

Public Diplomacy between China and the World : The 2008 Beijing Olympic Torch Relay, A Test Case

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<Abstract>

Soft power is often seen as one of China's weaknesses, especially when comparing China to the United States in terms of their superpower status. Yet soft power and the effectiveness of public diplomacy are fiendishly difficult to evaluate, let alone understand. Therefore the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and specifically the Olympic torch relay offer a unique and manageable perspective to evaluate China's public diplomacy and the world's reaction to it.

Contrary to the expectations of the Chinese government, the Olympic torch relay became a focal point for large anti-China protests in many of its most important economic partners. These protests in turn sparked counter protests from the Chinese emigrant community both in China and abroad. The protests and the political fallout that followed revealed much about the relationship between China and other countries and about the mutual expectations of foreign and domestic Chinese audiences about China's conduct on the world stage.

Key words: Public diplomacy, soft power, China, Olympic games, China, United States, France, South Korea, protests

I. Introduction

Under the theme of 'Journey of Harmony,' the Beijing Olympic Torch Relay began its worldwide journey on April 1st, 2008. The Beijing Olympic Games Organising Committee described the torch relay as a global event that would enhance "China's understanding of the world" and "the world's understanding of China" while "promoting peace, development and cooperation around the world."¹⁾

Contrary to the Organising Committee's aspirations, the torch relay became a flashpoint for anti-Chinese protests in many countries, protests which in turn sparked a strong public reaction inside China and by Chinese nationals abroad. The seriousness of these reactions led Jacques Rogge, chairman of the International Olympic Committee, to declare that the Olympic Games were in "crisis,"²⁾ less than two weeks after the relay began. Rogge compared the torch relay disturbances to the killing of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich and criticised the Chinese governments' record on media freedom and human rights.

The Beijing Olympics are undoubtedly a landmark event in

1) Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad, 2008, *Press release on the worldwide Beijing Olympic Torch Relay* (April 4) online at <http://torchrelay.beijing2008.cn/en/news/headlines/n214296388.shtml>.

2) Stephen Wilson, 2008, "Rogge Says Olympics in 'Crisis,'" *Associated Press* (April 10), online at http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/20080410/rogge-says-olympics-in-crisis_all.htm.

China's modern history and they serve first and foremost as a symbol of China's re-emergence as a modern, powerful nation on the world stage. As such, the Beijing Olympics and the Olympic torch relay are a critical part of Chinese public diplomacy, a public diplomacy that is directed at audiences both at home and abroad.

The 2008 torch relay was unprecedented: the Olympic torch visited a record 20 countries and its progress through major world cities was a global media event. Also unprecedented were the violent protests that surrounded the torch relay in San Francisco, Paris, Seoul and other major cities.³⁾ The torch became the focal point for anti-Chinese protests which in turn triggered a strong nationalistic response inside China and from Chinese people living overseas, using the internet, boycotts and street protests to get their message across.

All of these expressions of opinion were spontaneous and unscripted, largely unmanaged by governments but definitely influenced by the media, including the internet. Hence they are the exact opposite of traditional government-to-government diplomacy. The torch protests were unhindered by diplomatic protocols or political niceties and therefore offer a fascinating insight into Chinese public perception of the world and foreign public perception of China.

In this paper Chinese and foreign public perception concerning the 2008 Beijing Olympic torch relay are analysed to gain a better understanding of the underlying issues that are shaping public perceptions and how public perceptions are influencing

3) The 2004 Athens Olympic Torch Relay did not face a single protest.

China's relations with foreign countries. This analysis is necessary in order to identify the challenges that public diplomacy, both conducted by China and directed at China, needs to address in the coming decades.

The next section of this paper provides some necessary background: defining public diplomacy and describing how the torch relay fits into the broader context of China's public diplomacy. This is followed by a section describing foreign reactions to the torch relay and another section describing Chinese reactions to the torch relay protests.

II. Background: China, the Olympic Games and Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is probably best defined by contrasting it to traditional diplomacy. "The practitioners of traditional diplomacy engage the representatives of foreign governments in order to advance the national interests articulated in their own government's strategic goals in international affairs. Public diplomacy, by contrast, engages carefully targeted sectors of foreign publics in order to develop support for those same strategic goals."⁴⁾

Public diplomacy is the process of employing soft power much like traditional diplomacy relies on hard power to achieve its aims. "Soft power works by convincing others to follow, or

4) Christopher Ross, 2002, "Public Diplomacy Comes of Age," *Washington Quarterly* 25-2 (Spring), pp.75-83.

getting them to agree to, norms and institutions that produce the desired behaviour. Soft power can rest on the appeal of one's ideas or the ability to set the agenda in ways that shape the preferences of others.”⁵⁾

Shaun Riordan, a former British diplomat, goes so far as to argue that “The use of public diplomacy to promote civil society should become a central (if not the central) element of Western diplomacy.”⁶⁾

Public diplomacy is not simply propaganda. It is a much more refined process that seeks to create a positive perception of a country through open communications matched by coherent policies. For example: “Scandinavian governments are inherently more trusted by NGOs and broader publics because of their long-standing reputation for support for human rights.”⁷⁾

The importance of public diplomacy internationally is growing due to the diminishing cost of communications and the fact that the “international system based purely on independent states has been replaced by one in which the nation-state is still a key component, but by no means the only one.” These changes, explains Jorge Heine, a retired Chilean cabinet minister and diplomat, have produced “a growing number of actors, both domestic and international - nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private companies, churches, business associations... - which are making their presence felt and adding layers of complexity to government decision making and legislation.”⁸⁾

5) Joseph S. Nye, 1991, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books), p.61.

6) Shaun Riordan, 2003, *The New Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press), p.125.

7) Shaun Riordan, *op cit*, pp.123.

In the case of Chinese public diplomacy, these new non-state actors include human rights groups, labour unions, the Falun Gong movement, the Tibetan émigré community and Chinese political dissidents who harm Chinese public diplomacy “by focusing world attention on the China threat or human rights abuses,”⁹⁾ as they did during the torch relay.

Chinese public diplomacy really has two faces: that of the ‘dominant dragon,’ aimed at the domestic public and that of the ‘peaceful panda,’ aimed at foreign audiences. The ‘peaceful panda’ public diplomacy is expressed in Chinese official documents that stress concepts such as ‘peaceful development’ and ‘good neighbourhood policy’¹⁰⁾ and in the theme of the torch relay: ‘Journey of Harmony.’ The message is that China is peaceful and that it wants to cooperate with the world. However this message is undermined by several serious inconsistencies, including China’s human rights abuses at home and its support for certain African dictatorships, which damage China’s reputation.¹¹⁾

Restrictions on freedom of speech limit China’s ability to develop its soft power and ‘peaceful panda’ image, even though it has vast cultural resources. “A true expansion of contemporary Chinese culture requires a politically relaxed environment that

8) Jorge Heine, 2006, “On the Manner of Practising the New Diplomacy,” *Re-Shaping Diplomacy*, Working 11 (Waterloo: Centre for International Governance Innovation), p.7.

9) Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang, 2006, “Sources and limits of Chinese ‘soft power,’” *Survival* 48-2, pp.17-36.

10) Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2005, *China's Peaceful Development Road*, Government White Paper (December, 12) online at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/book/152684.htm>.

11) Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang, *op cit*, pp.17-36.

encourages freedom of expression and a free exchange of ideas among Chinese and the world at large.”¹²⁾

By contrast, the ‘dominant dragon’ public diplomacy is aimed at strengthening Chinese nationalism. From this perspective the Olympics signify China’s growing power; a similar role that the Olympic Games in Seoul (1988) and Tokyo (1964) fulfilled in decades past. The Olympic Games thus served to gain praise from foreign countries in order to “restore Chinese pride” and thus re-enforce the “legitimacy of China's socialist government and of the Communist Party.”¹³⁾ However taken to the extreme, ‘dominant dragon’ public diplomacy leads from nationalism to xenophobia which is also damaging to China’s international reputation and economy.¹⁴⁾

Whereas China expected the Olympics to enhance its prestige, as is the purpose of its public diplomacy in general, foreign publics and governments, particularly those in developed democracies, saw the Beijing Olympics as a promise by China to improve its human rights record. This expectation was partly based on the experience of the 1988 Seoul Olympics which were widely seen as a precursor to the democratic elections that were held in South Korea in 1992.¹⁵⁾

Regardless of whether these expectations were realistic or not,

12) Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang, *op cit*, pp.17–36.

13) Kazuo Ogoura, 2007, “China’s public diplomacy,” *The Japan Times* (December 31), online at <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/eo20071231ko.html>.

14) Reuters, 2007, “Temasek exec: Investors may face China nationalism,” *China Daily* (May 11), online at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-05/11/content_870519.htm.

15) Chen Kuide, 2007, “Two historical turning points: the Seoul and Beijing Olympics,” *2008 In Perspective* (New York: Human Rights in China), pp.36–40, online at <http://www.observechina.com/info/artshow.asp?ID=43205>.

Chinese society is changing rapidly and public discussions of Chinese foreign policy are increasingly frequent. “Open debates on sensitive issues such as non-proliferation and missile defence were unheard of even ten years ago. Today, pundits tackle all these issues in opinion pieces, TV talk shows, and books seeking to influence and shape China's diplomacy.”¹⁶⁾ And, as author Diane Wei Lang notes: “In China there are two levels. One is what you see in the press which is the official level which is quite tightly controlled. On the other hand, privately, there is a great deal of freedom.”¹⁷⁾ In this sense, the potential of effective public diplomacy directed at China and aimed at strengthening its civil society is increasing.

However, China's continued oppression of political activists, including those concerned with human rights, corruption and environmental abuses¹⁸⁾ clearly demonstrate the limits to freedom of speech in China, and by default the limits of public diplomacy directed at China.

16) Evan S. Medeiros and R. Taylor Fravel, 2003, “China's New Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 82-6 (November/December), pp.22-35.

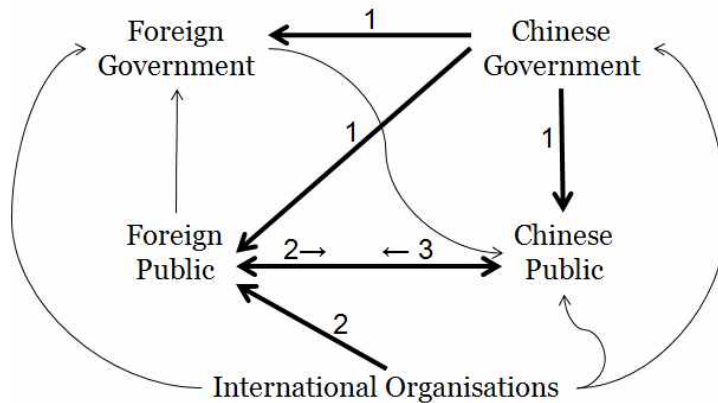
17) BBC, *Newsnight special: China* (broadcast 5 August 2008 at 22:30 British Standard Time), online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/7542187.stm>.

18) Amnesty International, 2008, *China: The Olympics Countdown-Broken Promises*, (London: Amnesty International), p.11.

III. Foreign Perception

If we view the torch relay through the lens of public diplomacy, then we must also view the reaction to the torch relay as such. Conceptually, we can regard the torch relay as a first order action by China, which provoked a second order reaction from various foreign actors, that in turn caused a third order reaction from the Chinese public, inside and outside of China. This concept is illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1 – Conceptual model of Beijing torch relay public diplomacy.



The torch relay and the Beijing Olympics were aimed at impressing foreign dignitaries and improving public opinion at

home and abroad (arrows labelled 1 in figure 1). The torch protests were a response to this message by international organisations, such as the human rights movement, and foreign public opinion (arrows labelled 2). Chinese public opinion reacted to this through protests and boycotts (arrow labelled 3). There are other factors in public diplomacy (unlabelled arrows), but these played a relatively minor role in torch relay public diplomacy. In this section we analyse the second order reaction by foreign actors and publics to the torch relay.

To gain some basic insights into the reaction to the torch relay in different countries, refer to table 1. The table seeks to correlate the reaction to the torch relay with countries' economic relationship with China and their form of government. As a proxy for the economic relationship, these countries' foreign direct investment (F.D.I.) into China is used.¹⁹⁾ To determine countries' form of government, we use the Democracy Index published by the Economist Intelligence Unit.²⁰⁾ Note that Taiwan, a democracy and one of China's largest foreign investors, refused to hold the torch relay.

19) K.C. Fung, 2002, Hitomi Iizaka and Sarah Tong, "Foreign Direct Investment in China: Policy, Trend and Impact," Paper presented at the International Conference on China's Economy in the 21st Century, (Hong Kong: June 24-25), p.21.

20) Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006, "Democracy Index 2006," *The Economist's The World in 2007* (London: The Economist Newspaper), pp.3-5.

Table 1 – Overview of international reactions to the torch relay.

Form of government →	Democracy	Mixed	Authoritarian
Economic ties ↓			
Strong Economic Ties (F.D.I. top 15)	<u>U.S., Japan, Britain</u> <u>South Korea,</u> <u>France, Australia</u>	Hong Kong, Macao, Malaysia	
Weak Economic Ties (F.D.I. not in top 15)	Greece, <u>Argentina, India,</u> Indonesia	Russia, Tanzania, Thailand	Kazakhstan, Oman, Pakistan, Vietnam, North Korea

Legend: Underlined: Minor protests, Bold Underlined: Major protests and disruptions.

Although the analysis in table 1 is very basic, and economic and political relations between China and the world are much more complicated, it does suggest that all major protests against the torch relay occurred in countries with democratic governments, all of whom are amongst China’s most important economic partners. This conclusion is also supported by a global survey conducted in 2005 for the BBC which found that China was generally perceived positively, but less-so in developed democracies such as Japan, Germany and the U.S.²¹⁾

One reason for the protests there is the fact that they were allowed to occur: in India, as in many other countries, the relay took place “under massive security lock-down, and by disallowing any democratic expression.”²²⁾ In many cities the

21) BBC, “China’s influence seen positive,” *BBC News* (5 March 2005), online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4318551.stm>.

22) Dr. Adityanjee is the President of the Council for Strategic Affairs, 2008, New Delhi. Adityanjee, “Olympic Torch Relay Ceremony: China makes a Geopolitical Statement,”

torch route was changed or shortened at the last minute to avoid or minimise protests. Interestingly, with the exception of South Korea, the torch relay in Asia was generally peaceful, suggesting that China's 'good neighbour policy' is working and it genuinely enjoys a good public perception or that the region's governments are very keen to avoid protests that may damage their relations with China.

Foreign perception of China is largely shaped by events on the ground in China and the Chinese government's response to them. The torch relay protests, which took place in the 2nd quarter of 2008, were followed by the Beijing Olympics in the 3rd quarter of 2008. According to East West Communications' Nation Branding Index,²³⁾ an index that measures positive mentions of countries in the international media, China ranked 136th best of 200 countries in the 2nd quarter but 7th best in the 3rd quarter of 2008 on massive positive media coverage of the Olympic Games. Some observers have therefore rightly noted "the public-relations disaster which parts of the torch relay have become for China's foreign relations"²⁴⁾

This general overview of foreign public perception of the torch relay tells only a part of the story. Country-specific circumstances also strongly influence public perceptions and therefore the remainder of this section focuses on three countries: France, South Korea and the U.S. All three countries are democracies, have strong economic relations with China and they all experienced major torch

Boloji (April 22), online at <http://www.boloji.com/opinion/0550.htm>.

23) East West Communications, 2008, *Nation Branding Indexes*, (<http://www.eastwestcoms.com/global.htm>).

24) Robert Ayson and Brandon Taylor, 2008, "Carrying China's Torch," *Survival* 50-4, pp.5-10.

relay protests. But this is where the commonalities end.

The U.S. is, like China, a major power in Northeast Asia. It has a military presence on China's doorstep and it supports Taiwan, which China regards as a renegade province. South Korea and France are both much smaller powers. South Korea is close to China in terms of geography and culture. Both countries also have a long and complicated historic relationship. On the other hand France is much more distant from China, yet it has been very pro-Chinese politically. Essentially these three countries cover all the major aspects of relations between China and the world: trade and investment, security, history, culture and politics. They therefore serve as excellent case studies for evaluating the effectiveness of Chinese public diplomacy.

1. Sino-French Relations

The Republic of France was the first western country to established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1964 and provide it with official recognition. But during the torch relay, it was also the first country where anti-China protesters forced authorities to extinguish the Olympic flame. The Sino-French relations entered a brief period of uncertainty after widespread pro-human rights and pro-Tibet protests in Paris. It was said the "honeymoon" was over between China and France²⁵⁾ along with anti-French demonstrations in

25) "Sarkozy has a deep China complex,... the French president and his delegation of business executives flew back home with more than \$30 billion in business deals after

China.

After the events surrounding the torch protests in Paris the Chinese government attempted to calm the situation and French authorities attempted to secure good relations with China as well in response to the incidents of the boycott of French goods, regardless of the French president Nicolas Sarkozy's personal amicable statements.²⁶⁾ Though the French authorities still tried to raise the tricky subject of human rights with Chinese leaders, at the Olympics opening gala, some French people said that they don't see any problems in China-French relations.²⁷⁾

French authorities are continuing to stress their adherence to the one-China policy on Taiwan and the Tibet issue²⁸⁾ and avoiding any meeting with the Dalai Lama in France.²⁹⁾ However some quarters of the French establishment, notably the mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, a political rival to the current French president, continue to antagonise China. On April 22nd the Paris City Council voted to make the Dalai Lama an honorary

Sarkozy's third trip to China... But that honeymoon period seems to have come to a crashing end, following the Paris leg of the Olympic torch relay" Adrienne Mong, 2008, "Honeymoon over for China and France," MSNBC *World Blog* (April 11), online at <http://worldblog.msnbc.msn.com/archive/2008/04/11/878049.aspx>.

26) French President Nicolas Sarkozy wrote a letter of support and sympathy to Jin Jing, a Chinese athlete who had carried the Olympic torch in Paris; the letter was delivered in person by the President of the French Senate. Source: Reuters, 2008, "Disabled Chinese torch-bearer thrust into spotlight," *The Economic Times* (April 24), online at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/rssarticleshow/msid-2977723.prtpage-1.cms>.

27) Lindsay Beck, 2008, "Olympics-China-France tensions forgotten at handball match," *Reuters* (August 12), online at <http://www.reuters.com/article/olympicsNews/idUSPEK17774620080812>

28) Xinhua 2008, "China, France to promote relations," *China View* (April 25), online at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-04/25/content_8049855.htm.

29) Associated Press, 2008, "Sarkozy says he will not meet Dalai Lama in France," *International Herald Tribune* (August 6), online at <http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2008/08/06/europe/EU-France-Dalai-Lama.php>.

citizen of Paris. This action triggered the fury of China's foreign ministry, which noted that "This act of crude interference in China's domestic affairs has seriously damaged the Sino-French relationship,"³⁰⁾ thus undermining the goodwill President Sarkozy's personal diplomatic efforts had attempted to create.

2. Sino–American Relations

By the time the torch relay reached the United States of America, both pro- and anti- China demonstrations had grown tremendously (including the hiring of a helicopter with an anti-Tibet slogan). Yet, unlike in France, these demonstrations did not lead to a boycott of American goods in China. This is due to the strong American influence on China and Chinese economic life, and a balanced and sophisticated relationship that has developed between China and the U.S. over recent years.

During the torch relay period, rather than proclamation for or against Tibet, there were far more issues regarding to freedom of speech in Beijing. With the caution on athletes to limit their protests at the games, the U.S. authorities took strict measures to prohibit free speech of American athletes (completely different with the attitude of Australia). According to U.S. Olympic spokesman Darryl Seibel, they will not allow their athletes to use the Games as a forum to make political statement.³¹⁾

30) Steven Erlanger, 2008, "Honor for Dalai Lama by Paris a provocation, says China" *International Herald Tribune* (April 22), online at <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2008/04/22/europe/france.php>.

31) Dr. Denny is an anonymous but frequent and respected contributor to the website cited.

Regarding commercial communications: American corporations also emphasized the unity and friendship as well as boosting Chinese nationalistic pride in commercial campaigns inside China.³²⁾

But concerning the question of human right, in the U.S. soon before the opening ceremony of the Games, the House of Representatives passed a resolution 419-to-1 on July 30th that called on China to “end abuses of human rights of its citizens” in order to ensure that the Olympic games take place “in an atmosphere that honours the Olympic traditions of freedom and openness.”³³⁾

U.S. President George Bush was criticized at home for attending the Games and for his administration’s refusal to publicly condemn Beijing for its human rights record. Yet he met with five Chinese dissidents³⁴⁾ before his departure to Beijing and planned to transmit their messages of freedom during his visit in Beijing. Bush also mentioned in his speech in Bangkok, Thailand on the way to Beijing that: “We speak out for a free press, freedom of assembly, and labour rights not to antagonize China’s leaders, but because trusting its people with greater freedom is the only way for China to develop its full potential… We press for openness and justice, not to impose our

2008, Dr. Denny, “‘Free’ speech at Beijing Olympics decidedly costly,” *Scholars and Rogues* (July 27), online at <http://www.scholarsandrogues.com/2008/07/27/free-speech-at-beijing-olympics-decidedly-costly/#more-2533>.

32) One of the slogans used by McDonald's: "I'm loving it when China wins"

33) Bonnie Glaser, 2008, “Olympics boost Chinese pride and U.S.-China relations – Human rights comes to the fore,” *Asia Foundation/Pacific Forum* CSIS (October), pp.2-4.

34) The dissidents mentioned are: Harry Wu, Wei Jinsheng, Rebiya Kadeer, Sasha Gong and Bob Fu.

beliefs but to allow the Chinese people to express theirs.”³⁵⁾

Nevertheless, after President Bush's return from Beijing, the final official U.S. statement on the Olympics was delivered which was focused on disappointment in China's failure to use the occasion to show greater tolerance.³⁶⁾

After all, though the Americans had praised the Dalai Lama with the Raoul Wallenberg Human Right Awards³⁷⁾ in 1989 and many other awards of liberty and peace, the 2008 Olympics is still considered to foster a better U.S.-China diplomacy. The Beijing-owned Hong Kong newspaper Wen Wei Po asserted that “The U.S. President's first appearance at a foreign country's Olympic opening ceremony not only suggests that they are strategically each other's stakeholders, but also indicates that they help each other in time of need... the Olympics is a lubricant for improving China-U.S. relations and boosting the level and content of China-U.S. Relations.”³⁸⁾

Yet the same editorial also mentioned that “in the post-Olympic era, China's soft and hard power would be ascendant, while the U.S. would continue to face serious economic crisis and would need China's help on a wide range of international issues.” Cooperation would serve both countries'

35) Steven Lee Myers, 2008, “Bush to Urge China to Improve Human Rights,” The New York Times (August 6), online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/06/sports/olympics/07prexy.html>.

36) As the White House spokesman said, “It was maybe an opportunity missed for the Chinese to demonstrate their willingness to be more open and to allow more freedom of speech, freedom of religion, while the world was watching,” Bonnie Glaser, *op cit*, pp.2-4.

37) In 1989 by the Congressional Rights Caucus, Human Rights, 2008 Washington D.C., U.S.A. Source: The Government of Tibet in Exile, *List of Major Awards conferred on His Holiness the Dalai Lama* (May 8), online at <http://www.tibet.com/dl/awards.html>.

38) Bonnie Glaser, *op cit*, pp.2-4.

interests, the article asserted, predicting that “China-U.S. relations after Bush’s era will only be better.”³⁹⁾

3. Sino–South Korean Relations

The Republic of Korea’s foreign relations are traditionally most effective when Seoul maintains positive relations with all its larger neighbours.⁴⁰⁾ Historically, Korea has yielded a flow of economic exchange with the Chinese market and maintained an beneficial diplomatic relationship with China. Although the Dalai Lama was awarded for Manhae Peace Prize in August 2005 by the Manhae Foundation in South Korea,⁴¹⁾ the prize was awarded by a private foundation, not by the South Korean government.

Although the Seoul government also hoped that the torch relay would contribute to forging closer ties with Beijing,⁴²⁾ at the time when the torch passed through Seoul, Chinese students violently attacked peaceful demonstrators which enraged the Korean public and caused a strong public backlash. The ‘uprising’ of Chinese students in Korea was part of a movement that started following the first torch relay protests in Europe and it gained momentum as the torch continued on

39) Bonnie Glaser, *op cit*, pp.2–4.

40) Scott Snyder, 2008, “China–Korea Relations, Establishing a Strategic Cooperative Partnership”, *Asia Foundation/Pacific Forum* CSIS (July), p.2.

41) The Government of Tibet in Exile, *op cit*.

42) Korea Times, 2008, Editorial “The Anti–Korea Sentiment – Seoul, Beijing Should Boost Understanding and Friendship,” *Korea Times* (21 August), online at http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2008/08/202_29759.html.

its journey, culminating in heavy protests in South Korea. The anti-Korean sentiment⁴³⁾ was also attributed to different interpretations of history and Korean's perceived support for Tibetan independence.

Following the protests, the Chinese ambassador delivered a message to the Korean government of "strong regret" concerning the Chinese students' violent demonstrations. The Korean government announced that it would take stern legal measures against the protesters, including deportation.⁴⁴⁾ The Prime Minister, Han Seung-Soo claimed that "Legal and diplomatic measures are necessary as the incident hurt [Korea's] national pride considerably,"⁴⁵⁾ but finally, the South Korean president ended up waiving charges against the students after they expressed remorse for their actions.

During the clashes surrounding the torch relay in Seoul many critics also focused on Beijing's treatment of defectors who try to escape their lives of hardship in North Korea⁴⁶⁾ which is another issue that must be seen in the context of the recent China-South Korea "strategic cooperative partnership" agreement which, in terms of political relations, seems to be more an aspiration than a reflection of reality. All these issues are manifestations of Sino-South Korean differences in world view,

43) Korea Times Editorial, *op cit*.

44) Michael Kim, 2008, "Olympic Torch relay turn violent in Seoul, Demonstration highlighted the plight of North Korean refugees in China" *Korean American Press* (May 6), online at <http://www.bostonkap.com/detail.php?number=2927&thread=21r12r02>.

45) Agence France-Press, 2008, "S. Korea to deport Chinese torch relay attackers," *Google News* (April 29), online at http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5jQG9eq8ZpNkYGbXJF-eNQcbA0_CA.

46) Michael Kim, *op cit*.

social systems, and social values that impose real limits on the level of this partnership.⁴⁷⁾ An international opinion poll released shortly after the torch protests revealed that South Korean's perception of China and Chinese people is the most negative of all countries surveyed.⁴⁸⁾

IV. Chinese Perception

The Olympics were seen by many foreign publics as an expectation of China for the future (political and human rights reform; environmental reform; freedom of press; pluralism).⁴⁹⁾ Yet China's interest in the 2008 Olympics is based on its desire for legitimisation and recognition for the progress of its development after 35 years of reform. The Chinese public looked at the Olympics as a reward for their past and as inspiration for what would come between 2001 and 2008. As a matter of fact, Chinese ambitions to host the Olympic Games are strongly tied to the desire to modernise China. This desire is succinctly captured by one of the Beijing Olympics' catchphrases: "one hundred year dream" (bai nian yi meng), referring to the fact that China had first

47) Scott Snyder, *op cit*, p.2.

48) The other countries in the poll were India, Brazil, U.S. and Britain. BBC, 2008, "World still wary of modern China" *BBC News* (August 4), online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asiapacific/7540871.stm>.

49) Chic Dambach, 2008, "Olympic Diplomacy," *Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum* (May 13).

expressed the ambition to host the Olympic Games in 1908, when writers of the *Tianjin Qingnian* (Tianjin Youth) magazine asked when the Olympic Games would be held on Chinese soil.⁵⁰⁾

The Olympic Games gave China the opportunity to strengthen its 'soft power' efforts by allowing China to improve its image and work towards public diplomacy goals. However, strong nationalist emotions are managed in the country in order to support the public diplomacy efforts of the Chinese nation-state. This led to a huge outburst of nationalism that is not just pro-China, but pro-Chinese government and anti-foreigners.

1. Chinese public perception and reaction: boosted by nationalism

Outside China, overseas Chinese and Chinese students came out in large numbers to protect the torch against the anti-China elements in cities where the Olympic torch went through. In France, the strong disruption from pro-Tibetans and the cancelling by the Mayor of Paris of the welcoming ceremony for the Olympic torch even invoked the boycotts of the main French luxury and cosmetic goods. Then the boycott of French supermarket chain Carrefour spread in China's main

50) In 1908, some young Chinese intellectuals first addressed in the *Tianjin Qingnian* (Tianjin Youth) magazine these three questions: When will China be able to send athletes to Olympics? When will Chinese athletes win their first gold medal? When will China hold the Olympic Games? Xinhua, 2008, "The Olympics Forever" Xinhua News (August 6), online at http://news.xinhuanet.com/olympics/2008-08/06/content_8989830.htm.

cities, accusing the company's major shareholder, the LVMH Group, of donating funds to the Dalai Lama.⁵¹⁾ Some short demonstrations took place in Beijing, Wuhan, Kunming, Hefei, Qingdao, accusing the French nation of taking part in a pro-secessionist conspiracy and anti-Chinese racism. According to a survey from Sina.com, nearly 90% of Chinese people surveyed claim that French president Sarkozy is not welcomed at the Beijing Olympics.⁵²⁾

During numerous overseas Chinese students' demonstrations in different countries, their main concerns focussed on three issues:

- Anti-Tibetan independence, this was expressed in Seoul when Chinese students physically assaulted a pro-Tibetan protester,
- Claim of distortion on the pictures published and broadcast by foreign media (CNN, BBC, etc), accusing them of purposeful exaggeration and misrepresenting a scene about Chinese police action in riots that took place in Tibet.
- A call to the public to stop using the Olympic Games to achieve political purposes and defend the Chinese image to emphasize the aspirations of "harmony" that the games were intended to bring.

Regarding the attitude to Tibet protest, what the public perceive inside of China was different from the public outside of China. When the recent protest started in Tibet, many Chinese

51) Reuters, 2008, "Chinese demand Carrefour boycott for Tibet 'support,'" *Guardian* (April 15), online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/feedarticle?id=7463240>.

52) Herald Sun, 2008, The survey was taken among 99,461 respondents. Herald Sun Beijing Correspondent "Sarkozy not welcome at Olympics - poll" (July 2), online at <http://www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,21985,23957742-5005961,00.Html>.

people were surprised, since the Chinese state has poured large amounts of money into the region and in recent years Tibet's economic growth keeps being higher than the national average. Regardless, it was seen that the majority of Tibetans have been excluded from the recent fast economic development, which the state controlled media failed to report - again, nationalism has been well promoted in media.

2. The Chinese government's utilisation and rethinking of nationalism

“Fueling anti-foreign sentiments and identifying distant threats is always an effective tool to divert public attention away from domestic problems.” This is a correct description for the situation in China - the government claims that social and political stability is paramount and anything that could disrupt it should be strictly prohibited.⁵³⁾ And, in response to the incidence of anti-Beijing Olympics or anti-China, “nationalism did work well.” Nothing is seen as more useful than the public expressing their rejection of international criticism toward China for what is perceived as dictatorial and oppressive policies.⁵⁴⁾ As one communist party official interviewed in Beijing, describing nationalism, said: “Government policies employed to stoke nationalism tend to heavily stress

53) Jens Kolhammar, 2008, “Nationalism is both a sanctuary and a grave,” *Chinese Elections and Governance*, online at <http://en.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=17303>.

54) Yomiuri Editorial, 2008, “Chinese Nationalism” *Daily Yomiuri* (August 27) online at <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/world/20080828TDY05301.htm>.

patriotism and national interests, leading to increased totalitarian adverse effects, such as oppression of those who possess alternative or controversial views toward government policies. There are fears of a reversal of progress in reforms and the opening of China.”⁵⁵⁾

Without a doubt, the Olympics have, proved that nationalism can be used as a basis to unite the people as one country. The games have also managed to secure a solid communication platform on the international stage, but surging nationalistic pride can also bring oppression and recklessness. The current Chinese leadership seems to be aware of the fact that nationalism is also a double-edged sword. The Chinese state-run newspaper China Daily expressed the government's views on the protests, warning against “false patriotism” and encouraging tolerance of differing opinions because “over-the-top nationalism is not constructive, but can do harm to the country.”⁵⁶⁾ Inside China, the government began to launch media campaigns asking the citizens to be rational and declaring that the best form of patriotism is to focus on solving China's own problems.⁵⁷⁾

The implication is clear: the objective of the Chinese government is to stay on the path of peaceful development with mutually beneficial and durable relations with foreign countries. The impact from extreme nationalism made China rethink the orientation of its public diplomacy and find some remedy which would allow it

55) Yomiuri Editorial, *op cit.*

56) Jamey Keaten, 2008, “France tries to repair relationship with China”, *San Francisco Chronicle* (April 22), online at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/04/22/MNA610958V.DTL>.

57) Jens Kolhammer, *op cit.*

to return to its opening-up strategy, formulated as a win-win strategy for all countries involved.⁵⁸⁾

Accordingly, to face any possible negative economic and diplomatic effects, which the Chinese government indubitably does not desire with any country, it then tended to repair and promote relations with other countries, especially the call to continue to “harbour friendly bilateral relation” with France.⁵⁹⁾ Concerning the disruption of the torch relay through Paris and anti-French demonstration in China, the president of China stressed France must work with the Chinese side to eliminate disturbances and properly handle the new situation and new problems of bilateral ties, calling for both sides to make joint efforts to push forward a healthy and stable development of their comprehensive strategic partnership.⁶⁰⁾

With Korea, Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister expressed verbal regret for the incidents during a meeting in Beijing with South Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Yong-joon, but this was in an usual way that offered no formal written acknowledgment or apology. The Chinese government declined to condemn the behaviour of Chinese students.⁶¹⁾ However officials did mention

58) Yang Wei, 2008, “Embracing the world with confidence—President Hu Jintao’s Asian tour thrusts post-Olympic China into global spotlight,” *Beijing Review* (September 12), online at http://www.bjreview.com/print/txt/200809/01/content_148036.htm.

59) Jamey Keaten, *op cit.*

60) Xinhua, *op cit.*

61) Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu told a news conference in Beijing stating that “They did not want any harm to come to the torch; hence some of their actions may have been a little over-excited. The Chinese side expresses its sympathies to police and reporters in South Korea who were hurt in this event,...” “some Chinese students came out to safeguard the dignity of the torch. I believe that’s natural...” Source: Reuters, “S.Korea probes Chinese violence at torch relay,” *op cit.*

China's intent to engage in more active high-level bilateral diplomacy with South Korea. When the Chinese president embarked on a three-nation tour at the end of August, his first overseas trip after the Beijing Olympics, his first stop was South Korea. Although it may not convince critics prejudiced against China, President Hu's speech in Seoul contained important language indicating that China wished to pursue development based on peace, openness and cooperation.⁶²⁾

Regarding China's attitude to the call from Western countries on increasing freedoms, China's foreign ministry maintained a moderate rebuke (especially concerning the U.S.), noting that compared to western countries, China has a divergence of views on human rights and religion due to its specific social background. Instead their differences should be discussed on the basis of mutual respect and equality, with the aim of enlarging mutual consensus.⁶³⁾

V. Conclusions

The effectiveness of China's public diplomacy depends on the credibility of its government and its ability in handling crises. China's credibility is greatly damaged by the way officials deal with the press. "Their minor, provable lies—the sky is blue, no one wants to protest—inevitably build mistrust of larger claims

62) Yang Wei, *op cit.*

63) Bonnie Glaser, *op cit.*, pp.2-4.

that are closer to being true,” or when Chinese officials describe the Dalai Lama as “a jackal clad in Buddhist monk’s robes or a man with a human face and the heart of a beast, it only builds international sympathy for him and members of his splittist clique,”⁶⁴⁾ and ensures Chinese officials are not taken very seriously.

Foreign public diplomacy towards China can also be harmed by the foreign media’s lack of sensitivity towards China. For example, when CNN commentator Jack Cafferty describes China as a “bunch of goons and thugs,”⁶⁵⁾ Chinese audiences immediately took offence and the quote was widely cited, including by the Chinese state-owned media, as proof of Western media bias. However, as China becomes more prosperous and confident, Chinese people are likely to be less concerned about the outside world’s opinion of them.

But how will China’s public diplomacy develop in the coming decades and what challenges will it present? On the bright side, although opinions of China are mixed, young foreigners tend to hold a more positive view of China than do older people. And although public opinion in Western countries is concerned about China’s human rights record, as individuals, the Chinese are generally regarded as ‘friendly’.⁶⁶⁾

If this goodwill persists and China becomes more open, then public relations are bound to improve. A more prosperous and

64) James Fallows, 2008, “Their Own Worst Enemy,” *The Atlantic* (November), online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200811/chinese-progress>.

65) CNN, *The Situation Room* (broadcast 9 April 2008 at 18:00 U.S. Eastern Time), online at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0804/09/sitroom.03.html>.

66) BBC, “World still wary of modern China,” *op cit*.

open China will receive much better media coverage which will make Chinese people more open and exposed to foreign views, a unique development in a country that historically considered itself to be the centre of the world. The 'peace panda' will prevail.

But public relations could also develop in a very different direction. Firstly, there is a wide discrepancy between the self-perception of Chinese people and foreigner's perception of China. A report by Kissinger Associates, a lobbying firm, noted that: "most people in China considered their country very "trustworthy." Most people outside China thought the country was not trustworthy at all."⁶⁷⁾ This perception, along with difference in perceptions of the Olympic Games, pointed out earlier, go a long way to explain the torch relay protests and the counter reaction from China.

In addition to that, China seems to be becoming more nationalistic, not less. Some of the most violent protesters were Chinese students, precisely the people who, from the perspective of soft power, should be building bridges between China and the world. "The explosion of nationalist sentiment, especially among young people, might seem shocking, but it's been simmering for a long time. In fact, Beijing's leadership, for all its problems, might be less hard-line than China's youth, the country's future. If China ever were to become a truly free political system, it might actually become more, not less, aggressive."⁶⁸⁾

Looking at the torch relay from this 'dominant dragon'

67) James Fallows, *op cit.*

68) Joshua Kurlantzick, 2008, "Chinese nationalism exploding," *China Post* (May 9), online at <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/print/155570.htm>.

perspective, the torch relay was a provocation by China. Refusing to budge on human rights, China sent the torch to the world's major cities, surrounded by "blue track-suited Chinese commandos" who were "brutally man-handling the protestors on the soil of third countries."⁶⁹⁾

This perceived symbol of aggressive Chinese nationalism then triggered protests that in turn fuelled Chinese xenophobic sentiments, strengthening the credibility of the Chinese government at home and giving anti-Chinese protesters a platform to harm China's image abroad. Thus the torch relay harmed public relations, hardening Chinese nationalism and pummeling China's international image. The torch relay was perhaps a good example of how not to conduct public diplomacy.

It must therefore be concluded that the greatest power to shape public diplomacy lies with the Chinese government. It is the focus of public scrutiny and it controls the Chinese media and thus greatly influences Chinese public perception. Foreign media are essentially reacting to the Chinese government and are protected by freedom of speech laws that make them almost immune to government influence.

By improving transparency and running its affairs well, the Chinese government will increasingly be able to win public arguments in an environment where it does not control the media, allowing it to close the gap between Chinese and foreign perceptions and delivering it the soft power that it seeks and needs to realise China's peaceful development and to fulfil the

69) Adityanjee, *op cit.*

dreams of the fifth of humanity that live within its borders.

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