing top hashtags, we found that pandas are first seen as friendly ambassadors and animal diplomat of China. On Chinese national media’s Twitter, pandas are often seen as a bilateral friendly witness to China and other countries. Three hashtags have been found for serving China’s political communication, and diplomatic relation-building: #France (quoted 890+), #XiVisit (quoted 530+) in Germany, #Tokyo (quoted 430+), each hashtag refers to a diplomatic narrative between China and other countries.

For instance, the panda theme tweets related to the *#France* revolve around the relationship between Yuan Meng, a French-born panda cub, and the French President’s family. While Emmanuel Macron was celebrating his 40th birthday with his family, he visited this newborn panda cub (see the figure 10), and his wife Brigitte Macron has given the name to this panda and been its godmother⁵. Through the use of different pictures and storytelling, China’s official news agencies have established an atypical “diplomatic” interaction with French politicians and people on Twitter. The new-born panda Yuan Meng has become an ambassador who links the relations between China and France.

⁴ Tweet : “#XinhuaSpecial: How can you visit China's Terracotta Warriors and the Giant Panda in just one day? This calls for a bullet train!” (12/05/2017 19:07 @XHNews)

⁵ Tweets : -“ ‘I have a name now!’ First panda cub born in #France named Yuan Meng, says French First Lady Brigitte Macron @zoobeauval <http://xhne.ws/zDm2d>” (12/05/2017 03:00 @XHNews)

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(Figure 10)

4) To tweet panda’s information for achieving pedagogical goals

In practice, the Chinese news agencies spread panda’s news and knowledge for achieving pedagogic objectives. These tweets which, present some detailed information about panda’s life and habits, have also been welcomed by the world audience to know more and more details about panda.

Regarding the French-born panda Yuan Meng, before it was born, the Xinhua News Agency and the CGTN had always been concerned about the situation of its mother. When the panda mother gave birth, the Chinese media Twitter accounts used live tweet for showing and explaining the delivery process of panda. The Chinese reporter has invited a French animal expert to give a “live lecture” about panda’s knowledge in the video. This communication action has profound educational implications (see the figure 11). After the panda’s cub was born, China’s news agencies also paid regular attention to its growth and introduced the biological characteristics of panda through Twitter. This series of efforts shows that China’s media not only use the image of the panda for achieving its diplomatic aims, they also intend to spread biological and scientific knowledge as well as to introduce the living environment of giant pandas to the world audiences.

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(Figure.11)

Discussion

This study explores how China used panda public diplomacy to enhance the cognitive influence of China’s national treasure and to soften China’s image in the social network. It is the first time that large Twitter dataset was used to prove the effectiveness of China’s digital public diplomacy.

This study creates an innovative approach in public diplomacy research field. By using the mixed method of the quantitative and qualitative methodologies, as well as the computer-assisted big data analysis, this study shed lights on social media analysis in public diplomacy research.

Through this paper, both quantitative and qualitative analysis confirmed that the Chinese government used the Twitter account of its state-owned media to conduct the emotional influence strategy in the panda diplomacy practice. The universal image of pandas helps Beijing to conquer the vast difficulties of language, politic, ideological and cultural gap (Xing, 2010, p. 22) of China’s public diplomacy, therefore, publishing regularly pandas’ videos, GIF images and pictures on Chinese official media’s Twitter facilitates the government to reach

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overseas target audiences, especially appealing to young netizens. Regardless of race, cultural background, faiths and nationality, the panda’s lovely and babyish image will be deeply rooted in the hearts and minds of people. This practice can also interact with foreign audiences and effectively promote a close picture of China in target countries.

By qualitative analysis of the top tweets and hashtags, we also detected four typologies of China’s panda public diplomacy on Twitter: entertaining public to building the attractiveness; using panda’s image for achieving add-value; panda as an ambassador for serving to atypical diplomatic interactions; and the pedagogical objectives in panda diplomacy. The panda diplomacy joins the exercises of affective capitalism to focus on promoting local economy, showing China’s branding, and attracting potential foreign tourists, on the one hand, on the other, the hiding objective is to influence foreign governments by affecting their citizens who become China-friendliest (Hartig, 2013, p. 64).

Limitation and Future research

This study is a pilot study of our research plan. The current paper mainly focuses on computer-assisted coding for sentiment and emotion analysis, as well as qualitative analysis of top tweets. The method used in this study is more descriptive than statistical. We plan to add more statistical analysis in future studies. Future studies include but are not limited to: explore more tweets posted by mainstream Chinese media outlets as well as the retweets; analyze public opinions and reactions; find more innovative methods and approaches in public diplomacy, especially digital public diplomacy research; and compare human coding and computer coding for detecting a valid mixed method for big data analysis in public diplomacy.

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