

## A Literature Review of Panda Diplomacy

### INTRODUCTION

The giant panda is easily recognized by almost everyone in the world. The panda is the logo of the World Wildlife Fund, it is the face of many conservation campaigns, and the panda even stars in an animated movie franchise - Kung Fu Panda. People all over the globe get exceptionally excited about pandas. Whenever it's announced that a nearby zoo is getting a pair of pandas or that a local panda has given birth, the public goes into a frenzy and there is instant media coverage of the entire ordeal. When most people think of pandas, they usually think of words like "cute," "cuddly," and even "clumsy." Another word that is almost always associated with pandas is "China." Pandas have quickly become a modern national symbol of China and are intrinsically linked to the country. The way that China has used the panda to affect how people view the country is a masterful display of animal diplomacy. Despite China's shifting status on the global stage over the years--and its accompanying shifting priorities--the literature on panda diplomacy shows that China has been able to successfully and consistently use the panda in various ways as a tool for public diplomacy.

## PANDA DIPLOMACY

### **CHINA AND THE PANDA**

In a world that is ever-changing due to globalism and advances in technology, more and more countries are coming to rely on soft power to accomplish their political goals instead of the more traditional forms of hard power. Falk Hartig (2013), in his article *Panda Diplomacy: The Cutest Part of China's Public Diplomacy*, states that many people see panda diplomacy as a central aspect of China's soft power. He says that "these creatures can easily conquer the hearts of people in foreign countries, particularly with the younger generation, and win favor for China..." (p. 50). In this way, pandas can be used as a tool for China to engage the rest of the world (Songster, *Panda Diplomacy*, 2018) and have been "honored as high-ranking celebrity ambassadors" (Songster, *Panda Diplomacy*, 2018, p. 2). This form of public diplomacy serves to improve the image of China internationally, overcoming language and cultural barriers and attracting everyone who sees this cuddly creature (Xing, 2010). The literature on animal diplomacy shows how this is accomplished.

### **ANIMAL DIPLOMACY**

Animal diplomacy, simply defined, is "the use of live fauna...for diplomatic purposes" (Cushing & Markwell, 2009, p. 255). Three different forms of animal diplomacy are typically recognized (Hartig, 2013). The first form of animal diplomacy is that animals can be given as gifts from one country to another. The second form is that animals can be exchanged as gifts, either for other animals or other types of gifts. The third form is that animals can be loaned to

other countries. Animal diplomacy has a rich history, can be traced all the way back to ancient Egypt, and animals that have been used for this purpose include elephants from Baghdad, giraffes from Egypt, and even platypuses from Australia (Hartig, 2013). In most of these cases, these gifts were meant to delight the ruler receiving the animal, which can be seen as a form of ruler-to-ruler diplomacy (Hartig, 2013). However, these animals also made an impact on the general public in the receiving countries as well.

There are two basic requirements of animal diplomacy (Hartig, 2013). The first one is the visual identity of the animal. Not just any animal works well for attracting positive attention from other countries. There are certain looks and physical characteristics that are desired and appeal to people. Animals that usually work best for diplomacy purposes generally have "characteristic features of a small child" which "evoke a care and protective instinct" and a "feeling of cuteness" (Hartig, 2013, p. 55). The visual identity of the animal is extremely important, not just because it draws people to the zoos where the animal is usually located, but it also attracts media attention. Hartig uses Walter Lippman's concept of "news value" to highlight the fact that certain animals work especially well because of their ability to entertain and amuse audiences, which makes the likelihood of media coverage that much greater (Hartig, 2013).

The second basic requirement of animal diplomacy is the natural distribution of the animal (Hartig, 2013). Cushing and Markwell (2009) state that for this form of diplomacy to be effective, "the animals involved had to be distinctive and preferably naturally occurring only in the donor country, such that they were associated with it exclusively" (p. 256). In other words, animals that are so rare that they are only associated with one country are the ones that are

best utilized by animal diplomacy. Halvard Leira and Iver B. Neumann (2016), in their article entitled *Beastly Diplomacy*, discuss how common it is for countries to create bonds through gift-giving and that this helps to form a reciprocal relationship between the two countries. They say that animals are a different sort of gift compared to any other type of gift solely because they are living. The authors continue, saying that in many cases, "reciprocating a beast gift directly has been impossible, and that has indeed been the whole idea of giving that exact gift" (p. 10). Choosing to gift a rare animal is clearly advantageous because "...an exotic beast could be met with another exotic beast, but more common would be for the reciprocity to come in another form: best being exchanged for status, political favour, goodwill or suchlike" (Leira & Neumann, 2016, p. 10). In this way, it is clear to see how animals can be used to accomplish state goals.

The most obvious example of animal diplomacy--and one that has garnered much attention around the world--is panda diplomacy (Cushing & Markwell, 2009).

### ***PANDA DIPLOMACY AS ANIMAL DIPLOMACY***

When it comes to fulfilling the basic requirements of animal diplomacy, pandas seem to score a one hundred percent. Their physical characteristics are adored by all. They have "a cuddly and clumsy appearance" and an "innocent, childlike quality" that add to the panda's universal appeal (Hartig, 2013, p. 56). The panda can also only be found in only a few mountain habitats in China (Hartig, 2013), making it one of the rarest animals in the entire world. Because of this, opportunities to see a panda in person are also extremely rare (Songster, Panda Diplomacy, 2018).

Animals like the panda can have symbolic power, which can make them a strong representation of the country. The perceived global identity of the animal can have a direct impact on the perceived global identity of the country (Hartig, 2013). And although the panda does not communicate any actual facts about China, "it's cute and cuddly, and sends all the right messages of goodwill" (Hartig, 2013, p. 57). The panda's capacity to draw attention can clearly be seen when observing the public and media response to the animal (Xing, 2010; Hartig, 2013). This media coverage can be seen as a spill-over effect (Hartig, 2013). China is not paying for the coverage or orchestrating the media event. It is merely loaning animals to other countries and, due to the newsworthiness of pandas, the media jump at the chance to broadcast the event across the globe. Another particularly fascinating part of panda diplomacy is that it almost always has a way of mentioning China without all of the negative issues that are often associated with the country in international media (Xing, 2010). What it comes to stories on pandas, China is usually just mentioned as the country of origin for the animal. These media reports are usually quite generous and kind regarding the mentions of China (Hartig, 2013).

Scholars like Keith Dinnie and Ada Lio (2010) are quick to point out though that panda diplomacy has its limits, claiming that it takes more than the use of "cute pandas" to make a great impact (p. 202). Rather than being a way to directly implement policy, most scholars tend to agree that panda diplomacy works more as a way to grow relationships with other countries and to solidify existing partnerships (Hartig, 2013; Buckingham et al., 2013; Songster, *Olympic Pandas...*, 2018).

Although the use of pandas in China's diplomatic efforts have been consistent for many decades, scholars identify three distinct phases of panda diplomacy.

## THE THREE PHASES OF PANDA DIPLOMACY

### ***PHASE ONE***

Modern panda diplomacy started in the 1940s when China gifted two pandas to the United States to show gratitude (Hartig, 2013). In the decades following, China continued to offer pandas to build new friendships and to strengthen existing allegiances they had with other countries. Up until the 1970s, most pandas were sent to communist ally countries to strengthen relationships with those countries. Once China became a part of the UN in 1971, they began gifting pandas to western nations as well (Hartig, 2013). The effects of the pandas on international publics resulted in its intended outcomes and the efforts to engage with the rest of the world proved worthwhile: "...these fuzzy creatures thawed Cold War tensions and promoted the idea that warmer relations with the inscrutable Communist power could be possible" (Songster, Panda Diplomacy, 2018, p. 18).

However, the rarity of the panda--a key component to the value of the animal--began to work against China, as it realized that the panda's already low numbers were dwindling. In order to continue using the panda to gain favor with the rest of the world, China needed to come up with a new plan.

### ***PHASE TWO***

In the 1980s, China stopped gifting pandas to other nations "on the grounds that the animals were too precious to give away" (Songster, Panda Diplomacy, 2018, p.17). Instead, seeing the financial benefit of having a very lucrative commodity, they began loaning the

animals to other countries. The purpose behind using pandas for diplomacy moved "from an emphasis on geopolitics to a focus on markets" (Buckingham et al., 2013, p. 263). In other words, the panda became a Chinese product for a global market. Referred to unenthusiastically by many as a "rent-a-panda program", China loaned out pandas primarily for exhibition purposes for short periods of time, usually between 100 and 200 days (Hartig, 2013). Using this method, China would not lose their pandas to other countries and would also be able to rotate the pandas through breeding programs in China between stints in other countries (Songster, Olympic Pandas..., 2018). Hosting the pandas through these short-term loans became incredibly popular and countries vied for the chance to showcase the crowd-pleasing animals (Songster, Olympic Pandas..., 2018). Pandas were even brought in specially for major events like the Olympics (Songster, Olympic Pandas..., 2018). By implementing these loan programs, China found a way to not only have other countries pay a lot of money to lease these pandas, but also in doing so, allowed those other countries to fund a large public diplomacy tool (Hartig, 2013).

However, as time went by, these short-term loans garnered much criticism from activists concerned with animal and environmental rights. Because of the complexities involved in the caring for and breeding of pandas, conservation issues began to surface rapidly. It was widely believed that the short-term panda loan programs were doing great harm to the species. In order to address the criticism, China began to implement a third phase in its panda diplomacy.

### **PHASE THREE**

Mounting pressure concerning the welfare of the pandas led to China stopping its short-term loan program. In its place developed the long-term loans. These panda loans are based on scientific research and come with the goal of finding ways to better breed and take care of pandas (Hartig, 2013). In order for these loans to take place, both China and the receiving country have to agree that the loan will benefit the animals involved. The loans are usually for ten years, but can be extended. An interesting aspect of these agreements is that any panda cubs born during the loan are the property of China and are usually required to be sent back to China within a couple years of it being born (Hartig, 2013).

More and more throughout the history of pandas travelling across the globe, the protection of pandas has become very important, not just in China, but globally as well (Hartig, 2013). The uproar over the environmental issues surrounding the panda clearly illustrate the global popularity of the animal (Songster, Olympic Pandas..., 2018). Rather than focusing on the negatives of the situation and the criticism of the way it handled such an important species, China saw an opportunity for itself: "by ending the short-term loans, China could portray itself as more environmentally friendly" (Songster, Olympic Pandas..., 2018, p. 7). Pandas have since been used to "raise public and political support for international conservation policy" (Buckingham et al., 2013, p. 262). And because the panda is seen as a Chinese icon, aligning the animal's image with conservation efforts has positioned China as a leader in those efforts (Buckingham et al., 2013). It's noted that "...environmentalism is an integral part of the image of the panda and, as such, has added political value" (Songster, Olympic Pandas..., 2018, p17). China has emphasized that these longer-term panda loans are purely for science and for the



survival of the species. But the diplomacy aspect of the loans should be "beyond any dispute" (Hartig, 2013, p. 64).

In 2010, Mei Lan, a panda born in Atlanta and then sent back to China, pressed a button that shut off all of the lights in his enclosure. This act, which was watched by millions of people all over the world, was the start of Earth Hour 2010, an event that encourages saving energy and environment protection. "The panda was serving as the World Wildlife Fund's official Earth Hour Global Ambassador, an honor he shared with esteemed dignitaries and celebrities such as African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, UK tennis star Andy Murray, and actress and Honest Company co-founder Jessica Alba" (Songster, *Olympic Pandas...*, 2018, p.2). This action was "invoking the giant panda's symbolic association with environmental protection" (Songster, *Olympic Pandas...*, 2018), and thus, associating China with environmental protection. The panda at this point was no longer just connecting China to the rest of the world, but it was reintroducing China as an environmentally conscious country (Songster, *Olympic Pandas...*, 2018).

However, not everyone thinks that China's handling of the species should be lauded. Rosemary Claire-Collard (2013) points out that, though she understands that there is no denying that there are political implications for panda diplomacy, the pandas are merely "diplomatic pawns" in China's playbook and that the well-being of the species is not taken into consideration, even while under the guise of conservation (p. 227). Others say that the focus on panda conservation tends to hide other less pleasing things that China is pursuing. International deals that include possible environmental challenges can essentially be covered up by the pandas (Buckingham et al., 2013).

This third phase of panda diplomacy, aside from its focus on conservation, has had noticeable patterns (Buckingham et al., 2013). The first pattern is that many of the long-term panda loans have involved "close Asian neighbor nations that have signed free-trade agreements with China" (Buckingham et al., 2013, p. 264). The second pattern is that the loans have involved "nations supplying China with natural resources and advanced technology" (Buckingham et al., 2013, p. 264). China giving these countries a panda is symbolic of the relationship between the two countries. Often waiting until a high-level government leader visits the country, China then announces the loan of the pandas, making it very public so that everyone knows (Hartig, 2013). Natascha Gentz, Professor of Chinese Studies and the Director of the Confucius Institute in Edinburgh says that there is no doubt that panda diplomacy is "a manifestation of goodwill to collaborate with a country, a consolidation of partnership and friendship. Once relationships are consolidated, with high-level summits and mutual agreements, then they might choose that country to receive a panda" (The Scotsman, 2011, pp. 3). In this way, leasing pandas to a country is not seen as much as a desire to be closer to that country or earn that country's esteem, but more as a reward for being friendly with China. "...panda loans are not simply part of a larger deal; rather, they represent a seal of approval and intent for a long, prosperous working relationship" (Buckingham et al., 2013, p. 265). China's more modern version of panda diplomacy, then, is more about rewarding countries for doing what China wants them to do. For example, if you agree to trade with China, you might get a panda.

## CONCLUSION

After surveying the academic literature on panda diplomacy, it is clear why China has chosen to use the panda in its diplomatic efforts. The visual appeal of the panda lends itself to attracting many people. Its physical characteristics and its behavior combine to charm the public and the media alike. The rarity of the panda makes it something special; it's an exotic animal that people go out of their way to experience. The panda is able to represent China without any of the negative associations that sometimes accompanies China on the global stage.

The first stage saw China use panda diplomacy by giving the animals as gifts to other countries for the purpose of seeking favor with those countries. The second stage of panda diplomacy saw China focus more on financial interests by providing short-term loans to other countries. In the third and current stage of panda diplomacy, China has used long-term panda loans to not only align themselves with conservation efforts, but to reward and affirm countries that work nicely with China. In this stage, the pandas are a sign of partnership visible to rest of the world.

Over time, China's position in the world has changed but its use of the panda as a tool for public diplomacy over the past century has remained consistent. As a nation still struggling to develop its influence on a global scale during the first half of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century where China is continuously flexing its power and showing its domination over other countries, pandas have played a role in China accomplishing its foreign policy objectives. The panda may seem cute and cuddly to most, but there is no doubt

that, based on the current scholarly literature on the topic, China has found many ways throughout the years to leverage the panda's underlying strength.

## Bibliography

- Buckingham, K. C., David, J. N., & Jepson, P. (2013). Diplomats and Refugees: Panda Diplomacy, Soft "Cuddly" Power, and the New Trajectory in Panda Conservation. *Environmental Practice*, 15(3), 262-270.
- Collard, R.-C. (2013). Panda politics. *The Canadian Geographer*, 57(2), 226-232.
- Cushing, N., & Markwell, K. (2009). Platypus diplomacy: animal gifts in international relations. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 33(3), 255-271.
- Dinnie, K., & Lio, A. (2010). Enhancing China's image in Japan: Developing the nation brand through public diplomacy. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 6(3), 198-206.
- Hartig, F. (2013). Panda Diplomacy: The Cutest Part of China's Public Diplomacy. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*(8), 49-78.
- Leira, H., & Neumann, I. B. (2017). Beastly Diplomacy. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*(12), 1-23.
- Songster, E. E. (2018). Olympic Pandas, Trojan Pandas, and the Science behind Soft Power. In *Panda Nation: The Construction and Conservation of China's Modern Icon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Songster, E. E. (2018). Panda Diplomacy. In *Panda Nation: The Construction and Conservation of China's Modern Icon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- The Scotsman. (2011, December 4). *Bear necessities: A closer look at panda diplomacy*. Retrieved from <https://www.scotsman.com/news-2-15012/bear-necessities-a-closer-look-at-panda-diplomacy-1-1990882>
- Xing, Y. (2010). China's Panda Diplomacy: The Power of Being Cute.

