

DOI: 10.24412/2618-6888-2021-26-274-290

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CHINESE DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN THE PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC TIMES: ANALYSIS OF THE RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE ACCOUNTS

Abstract. This study evaluates the effect of Chinese web diplomacy in Russian-language social media during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite several external and internal factors, China's soft power has demonstrated resilience and a multi-vector approach. We compared the online performance of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Russia with the diplomatic missions of Japan and the Republic of Korea across key activity indicators and types of content published. Based on the collected data, we found that the Korean and Japanese embassies are ahead of the Chinese Embassy regarding overall performance on most social media platforms. However, PRC Embassy is ahead of them on Twitter and see this social medium as a priority for promoting national image. The launch of new accounts on Russian-language social networks demonstrates the Chinese diplomatic apparatus' desire to achieve maximum audience reach. However, the study also reveals several flaws in China's e-diplomacy: excessive politicization and insufficient focus on engaging netizens by selecting human touch topics. Our study

confirms the findings of other scholars that, so far, Chinese embassies mostly act as info-mediators, who only disseminate official information from other sources without commenting on it. Although China's digital diplomacy remains reactive and defensive, it is increasingly subordinated to China's national branding strategy and has potential for improvement. The results of this study suggest that China builds up resources on the Web in an effort to strengthen its discursive power. The article concludes that the problem in a number of cases remains the effective use of available capacities. Still, the authors cannot rule out that catch-up development of the digital diplomacy could be gradually replaced by innovations, which China can back up with financial resources. Finally, the paper proposes avenues for future research. Further comparative analysis on a larger sample will provide a better understanding of the trends and effectiveness of Chinese web diplomacy.

Keywords: China, digital diplomacy, soft power, discursive power, COVID-19, social media, national branding.

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Китайская цифровая дипломатия в пандемический и постпандемический периоды: анализ аккаунтов на русском языке

Аннотация. В статье оценивается эффективность цифровой дипломатии Китая в русскоязычных социальных сетях в первый год пандемии COVID-19. Несмотря на ряд внешних и внутренних факторов «мягкая сила» Китая продемонстрировала свою состоятельность и многовекторность. В исследовании сравнивается деятельность в соцсетях посольств Китайской Народной Республики, Японии и Республики Корея в России по ключевым показателям

эффективности и типам контента. На основании полученных данных авторы выяснили, что посольства РК и Японии по эффективности медийной деятельности опережают посольство Китая в большинстве соцсетей. Однако посольство КНР более успешно разворачивало информационную кампанию в Twitter из-за приоритетного значения данной платформы для укрепления имиджа государства. Открытие новых русскоязычных аккаунтов в соцсетях говорит о стремлении внешнеполитического аппарата КНР к максимальному охвату аудитории. В то же время исследование выявило и ряд слабых сторон китайской цифровой дипломатии: излишняя политизированность, слабое внимание к вовлечению пользователей путем выбора нейтральных тем, интересующих широкую аудиторию. Статья подтверждает выводы ряда исследователей о том, что посольства Китая играют роль информационных посредников, распространяющих официальную информацию из других источников без ее комментирования. Несмотря на то, что цифровая дипломатия Китая пока в значительной степени является реактивной и оборонительной, она все больше встраивается в национальную имиджевую стратегию и обладает потенциалом для развития. Полученные в ходе исследования результаты показывают, что Китай наращивает ресурсы в интернете для усиления своей дискурсивной силы. В статье делается вывод, что в ряде случаев проблемой остается эффективное использование имеющихся возможностей. Тем не менее, авторы не исключают, что догоняющее развитие цифровой дипломатии может постепенно смениться инновациями, которые Китай способен подкрепить финансовыми ресурсами. В заключение статья предлагает направления для будущих исследований. Дальнейший сравнительный анализ на большей выборке позволит лучше понять тенденции и эффективность китайской веб-дипломатии.

Ключевые слова: Китай, цифровая дипломатия, мягкая сила, дискурсивная сила, COVID-19, социальные сети, национальный имидж.

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1. Introduction

As is the case with traditional instruments of soft power, the conceptualization of digital diplomacy is complicated by the diversity of practices that the concept encompasses. The multifaceted character of digital diplomacy is manifested in terms of multiple platforms (social networking sites, online video platforms, websites, etc.) and a great variety of content and forms.

Researchers of digital diplomacy are confronted with multi-vector activities on the Web, closely related to the domestic political context and foreign policy objectives that a country's digital diplomacy is designed to serve. By choosing Chinese digital diplomacy as the object of our research, we place it within the framework of a general analysis of PRC's foreign policy under Xi Jinping, showing how the current online activity of diplomatic missions is determined by the national interests, the characteristics of China's foreign policy apparatus, and China's growing global outreach.

Although we do not assume that online diplomacy is exclusively limited to the actions of diplomats and diplomatic missions on popular social networks, nevertheless Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms constitute the growing segment of public diplomacy, fully using new communication technologies. We can agree with Manor and Segev that "digital diplomacy refers mainly to the growing use of social media platforms by a country in order to achieve its foreign policy goals and proactively manage its image and reputation" [Manor & Segev, p. 94].

While Chinese digital diplomacy is actively expanding its influence globally, analysis of this phenomenon remains Western-centric in two senses: first, the activities of English-language accounts are predominantly monitored and analyzed, and second, Beijing's increased online activity is primarily viewed through the prism of China's growing conflict with the

West. Our research is intended to fill existing gaps in the study of PRC's digital diplomacy as we analyze China's activities targeted to the Russian audience, which have not been adequately addressed in the current academic literature.

At the end of February 2020, the PRC Embassy in Russia created accounts in three social networks — Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. It happened simultaneously with the rising online activity of PRC embassies worldwide: diplomatic missions began to spread the news about fight against the coronavirus, at the same time exposing the prevailing criticism of China in the Western media. Beijing apparently approved plans to expand the Chinese Embassy's presence in the Russian segment of the Internet earlier, but the political leadership may have accelerated their implementation due to the increased priority of external propaganda against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further analysis of the online activities of the Chinese Embassy in Russia will provide a better understanding of the general features and country specifics of the communication strategy of the PRC government.

Additionally, we believe it is crucial to put Chinese e-diplomacy in a comparative perspective, analyzing China's efforts against the policy of other actors. As Adesina rightly notes, “state and non-state entities all compete for influence and power in the same online space” [Adesina, p. 10]. Meanwhile, while the global information space is unified, existing studies very rarely focus on the fact that China has to operate in a competitive environment, as in the case of commercial projects.

2. China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea: Brief overview of soft power strategies

In this article, we compare the performance of the Chinese Embassy in Moscow with the diplomatic missions of Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK). The choice of these two Asian countries has the following rationale: (1) Japan and ROK are the major political and economic actors in the Asia-Pacific, with whom Russia is advancing relations as part of the “turn to the East” policy; (2) In several commercial projects and market sectors in Russia, Japanese and Korean businesses are competing with

Chinese companies; (3) Despite the present downturn in Russian-Western relations, Tokyo and Seoul are still expressing their desire to intensify cooperation with Moscow; (4) The most relevant factor to this study is that Japan and the ROK have elaborate strategies for strengthening soft power, and their diplomatic missions actively use social media tools to engage the Russian public.

Japan has been successfully implementing a soft power strategy since the 1980s. Overview of cultural diplomacy is included in the Diplomatic Bluebook published annually by the MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) of Japan [Diplomatic Bluebook, 2020]. The Japan Foundation (an independent administrative organization run by the MFA) is the key agency institutionally responsible for the array of cultural and educational programs.

Tea ceremonies, ikebana, origami, anime and manga, and other activities with the Japanese flavor serve as the main channels for promoting the country's image. The government and major commercial companies are implementing the marketing concept "Cool Japan". It brings together diverse cultural projects, from national alcoholic beverages' promotion to the creation of the satellite TV channel WakuWaku Japan for foreign audiences.

Since the 1990s, the Republic of Korea has been actively promoting its national image under the umbrella concept of the "Hallyu" or "Korean Wave". Public diplomacy peaked in 2010 when the government underlined its importance alongside with classical and economic diplomacy. In February 2016, the Foreign Ministry published a paper that outlines the goals, basic principles, and procedure for implementing South Korean public diplomacy, as well as the key role of the Public Diplomacy Committee subordinated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea [Public Diplomacy Act..., p. 3]

China has been using the soft power concept in its diplomatic practice since 2007, when Secretary-General Hu Jintao at the 17th Party Congress expressed the need to strengthen China's cultural soft power and enhance the influence of Chinese culture worldwide [Hu, 2007]. At the 19th CPC Congress in 2017, Xi Jinping stressed out that "China's cultural soft power has grown much stronger" and reiterated the hope to further strengthen people-to-people and cultural exchanges with foreign countries. The objectives of public diplomacy are fixed in Xi's formula "to tell China's stories well" [Xi, 2017].

The study revealed that the PRC does not have comprehensive policy documents in the public domain that summarize information about the national communication strategy aimed at foreign audiences. However, there are several works by well-known Chinese scholars and statements made by representatives of the Chinese political elite. Soft power issues are definitely a major focus for PRC's political leadership. In recent years, we can observe the rise of an internal debate in China on strengthening discursive power, signifying a wide and flexible variety of tools, not just propaganda [Denisov, p. 48]. As J. Nye once explained, "the best propaganda is not propaganda," because during the information age, "credibility is the scarcest resource" [Nye].

Despite several problems, China's soft power demonstrates sustainability and multi-vector focus. A vivid example of its success is the vast Confucius Institutes network that includes 500 branches in 162 countries and regions worldwide. In addition, CGTN (China Global Television Network), broadcasting in 5 languages, and the multi-language newsfeed of Xinhua News Agency plays a role in amplifying China's voice. Nowadays, digital diplomacy is emerging as a new foreign policy tool supplementary to traditional instruments of strengthening China's national image overseas.

3. Methodology and key findings

The chronological framework of the study is from 1 January 2020 to 1 January 2021. The choice of time interval was determined by two factors: (1) intensification of embassies' media activities on the Internet during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (2) the launching of new Russian-language social media accounts of the Chinese diplomatic mission. Online activity of China, Japan, and the ROK targeted to the Russian audience was subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Our dataset was derived from the three embassies' accounts in Twitter, VKontakte, Facebook, and YouTube (See Table 1).

The raw data contains 2128 posts that appeared in the official accounts throughout the year. Based on data from social media platforms, we collected information that indicated the basic activity of accounts and calculated a number of metrics: total subscribers (followers); posts per day; li-

Table 1. Embassies' accounts on social media platforms

Country	Launch date	URL
Twitter		
China	23.02.2020	https://twitter.com/chineseembirus
VKontakte		
China	04.03.2014	https://vk.com/club66846978
Japan	12.02.2016	https://vk.com/embassy_japan_rus
Facebook		
China	21.02.2020	https://www.facebook.com/ChineseEmbassyInRus/
Japan	12.09.2013	https://www.facebook.com/EmbassyOfJapanInRussia/
The Republic of Korea	12.02.2011	https://www.facebook.com/KoreanEmbassyInRussia
YouTube		
Japan	14.05.2018	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7Dwjli-a0V8ot9At0il8sw
The Republic of Korea	27.05.2020	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4YUmo_c0o-IYYLD 0YrSg

kes per post; views per post; and shares per post. These indicators are most commonly used in the analysis of accounts on social media platforms. In addition, the daily engagement rate (ER day) and engagement rate by posts (ER post) were calculated. Engagement metrics allow further analysis of the audience and its activity (See Table 2).

The second part of our research was quantitative content analysis. We preliminarily reviewed the posts on embassy accounts and concluded that the content could be classified into several broad groups. Three independent coders allocated the categories on random sampling in order to determine the breakdown of content more accurately. We coded posts collected during the study according to the following eight content categories: Politics; Science and technology; COVID-19; Nature and leisure; Sport; His-

Table 2. Activity Indicators

Indicators	Twitter	VKontakte		Facebook			YouTube	
	China	China	Japan	China	Japan	The Republic of Korea	Japan	The Republic of Korea
Total subscribers (followers)	1434	1414	28 259	371	34 158	2925	1010	4050
Posts per day	0,70	0,49	1,64	0,65	1,64	0,40	0,34	0,47
Likes per post	199	6	169	7	441	6	20	159
Views per post	/	400	12 338	/	/	/	461	929
Shares per post	32,81	0,66	11,87	1,70	49,34	0,67	/	/
ER day	12,84 %	0,33 %	1,08 %	1,61 %	2,46 %	0,10 %	0,27 %	5,45 %
ER post	16,15 %	0,49 %	0,66 %	2,30 %	1,50 %	0,24 %	2,08 %	10,10 %

tory and culture; Movies and music; and Useful advice and etiquette. Table 3 displays the results of content analysis.

3.1. Engagement metrics

One of the objectives of our study was to analyze the interaction of diplomatic accounts with the audience of the social media platforms.

Based on the collected dataset, the following observations can be made:

1. Not all three embassies have accounts in the social networks selected for analysis. For instance, while the PRC embassy is the only one present on Twitter, it is also the only one in our study that does not have a YouTube account. Facebook, on the other hand, has not only become the platform chosen by all three embassies but has also been the most frequently used digital soft power tool.

Twitter is popular with government departments, politicians, media organizations, and eminent scholars worldwide. Chinese embassies, trying to strengthen the discursive power, consider the presence on Twitter as a priority. Creating high-quality videos for YouTube requires more signifi-

cant financial and human resources; on the other hand, short tweets enable embassies to respond more quickly to events and require far fewer resources.

2. The embassies of Japan and the ROK began to develop their accounts for the Russian public 7–9 years earlier than their Chinese counterparts. Moreover, China created its Facebook and Twitter accounts on February 21 and 23, 2020, respectively. The sudden appearance of the accounts can be explained by the coronavirus outbreak in China and the need to intensify efforts in the digital sphere to counter the Western narrative to politicize the virus.

3. The Japanese Embassy in VKontakte is far ahead of the PRC Embassy on the overall measure. Even though China appeared on this platform two years earlier than Japan, its total number of subscribers is almost 20 times less, and the average number of views per post is nearly 31 times less compared with Japanese performance. The case is similar with Facebook: the Japanese Embassy has the best record, both in terms of the number of subscribers and engagement with the audience.

4. An unexpected result is that the account of the PRC Embassy on Twitter took a leading position in measures of efficiency, ahead of the Korean and Japanese embassies in other social media. Our study further illuminates why Chinese diplomats prefer Twitter and why Beijing's digital diplomacy is expanding the use of this channel of influence. Other researchers have shown that more than three-quarters of Chinese diplomats on Twitter joined the platform within the past two years [Schliebs et al., p. 5].

3.2. Content analysis

Content analysis allows us to identify the main objectives of the digital diplomacies of China, Japan, and the ROK, as it determines the priority messages that the embassies choose to convey through social media platforms. The content analysis does not include data on the ROK Embassy posts on Facebook, as all 147 entries were made in Korean, and the focus of our study was to explore foreign policy signaling and engagement with a broad Russian-speaking audience.

1. PRC Embassy assigns high priority to political information (official statements, high-level contacts, ambassador's articles, measures during the COVID-19 epidemic in China, etc.). In particular, only 10 out of 607

Table 3. Number of Posts by Content Categories

Categories	Twitter	VKontakte		Facebook+	YouTube		The Republic of Korea
	China	China	Japan	China	Japan	Japan	
Politics	141	90	35	90	35	4	32
Science and technology	/	/	30	2	30	5	/
COVID-19	77	87	52	112	52	/	6
Nature and leisure	/	/	119	/	119	8	7
Sport	/	/	32	/	32	1	/
History and culture	3	1	247	2	248	37	55
Movies and music	/	/	34	/	34	1	4
Useful advice and etiquette	/	2	53	/	53	6	3
Total posts	221	180	602	206	603	62	107

posts published by the Chinese Embassy on the three social media platforms are thematically neutral, while the remaining 98,4 % fall into the categories of “Politics” and “Covid-19”.

2. Embassies of China and Japan generally publish the same set of posts on VKontakte and Facebook. However, Japanese Embassy’s accounts provide netizens with various cultural and entertaining topics which attract new subscribers. Meanwhile, political topics are approximately 6 % of its total posts.

3. The Ambassador of Japan writes a column named, “Walking the Streets of Moscow”. He describes his favorite places of the Russian capital and attaches a human touch to these posts. If the information on social networks concerns the work of the PRC Embassy, mostly duplicates from the embassy’s website are published — no unique content for social media is created.

4. Despite its world-acclaimed cuisine, China underestimates “gastro-nomic soft power”. In comparison, the ROK Embassy posted a significant number of videos of Korean cuisine on YouTube, gaining a relatively high number of views.

4. Discussion

Our analysis of the activity of the Chinese Embassy in Russian-language accounts confirms a number of conclusions about the Chinese digital diplomacy characteristics, which were made using other target audiences [Huang & Arifon; Jia & Li]. In the study, we showed that Chinese digital diplomacy is multifaceted, increasing its penetration in all key regions, including Russia. The fact that the PRC Embassy in Russia has recently launched new accounts on social networks shows that China is striving for the broadest audience coverage. However, strong results on Twitter in the absence of a YouTube account¹ indicate that Chinese diplomats are still carefully evaluating the cost, preferring to develop less resource-demanding projects on social media. At the same time, the study revealed some weak spots of Chinese digital diplomacy: excessive politicization and low attention to user’s engagement by choosing neutral topics for a wider audience.

The increased focus on the coronavirus and the creation of three new accounts in the midst of the pandemic suggests that China’s digital diplomacy is still mainly reactive and defensive. Simultaneously, it is noticeable that China is using international experience, which is based on the premise that “nation branding practiced through digital diplomacy channels (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) can serve as an effective tool for image and reputation management and as such may help nations alter their status quo images” [Manor & Segev, p. 94].

The Chinese leadership is aware of the soft power issues and its influence on the state’s image. Moreover, the calls to strengthen international discursive power indicate that Beijing adequately assesses the current in-

¹ According to the Global Web Index, 85 % of Internet users aged 16 to 64 use YouTube, making it the most popular social platform in Russia [Social media marketing trends..., 2021].

sufficiency of efforts to build a positive image of China abroad. This point of view is confirmed by a number of Chinese analysts who urge the diplomatic corps to improve the effectiveness of digital diplomacy and reduce the concerns of the world community caused by the economic rise of PRC and the growth of its military power [Wang, p. 157].

Therefore, we can conclude that the strategy to develop digital diplomacy, and the nation branding strategy in general, is a subject of discussion in China. The growth of external challenges, particularly the intensifying conflict with the United States, formulate new objectives for Chinese digital diplomacy. Meanwhile, foreign policy rhetoric and actions of embassies are significantly influenced and determined by internal political discussions.

According to China's foreign minister Wang Yi, diplomatic apparatus should use understandable and easily digestible language and means of transmitting information to tell the world truth about the Chinese governance model [Wang Yi: Jiaqiang gonggong waijiao...]. Although our research reveals that the Chinese Embassy's posts on social media are generally well-written and stylistically correct, there are examples of culturally unadapted texts. Our observations support the view of Chinese scholar Cao Wei that the contents and implementation of Chinese public diplomacy should be designed more from the perspective of the target audience [Cao, p. 432].

Particular attention should be paid to how frequently the PRC Embassy updates its accounts in Russian-language social media. Our study revealed that between August 23, 2019, and March 10, 2020, the account at VKontakte had not published any posts. While Japan's Diplomatic Bluebook and several Korean MFA's regulations identify the role of the diplomatic corps as a core of soft power expansion, Chinese embassies have not become the primary agents of enhancing the country's image. That is mainly due to the vast presence of PRC media overseas. According to the Chinese Embassy in Moscow, six accredited media outlets publish materials in Russian [Spisok...]. In the status of PRC government-affiliated media, they fill information space and to a large extent, take on the embassy's role.

Analysis of VKontakte, Facebook, and Twitter posts at China's embassy accounts indicated that 60 % of the publications are not unique con-

tent created by Embassy's information office. Finally, it can be stated that embassies and consulates are not the only main actors of China's digital diplomacy. Due to the limited scope of our research, we did not consider this factor in detail. Future studies of Chinese digital diplomacy should assess the role of different state actors in social media and the extent to which their efforts are coordinated.

Our study confirms the conclusions of other scholars that so far, Chinese embassies more often play the role of info-mediators who only distribute official information from other sources without commenting on it in any way [Huang & Arifon, p. 51]. However, it can be assumed that this is only relevant for the present period. In the future, due to the accumulation of experience and the growing challenges of the international information environment, Chinese embassies could start to transmit information with more added value, independently evaluate the audience's feedback, and make adjustments to their online activities. Meanwhile, there remains the possibility of a conservative scenario, where embassies will act cautiously and proceed from the situation in host countries, while a unified model of digital diplomacy will be in the formation stage. The findings from this study suggest that China builds up resources on the Web in an effort to strengthen its discursive power. The problem in a number of cases remains the effective use of available capacities. Still, we cannot rule out that catch-up development in the field could be gradually replaced by innovations, which China can back up with financial resources. Although we recognize the limitations of our research design, we nevertheless think that a comparative analysis on a larger sample will provide a better understanding of the trends and effectiveness of Chinese web diplomacy.

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