CONSTRUCTING CHINA FROM AFAR: NATIONAL IMAGE, PUBLIC DIPLOMACY, AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

A Dissertation in
Mass Communications

by
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2015
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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly globalized world, connected through trade, education, and tourism, nation states have become more conscious about the importance of their images in the other parts of the world. Public diplomacy is a strategic approach to shaping national images among foreign publics. As a growing power in the global marketplace, China has used both information based advertising campaigns and the relationship based cultural programs to tell the China story.

Though there has been a long discourse in the West regarding China, most previous studies about the image of China have been limited to examining preexisting texts, such as newspaper coverage, historical documents, popular TV shows, and films. While the media textual analyses can best tell us how media are representing China, they cannot tell us how China is being consumed by the public.

This study used focus group interviews to investigate the national image of China as constructed by American college students. Analyzed using the Circuit of Culture model developed by du Gay, et al. (1997), any cultural meaning is a result of the interactive and synergistic relationship among five moments (regulation, production, representation, consumption, and identity) in a communicative process, three separate themes emerged from American college students’ discussions about China: consumerism; perfectionism; and otherness.

The findings of the study suggested that despite a government effort to portray a rising power that is friendly and benevolent, the behavior of Chinese students in America has hijacked that positive image. The dissertation suggests new avenues for public diplomacy in China, including a significant change of focus to internal Chinese publics.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have helped me in the process of completing this dissertation. First of all, I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Colleen Connolly-Ahern. Without her unending support and care I would not have come this far in my graduate studies. I could not thank Colleen enough for the tremendous work she has done, from the very beginning of conceptualizing this project to the data collection and the final writing up of this dissertation. She is the best advisor I can ever have. I would also thank my three committee members who have given me gracious and critical support throughout the years. Dr. Matt Jordan has been always willing to help especially when I needed to collect data from other campuses. Dr. Fuyuan Shen lent me a crucial hand when I was facing a difficult time. Dr. Eric Hayot has always been very supportive providing excellent insights. I would also like to thank Dean Marie Hardin for her support during my studies in the program.

This dissertation would not be possible without the various support from my colleagues at Penn State and beyond Penn State. I thank Stef Davis for helping me collect the two focus groups at Penn State. I specially thank Dr. Susan Camille Broadway and Matt Nolen for helping me collected focus groups in other campuses. I would also like to thank Dr. Denis Simon for inspiring me on the understanding of China from an earlier stage. I thank Dr. Michelle Baker who has been so kind and supportive to me. Steve Bien-Aime is another wonderful colleague and friend that I would like to thank. He is always willing to help me and cheer me up.

Many good people in the Dean’s office have been providing excellent support and help over the years. My sincere thanks go to Betsy Hall, Serena Sidwell, Laurie Porter, and Sherry Kyler. Thank you all for always being there to help whenever I stop by for any questions about any issues.

I would thank my friends that have been supportive as I need a shoulder to lean on during the ups and downs. I thank my friends I made in the Pattee and Paterno libraries – Helen Sheehy.
Karen Jensen, and Denise. I also want to thank Shennetta Selden who has been such a wonderful companion in the computer lab as we both worked on our dissertations day in and day out. I was also thankful that I met many good friends at the State College Chinese Alliance Church. I especially thank Dr. Grace Wu who was always willing to help me whenever I wanted to have a listener and mentor. I also thank Dr. Hongjuan Xu, Bing Hou, and many other brothers and sisters at the church. I would also thank my three sisters Dr. Ying Deng, Yizhou Fang, and Manyu Du for all their support.

Finally, I thank my families for their unswerving support and love. I thank my son and my husband for their understanding on those weekends when I had to come to school. I thank my parents who have been supporting me all through the years as I am pursuing advanced degrees at Penn State. I owe my parents a lot of time; I was not by their sides when they were not feeling well. This dissertation is dedicated to my parents.
Chapter 1

Introduction

National Image

In an increasingly interconnected world, nations do not just exist only in bounded geographical locations; they also exist in the boundless imaginations of a global audience, thanks to the advanced media technologies that communicate numerous images, icons, symbols, and narratives about the world. In the same way people do not only live in the physical communities of our own neighborhoods, towns, cities, and countries; we often find ourselves live in an imagined global community in which people of different origins connect with people from oceans and continent afar via trade, education, and politics. From such a communicative process of imagining who we are and who they are emerges the notion of national image. National image plays a very important role in international relations and global communication (van Ham, 2001; J. Wang, 2008). A favorable national image provides tangible economic, political, and sociocultural benefits for nation states, as seen in attracting foreign investments and tourists, building political alliances and governmental coordination, as well as cultivating cultural attraction and identification. Conversely, an unfavorable national image may generate hostility, isolation, and even rejection by the international community. With no exaggeration, national image has become “essential parts of the state’s strategic equity” (van Ham, 2001, p. 3).

Realizing the importance of national image, states have used what is called nation branding to build, brand, and rebrand their national images for various purposes ranging from the economic to the political. In post-communist countries in Eastern Europe such as Romania and Hungary, mass media based strategies such as television commercials have been used to rebuild a
new national image with the goal of attracting tourists from Western Europe (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011). Russia, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has tried to divest from its Soviet past and brand the country as a technology-driven economy to attract foreign investors (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). In post-colonial countries such as India, tourism-oriented campaigns have been used to rebrand India and attract foreign tourists and businesses (Kerrigan, Shivanandan, & Hede, 2012). In post-apartheid South Africa, state-sponsored initiatives have been implemented to rebrand South Africa as not only culturally and economically attractive to the world but also a country that can play an active role in world political affairs (Youde, 2009). Nation branding and rebranding practices have also been seen in relatively better-off countries such as South Korea, the United Kingdom, and Canada, as a way to attract foreign investment and tourists (Pamment, 2013). Within the past decade, Asia, more than anywhere else, has seen countries in the region competing to promote their national brands (Anholt, 2008).

As countries around the world have been using various strategies to change, improve, and maintain their national images, there has been an emerging interest in the scholarly literature on such practices. National image has been studied in largely two kinds of research areas: nation branding and public diplomacy. Drawing heavily on literature from marketing and advertising, nation branding treats national image as similar to, if not identical to, a corporate brand or a product brand, with the ultimate objective of gaining revenue (Anholt, 2005; Olins, 2002; Yan, 2003). Unlike nation branding, public diplomacy which draws heavily on literature from international relations and public relations, takes a broader, and strategic approach to managing a nation’s image among its foreign publics from the aspects of national security (Fitzpatrick, 2010; Rasmussen & Merkelsen, 2012) and managing relations with foreign publics (J. Wang, 2006; Zhang, 2007). Corresponding with the two paradigms of communication research, the use of mass media based approach to national image reflects a transmission view of communication while the
use of relationship management approach to national image reflects more of a relational view of communication (Pamment, 2013).

Given that national image has so much at stake, an integrated model proposed by Golan (2013) seems to be conducive to both practical and theoretical development of national image management. This integrated approach to public diplomacy sees mass media campaigns as tools of the short-to-medium-term public diplomacy, nation branding/country reputation efforts as the medium-to-long term, and relational approach as the long term strategy to managing national image (Golan, 2013).

**China’s National Image**

The nascent literature on nation branding and public diplomacy tends to focus on nation states that have been undergoing different types of transition, be it economic or political, or a combination of such transitions. This study focuses on China’s national image as China in the past three decades has been undergoing tremendous economic and sociocultural transitions domestically while gaining geopolitical and economic influence in the world.

While transitioning countries in Eastern Europe, for example, started their national image campaigns and initiatives in the 1990s, China’s image shaping efforts did not take a noticeable turn until the first decade of the 21st century. A couple of notable examples include China’s sponsoring of a language and cultural education program in the form of the worldwide Confucius Institutes, hosting high profile world events such as the Beijing Olympics and World Expo, displaying national image ads in the United States, and building Chinese media presence overseas. These efforts made by China were seen as a “charm offensive” to project a benign and positive national image (Kurlantzick, 2007).
Still, the British consultant Joshua Cooper Ramo (2007) argued that “China’s greatest strategic threat today is its national image” (p. 12). China’s image problems lie in the issue of an image gap between how China sees itself and how others see it (Ramo, 2007). While China sees itself as a great nation, peace-loving and dedicated to being prosperous, as every other nation does, China is often understood in the West through the media stories and frames that tend to dominate the news. Those relating to the violation of human rights, persecution of political dissidents, religion and ethnic groups were often seen on the media’s agenda. China was also seen as manipulating the Chinese currency to gain a favorable trade status vis-à-vis the U.S., stealing U.S. jobs, and conducting unfair trade. These negative images of China would seem to support an increasing “China threat” discourse in the West.

Unlike tourism-oriented national image campaigns used by other countries to attract foreign tourists, investors, and businesses, China’s national image shaping efforts have a long term strategic concern. While other countries may be driven by a rationale of making their countries attractive to foreign tourists, businesses, and investment, China is uniquely driven by a perceived need to alleviate suspicion and fear for its so-called “rise.” The suspicion and fear of a rising China can be traced to a decade ago when China officially announced “peaceful rise” as its national goal (Cody, 2005). Zheng Bijian, who was a top Chinese Party School scholar, has articulated China’s official discourse of the peaceful rise among leading U.S. think tanks and other international arenas. Given the Western reaction to China’s peaceful rise strategy, the Chinese government changed the wording of the term into peaceful development, noticing the word rise may have a negative and threatening connotation (Economy, 2010).

Time magazine’s Asia and global economic affairs reporter Michael Schuman (2011) offered one explanation for the West’s fear of a rising China. According to him, the reason why Americans fear a rising China is similar to the reason why Americans feared Japan when Japan’s economy was at the peak in the 1980s. Schuman (2011) noted that Americans fear China’s
astonishing economic achievements without adopting the Western sense of a free economy and liberal democracy. In other words, Americans fear a superpower that is radically different from the U.S.

**China’s Image in the U.S.**

There are a couple of reasons why this dissertation focuses on China’s image in the U.S. First, there has been a growing interdependence between the two countries, first and foremost in economic terms. While the U.S. remains the largest economy in the world, China in the past decades has surpassed Germany and Japan, and become the second largest world economy in 2010. The U.S. is the largest export market for Chinese products. China is holding huge amount of U.S. federal debt. British historian Naill Ferguson (2008) has coined the term “Chimerica” to describe the interlocked relationship between China and America. The economic relationship between the two has been a contentious issue in U.S. domestic politics. For instance, Congressman Chris Smith from New Jersey, who is a member on the House Committee on Foreign Affairs criticized China for stealing U.S. jobs (Sagnip, 2012). In the midterm elections in 2012, Republic candidate Mitt Romney promised that he would call China a currency manipulator on the first day of office if he was elected (Lowrey, 2012). The tensions created on the economic front would certainly impact China’s image in the U.S.

Second, the U.S. media has been the agenda setter for media images of China in the world at least from the 20th century (Mackerras, 1999). During World War II, in which the U.S. and China fought against Japan in Asia, China was portrayed as an ally (Jespersen, 1996). However, when China turned into a communist country in 1949, the media in America raised the question of who lost China (Jespersen, 1996). Chang (1992) examined how the American press covered U.S.-China relations from 1950 to 1984, the time when the U.S. government renewed
ties with the People’s Republic of China. In his conclusion, he argued that the U.S. press, in terms of foreign policy coverage, is “part of a complex image-making machine in shaping the faces China came to be perceived as in the United States” (p. 238). In 2005, there was a CNN series of reports on China titled “Red Storm Rising”, which portrayed China as a threatening other (Ho, 2010).

Third, the media portrayal of China has been supported by American public opinion polls. A recent search of popular polling services tells us that the American public tends to view China as America’s greatest threat or challenge. According to a Gallup poll on world affairs, 53 percent of American adults view China most unfavorably when asked their opinions of China (Dugan, 2014). In the same Gallup poll, majority of Americans (52 percent) view China as the leading economic power in the world today while only 31 percent view America the leading economic power today (Dugan, 2014). A Pew Research article published in November 2013 said that American people have a keen awareness of the challenges to America posed by China, though more people think the challenge by China remain mostly in the economic realm (Kohut, 2013). Pew has also found that China’s image among American people have slipped in terms of favorableness (Kohut, 2013).

The high level of interconnectedness between China and the U.S., and the tension as seen in how American media and the American public perceive its economically significant other warrant a more in-depth investigation of what exactly American people think of China. Because media portrayals and public opinion polls have limitations in terms of expressing individuals’ viewpoints, there is a gap in the literature regarding how this critical foreign public actually thinks of China.
Public Perceptions

The image of China in the West has long interested sinologists and scholars studying issues related to China. China area scholars have engaged in a historical discourse of Western representations of China, but most of the studies were limited in two significant ways.

First was the reliance on preexisting texts as data. Most studies examining Western images of China focused on preexisting texts, such as historical texts (Jespersen, 1996; Mackerras, 1999; Mosher, 1990) newspaper articles (Lee, 2002; Peng, 2004; Sparks, 2010), newspaper cartoons (Cronin & Huntzicker, 2012), TV shows (Cao, 2012; Wang & Hallquist, 2011), films (Leong, 2005; Wu, 1982), and blogs (Tang & Chao, 2010). The heavy reliance on preexisting texts as data to study Western images of China limits understanding to how the Western media in general have been constructing the Chinese image, privileging the perspectives of the media without taking into account of other non-media factors, nor attributing any agency to the publics.

Regarding the relationship between how media portrayals of foreign countries and the public understanding of foreign affairs, published literature in agenda setting, framing, international news, and public knowledge of foreign affairs yield different results. According to the agenda setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), studies have indicated that international news coverage of foreign countries correlated with public attitudes toward foreign countries (Besova & Cooley, 2009; Perry, 1987; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). In other words, the press plays an important role in informing and influencing public’s knowledge of foreign countries. The framing literature suggests that the media construct messages in certain ways to organize and structure interpretation to shape and frame public understanding of the social world (Reese, 2001). Studies of international news and public knowledge of foreign affairs, however, have suggested that some non-media factors such as education, prior knowledge, and the general
orientation toward foreign affairs are also shaping and influencing people’s knowledge of and attitude toward foreign countries (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Peffley & Hurwitz, 1992, 1993; Perry, 1987).

With respect to the majority of previous studies on Western media construction of the image of China, their focus on preexisting texts fails to describe how the audience or media users perceive China. In an early study of international news, Galtung and Ruge (1965) noted that the international image of a nation “is not shaped by the news media (press, radio, TV, newsreels) alone; personal impressions and contacts, professional relations abroad, diplomatic dispatches, etc., count too – whether less, equally much or more, we do not know” (p. 64). Accordingly, it would be misleading if we assume that readers and audiences of mediated messages would passively consume and accept whatever and however the message creators intend in their portrayals of China.

The reliance on preexisting texts also fails to acknowledge the agency of the audience. By agency of the audience, I mean that the audience has the capability of critically assessing and interpreting the message created by the media, based on cultural studies propositions such as Stuart Hall’s (1980) three modes of message decoding: the dominant mode, the oppositional mode, and the negotiated mode. In other words, the audience is “active” and has the capacity to resist the mediated message and create its own knowledge or understanding of the social world (Philo, 2008). For instance, when TV coverage of a miners’ strike portrayed the workers as violent, a viewer who had personal experience of similar issues rejected the TV message (Philo, 1990).

Audience perception of a foreign country is an integral part of the communicative process of forming national images. While media portrayal of a foreign country’s national image constitutes the production and representation parts of a communicative process, the encoded meaning/message represented in the media does not actualize until audience consume and
interpret the message, based on the Circuit of Culture model (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997). Therefore, previous studies that focused on the texts overlooked the power of audience interpretation and construction of meaning in this process.

The second limitation of previous studies has been in their lack of attention to China’s engagement activities among foreign publics. Because most of the previous studies largely served the purpose of describing and documenting the image of China in the West via Western media, and also because most of the studies were historically limited to the pre-21st centuries, they could not take into account of China’s recent image shaping efforts in engaging foreign publics. Though scholars have argued and explained that the way China has been constructed in the news, films, TV shows, and blogs reflects an underlying notion of the Self versus the Other in line with Foucault’s (1980) power knowledge theory and Said’s (1994) orientalism, such studies fail to address the question of whether there was any impact of China’s image shaping efforts among Western and global audiences in the 21st century.

Given that previous studies predominantly focused on mediated and preexisting texts, that is, the production and representation of China by the Western media, I believe there is a critical need to examine audience perceptions, as people are active consumers of information; the image of a foreign country will not be actualized until audience or the public consumes the meaning behind the image on their own terms (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). Creating and managing national image is a communicative process that involves the interactions among five moments, namely, production, representation, consumption, regulation, and identity, according to the Circuit of Culture model (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997). Previous studies of Western images of China inevitably overlooked the Chinese production and representation of the China image, as well as the important part of consumption. Therefore, this study seeks to address the public consumption part in the communicative process of understanding China’s national image in the contemporary context.
American College Students

One of the rationales for focusing on American college students is that they are a key segment of the American public that has unprecedented media exposure and media experience. Based on a telephone interview survey conducted by Pew (2011), the Internet has gained on TV as the American public’s main news source. Young people go to the Internet more for news than TV for national and international issues (Pew, 2011).

Being “digital natives,” current college students in America were born and raised in the Internet age where they have virtually unlimited access to information. We may assume that college students in America will have their perspectives of the image of China as different from old image of China because they get their information from a much wider range of sources, unmatchable by any of the non-Internet generations.

Another important rationale for studying American college students is that, parallel to their unlimited access to the Internet as an information source, they also have extensive interactions with an increasing influx of Chinese students coming to the United States for education. The fact that they have been in various levels of contact with students from China in classrooms and in their daily experiences will inevitably contribute to American students’ perceptions of China.

According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), the number of Chinese students studying in the U.S. is the largest among all foreign students groups. According to their 2012/2013 Open Doors Report (IIE, 2013), China is now the top place of origin sending students to the United States, accounting for 29 percent of all foreign students studying in the U.S. (See Figure 1).
Contextually, the increase of Chinese students coming to the U.S. for college education has been a result of affluent Chinese families who favor a better education for their children. There are two factors to explain the phenomenon of increasing influx of Chinese students to American universities. First, as the Chinese economy is growing many families become the middle class and better off. Also, thanks to the one-child policy that has been in place since the late 1970s in urban areas, families are able to use their disposable income to invest in their one child’s future through a U.S. education. Second, China has been using a one-time score based Gaokao (高考) system to provide higher education for Chinese college bound students. To get in the top tier universities, Gaokao test takers have to get exceptionally high scores. Because the top universities can only take limited number of students each year, for those who performed less well and their families have the resources to support them, a U.S. college education naturally
attracts them. The most obvious benefit of sending Chinese children overseas for college education is that they will have more choices of what majors they want to study.

At the same time, the recruitment of international students, especially from China, also brings tangible revenues for U.S. public schools which have experienced financial strains due to the most recent financial crisis (Millman, 2013). The Chinese students coming to study in the U.S. inevitably provide opportunities for close contact with the American people, which would contribute to the understanding of China.

Significance of the Study

This dissertation will contribute to the literature on national image construction and public diplomacy in a number of ways. First, unlike previous studies that focused on the production and representation of the China images by the media, mostly Western media, this study uses the Circuit of Culture model (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997) to conceptualize national image management as a communicative process that encompasses interactions among production, representation, consumption, identity and regulation of that image. With regard to China’s national image, it seeks to add to the literature how the meanings of “China” have been constructed by focusing on the consumption aspect, which is often overlooked by communication scholars.

Second, this study used a different methodological approach, focus groups, to address a need to extend study beyond textual analyses. Focus groups, as a form of qualitative research methods that has influence from ethnography, is one of the many different types of interviews that help researchers gain an understanding of people’s perspectives and experiences (Morgan, 1988). By interviewing people, the data will give the researcher a closer look at the respondents’ mental picture of what, how, and why they view the world in certain ways (Kitzinger, 1995). In
other words, group interviews will provide insights on the complex nature of people’s motivations and behaviors (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). The use of interview data will avoid the downsides of using preexisting texts produced by various types of media, thus providing original and meaningful data as they come from the publics’ own minds, not filtered through any organizations or institutions. Accordingly, the stories, accounts, and knowledge of China as narrated by the public will provide a more complex construction of the images of China, which may not be like the more often than not one-dimensional media portrayal of China.

Third, the investigation of how American college students think of China may have practical implications for public diplomacy practitioners, not just for China but for any countries that are interested in improving their national image through both information based and relationship building based public diplomacy. Because of the Internet age that college students are living in, how they perceive the world may be very different from their parents’ generation. How they access information and how they interpret information about foreign countries may provide meaningful thoughts for public diplomacy practitioners. The rise of social media has changed the global communication environment as information is no longer disseminated in a linear fashion. On the contrary, information gets produced, circulated, and communicated in a network fashion. The nature of connectivity in the way people communicate in the social media age prompts public diplomacy practitioners to think about how to effectively and successfully engage foreign publics (Zaharna, Fisher, & Arsenault, 2013). In line with the paradigm shift in communication studies from the transmission model to the relational model, the study may show that public diplomacy as a type of applied communication also needs to shift from the traditional mass media based practices to more relational based and network based approach to engage foreign publics. Having a good understanding of how the foreign public views a targeting country and knowing what the existing national image of a country has play a crucial role in informing any future public diplomacy efforts. After gaining a nuanced and diversified view of the public,
future public diplomacy efforts could create more meaningful messages for and build long term engaging relationships with foreign publics.

This study focuses on how the audience constructs their views of a foreign country. Addressing a theoretical limitation and a methodological one, the study uses the Circuit of Culture model with an emphasis on the consumption moment to study American college students’ view of China via focus groups. With the use of an integrated theoretical framework and an alternative method, the study adds to the literature in terms of investigating people’s perceptions as opposed to a hackneyed reliance on textual analysis of preexisting media texts, thus opening up spaces for alternative meaning making in the communicative process of national images management.

Here is a preview of each of the upcoming chapters.

Chapter Two is the theoretical framework. I presented the Circuit of Culture model first, followed by the definition of national image, a literature review of public diplomacy as a strategic approach to managing national image, a discussion of previous studies of Western media representation of China, and the importance of the consumption moment in actualizing meaning.

Chapter Three is the description and discussion of public diplomacy practices from a historical and global perspective, followed by a discussion of some of the most recent Chinese public diplomacy efforts: The language and culture program Confucius Institutes, two mass-media based image shaping advertisements, and the Beijing Olympics. At the end of Chapter 3 were the research questions.

Chapter Four is the methodology, in which I introduced my role as the researcher, what shaped me to do what I do in this project, a detailed introduction to focus groups, and how I collected data, analyzed data, and finally, a discussion of qualitative research evaluation standards.
Chapter Five is the report of what I found in my data analysis corresponding to the research questions. Largely American students used two big categories of sources – direct and indirect sources to form their views of China. The focus groups’ discussion on how they look at China and the people in general suggested three major themes: consumerism, perfectionism, and otherness.

Chapter Six is discussion. I first interpreted the limited public diplomacy programs within the larger social, political, and cultural contexts. Specifically, I discussed why the public diplomacy campaigns did not seem to register with the American people. I then interpreted the definer of the Chinese image between Mulan and the Chinese people. I also discussed the pollution image in the context of neoliberal world. The three major themes were also interpreted within a historical context in which issues of wealth resentment, a perfection driven social culture, and the ultimate otherness frame were discussed. Then, I discussed the implications for public diplomacy. Next was the limitation and future research. Finally was a conclusion.
Chapter 2  
Theoretical Framework

National image is a complex construct which requires a holistic approach to understanding how national image is being communicated at multiple levels among foreign publics. Applying the Circuit of Culture model (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997), the construction and evolution of national image is a complicated cross-cultural communicative process that involves five moments, namely, production, representation, consumption, regulation, and identity. This chapter will lay out the theoretical framework of the study, applying the Circuit of Culture model to the question of China’s national image communication. Viewing national image as a dynamic process of creating and recreating meaning, I regard public diplomacy as a strategic approach to communicating national image, because public diplomacy involves not only message design and dissemination but also, more importantly, relationship building and maintaining in the longer term. Based on the five moments of the model, national image is being formed and negotiated in the circle of meaning production, representation, consumption, and regulation.

The Circuit of Culture Model

The Circuit of Culture model developed by du Gay, et al. (1997) articulated the integrated relationship among the five moments in the communicative process of constructing the cultural meanings of the Sony Walkman as a cultural artefact. While they used a seemingly clear cut graph to present their model, the actual process of how the Sony Walkman is being constructed is
messy, because all the five moments are interacting between and among themselves, as the authors noted. (Figure 2-1)

![The Circuit of Culture Model by du Gay, et al. (1997)](image)

According to this model, the production refers to how the artefact of the Sony Walkman was actually produced by the Sony Company from the original idea to the actual manufacturing of the product. Representation refers to how the portable listening devices were designed with Japanese characteristics as portrayed, for example, in ads. Consumption refers to how Sony Walkman had been used for various purposes by various ages of consumers in social relations. Regulation refers to in what kind of global and local contexts that the Sony Walkman existed. And finally, identity refers to the idea that Sony Walkman has ascribed a cultural identity in the meaning making process of understanding this cultural artefact.

Applying the model to the study of communicating national image among foreign publics, in this case, China’s national image communication process, I regard the U.S.-China relations in the global context as the regulation moment. China’s image shaping efforts and
Western media portrayal of China would be the production and representation moments. How foreign public constructs their image of China would be the consumption moment. The image of China would be the identity moment in the model.

Defining National Image

Defining Image

The academic literature on image offers the following perspectives that are considered relevant to the scope of this study. There are largely two big camps regarding how scholars define image. One camp regards image as existing in the perceptual world which is as opposed to the reality (Kotler, 1997). This perceptual meaning of image largely comes from psychology, cognitive psychology. The other camp comes from social politics and relationship communication which regards image as always about reality (Avenarius, 1993).

Within the first camp, the psychological perspective of image defines the concept as “the total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure of the behavior unit, or its internal view of itself and its universe” (Boulding, 1959, p. 120-121). This definition is very complex and inclusive; it conceptualize image as “a decisive element in the structuring of the dimensions of human behavior and axiology” (Abrudan & Mucundorfeanu, 2009, p. 90). The definition given by Boulding (1959) reveals that image is a multi-dimensional structure that cuts across the rational, emotional, and value aspect of any experiences. Again, this psychological perspective of image indicates that image exists in the intangible nonphysical world yet powerful and decisive as image affects how human behaves rationally, emotionally and socially.

From a social psychology perspective, according to German psychologist Gerhardt Kleining, image is defined as “the dynamically perceived and meaningful, more or less structured
totality of perception, beliefs, ideas and feelings that a person or more people have towards
something” (as cited in Abrudan & Mucundorfeanu, 2009, p. 90). A similar one was offered by
Kotler (1997), who defined image as “the set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person
holds regarding an object” (p. 607). This definition reflects a world view that separates the
physical and the perceptual world.

The perceptual meaning of image is similar to the idea of stereotype coined by American
scholar Walter Lippmann (1966). According to Lippmann (1966), stereotypes are “an ordered,
more or less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our
comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves. They may not be a complete picture of the
world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted” (p. 63).

For the perceptual meaning of image, it is about our perception, attitude, or feelings
toward something. In other words, image is referring to how the social reality is being perceived.

From a relationship communication perspective, image is an averse word; Cutlip (1991)
and Grunig (1993) both loath the word simply because they dislike the psychological definition of
it which tends to separate the symbolic and the physical aspects of the world. Grunig (1993)
argues that image as defined in the public relations realm is about impression management, which
is one part of what public relations do. What is more important to the study and practice of public
relations is building and managing relationships, not just cultivating a good image (Grunig,
1993).

The above perspectives of how scholars have defined image indicate that image is
referring to how we perceive, see, feel, and have an attitude or opinion about the world. Image is
decisive in affecting our attitude toward the outside universe. Image is also affecting relationships
in social reality.
National Image

To add “national” as a modifier to image, we get national image. Accordingly, a working definition for national image is the general perception and/or attitude that people have for a nation. National image is the total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure a person holds of a foreign country (Boulding, 1959). It is “the cognitive representation a person holds of a given country, what a person believes to be true about a nation and its people” (Kunczik, 2013, p. 14).

National image is a highly abstract construct that entails multiple dimensions. According to Boulding (1959), these dimensions include 1) a geographical space as constructed on a map; 2) the perception of hostility or friendliness with other nations; 3) national strengths or weaknesses such as economic resources, military power, cultural appeal and values. To some scholars arguing from a soft power (Nye, 2004) perspective, national image is viewed as part of a nation’s soft power. It is also a resource of soft power (Ding, 2011). To other scholars coming from a communication perspective, national image is defined as “the climate of opinion formed by collective expressions of perceptions and judgments of a country by its overseas publics” (J. Wang, 2008, p. 9).

In this study, I incorporate both the perceptual aspect and the relationship communication aspect of national image. Such elements of people, political structure, economic status, environment, military power, cultural values, history, traditions, as well as interactions with a foreign country are all included in the concept of national image. These elements of national image are not exhaustive; they are illustrative of how foreign public views a nation from different aspects and angles. Essentially, what is fundamentally pertinent to this project is the question of how foreign public views or imagines a nation from these various aspects of the national image.

To apply the identity moment of the Circuit of Culture model, national image is like a nation’s identity that evolves over time. It is a very complex construct, nebulous, fluid, and
affected by long time stereotypes (Fan, 2005). What a nation’s image conveys to foreign publics is being constantly constructed and reconstructed. Therefore, managing national image requires a continued effort and a strategic approach.

**Public Diplomacy**

Public diplomacy is one of the oldest forms of human communication. Over human history, public diplomacy has taken different labels and forms but carried similar function, that is, to engage foreign publics to advance national interests.

As an emerging subject area within strategic communication, public diplomacy offers a comprehensive approach to studying national image management given the complexity and importance of national image in today’s increasingly connected world. Academically, public diplomacy has attracted scholars from various fields including public relations, mass communications, and international relations to define and conceptualize public diplomacy. For instance, from an international relations perspective, public diplomacy is regarded as an instrument of improving a nation’s soft power (Nye, 2004, 2008). From a public relations perspective, public diplomacy is viewed as international public relations – managing relations with foreign publics (Fitzpatrick, 2004; Grunig, 1993). To critical scholars, public diplomacy is closely linked to international propaganda (Nichols, 2003).

So far, there are six categories of conceptualizing public diplomacy ranging from information based advocacy to engaging foreign publics in relationship building (Fitzpatrick, 2010). In the following discussion, I will discuss two big approaches to understanding public diplomacy in the field of communication: the informational approach and the relational approach (Zaharna, 2009).
The Informational Approach

Public diplomacy, viewed from an informational approach, is essentially about message design and dissemination, with the goal of achieving foreign policies (Zaharna, 2009). Some of the earlier definitions of public diplomacy reflect the central role of information in public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy, as a term, was formally coined in 1965, in the heyday of the Cold War, by Edmund A. Gullion, who was the dean of The Fletcher School of Tufts University (The Murrow Center, 2014). Dean Gullion used the term public diplomacy to name The Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy when it was established at Fletcher in memory of Murrow, who was a CBS broadcaster and producer from the 1930s to the 1950s (The Murrow Center, 2014).

According to an earlier brochure of The Murrow Center, public diplomacy was described in the following quote:

Public diplomacy …deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as between diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the processes of inter-cultural communications. (The Murrow Center Website, 2014, “What is Public Diplomacy?”).

This 1965 description of what public diplomacy is offers a grand scope covering six areas ranging from cultivation of foreign public opinion, to international and inter-cultural communication. Implicitly, the description tells that public diplomacy is essentially concerned
with information flow from government to foreign citizens across national, cultural, and socioeconomic borders with the goal of benefiting foreign policies via the then dominant mass media based communication technology (Pamment, 2013).

After the end of the Cold War, public diplomacy, in the American context, refers to the idea of promoting American national interest through understanding, informing, and influencing foreign audiences, according to the Planning Group for Integration of USIA into the Department of State in the late 1990s. The United States Information Agency (USIA), the primary government agency responsible for public diplomacy in the U.S. during the Cold War, was being integrated to the State Department in the late 1990s. This definition of public diplomacy also reflects the one-way informational communication approach in that it emphasizes advancing national interests of the initiating country. In a rather simple term, public diplomacy, from the informational perspective, is to tell your nation’s story to foreign publics (Fitzpatrick, 2004).

Commonly used ways of information-based public diplomacy include psychological warfare, international broadcasting, and more recently, nation branding (Zaharna, 2009). Since public diplomacy and nation branding are being closely linked in the literature on national image, I will discuss the concept of nation branding here as a component of public diplomacy.

Nation branding originates from the business and marketing literature where a nation is being regarded as similar, if not identical to a product brand. According to one definition of nation branding, it is “applying branding and marketing communications techniques to promote a nation’s image” (Fan, 2005, p. 6). The conceptual compatibility of applying corporate or product branding to the area of national image management is premised on the idea that today’s world is all about how to make your nation competitive in the global marketplace (J. Wang, 2008). A favorable and well managed national image is potentially instrumental for nations to compete for various resources, political and economic gains, cultural appeals, etc. (J. Wang, 2008).
Essentially, nation branding is about designing and disseminating a favorable image of a nation to foreign publics with the goal of improving international recognition and winning tangible benefits. Arguably, nation branding can be viewed, for example, as the business version of public diplomacy (Svensson, 2013). However, the nation branding perspective is limited in that it implies a one-way selling of a nation (Fitzpatrick, 2010). Because of the focus on the business aspect of engaging foreign publics, public diplomacy approached from this nation branding lens has an inadequacy problem. The functionalist approach focusing on the economic aspect of the national image in a global marketplace of competition ignores the political and cultural aspects of national images (Kaneva, 2009). Some scholars critiqued the use of nation branding in managing a nation’s relationship with foreign publics (Rasmussen & Merkelsen, 2012). For instance, when the Danish government used nation branding metrics to manage the nation’s reputation based on aggregate data, they could not addressing national security concern, especially when security threat comes from individual terrorists (Rasmussen & Merkelsen, 2012).

With the increasing popularity and accessibility of social media networks, there is a growing literature on the impact of social media on public diplomacy seen in the most recent public diplomacy scholarship. Still, such research falls under the informational approach because the message orientation did not change. What changed was the medium that carries the message. For instance, Zhang (2013) studied how the viral posts of former U.S. Ambassador to China Gary Locke’s humble official image were being strategically managed by diplomats to engage social media users – a key part of the Chinese public.

**The Relational Approach**

In the post 9/11 era, unlike previous understanding of public diplomacy which focuses on the information aspect, the concept is shifting toward a relationship-building and relationship
management approach. Scholars and practitioners of public diplomacy concertedly indicate the shift toward the relational approach (Fitzpatrick, 2007, 2010; Snow, 2009; Zahana, 2009).

According to a former USIA officer, public diplomacy was defined as “not providing information. It is building relationships” (Fitzpatrick, 2010, p. 79). Public diplomacy is “the process by which direct relations are pursued with a country’s people to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented” (Sharp, 2005, p. 106). In a similar vein, public diplomacy is supposed to be building long term relationships with foreign publics, not short-term policy driven (Leonard, 2002). Public diplomacy is “a country’s engagement and communication with foreign publics” (J. Wang, 2011, p. 3). According to Jan Melissen (2005), public diplomacy “is first of all about promoting and maintaining smooth international relationships” (p. 21).

Under the relational approach, public diplomacy is seen in such forms as language and cultural programs, educational programs, international aid projects, etc. (Zaharna, 2009).

In the academic literature, scholars largely from public relations have long been articulating and supporting the conceptual convergence of public relations and public diplomacy (Fitzpatrick, 2007; Grunig, 1993; L’Etang, 2009; Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; Signitzer & Wamser, 2006; Yun, 2006). For instance, Signitzer and Coombs (1992) identified the conceptual convergence between public relations and public diplomacy as the two areas “seek similar objectives and use similar tools” (p. 137). A key shared objective by both public relations and public diplomacy is “to convey a favorable image of one’s culture” (Stignitzer & Coombs, 1992, p. 142). There has also been empirical testing of the applicability of Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) Excellence Theory to public diplomacy (Yun, 2006). Yun (2006) conducted a survey and analyzed data on public diplomacy practices and management among 113 embassies in Washington D.C. Her findings indicated that public relations Excellence Model fit public diplomacy behavior.
The advocacy for a relational approach to public diplomacy came after a critical reflection on the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East after the 9/11 attacks. For instance, Kathy Fitzpatrick (2010), in her book *The Future of U.S. Public Diplomacy: An Uncertain Fate*, criticized the primarily informational approach in America from World War I to post 9/11. She also suggested that public diplomacy should be considered at the national strategic level rather than from a foreign policy tactic level. According to her, public diplomacy is not about one-way information transmission but about two-way relationship building. Public diplomacy is not using short-term campaigns but using long-term strategies; not relying on technology but focusing on personal relationship building. Additionally, public diplomacy’s strategic role in protecting and advancing national interests, building long-term relationships with foreign publics should be recognized.

The relational approach is based on a critique of the soft power theory (Nye, 2004; 2008; 2011), which argues that a nation can gain what it wants by attraction rather than coercion. Public diplomacy, through the lens of soft power, is understood as wielding soft power resources to get a favorable international image. Fitzpatrick (2010) critiqued the soft power-based public diplomacy approach because it still bears a Cold War mentality in the conduct of engaging foreign publics. The perspective of wielding soft power suggests an information approach to public diplomacy as it inherently implies a top-down information flow (Hocking, 2005; Zaharna, 2010). According to Zaharna (2010), the approach of wielding soft power to public diplomacy still suggests a mass communication oriented public diplomacy as the strategy is centered on message design and dissemination and message delivery via mass media. She argued for a shift toward relationship building in creating soft power in the conduct of public diplomacy rather than wielding soft power by sticking to the mass communication approach to public diplomacy.

The relational approach to public diplomacy, sometimes suggested as the new public diplomacy (Fitzpatrick, 2007; Melissen, 2005; Pamment, 2013; Seib, 2009), has the following
characteristics: new players in engaging foreign publics in addition to traditional diplomats; the blurred line of domestic and foreign publics; and the move from one-way information dissemination to two-way communication and engagement with foreign publics (Melissen, 2005). The advanced communication technologies i.e. social media networks also changed the way information disseminates, shaping new patterns of communication (Pamment, 2013). Because of the new players, such as NGOs, and new communication technology involved in the process of public diplomacy, the new public diplomacy really moves toward two-way message exchange (emphasis added), away from the one-way message flow model (Zaharna, 2010).

As public diplomacy is closely impacted by a lot of social factors such as geopolitical context, communication technologies, the definition of public diplomacy will continue to change. However, no matter how public diplomacy evolves, four elements seem to be essential in defining the term, according to Fitzpatrick (2010): the purpose, actors, targeted publics, and whose interests to be served by public diplomacy.

**An Integrated Approach**

The shift of conceptualizing public diplomacy from the information model to the relation model is parallel to the paradigm shift in communication research in general, which is from the effects model to the relational model (Pamment, 2013; Zahana, 2009). The discussion of the informational and relational approaches may seem to portray them as an either-or relationship. However, in the day-to-day conduct of public diplomacy, both are needed. Arguing that the 21st century public diplomacy should adopt an integrated approach, Golan (2013) defined three layers of such public diplomacy: the short-to-medium-term, the medium-to-long-term, and the long-term public diplomacy. The three layers respectively feature mass media, nation branding, and relationship building approach to public diplomacy (Golan, 2013).
This integrated model of public diplomacy incorporates all the different approaches to the process of engaging foreign publics. Because engaging international public is essentially a mediated process, information dissemination, message exchange, and relationship building and maintaining are necessary components in public diplomacy. Through information exchange and relationship building with foreign publics, a national image arises in such an interactive process. When engaging foreign publics one needs to know that the mass media in that foreign country play a significant role in representing your country before you could send the message you desire. Therefore, it is important to learn what the existing image of your country is in the target country. In the case of China’s image, Western media have long been serving as the main image setter for Western and even global audience.

**China in the Western Eyes**

There is this long historical and academic curiosity about China in the West. China has been historically and intellectually constructed as the antithesis to the West (Zhang, 1998). The relationship between China and the West is like an ecliptic relation, “… the ecliptic relation between China and the West helps the West understand itself as a civilization and as modern…” (Hayot, 2009, pp. 11-12). In the literature of how the image of China has been studied in the West, there are largely three categories. The first category is studying the mediated image of China via mass media. This line of research is about media representation of China. Representation is one of the five moments in the process of communicating the meaning of China to foreign audiences.
Media Portrayals

Western media play a critical mediating role in portraying China, as traditionally most people rely on mass media to learn about the outside world. Since China is largely viewed as a civilization radically different from the Western civilization, Western media has, through their representation of China, formed a media discourse of China with an underlying frame of otherness.

Frames are ways to help people conceptualize, organize, understand, and interpret social reality (Goffman, 1974; Reese, 2001). According to Goffman (1974), frames are ways to help people understand and organize their interpretation of the everyday life. Reese (2001) referred to frames as “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (p. 11; italics original). Gitlin (1980) conceptualized media frames as “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (p. 6). Hertog and McLeod (2001) argued that frames are “relatively comprehensive structures of meaning made up of a number of concepts and the relations among those concepts” (p. 140).

Regarding how frame works, Entman (1993) gave a definition. “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 52; italics original).

Entman (1993) identified the four functions of framing, namely to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. He also identified four locations of where framing occurs in the communication process, or the locations of framing, which are “the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture” (p. 52). Van Gorp (2007) argued that
frames are part of culture and the underlying cultural frames link the interactions between media content production and consumption.

The study of Western media representation of China features in the use of preexisting texts, such as newspapers (e.g. Lee, 2002), magazines (e.g. Jespersen, 1996), literary works (e.g. Mackerras, 1999), TV shows (e.g. Wang & Hallquist, 2011), etc. as data. The time span of such a discourse ranges from the Romans to the contemporary. The studies within this category are significantly limited to the description of the media images of China in the West. Scholars of generations have documented what was called the “pendulum swings” of those Western images of China from Sinophiles to Sinophobes (e.g. Cao, 2012; Jespersen, 1996; Mackerras, 1999, 2000). Scholars tended to describe, document, and explain certain positive and negative images of China over historical time frames. For example, the Australian scholar Colin Mackerras (1999) wrote a book of Western images of China in the past three centuries, illustrating the alternation of the positive and negative images. From the favorable portrayal of the Chinese society by the French Jesuits in the 18th century to the negative view of China as a static society in Adam Smith’s account in the 19th century, and then how American views of China in the 20th century had changed from positive to negative after the Tiananmen incident, Mackerras (1999) argued such Western perspectives of China reflected a power relationship/dynamic between China and the West. He drew upon Foucault’s (1980) concept of power/knowledge to explain the pendulum swings of Western ideas of China. The pendulum swings of the views of China as portrayed historically in the West, are essentially reflecting an otherness frame, despite a positive otherness or a negative otherness.

Similarly, in studying Time’s portrayal of China from 1931 to 1949, the time period when China was under the Japanese invasion, Jespersen (1996) suggested that “images of China have largely come from Americans’ assumptions about themselves and not from the reality of Chinese linguistic, historical, or cultural similarities” (p. xv). In a reading of the BBC documentaries of
China series, Cao (2012) explained China had been constructed in the British BBC documentaries as according to the grand narrative of the Western modernity discourse, which had dual lenses of “capitalistic industrialism” and “liberal humanism” (p. 3). Using frame theory, Lee (2002) examined how The New York Times portrayed the China image from a foreign policy perspective. Based on his frame analysis of columnists’ opinions published in the newspaper, Lee (2002) found that there were three ideological frames of China in The New York Times: Containment, Engagement, and Globalization. He argued that the seemingly pluralist nature of these frames was essentially conforming to the unified American foreign policy discourse about China and how China should serve the American global interests. All these reading of China in different historical and geopolitical contexts suggest an underlying otherness as well.

The heavy reliance on preexisting texts as data may imply such an assumption that the publics are influenced by the mass mediated messages; they absolutely accept what is being reported in the mass media about China, in line with the agenda setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). According to the theory, the media set the public’s agenda by transmitting the salience of issues. There have been many studies using agenda setting to study the relationship between news media coverage and public opinions, knowledge, and attitude toward i.e. foreign countries (Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). In their study of news coverage and public opinions of foreign countries, Wanta, Golan, and Lee (2004) found that there was a strong correlation between news coverage of foreign affairs and public opinions of foreign countries. However, literatures in cultural studies, active audience, environmental communication, and public relations suggest that the audiences do not always accept the media message; rather, they actively engage and even refuse the media message (Manheim & Albritton, 1984; Budd, Entman, & Steinman, 1990; Bush, Moffatt, & Dunn, 2001; Hall, 1980; Philo & Berry, 2004; Tsfati, 2003).

According to Stuart Hall (1980), the audience may decode the media messages in three modes: accepting the preferred message, negotiating the message, or refusing the message. In a
case study of how the public understood air pollution information released from the UK government in the 1990s, Bush, Moffatt and Dunn (2001) found that the public did not just passively assimilate the air quality information. Rather, they actively evaluate and negotiate the information. In a study of how the audience interpreted the TV portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Philo and Berry (2004) found that active audience used logic in coming to the conclusion that the Palestinians suffered more casualties than the Israelis simply because the former used “sticks and stones” while the latter used “guns and tanks” (p. 235). Tsfati (2003) studied how audience skepticism toward media affected agenda setting effects. He found that for people who were skeptical about media the correlation between media agenda and public agenda was weaker, compared to people who were not skeptical about media. Agenda setting has also been questioned by studies that look at the public relations factor in shaping public opinions about foreign nations (Manheim & Albritton, 1984). In their study of how public relations efforts may impact foreign nations’ images in the U.S. press, Manheim and Albritton (1984) found that the U.S. press was subject to outside manipulation, as the six nations under study that signed American public relations firms to improve their coverage in the U.S. press saw improvement in the visibility and valence of their national images.

Based on the agency of the audience, previous studies using preexisting mediated texts as data to study Western media representation of China could not tell us what and how the audiences, readers, the public view China from their own perspectives. We were only able to know how the media constructed the image of China throughout history.

**China in Public Opinion Polls**

The second category of works on the image of China is done through analyses of public opinion surveys (Committee100, 2012; Gries & Crowson, 2010; Page & Xie, 2010). Page and
Xie (2010) analyzed American public opinion polls over 50 years and found that the average American public attitude toward China was “lukewarm to cool” (p. 112). Committee of 100 (2012) in their most recent public perceptions survey found that favorable opinion of the U.S. public toward China has increased since 2007, particularly among business leaders. This was an interesting finding. It may suggest that the political rhetoric of accusing China of manipulating its currency and the imbalanced trade flows were not so endorsed by the public.

In Gries and Crowson’s (2010) study, partisanship was a key variable in gauging American public perceptions of China. In their both online and offline surveys of 1,561 American adults in February and August 2008, Gries and Crowson (2010) found that on average, self-reported conservatives perceived a significantly more negative view of China’s rise as a threat than self-reported liberals did. However, this result had to be interpreted very carefully because the sample was not random; it turned out that over half of the survey participants were from two states (Gries & Crowson, 2010).

Manzenreiter (2010) used global public opinion polls to argue that the perceptions of China among foreign publics were not indicating that the Olympic Games improved China’s national image because “the Beijing Olympics failed to win over the hearts of Western publics” (p. 42). The negative views of China and the Olympics might be related to some controversial issues surrounding the Games such as the lip-synching of a girl singing in front of the global audiences, and the Han children dressed up as ethnic children (L. Yang, 2012).

Though these survey studies of American public opinions of China gave us some ideas of the longitudinal trends, they could not tell us why the people held certain views and they tended to miss the much detailed and varied layers of the publics’ views of China. Also because quantitative surveys tend to use close-ended questions, survey participants were limited to the scope and structure of the survey questionnaires. They might have more to respond to the
questions but the surveys didn't provide the space to entertain a more detailed and deeper publics’ views of China.

**China in Public Perceptions**

The third category of studies of Western understanding of China is done through interviews (Isaacs, 1958; J. W. Wang, 2000). This is also the least used method. The often cited project was *Scratches on Our Minds* by Harold R. Isaacs (1958). In that book, the journalist-turned scholar examined how Americans viewed China based on a massive project of interviews with 181 informants including American leaders in academia, foreign affairs, media, business, and missionary. He analyzed their views of China and the Chinese people, paying attention to the adjectives the interviewees used in describing their views of China. In the eyes of Americans interviewed half a century ago, the Chinese people were switching between “the superior people” to “the inferior people” (Isaacs, 1958, pp. 89-108). Such a switch of American views of China was because China once was viewed as having splendid ancient civilization, but later China was weakened when facing challenges posed by European industrial powers and later the Japanese.

Though the scale of the project was impressive, his findings remained to be descriptive. His often cited summarization of metamorphosis of Western perception of China was not based on his interview data. Another limitation of this seminal study using interviews was that the views tended to be elites’ views, not public’s (L. Yang, 2012).

In a more recent project, J. W. Wang (2000) used structured face-to-face interviews of elites from both China and the U.S. to investigate the mutual images of these two countries. His findings were that people on both sides held rather complex than one-dimensional views of each other. Instead of viewing each other as enemies, the findings led to J. W. Wang’s (2000) characterization of the bilateral relations as “limited adversaries” (p. 259). However, this study
was based on interviewing elites’ opinions too. A second limitation was that J. W. Wang’s (2000) study could not assess the impact of China’s image shaping efforts among its foreign publics, e.g. American public in the 21st century.

**Contemporary Audience Consumption: The Missing Link**

Though previous studies played a role in understanding the media representation of national image, they fail to actualize the meaning of national image due to the lack of an understanding of how exactly foreign publics consume the encoded messages and how they actively construct their own meanings which may defy the encoded message. Cultural studies offer a great alternative to investigating and understanding how publics construct their meanings, which eventually actualize some of the possibilities in the production and representation aspects of the communicative process (Curtin & Gaither, 2007).

Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding models explained the relationship between message encoders and message decoders. Specifically, Hall (1980) hypothesized that there were three ways of how audiences decode a message: The dominant mode, which is conforming to the intended message, the negotiated mode, which does not totally accept or negate the dominant meaning, and the rejection mode, which totally defies the intended message.

While previous studies have focused on the representation of China in Western media, this study focuses on the understanding of the national image of China by the American people and the decoding of the public diplomacy efforts by the Chinese government. Though representation assumes an infinite number of possible ways of interpreting the embedded message or meaning intended by the producers, past studies have failed to examine exactly how the consumers of these messages actually read them.
This review of existent literature on the image of China indicates that the three categories of the previous studies have been limited in different ways. For the studies that focused on the use of preexisting data, they cannot tell exactly how the public views China from their standpoints. In other words, those media text based studies do not pay attention to individual agency of the audience (L. Yang, 2012). For the survey approach, they often miss the nuanced and individualized opinions because the percentages, though presenting a results in numbers, actually lost the richness and diversity of nuanced meanings generated by the public. For the two studies that used interviews, they were elite oriented as the interview participants were considered elites in America. Because the two studies were done before China’s active image shaping efforts, the two studies were not able to give any policy suggestions or recommendations to future public diplomacy efforts.

Given all the aforementioned limitations of the previous studies, this study took a focus group interview approach to the understanding of China’s national image as perceived by China’s key foreign public – the American people specifically the American college students. Through the interviews the researcher gained primary data on the publics’ views, perceptions, impressions, attitudes and opinions about China. The data were original, not filtered through any institutional frames that may be dominant but not reflecting what the publics’ views were. In this study, China’s national image was defined as how American people view China as a nation.
Chapter 3

Public Diplomacy Practices

Chapter 2 discussed the different conceptual approaches to public diplomacy as an emerging academic subject area. No matter what kind of approach to understanding public diplomacy, informational or relational, in practice, public diplomacy initiatives often combine the information based and the relation based approaches. Because of the importance attached to public diplomacy as a strategy to advance national goals and shape national images, nation states have spent increasingly large amount of financial and human resources to public diplomacy initiatives. Among China’s public diplomacy initiatives, for instance, each Confucius Institute costs about 500,000 U.S. dollars (Zhao, 2008). The Beijing Olympics cost over 40 billion U.S. dollars (Broudehoux, 2007). China’s state media were also reportedly to get a total of 45 billion yuan to expand overseas presence and lead the image campaign (Wu & Chen, 2009).

This chapter is about public diplomacy in practice. Two parts are included. The first part will describe and discuss the history and forms of public diplomacy by nation states, large or small, with the goal of advancing foreign policies and national interests. The second part will describe and discuss some of the noticeable public diplomacy efforts made by the Chinese government in recent years.
**History and Forms**

**Psychological Warfare**

Public diplomacy is as old as statecraft (Cull, 2008). Historically, public diplomacy was commonly associated with and conducted in warfare. From the American Independence War to World War I, World War II, and then to the Cold War, public diplomacy efforts and initiatives have been used with the fundamental goal of defeating the enemies, garnering sympathy from the wider public, and ultimately winning hearts and minds globally. In general, public diplomacy practices include the following forms from a historical perspective: letters, psychological warfare, propaganda, international broadcasting, cultural diplomacy, international aids projects, nation branding, and non-traditional mediated public diplomacy. The evolving of public diplomacy forms has been shaped by different mediums thanks to the evolving communication technologies.

As an American tradition, public diplomacy can be traced back to America’s colonial times when the Continental Congress published documents including letters and declarations to win the Independence War against the British (Waller, 2007). For example, one of the pieces was the *Address to the People of Great Britain*, published in 1774 to win public opinion support and give pressure to the British government (Waller, 2007). Shortly after the independence, Benjamin Franklin wrote messages targeting non-British powers in Europe to get military and monetary support for America (Waller, 2007).

If pens and letters – the print media – were tools of public diplomacy in the time of American founding fathers, telecommunication technologies such as radio and later satellite TV became the dominant tools in reaching out to foreign publics. International broadcasting thus became the norm of public diplomacy. Scholars coming from a critical perspective often regard such mass media based public diplomacy efforts as international propaganda (Nichols, 2003).
Overseas radio broadcasting dominates in this form of government outreach efforts. BBC World Service, Voice of America, Radio Beijing, Voice of Russia, are some of the large ones (Nichols, 2003). However, after the end of the Cold War, these overseas international radio broadcasting services have undergone different changes. For instance, VOA, once believed “the best instrument of public diplomacy” (Ungar, 2005, p. 7), has to cut staff and close down local bureaus due to the lack of funding as well as the lack of institutional support. Radio Beijing has changed its name into China Radio International in the early 1990s (CRI, 2014), and now become one of the key players in China’s state media expansion overseas (Li & Sligo, 2012).

**Nation Branding**

After the end of the Cold War, nation branding – the use of business marketing strategies to present a favorable national image – becomes a popular way of engaging foreign publics, more often from an economic perspective. Nation branding initiatives is seen in East European countries when they became independent from the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Such nations longing for a new national image that distancing themselves from the Soviet influence, wanted desperately to rebrand their nations for the purpose of attracting investment and building economy and ultimately a new identity in the world.

Most of nation branding practices has been studied in country case studies. For instance, post-communist Romania used mass-media based nation branding campaigns to promote tourism and the export of Romania products (Abrudan & Mucundorfeanu, 2009). The branding relied on crafting a culturally unique message that hopefully conveyed a favorable idea about Romania in the world. India, as one of the emerging economies, has used a more than 10-year long tourism branding campaign “Incredible India” to attract foreign tourists (Kerrigan, Shivanandan & Hede, 2012). The sponsor of this tourism-oriented nation branding campaign basically used visual
images to produce a “unique and unified brand” to communicate India with foreign tourists (Kerrigan, Shivanandan & Hede, 2012, p. 319). Regarding the case study based nation branding literature, Fan (2010) argued that “all published empirical studies of ‘nation’ branding, under close scrutiny, are merely export branding, or destination branding, with none of them actually branding at the nation level” (p. 101).

Ecobranding

While war and peace issues have commonly occupied global headlines that shape and reshape national images, increasingly environmental and sustainability issues have become an important factor that may affect national image. Recent headlines around the world have warned of the degradation of the Chinese environment, and the risks China’s industrialization holds for the planet at large. In a *Guardian* article, Chinese scientists were quoted as saying the dense smog that blanketed Beijing and other northern provinces in China could threaten the food supply system in China (Kaiman, 2014). The emissions from export industries in China could be carried by wind and moved across the Pacific and affect western states in the U.S., according to a *New York Times* report citing a recent scientific research (Wong, 2013). Water is also an issue, with as much as 90 percent of groundwater in Chinese cities being polluted (Mullany, 2013).

All the environmental problems that are plaguing China may certainly affect China’s national image, because tourists simply would not favor a polluted place. In the academic literature, scholars have been thinking of how countries may conceptualize their green destination brands, because “a nation’s natural assets, properly managed, provide a powerful source of emotional and symbolic value for internal and external audiences” (Insch, 2011, p. 283). Unlike the typical approach to tourism-oriented nation-branding campaigns that center on crafting a
singular and culturally unique national image, scholars have suggested new approaches toward
tourism based ecobranding (D. Hall, 2004; Lai & Shafer, 2005; Ren & Gyimothy, 2013).

In their case study of the Danish pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, Ren and
Gyimothy (2013) suggested a move from the uniqueness narrative to an inviting and culturally
sensitive approach. Two tactics were used. First, the Danish pavilion offered a number of bikes
for visitors to use to convey a green message. Aware of the increasing pressure on climate change
and the problem of Green House gas emissions, in combination of a recent history of China
where bikes were the dominant transportation means, such a culturally and environmentally
conscious touch in Danish public diplomacy efforts toward the Chinese people made more sense.
Second, the Danish pavilion moved a miniature of the Little Mermaid, a well-known Hans
Christian Andersen character to the Chinese people, also a tourist attraction in Copenhagen, to
Shanghai Harbor, which conveyed a clear and strong tourism message. The use of a performative
and event-based branding effort, as shown by the Danish pavilion at the Shanghai Expo,
symbolized the Expo’s theme on sustainable urban city life, because it “invites the visitor to not
only observe or learn about the country, but to participate through interactions” (Ren &

In the Internet age, many tourism dependent countries have also used the Internet to
market their ecotourism industry. For instance, based on four dimensions of sustainable
ecotourism, namely, environmental sustainability, socio-cultural sustainability, economic
sustainability, and education, Lai and Shafer (2005) examined the website of ecolodges in Latin
America and The Caribbean. What they found was there were more ecolodges that emphasized
the environmental dimension of sustainability in their online marketing. The educational
dimension, however, was the least addressed on these ecolodges’ websites (Lai & Shafer, 2005).

With sustainability, ecotourism and other environmentally conscious tourism becoming a
niche market to attract international travelers, it is important to understand whether or not the
online branding of such business actually matched with what is being practiced in the ecotourism destinations. For instance, New Zealand has been very successful in terms of branding itself as a destination for backpackers (Bell, 2008). However, if the branding message does not match with what is being practiced could affect the potential image of New Zealand and other destinations. Bell (2008) interviewed 25 local hostel operators in New Zealand and found that there was a very limited commitment to green practices at the local level. Most hostel operators only subscribed to the national myth that portrayed New Zealand as “the clean, green and 100% PURE” (Bell, 2008, p. 345).

For nations in Southeastern Europe and Central Europe, they faced a challenge of rebuilding their national identities in the post-communist era. Tourism and especially rural tourism became a tool to start the re-imaginary process (D. Hall, 2004). Specifically, such countries adopted a strategy to diversify tourist destinations, moving away from the commonly favored destinations toward more rural areas where tourists could find more traditional, “‘idyllic’ portrayals of timeless sustainability” (D. Hall, 2004, p. 172).

Relational Public Diplomacy

Other than the information based public diplomacy efforts, public diplomacy initiatives are also seen in the relational realm. States have used educational exchange programs, language and cultural programs to connect with and communicate with foreign publics. Well-known educational exchange initiatives include the Fulbright Program sponsored by the United States government, for example. Established in 1946, right after World War II, the Fulbright Program is currently operating in over 155 countries in the world, with a clearly public diplomacy goal. Students and scholars both from the United States have been sent overseas while students and scholars from other countries have been invited to come to the U.S. to study, teach and conduct
research. According to the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs under the State Department, the goal of the Fulbright Program is “to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries” (Fulbright Program, 2014). Similarly, Japan operates its international exchange program through the Japan Foundation. The mission of Japan Foundation is also to promote Japanese language and culture as well as Japanese studies (Japan Foundation, 2014).

Language and cultural programs are also a common way of conducting relational public diplomacy. Some would label such practices as cultural diplomacy (Hartig, 2011; Pan, 2013; Wheeler, 2014). Over more than a century ago, accompanying to the rise of their global reach, earlier industrial powers including Great Britain, Germany, Spain, and France were predecessors in using language and cultural centers to extend cultural influence at a global level (Kluver, 2014). Each of the industrial powers have established around the world language and culture oriented institutes to gain cultural influences among foreign publics, namely, the British Council, the Goethe Institute, the Cervantes Institute, and the Alliance Francaise. China also has one called the Confucius Institute, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

With the world now into the Internet age in which information dissemination is done instantly and information control is very limited, the new communication environment has brought both challenges and opportunities for public diplomacy practices. States have tried to circumvent traditional mass media to deliver the message and build online networks. For instance, the Argentine government used video news release and social media networks such as Facebook and YouTube to disseminate its message about Argentina’s sovereignty claim over the Malvinas (Connolly-Ahern & Ma, 2014).
China’s Efforts

Public diplomacy, in China’s context, refers to the external arm of communication. It is about how and what to tell foreign audiences the Chinese story. Improving China’s national image is a recent thing after the country has undergone decades of economic reform and achieved remarkable economic growth.

In the Chinese language, public diplomacy, introduced to China as a foreign concept (Y. Wang, 2008), has a close relationship with the concept of xuanchuan (宣传). Literally, Xuan means to make announcement. Chuan means to disseminate and pass along. Together as a noun phrase, Xuanchuan means “benign activities as the release of news, general shaping of ideology, or even advertisement” (Y. Wang, 2008, p. 259). As a verb phrase, it means the act of announcing, disseminating and promoting ideas. Based on different target audiences xuanchuan in the Chinese context has internal xuanchuan and external xuanchuan (Y. Wang, 2008). Internal xuanchuan simply means the target audience is domestic audience while external xuanchuan is targeting foreign publics. Public diplomacy, therefore, falls into the external front of xuanchuan, the central mission of which is to tell China’s stories and cultivate the Chinese image in the world.

External xuanchuan as a way of telling China’s stories and cultivating China’s images in the world is not something new in China’s history. In the Republic of China era under the Nationalist Party’s rule (1912-1949), the then Chinese government was also trying to improve China’s image overseas. The Chinese journalism history scholar Volz (2011) argued that China during the Nationalist Party’s rule had used external xuanchuan to manage China’s images abroad and xuanchuan was considered as “a proper journalistic role” (p. 174). Out of the concern that foreign press was misinforming the world about China’s situation, an international
department within the Nationalist Party’s government was established to manage China’s overseas publicity targeting foreign press (Volz, 2011).

All countries’ national image shaping efforts happen under a particular historical context. For instance, Eastern European countries in the post-communist era faced a redefinition of their national identities and their national images after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For China, the awareness and capability of using mass media based strategies to craft a new China image in the world only happen after China has undergone 30 years of fast economic growth. The Chinese government has been using a series of initiatives with the goal of creating and shaping a favorable, non-threatening image of the country since the 2000s. From an educational and cultural institution called the Confucius Institute established throughout the world to major world spectacle events such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics Games, China has actively tried to construct a positive image among foreign publics. The following discusses some of the state’s major initiatives to actively produce and represent a positive China image.

The Confucius Institutes

The Confucius Institute, named after one of the most influential ancient Chinese sages, is a non-profit Chinese language and culture educational organization with the mission of teaching Chinese language and culture around the world (Hanban, 2013). According to Confucius Institutes’ official English website, the organization has the following missions: To meet a global demand for learning the Chinese language and culture; to facilitate educational and cultural exchanges between China and other countries; to build friendly relationships with other nations; to promote multiculturalism; and to facilitate world peace and harmony (Hanban, 2013).

Ever since the first Confucius Institute was opened in South Korea in 2004, this language and cultural project has rapidly grown in numbers. According to the Hanban website as of May
2014, there are 443 Confucius Institutes around the world (Hanban, 2014). Figure 3-1 shows the numbers of Confucius Institutes by region.

![Number of Confucius Institutes by Region](image)

Figure 3-1 Number of Confucius Institutes by Region

Source: Hanban’s website, 2014

The worldwide educational network of the Confucius Institutes is managed by Hanban, which is the supervising body of the Confucius Institutes headquartered in Beijing. Hanban is the short version of the official title of the executive body of the Chinese Language Council International, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Education of China (Hanban, 2013).

Regarding the operation modes of the Confucius Institutes, there are mainly three. One is totally operated by Hanban. One is joint venture between a host higher education institution and a Chinese higher education institution. The third one is locally run, but licensed by Hanban (Starr, 2009). The joint venture mode is the most common one. Usually, Hanban provides initial funding for starting up a Confucius Institute while the hosting partner higher education institution provides physical facilities and service support (Starr, 2009). The majority of the Confucius Institutes in the world are based on this joint venture operation mode, which refers to the idea of
building a partnership between a Chinese higher education institution and a higher education institution in hosting countries (Starr, 2009).

Since Hanban is the chief financier of Confucius Institutes around the world (Li, Mirmirani, & Ilacqua, 2009), there has been controversy and suspicion over the ultimate goal of the CI. Considering that the CI projects received initial funding from the Chinese government, some critics were concerned about the Confucius Institutes being used as an instrument for propaganda for China’s global domination and some people were even concerned about being brainwashed by communism (Hartig, 2011). Yet other critics were concerned about academic freedom being threatened as the Hanban financed CI programs censor such subjects as Tibet and Dalai Lama (Guttenplan, 2012). The most recent controversy regarding this language and cultural program was that two U.S. universities (The University of Chicago and The Pennsylvania State University) had severed ties with the Confucius Institutes. The reason, as was reported in one of the two cases, was inconsistent goals between the partnering universities (Jacobs & Yu, 2014).

Unlike political concerns, insiders who were involved in the operating of local Confucius Institutes expressed practical concerns such as textbook issues (Hartig, 2011). The textbooks provided by Beijing were all in English around the world; the English textbooks were not user friendly to the German students learning Chinese in the local Confucius Institutes in Germany, for example (Hartig, 2011). There were also the issues of the lack of Chinese teachers who know the local languages and how to make the project viable in the long run (Hartig, 2011; Starr, 2009).

The issues surrounding the fast growing network of the Confucius Institutes in the world have caught attention among scholars in different fields. From an organizational network perspective, Li, Mirmirani, and Ilacqua (2009) compared the operational modes of the Confucius Institutes to those of a franchised profit-seeking business network. According to their comparison, Hanban acted like a franchiser and all Confucius Institutes around the world would be the franchisees. The Confucius Institutes headquarters provide textbooks and Chinese teachers to the
local Confucius Institutes. From the perspective of shaping China’s national images and serving China’s foreign policy, the Confucius Institutes are seen as benefiting to the Chinese goal of improving its images in the world (Hartig, 2011; Paradise, 2009; Starr, 2009). These studies tended to conceptualize the Confucius Institutes projects within the concept of soft power (Nye, 2004). For instance, Paradise (2009) argued that the Confucius Institutes could help China to project a benign image of the country using soft power. However, he did not use empirical data to support his argument. In a similar way, Hartig (2011) did a case study of Confucius Institutes in Germany by interviewing some local managers about how their Confucius Institutes were operated, what textbooks they used, and what issues they had. Though Hartig (2011) used soft power as a conceptual tool in his study, he did not base his argument of the Confucius Institutes serving as an instrument of shaping China’s national image on his findings of the case study. Rather, he argued the Confucius Institutes serve China’s national interest based on the historical similar practices of France, Germany, Spain and Great Britain. The role of this language and education program serves in the larger picture of China’s national interests in shaping its national image among foreign publics.

The use of Nye’s soft power as the theoretical underpinning of assessing China’s CI projects implies a traditional top down approach to international relations as if soft power is something that nation states can create. In an essay assessing the impact of the CI projects, Kluver (2014) argued that the role of the Confucius Institutes have been exaggerated by both the critics and the apologists because in a globalized world today “geopolitical influence is an interactive value, determined by both the active agency, and the complicity or buy in, of local, national, and global players” (p. 198). Dismissing the concern over CI as China’s propaganda apparatus, Kluver (2014) posited that the CI project is a network to build China’s symbolic cultural capital to reposition China’s culture to the global culture.
The emerging literature on the role of the Confucius Institutes as an instrument of shaping China’s national image needs to be further explored from other aspects. While we already know what the project is about and how it is funded and operated, as well as some practical issues and concerns, we still don’t know how local people who actually participate in the language and cultural programs offered by the Confucius Institutes think of their experience and how they think of China. All the existing scholarly discussion even debate about the CIs remain to be scholars’ assessment with very little input from the actual people who may have in any way involved in any of the CI programs. Ironically, despite concerns and controversies mainly rising in Western countries, the United States and Europe remain the top places where the CIs saw the largest numbers. Table 3-1 shows the top 10 countries that host CIs in the world. The U.S. hosts 97 CIs as of May 2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>No. of CIs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>97</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
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<td>Japan</td>
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<td>Australia</td>
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<td>Canada</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Beijing Olympics

Hosting major spectacle sports events is definitely one of the favorite practices adopted by nation states to engage foreign publics and shape a positive image of the hosting nations. The 2008 Beijing Olympics was a major sports spectacle event that was partially staged to project a favorable image of the country (Brady, 2009). In Asia, Japan and South Korea had previously staged the Olympics as a symbol of their arrival on the international stage after having undergone rapid economic modernization (Hubbert, 2013). China was no exception. With investments of about 40 billion U.S. dollars and lavish infrastructure building, China was ambitious to host the best ever Olympics (Broudehoux, 2007). The symbolic significance of hosting the Olympics was no exaggeration. One scholar argued, for China, “hosting the Olympics was always more about international and domestic image and prestige than it was about sport” (Brady, 2009, p. 7).

In the academic literature of the Beijing Olympics, scholars have studied the relationship between the Olympics and China’s image (Brady, 2009; Chung & Woo, 2011; Wang & Hallquist, 2011; Zeng et al., 2011). Some examined media coverage and portrayal of China during the Olympics using content or textual analyses (Wang & Hallquist, 2011; Zeng et al., 2011). Some studied the impact of the Olympics on improving China’s country image among foreign consumers using quasi-experiment (Chung & Woo, 2011). Other scholars argued from a critical perspective that the mass campaign in the build-up to the Games was a way of distracting the public’s attention from more important social issues (Brady, 2009; Broudehoux, 2007).
The studies using content analyses indicated that the Olympics had little or no effect on changing foreign publics’ views of China. For instance, Wang and Hallquist (2011) examined how the Beijing Olympics were portrayed in American comedy shows *South Park* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. They found that the two shows’ comic portrayal of the Olympics was still reflecting the dominant perception of China as mysterious, authoritarian, and threatening to the U.S. Unlike the use of popular TV shows, Zeng et al. (2011) compared TV news coverage of China in nine countries before and after the Games to examine whether the sport event had an impact on China’s image. They found that the China image as framed in the foreign media did not improve directly but foreign media’s coverage of China after the Games indirectly raised awareness of China.

In a quasi-experiment designed to investigate whether the Olympics improved China’s country image and that of the Chinese products, Chung and Woo (2011) found that China’s country image was statistically significantly improved after the Games but no effect was found for the improved image of the Chinese products.

Other scholars argued from a critical perspective that the Olympics were an intended distraction from more important issues in the Chinese society such as political representation, environmental degradation, inflation, etc. (Brady, 2009) and the further gap between the urban elites and the poor in the city of Beijing (Broudehoux, 2007). According to Brady (2009) who focused on the media campaigns before the Games, the slogans, the media campaigns, the volunteers all served as a “mass distraction” (p. 5) to divert publics’ attention from more important social issues. At the same time, the mass campaigns also played the role of legitimizing the Communist Party’s rule despite rampant corruption and environmental degradation issues. Similarly from a critical perspective but focusing on the impact of the Olympics on the polarization within urban Beijing, Broudehoux (2007) argued that the massive infrastructure construction, the urban restructuring in Beijing before the Games further concentrated power into
a few hands in the planning of the Olympic projects; as a result, the gap between the rich and the poor in the metropolitan Beijing was enlarged.

Though viewing the Olympics from a critical perspective is important as it reveals the unflattering sides of the spectacular event, both Brady (2009) and Broudehoux (2007) focused on the domestic implications of the Games rather than the international impact of the Games. For ordinary foreign publics, they might have a different view of China through the lens of the Olympics. Scholars argued that the 2008 Beijing Olympics could be seen as China’s “opening act” for China’s coming to the global stage and therefore the “intended audience was truly global” (Caffrey, 2009, p. 1005).

The Beijing Olympics, though intended to present the China message in the most possibly positive way to impress the world, for example, in the splendid opening ceremony, the message, however, could have been interpreted rather the opposite by some observers. For instance, the NBC hosts of the opening ceremony were commenting on the drum show as “intimidating” when the drummers were performing in a highly synchronized and precise manner (Hubbert, 2013).

The review of the Olympics literature indicates that the use of textual or content analyses can only tell us what the foreign media think of China, but not necessarily what the public per se thinks of China. An exploration of the publics’ views of the country in the post Olympics world would add a meaningful picture to the national image of China.

**Advertising**

As opposed to the Beijing Olympics and the use of educational and cultural programs to engage foreign publics, the use of the mass media based campaigns is also a common practice to represent and convey an embedded message. China began to use commercial advertisements to
target Western audience by placing ads on mainstream Western TV networks in late 2000s. Within the past few years, the use of short commercials has become a frequent practice allowing China to tell its stories and project favorable images among Western audiences. These commercials were created to serve a variety of purposes.

“Made in China, made with the world”

The 2009 commercial “Made in China, Made with the World” was specifically designed to address the negative image of China’s products after wide recalls of “Made in China” products from Western markets. The commercial was supposedly to repair the damaged image of China as the world’s largest exporter.

“Made in China, Made with the World” was a commercial sponsored by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce in 2009 (Li, 2010). It was a global media campaign designed to alter the bad image of Chinese products after recalls of tainted toys and pet food. The 30-second long commercial was run on CNN, the Headline News and International Asia TV channels in the United States for six weeks (Li, 2010). The commercial showed a couple of scenes that people outside China used products labeled “Made in China”, including running shoes, refrigerator, MP3 player, and fashion clothes.

The idea behind that commercial was to explain to the world while the world has seen products with the labels of “Made in China” these products were actually incorporated with various inputs of technology, design, and human resources contributed from other places such as American technology, European style, French design, and engineers from all over the world. Therefore, the final product was actually made by a combination of efforts from more than just China. The commercial was masterminded by DDB Guoan, which is the Chinese branch of powerhouse advertising agency DDB on Madison Avenue (MacLeod, 2010). The commercial
sought to change the image that China made poor quality products. In other words, it was a commercial that aimed to brand the Chinese products in a positive light.

While the Chinese media were applauding the use of commercials to address the Chinese products issue overseas, scholars have argued that the commercial was unlikely to communicate the message that the commercial creators intended (Li, 2010; Wang et al., 2013). The commercial basically portrayed China as a contract country because, as the commercial said, the technology, design, and software were all coming from elsewhere; the implied message would be China only provided cheap labor and raw materials (Li, 2010). In a survey study of the product branding commercial among American college students, Wang et al. (2013) found that the commercial did not change people’s perception of the Chinese products in any positive way. The commercial even had some boomerang effects. Respondents’ ratings of the commercial’s credibility, trustworthiness, rationality, information, stimulation, and excitability were low. One of the suggestions Wang et al. (2013) gave was to focus on how to promote effectively the China brand by focusing on the quality, consumer preferences, and product safety regulations in receiving countries. They also suggested that it was very important to improve the effectiveness of the promotion efforts based on scientifically sound studies.

“Experience China”

The 2011 “Experience China” national image commercial was a positive “pseudo-event” to accompany the then Chinese President Hu Jintao’s state visit to Washington D.C. (Connolly-Ahern & Ma, 2014, p. 233). The commercial was one of the two parts of the national image films launched in 2011 targeting global audiences. Presenting largely Chinese celebrities including basketball player Yao Ming, entrepreneurs like Jack Ma, the commercial was run on a frequency of every couple minutes for roughly a month from mid of January to mid of February in 2011 at
the Times Square in New York City. It was also shown on CNN during the same time frame. The many Chinese celebrities presented in the one minute long commercial were supposedly to show the new and friendly Chinese faces to the world. However, this image ad was criticized by both domestic and international audiences (Barr, 2012). For domestic audiences, the people on the ad were not really representative of China because many of them were green card holders. Also, they were celebrities not necessarily representing the diversity and variety of the Chinese population (Barr, 2012). Rather than cultivating a good image of China among foreign audiences, Barr (2012) argued that the national image commercial was targeting domestic audiences for them to feel proud of their nation, and the strides the nation has made. For international audiences, the people shown on the ad were mostly unrecognizable (Barr, 2012). Probably only the basketball player Yao Ming was known to the foreign audience. Huang (2012) argued that the “Experience China” national image commercial could have used more linguistic signs and images embedded in the national characteristics of China to win a wide international recognition.

As for the effects of the “Experience China” commercial, in an unpublished Master’s thesis, Yuan (2012) found that most of the people shown on the “Experience China” ad were not recognizable to foreign audiences. This clearly indicated that before the commercial was launched, there might be a lack of what Wang et al. (2013) suggested “scientifically sound studies” (p. 16). The promotional ads were created with a lack of a thorough analysis of foreign audiences, their existing perceptions of China, the Chinese products, the Chinese people, etc. Yuan (2012) also found that foreign audiences did not see how the “Experience China” commercial was useful in improving China’s national image. Because of the unidentifiable Chinese people on the ad and because of the lack of psychological connection to the American audience, the “Experience China” commercial was considered rather for the Chinese audience to feel proud of their nation (Barr, 2012; Yuan, 2012). In other words, the ad turned out to be a national image ad targeting domestic audiences (Barr, 2012).
The use of commercials to shape China’s national image assumes that once foreign publics or consumers see these commercials, they would automatically understand the message these commercials were created to convey. A related assumption is that audiences would have a positive view of China after watching these commercials. However, two questions remain. One was whether the commercials were viewed by the audiences. For the commercials shown on CNN, only those who happened to watch the TV saw the commercials. For those shown on Times Square’s bulletin board, only passersby were the audience that saw the commercials. There were still a large number of audiences who may not have seen the commercials. Yuan’s (2012) unpublished master’s thesis indicated only three out of ten people could recall seeing or hearing about China’s commercials before. The other question was whether we could assume that for those who had seen the commercials would absolutely understand and accept the message as intended by the commercial initiators and producers.

To date, no research has indicated a major effect of China’s advertising initiative. A very important factor that was missing in the creation of such commercials was a good understanding of how the American people think of China contemporarily, for instance. Without a basic understanding of the ideas, views, and perceptions of China that foreign publics have, one can hardly create a tailored message to influence audiences. More importantly, even people have seen the commercials, we cannot assume that they would absolutely accept the message and process the message the way the commercial producers intended.

This chapter delineated public diplomacy practices from a historical and global perspective. It also discussed some noticeable public diplomacy efforts initiated by the Chinese government in the first decade of the 21st century. Such efforts, be it the language and cultural programs of the Confucius Institutes or the mass media based commercial campaigns or the Beijing Olympics, have a common underlying message, that is, to present a positive national image of China to the global audiences. In the communicative process of shaping China in a
favorable light in front of the global audiences, China has control over a Chinese way of producing and representing the country. However, what China does not have control over is how foreign publics actually construct their perceptions of China.

**Research Questions**

While China has started to use nation branding and public diplomacy strategies to cultivate and manage its images among foreign publics in the beginning of the 21st century, the nation faces a challenging task because Western media have held strong beliefs on such issues of human rights, freedom of speech, political dissent, currency control, etc. (Naisbitt & Naisbitt, 2010).

Though there is a long academic discourse of Western images of China, most of the previous studies were limited to the reliance on preexisting texts which reflect a kind of media elitism – privileging media’s perspective rather than the public perspectives. For the studies using surveys, they cannot tell nuanced and detailed views at the individual level. Even the studies using interviews were not public oriented per se, nor did they take into account of the changing geopolitical context and the Chinese imaging shaping efforts in the early 21st century.

Based on the review of previous studies and China’s image shaping efforts, this dissertation is interested in exploring how American college students think of China, while the Western media have been using essentially an otherness frame to suggest public understanding of China, for instance, the constantly reinforced idea of China as authoritarian, mysterious, and threatening (Wang & Hallquist, 2011). The four research questions that I would like to address are:

Research question 1: What effects have the Chinese public diplomacy efforts had on American college students?
Research question 2: Where do American college students get information about China?

Research question 3: To what extent do American students’ beliefs about China’s treatment of the environment shape their image of China?

Research question 4: Overall, how do American college students view China?
Chapter 4
Methodology

This dissertation explores American college students’ views of China. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 respectively provide a theoretical framework and a practical rationale for investigating the image of China among American college students. The theoretical framework is to conceptualize the importance of studying the consumption aspect of the communicative process of telling China’s stories with foreign publics.

In this Chapter, I discuss the utility of qualitative research, my role as the researcher in the process of this qualitative inquiry, and my justification of using focus groups to investigate the question of how American college students view China in the contemporary global context. I also lay out the research process, including the recruitment of participants, methods of data collection, strategies of qualitative data analysis, and finally, means of data analysis evaluation.

Qualitative Research

Within the social sciences there are two general research camps: quantitative research and qualitative research. Quantitative research often refers to the use of mathematic and statistical analysis to study social phenomena, based on the philosophical underpinning of an objective social reality that needs to be discovered by scientific and systematic observation (Creswell, 1994; Yilmaz, 2013). Qualitative research “aims to address questions concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans’ lives and social worlds” (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). This dissertation is interested in identifying
and exploring how the American people view China in the contemporary time. The ultimate goal is to understand the meaning of China to the American public. Put it another way, my goal is to identify the process of how American people make sense of the meaning of China. Given that this dissertation’s focus is on the meaning and process of how American people construct China at an in-depth level, a qualitative research approach is desirable, as qualitative research tackles how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The differences in philosophical groundings of qualitative research lead to a different use of methods as opposed to quantitative research. Quantitative research tends to take place in unnatural settings using quantifiable measures such as surveys and experiments to look for a causal relationship between variables. On the contrary, qualitative research tends to take place in natural settings and seeks to understand the various meanings and processes of social phenomena at an in-depth level. Therefore, qualitative data tend to be nonlinearly collected and usually the data are collected through interviews, not numbers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In terms of the role of the researcher, qualitative researchers tend to be the main investigation instrument in qualitative research while quantitative research is very careful of ensuring that the researcher does not impact the objectivity of the research (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007; Creswell, 2013; McCracken, 1988). Finally, qualitative data analysis tends to be messy and nonlinear, involving long time engagement with the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), whereas quantitative data analysis is very linear often adopting statistical software to do the analysis.

**Role of the Researcher**

One defining characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher serves as the main instrument in the process of investigation (Creswell, 2013; McCracken, 1988; Miles, 1979; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Because qualitative research acknowledges the subjectivity of the world
and also because qualitative researchers are often the main instrument in the whole data collection process, one way of ensuring rigorous research is to present the researcher’s positionality. Positionality refers to the various factors including age, gender, ethnicity, personal and professional experiences that have shaped their thinking of doing research (Plowman, 1995). In other words, the researcher’s positionality is serving the purpose of telling readers where the researcher comes from and what has shaped the researcher’s worldviews. The self-reflexive and introspective positioning of the researcher is important when it comes to evaluate the quality of data analysis and interpretation. Because this project is a qualitative investigation to the question of how American people view China from their own perspectives, and because I will be the main instrument in collecting interview data, I need to foreground my personal and professional experiences here to introduce to my readers things that have shaped my curiosity and thinking of doing such an investigation.

I was born in China in the late 1970s when China, at a time when China had just begun to focus on building its economy and engaging with the outside world following the end of political power struggles that culminated in the decade called the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). I grew up in a medium-sized city in a northern province of China. One of my early contacts with the non-Chinese outside world was a children’s English language TV program from Hong Kong. That was in the early 1980s when China began to shift its economic structure from a Soviet-style, highly centralized economy toward a market-oriented economy.

Probably because of that early contact with the English alphabet, I have been studying and working with English ever since. My Bachelor’s degree was devoted to English language studies, which led me to pursue a postgraduate two-year foreign affairs program in Beijing. As my school then was affiliated with the Foreign Ministry, I found myself interested in international relations, foreign policy issues, and international communication when pursuing academic and professional career choices.
After graduation I started to work for one of China’s state media organizations – Xinhua News Agency. In my night and day shifts working in Beijing’s headquarters as well as Xinhua’s Middle East Bureau, writing and translating news stories about the world for my domestic Chinese readers and audience, I was being a story teller, a meaning maker, and a gatekeeper. By story teller, I mean my work was to tell domestic readers and audiences what was going on in the world. I was hoping that the news stories that I translated and wrote would make sense to the domestic public. By gatekeeper, I mean I was also part of the gatekeeping function of the Chinese state media in terms of what foreign news were being produced and how they were being produced for domestic interpretation.

When I said goodbye to the news world and came back to campus to pursue Master’s and Doctoral degrees in the United States, I found my six years of working at the International Department of Xinhua had fueled my current academic interest in international communication in hindsight. Working in the international news world at one time made me feel good about being the one that sent out information and created meaning for the public. I never questioned whether the public accepted how we as the international news professionals framed the world for the people.

It was the time I was working on my Master’s degree in International Affairs at Penn State that I began to question the relationship between media portrayals and the public’s understandings of the social world. The stimulus for thinking about this question was the way that I observed China being covered in the U.S. news media. Certainly I would understand why China as appeared in the U.S. news media tends to be the negative other given that negativity is always newsworthy. Reading from the lens of the agenda setting theory which basically says that the media tell the public what to think about, I would assume that the American public would have a very negative idea about China, the country that is considered to be vastly different from the U.S.
in terms of political structure and political values. However, reading from works in active audience area tells me that people don’t take what is in the media for granted.

As I reviewed in Chapter Three, scholars who studied texts about China argued that the West had portrayed China as the negative other out of a concern to maintain a superior self, applying Foucault’s critical lens (e.g. Mackerras, 1999). Though many studies using textual analyses indicated a continuity of the discourse of a superior West versus an inferior non-West, such a methodology cannot tell exactly how people view China from their own experiences and stances.

To educate myself about how American people construct China and also understand how people are accepting, negotiating, or refusing the media representations of China, I found I had a desire to communicate with American people to find out whether American people align with the media message about China. I am interested in learning not only what kind of images American people hold for China but also why they hold such images. Because I do not believe there is an objective image of China, I did not seek to use objective investigation methods to pursue that. Instead, I positioned myself in the whole process of collecting data and interpreting data. In other words, as the main instrument of conducting this research, I embedded myself in the process. Instead of using surveys and experiments, I found interviews and specifically focus groups the most applicable and relevant methods to help me investigate my research questions.

**Focus Groups**

Focus groups are “a form of qualitative research” (Morgan, 1988, p. 9). Morgan (1988) defined focus groups as group interviews that rely on the interactions within the group discussants and between the moderator and the respondents for a focused topic. The key word in this definition is interaction because interaction provides access to how meaning is being socially
created among people, which is in line with the qualitative philosophical assumption. Focus
groups are especially applicable in communication studies, because communication, as argued by
Carey (1989), is focusing on the importance of sharing and interaction in a social context.

Compared to two other ways of collecting qualitative data, individual interviews and
participant observation, focus groups provide the advantage of allowing the researcher to observe
the group interaction (Morgan, 1988). “The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the
interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the
interaction found in a group” (Morgan, 1988, p.12; italics original). M. Carey (1994) argued that
what makes focus group special is the interaction among discussants which is the “group effect”.
The group effect is important because it generates a more engaging and higher level of data for
analysis. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), there are two kinds of group effects. One is
called complementary interactions, where participants may talk in a consensus building manner.
The other is called argumentative interactions, where participants offer various views that may
lead to critiques, debate, opposing views on a topic. Therefore, employing focus group will
enable researchers to observe the extent and nature of agreement and disagreement among group
discussants (Morgan, 1996).

Compared with participant observation, focus groups provide a more focused discussion,
or “concentrated set of interactions” (Morgan, 1988, p. 17) whereas participant observation
usually takes a long time filed work to observe less concentrated interactions. Therefore,
participant observation is usually time consuming and financially burdensome. Additionally,
focus groups do not cause privacy concerns in the same manner as participant observation does.
The downside of focus groups compared to participant observation is the unnatural setting.
However, for my project, which was to learn how American people construct the image of China,
I came to the conclusion that unnatural setting was problematic because I was interested in their
talking of their views and experiences, which did not have to happen in a natural setting.
Additionally, focus groups were advantageous because they provided insights into the sources of complex behaviors and motivations (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). As my goal of this research was to learn not only how American college students made sense of China but also what sources they relied on to help them form their views about China, I believed that focus groups would enable me to have access to my participants’ insights.

As for the relationship between the researcher and participants, focus groups provide a more equal relationship than other types of social science methods largely because of the flexible and less controlled nature in the process of interviewing (Morgan & Krueger, 1993).

Finally, focus groups were especially suitable to my research questions because focus groups were good to use when there was a gap between professionals and their target audience (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). This was exactly the rationale that I proposed such an investigation. The gap between Chinese public diplomacy practitioners and their target foreign publics warranted the use of focus groups to investigate how the foreign publics understood China. Focus groups were also good when there was a desire to investigate the degree of consensus on a topic (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). As the literature of previous studies on Western images of China could not tell how the people viewed China, I was interested in seeing if the public’s views aligned with the media views. Therefore, a focus group approach was necessary to carry out this research.

Summing up the comparative advantages of focus groups, I determined that focus groups provide an intermediary between participant observation and individual interviews, avoiding their respective disadvantages in terms of time and privacy concern. More importantly, focus groups provided a unique access to the dynamics generated by participants’ interactions. Focus groups were particularly pertinent to my proposed investigation as there was a gap between professionals and target audience.
Recruiting Participants

The nature of this study demanded a purposive sample. A purposive sample is a non-probability sample that serves the special research design to get the appropriate data (Oliver, 2006). This research project required to have access to the American college students who were willing and able to provide a wide range of data to answer my research questions. I only selected universities that I believed would give me a varying degree of geographical distribution and direct exposure to Chinese people. Based on this special research need, I selected universities that would allow different levels of exposure to Chinese population, which may affect American college students’ views of China.

Historically, the West Coast in the United States received the earliest Chinese immigrants in the 19th century (Tung, 1974; Zinzius, 2004). Early Chinese immigrants came to California as miners when California found gold in the mid of the 19th century (Kwong & Miscievic, 2005). Because of the 1882 Exclusion Act, which prohibited Chinese immigrants from migrating to America, the next wave of large numbers of Chinese immigrants did not come until after 1965 (Hooper & Batalova, 2015). According to the latest census data, there are over 2 million Chinese immigrants and most of them reside in two states: California and New York, accounting over half of all the Chinese immigrants in America (California, 31 percent and New York, 21 percent) (Hooper & Batalova, 2015). According to the information from the Migration Policy Institute, the top metropolitan area for Chinese immigrants is New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ-PA, which has 419,000 Chinese immigrants (Hooper & Batalova, 2015). The next two metropolitan areas that have large numbers of Chinese immigrants are San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward, CA and Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, CA (Hooper & Batalova, 2015). According to the U.S. Census data, there was 51 percent of all Asian population lived in the West while 19 percent lived in the Northeast (Reeves & Bennett, 2003).
I recruited participants from three public universities in three states: Penn State University, Georgia Southern University, and Arizona State University. Penn State, which is in central PA, has a large population of Chinese students. Arizona, which is in the West, provides a geographically distinct site for this project with a long history of Chinese migration. Georgia Southern, in contrast, is in the South, and has a very small Chinese population among its students.

The three public universities are different in nature in terms of student enrollment, the population of international students, and the population of Chinese students (see Table 4-1).

Table 4-1 Number of Students, Foreign Students, and Chinese Students 2013/14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>*Student Population</th>
<th>**International Students</th>
<th>Chinese Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PSU (University Park)</td>
<td>46,606</td>
<td>7,024</td>
<td>2,375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASU (Tempe)</td>
<td>62,599</td>
<td>8,683</td>
<td>3,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSU</td>
<td>20,517</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>25-30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *University’s websites, **IIE Open Doors Data (2014), and ***Chinese student organizations.

Among the three universities, Penn State and Arizona State are both large leading state grant public universities while Georgia Southern is a small public university. In terms of geographic location, Penn State and Arizona are close to the areas where large Chinese immigrants tend to live in the U.S. while Georgia Southern is not the case. In terms of student population, both Arizona State (Tempe Campus) and Penn State (University Park Campus) host very large number of Chinese students. According to the most recent Open Doors Data released by IIE (2014), Arizona State ranked No. 8 and Penn State ranked No. 13 in the top 25 leading U.S. higher institutions that host international students. In both universities, Chinese students registered the largest international student group and China tops the place of origins sending
international students. In contrast, Georgia Southern, given its much smaller size in terms of student population, international student population, and the lack of a large presence of Chinese student population, provided a contrasting point to the PSU and ASU focus groups.

After my study was approved by the Penn State IRB office, I started recruiting participants. In total, I recruited 38 American college students. They formed 5 focus groups: Two from Penn State, two from Arizona State, and one from Georgia Southern (see Table 4-2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PSU 1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSU</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASU 1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASU 2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSU 2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the first group, 9 communication major students from a large lecture at Penn State University in February 2014 were recruited. It happened that all of the 9 participants were female students. They were given extra credit for the class they were taking to participate in this research. A graduate student who was experienced at moderating focus groups conducted the first focus group interview. The first group was conducted in a media commons room in Penn State’s main library where there was audio recording device to record the conversation.

For the second group, with some funding from the Sustainability Institute at Penn State, 10 undergraduate students from Georgia Southern University in April 2014 were recruited. A faculty member of that university moderated the group there. Participating students each got a
$25 Visa card as reward. For the second group, there were three African-American females, one Korean-American female, four Caucasian females and two Caucasian males. They were from a variety of majors. Some were communication majors including public relations, journalism, multimedia communication, communication studies. Others were scattered among biology, business, political science, creative writing and psychology. They were all upperclassmen, mostly seniors.

For the third group, four participants were recruited by a communication graduate student at the Arizona State University in September 2014. The recruiting process, as well as the IRB approval at ASU was done by the colleague there. (Because ASU does not have any agreement with Penn State in regards to research ethics, the graduate student that collected data at ASU went through an independent ASU IRB application.)

For the fourth group, four participants were recruited by the same communication graduate student from ASU. This group was collected in October 2014. Both of the ASU focus groups participants got extra credit for classes they were taking as reward.

For the fifth group, 11 students from a large undergraduate communication class were recruited from Penn State. They got extra credit for participating in the research.

**Data Collection**

Because I am from China, it was believed that issues of politeness might impact results if I were to conduct the focus groups; students might not be as open about their opinions about China with me as they were with an American moderator. Therefore, an American graduate student moderated the two focus groups at Penn State. For the one focus group at Georgia Southern, an American faculty member acted as moderator. For the two Arizona State focus groups, an American graduate student moderated.
All the focus groups used an interview guide (see Appendix A) I provided. The interview guide included a verbal consent at the beginning, some grand tour questions, as well as specific questions relating to my research questions.

All the five focus groups followed the same interview procedure. At the beginning, the moderator introduced the project and read the verbal consent for participants to voluntarily participate in the project. Then the moderator asked questions on the interview guide. When it came to the questions about the two advertisements, participants were shown video clips of the two ads and then answered questions about the ads.

After these colleagues audio recorded the focus group interviews, the MP3 files were shared via Dropbox. I transcribed all the focus groups interviews myself, which served as my first iteration of analysis. In total, I transcribed approximately almost 5 hours of focus group discussion.

**Data Analysis Strategy**

As my collected data were focus group interview transcripts, before I describe my data analysis strategy, I need to say a few words about interview. Interview is one of the “most powerful” qualitative research methods (McCracken, 1988, p. 9). It is powerful because talking to people gives researchers the access to the interviewees’ mental world of how they conceptualize and understand the world (McCracken, 1988). Interviews are especially useful for learning people’s experiences and knowledge about issues, how they verbally present their knowledge and experiences, as well as why they think in certain ways (Kitzinger, 1995). Unlike quantitative research methods which tend to pay great attention to counting and interpreting the numbers, qualitative interviews and other qualitative research methods tend to make a deeper and contextual understanding of the social actors (McCracken, 1988).
My data analysis began when I started transcribing the interviews. Qualitative data analysis is a reflexive and constant reasoning process (Creswell, 2013). It requires intensive and long-time engagement and interaction between the researcher and the data (Altheide, 1996; Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

I employed thematic analysis as the major data analysis strategy. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative data analysis method “for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is very flexible because it does not restrict itself in any preexisting theoretical framework. As my research project is to explore how American college students understand contemporary China, thematic analysis is the most pertinent data analysis method to use.

A theme is a coherent integration of disparate pieces of data at the abstract level (Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012). It has also been described as a recurring thesis (Altheide, 1996). A theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). In Braun and Clarke’s (2006) definition, an important feature of theme is that it is responding to the research questions in a patterned way.

Unlike quantitative variables which are measured by numerical values, the identification of a theme in qualitative research relies on the researcher’s judgment (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The two authors emphasize that the criteria of a theme is whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question. Normally, if something repeats itself across the data set, it is a theme. However, it does not mean that a theme has to be across the whole data set; sometimes, a recurring pattern of something within a small number of data also represents a theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since theme is at the abstract level and not easy to identify, it takes long time engagement and interaction between the researcher and the data to identify a theme after a prolonged reading and rereading process.
For data analysis process, I will follow a six-phase thematic analysis strategy recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). The six steps are similar to the grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis, using open coding, axial coding, engaging constant comparisons among categories to generate themes eventually (Strauss, 1987).

Phase 1: I read and re-read the transcripts and immerse myself in the data. When I transcribed the interviews myself, I checked the transcripts with the audio recordings several times to make sure that the transcripts were as accurate as possible. This stage served the purpose of making myself very familiar with the data, reaching a high degree of sensitization between me and the data.

Phase 2: I started open coding of the transcripts to get a sense of what was in the data. In this phase, I was as inclusive as possible, coding every possible meaning unit that might or might not be useful to form my potential themes. I marked on the printed out transcripts to tag the open codes as many as possible, forming the widest possible range of open codes. By the end of this phase I had an initial sort of the data.

Phase 3: Using constant comparison of the codes, I refined the open codes and came up with some categories to form axial codes. Then I drew graphs to link the categories, looking for potential themes that respond to my research questions. In this phase, I used very simple graphics to gradually categorize all the open codes generated in Phase 2 and developed multiple versions of the graph. It was a process of refining, categorization, and conceptualization. By the end, I clarified the initial messy graph into a relatively clear and concise map with only the most abstract categories.

Phase 4: I reviewed the categories and potential themes by checking back and forth throughout the whole data set. I went back to re-read my research questions and then refined my categories, trying to figure out the relations among the categories while drawing lines and arrows.
The refined graph with all the abstract categories linked became my themes to answer my research questions.

Phase 5: I defined and constructed each theme to finalize the analytical process. During this phase, I generated themes. Then, I compared and contrasted among the themes and found out their similarities and differences.

Phase 6: I wrote up and presented the findings in my dissertation, using illustrative quotes and examples to support my findings. In this phase, I used rich and thick description of the participants’ accounts to bring my readers close to the participants’ views and experiences. The presentation of the main themes with illustrative quotes from the participants’ talk served the purpose of making qualitative data analysis transparent and trustworthy.

The data analysis process, as laid out here seemed linear. However, the actual analysis process of qualitative research was not linear. It was messy in nature, reflective, and involved constant checking back and forth with the data.

**Research Evaluation**

While quantitative research claims objectivity in the research process by discussing the issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability, qualitative analysis claims high authenticity and trustworthiness of the findings based on a set of different criteria than those of quantitative research. The overall trustworthiness as manifested in the issues of credibility, dependability, and transferability in the qualitative world (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) corresponds to the internal validity, reliability, and generalizability (external validity) in the quantitative world.

The issue of credibility refers to whether the qualitative research process and results are valid. In other words, how well the research methodology and the findings speak to each other (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although qualitative research does not believe in the objectivity of
truth, the interpretation can be evaluated according to several strategies such as a prolonged engagement with the text, a triangulation of different methods, multiple data sources, and multiple researchers (Merriam, 1998).

In this study, my long engagement with the data warranted credibility. From the time I started recruiting the first group of participants to the time that I transcribed all of the five focus group interviews, I have spent a great number of hours, if not days and weeks in reading and interpreting the data. This prolonged engagement with the data gave authenticity and trustworthiness of my study. I had three different moderators to conduct the focus group interviews in the data collection process. All three of the moderators are American English native speakers. Linguistically and culturally the interviews with American college students enhanced the credibility of the data. As for the transcribing of the interviews, for each interview which was between 40 minutes to a bit over an hour in length, I took six to eight times of the time to transcribe. I also verified the transcripts with the audio files many times.

The issue of dependability in the qualitative world refers to whether the research process is open and whether the findings are reliable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is about the consistency of observation and coding. Although qualitative coding does not require an intercoder reliability score, there are ways to ensure that the process and the results are reliable. For example, I followed the six steps in my coding and analysis process. I constantly checked back and forth among the categories and themes to make sure they were consistent and tied to the whole dataset.

Keeping a reflexive journal during the research process is a common tool used by qualitative researchers (Smith, 1999). This technique is necessary to make the research as transparent for evaluation as possible. To ensure the credibility of my investigation, I kept a research journal throughout the researching process. Dependability can also be increased by crystalizing the role of the researcher (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Basically, crystallization means to make the role of the researcher transparent. As one of the ways to present myself in front of my
readers, I wrote a section in the methodology chapter to tell my background, personal and professional experiences that have shaped my intellectual curiosity of doing this research.

The issue of transferability in the qualitative world refers to the idea of how likely the findings of the research can be applied to or generalized other circumstances or situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the philosophical orientation and fundamental interest of qualitative research is not extending to the larger population or situation, transferability is the least concern for qualitative research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). If transferability is indeed a concern, it should be referring to whether the findings of this research can be transferred to other segments of the data set. Usually, a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p. 6) will give readers a good sense of whether the findings can be transferred to other segments of the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

One commonly used strategy to increase transferability is thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick description refers to the way that the research presents the research process in a full and detailed fashion so that readers can judge by themselves how likely the findings can be applied to other situations. In my research, I presented a full detailed account of my participants for readers to have a good understanding of how likely the findings may be applicable beyond my participants.

Summing up the methodology chapter, I ground myself in the qualitative research paradigm using focus group interviews to understand the meaning and process of meaning making among American college students about their views of China. As a key segment of the general public, college students are the future American generation that China’s public diplomacy efforts need to engage for cross-cultural understanding.
Chapter 5

Findings

All the five focus groups used the same interview guide (Appendix), which provided a list of interview questions asked in each group. Because three different moderators conducted the actual focus group interviews at three different universities, there were some nuances in terms of the length of the interviews, the follow-up questions, prompts, and further probes. This may have led to different levels of expressed views from the participants, which is to be expected in qualitative research. A review of the transcripts indicated that all participants had the opportunity to answer the same set of questions.

Among the 38 American college students, only one student had visited China as a tourist before; the rest of the student participants have never been to China. Overall, all participants in these five groups discussed China from a wide range of perspectives as detailed by the interview guide¹.

Limited Potential Public Diplomacy Effects

The first research question asked whether there was any discernable effect of the Chinese public diplomacy initiatives. The findings indicated that there was no effect of the two known ads at all, because none of the participants had ever watched them or even heard of them before they participated in the focus groups.

¹ N.B. In block quotes, M stands for moderator; MS stands for male student; and FS stands for female student.
Confucius Institutes: An Unknown Project

Similarly, there was little effect of the Confucius Institutes because most of the participants did not even know of their existence. Despite the fact that two of the three institutions were home to Confucian Institutes (or were recently home, since the Confucius Institute at Penn State closed in November 2014), only two participants who were aware of them, and neither had participated directly in any programming sponsored by them. One visited the building which housed the Confucius Institute for her Japanese minor – nothing to do with China at all. The other student read about it but did not seem to know much about it.

For the two ASU groups, no one ever heard of it despite the fact that there is an operating Confucius Institute at ASU. After hearing the moderator’s explanation to what Confucius Institute is for, the reactions from ASU groups were decidedly negative. In one ASU group, student participants misunderstood the Confucius Institute as a program that makes everyone learn the Chinese language, which to them is a very difficult language. When asked what they thought about the program, one female participant noted: “Sounds really intense. Sounds hard.” In the other ASU group, hearing what the Confucius Institute is about, student participants had different views:

FS1: Again, they are sneaking, they are doing it step by step. They have a plan.
FS2: Smart. But I don’t know that they are sneaky. I am sure we tried to spread English everywhere, like we expect everyone to speak English as well like…
MS: I guess that’s just because of different cultures. We are so loud about things again and they are quiet about it.

The Beijing Olympics: Mixed Emotions

For the Beijing Olympics, the mega sport event was the only public diplomacy initiative that generated some awareness among the student population.
First of all, the students reported they had viewed the Beijing Olympics, including the opening ceremony. They all indicated that they had watched the Games, at least some portion of them. However, regarding how the Games make them think about China there were mixed messages. Some participants indicated that the opening ceremony was very impressive. As one female participant said, “it’s pretty cool that they [the Chinese people] banded together to make it.” However, the memory of the lip-synching in the opening ceremony and the controversy during the gymnastics competition were brought up in discussion. The following conversation at one of the groups indicated a strong negative emotion.

FS3: Oh, I wasn’t for the Beijing Olympics. Actually I was actually really mad at China during the [Olympics].
M: Why were you mad?
FS3: Because they were cheating during gymnastics.
FS2: Oh, yeah.
FS3: And I was like, …like my hero, Sean Johnson, that was like the dream team, and there was significant evidence that they put 13-year olds out there, with fake birth certificate and stuff that…
FS2: I remember that.
FS3: That also screwed up my perception of China, cause I was really into the Beijing Olympics so I am mad about that.

However, in groups where the controversies were not brought up, participants expressed different views. In one group when asked what impression the Beijing Games gave them, the immediate responses were:

FS1: They were there to win.
MS: They were very grand.
FS1: Yeah. It was very over the top. We’ll get what we have.

In another group discussion about the Beijing Games, one male participant from ASU noted the impressive opening ceremony and China’s attention to details, compared to the recent Winter Olympics held in Russia:

I remember I watched the opening ceremony and all their drum sequences or everything were exactly perfect and if you look at Russia last year [sic] they had one of the rings that didn’t even light up. That would not happen in China.
**Made in China Ad: Cheap Chinese Labor**

For the *Made in China* ad, the reactions were mostly negative after viewing it. A majority of the responses from participants indicated a belief that the ad portrayed China as a manufacturing factory using cheap labor to produce cheap goods. One group focused on China’s perceived lack of innovation:

- **MS1:** It’s saying they’ve assembled it but they don’t … that’s not their ideas. They were just manufacturing companies. That’s it.
- **FS:** They have cheaper labor.
- **MS1:** That they were not very intelligent that we have to come up with designs and just give them to produce it.

A similar reading of the ad evoked the worrisome notion of dependence on China. One female student participant said:

How much we depend on China…like a lot of our products come from China…It’s true. We rely upon China for a lot of resources and products.

One positive interpretation of the *Made in China* ad was illustrated by the following conversation between one female participant and the moderator:

- **FS:** I kind of almost thought of it as negative until the final screen…
- **M:** Why is that?
- **FS:** Kind of trying to say what I was saying. Basically they are like, it’s being designed and created by the people all over the world, then just given them to actually produce it.
- **M:** OK.
- **FS:** So, I don’t know.
- **M:** You said until the very end?
- **FS:** Yeah. Yeah until the end and it was like, “Oh we are working together …”

Students in one group also noted the *Made in China* ad as it was “less self-obsessed” compared to the *Experience China* ad. One female participant said, the *Made in China* ad “did incorporate other cultures like other countries, was like a team effort kind of thing.”
When asked to view the *Experience China* ad as part of the focus group, the opinions about the ad varied widely. A typical reaction from many participants was that they did not understand the message the ad was trying to get across:

FS2: Is that really a thing?
FS3: I didn’t get what that ad was for.

Another group included this exchange:

MS: We have different symbols for different things but just not encompassing everything.
FS1: Yeah, that’s why I think it is weird.

Another interpretation of the ad assumed it was an atypical tourist ad. One female participant noted:

I think it’s everyone goes to visit China in general. I just think it’s very different from what we see in other ads from other places. We normally see the scenery and landscape, like beach or sightseeing, and that was all people. It was interesting.

Student in more than one group did not see how Americans could be the target of the ad, at least not exclusively. A female participant interpreted the ad was also targeting Chinese tourists at the Times Square:

Then if someone is from China visiting America, a kind of a piece of home [seeing the ad], maybe comfort them a little bit.

The ad generated opposing views. While student participants from one group suggested the ad was targeting U.S. tourists but “not appealing” and ineffective, students from another group indicated the opposite:

FS1: You know the art, like with the hands going pretty cool. I like that.
FS2: Yeah,
FS1: It’s beautiful.
MS: They are trying to show how they are kind of like a, you know, well rounded society essentially now that they had the engineers and the artists…
FS1: Yeah, exactly.
FS2: Uh huh.
Most students noted that Times Square was a place that you can access a lot of people at one time. For instance, one female student commented: “I cannot think of a place that you would access more people but I feel like that would have no effect on New Yorkers.”

Clearly, while the big-budget Beijing Olympics left an impression on America’s college students, the Chinese advertising initiatives were ineffective with this group. More of a problem, when the students were actually exposed to the ads, they did not respond positively to them.

**Information Sources: From Interactions to Mulan**

The second research question asked the main sources that American college students use to form their views of China. There were largely two big categories of sources: direct and mediated sources, based on the focus groups discussions.

**Personal Interactions**

The first source category is direct sources, which includes personal experiences, observations, and direct interactions with Chinese people. In the five focus groups’ discussion of China, the strongest impressions participants had about China tend to come from such sources. For example, one student had a very strong opinion about China being very regulated, restricted, because of a personal experience with a very intense ballet teacher from China in the past. When asked what comes into mind when they heard the word China, this participant, female, from one PSU group noted: “I have, like, a really intense ah… ballet teacher from China.”

Personal observations of Chinese students as a direct source for ideas about the country were salient on both the ASU and PSU campuses, but not the case at GSU because there is not a presence of large number of Chinese students. For instance, in the PSU and ASU focus groups,
participants believed Chinese people had very different views regarding skin color. Many
students focused on differences in habits and culture. For example, participants mentioned they
saw Chinese students (mostly females) carry umbrellas and wear sun blocks for fear of their skin
getting tanned. This observation came up immediately in the discussion, as illustrated in the
following conversation:

FS2: Like on top of my head, a lot of them are wearing SUV block, more wary of skin
cancer or skin conditions.
FS1: Yeah. They always carry umbrellas. It’s brilliant like I am going to have horrible
skin when I grow old.

Interactions with Chinese students (and to a lesser extent Chinese TAs) in various
settings including group projects, classrooms, and out of class activities gave them ideas about
how different the Chinese people are. For instance, participants from both PSU and ASU groups
talked about how they were frustrated that their Chinese teammates did not know how to
communicate and work on group projects. The following opinion expressed by a female
participant was a typical example:

For Comm students I guess I definitely had these frustrations. We probably all have. I’ve
overheard people talking about, like, we all have this perception that Chinese people are so
intelligent that they can do anything. Not like communication is like not a good field but
it’s one of the easier majors here. So I’ve been in a situation where I am partnering with
someone who cannot speak English. And I am like: Why are you in this major? You could
do bio, you could do chemistry, you could save the world, and yet your major is something
like you cannot communicate in this language. So that’s something that confuses me. I feel
like I get really frustrated when I sit back and calm down and feel really bad for them and
think how bad that must feel, like, you never completely understand what’s going on in the
classes. But like that is a question I have for people like who were in that situation in this
major. I just wonder what drives them to do that if they aren’t fluent in the language.

Personal boundary issue was also based on interactions with Chinese students in
classrooms, dorms, and other settings. For example, one female participant recalled an experience
of how the Chinese people have a different view about personal boundaries, as she was moving to
let two Chinese students sit together in a lecture hall:

So I go to get up to scoop over that they could have the two seats that are there. And she
picks up my laptop off of my desk and moves. I was like, No, No. That’s Okay, really.
And I just thought that was weird. I don’t know anyone from America that would ever just pick up somebody’s stuff and like move it. But I know that was like trying to be helpful. But still it was such a shock to me. I was so mad like, what if you drop my new laptop. Oh, my God.

In addition to direct interactions, personal experiences and observations that participants used to form their views about China, they have also indicated second-hand knowledge of China, usually through interactions of friends and family. For example, one female participant from one of the ASU groups mentioned a good friend told her about how the Chinese culture was “really inviting and friendly.” This friend of the participant studied in an international school in China because the friend’s family relocated to China for job reason. In another case, one female participant and one male participant indicated that the Chinese people did not have any awareness of personal boundaries based on what they heard from their parents’ personal experiences:

FS: Ah…my parents when I was really little so they talked about the trip they went to Hong Kong…so, ah…, I don’t know. It was funny cause my dad’s really tall and my mom’s blonde, so I think, like, they stood up a lot. There’s a lot of funny stories about, like tourists wanted to take pictures and stuff, like touched my mom’s hair.
MS: My mom lived there for two years … they would come up and touch her hair…they don’t really have a boundary, like they’ll come up and look in your car see what you are shopping for because they are like interested in American stuff.

Mulan and Other Mediated Sources

Class topics and discussions related to China provided an indirect source of information. For instance, many students indicated a wide range of classes where China was discussed from certain aspects such as economics, international media, world history, globalization, and environment. One female participant recalled an international media class where she learned how media in China worked differently:

So we talked a little bit about China. It was interesting cause it was more like how the press works in China. It was just like interesting things how they really don’t like negative news. They really don’t, like if a bus crashes, they don’t put that out there. It’s more ... because it’s not a positive reflection of them, so it’s like they pick and choose
more of what is shown. It’s just totally different cause in the U.S., you would, the bus crash would be like what you would see, [top stories], it was just those kind of things was interesting.

A second indirect source was the mass media. Movies, documentaries, and videos were the common sources that they used to form their views about China. For instance, the 1998 Disney movie *Mulan* was the single most frequently mentioned source that formed students’ earlier ideas about China. Participants from four out of the five focus groups brought up *Mulan* as a source of ideas about China, though they noted *Mulan* was kind of culturally stereotypical of China.

M: What images of China you remember when you were growing up? Like what was the first thing that…
FS1: Mulan. [laughing]
M: Mulan, ok. [laughing]
FS2: Yeah.
MS: Yeah, just the kind of the images of the Great Wall, like, not the Samurai but it’s like the Chinese version of it, I guess, warriors, like the Chinese infrastructure, I guess, like the buildings the way they were built.
Group: Uh huh.

Documentaries were mentioned when students talked about the one-child policy, China’s environmental problems, and poor labor conditions. Compared with the popular mass media, documentaries seemed to have formed more knowledge-based views of China. For instance, one female participant was able to give a contextualized understanding of the one-child policy:

So, and then, I learned a little bit about from … I am really into Netflix, so I watched a documentary about it once, and you can have I think, I think it’s two children, and then anything after that, they are taxed. So like you are paying per child. And ah, yeah, that sounds like, and that’s where it comes into, like, female discrimination because people want boys to help, like do you think, most people live on farms, those are things I learned, our ideas of China is like paddy cities majority of people live on acres of land alone with no one else in sight for like, miles. Cause there’re just like, other than like the big dense areas the rest of the country are just farm areas, so they need boys to like do that and obviously carry on the names.
In another case a female student participant recalled a video watched in an online class about population growth and sustainability in China. The video made the student think China has a bigger responsibility to the world:

I am in a sustainability class, online, and I have had to watch some videos about population growth and sustainability in China. So that’s kind of a little bit different, but I think, I don’t’ know, I kind of watch these videos and I realized that they have a bigger responsibility to the world as far as it goes because they have a huge percentage of population, that’s kind of pressure on them to lead that because of so many people can do it, it’ll make a difference as far as globally, kind of other people can follow. Kind of they have a lot of pressure with a lot of things, like politically or just everything they have to be the leader and they are kind of creeping and they are along the ways that the United States used to be.

As for traditional news media, there was no clear identification of any specific sources. But the responses from participants’ discussion of China suggested that they got information from the traditional news media such as TV. For instance, one female participant from ASU noted:

“Before you would hear about it and ‘oh, it’s the sweatshop’ and all that stuff, and now you hear about ‘they are taking the jobs’ …” When referring to the issues of personal space, participants talked about how the news media kept using the same video clip that showed how crowded China was. One female participant from ASU remembered a media portrayal of China:

Like every picture or image I see on the news about China, they are talking about China, regardless of what they are talking about, they are showing this little video clip – thousands of people walking on the sidewalk. I feel every time that is there.

Participants suggested that they would go to major news networks such as CNN or BBC or other sources to learn information about the world, not necessarily China in particular.

Surprisingly, to some extent, there did not seem to be any explicit presence of social media in providing information about China. Even though this generation of American students grew up in the Internet age, there was hardly any trace of knowledge reported from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or other social media platforms. Across all the focus groups, none of the 38 participants ever indicated a Facebook discussion about China, though a few had Facebook friends that are Chinese.
The Environmental Problem

The third research question asked to what extent American students’ beliefs about China’s treatment of the environment shape their image of China. Responses from the groups’ discussion revealed a predominantly negative view: China is not a green country at all. Students agreed that China does not have environmental standards. If there are rules, people don’t follow them. However, there was a limited expression of hope that China would be a better place in the future.

“Extremely Polluted”

Across all the focus groups, pollution came up immediately in discussion about China’s environment. One female student from ASU reported that pollution was one of the first images she had about China: “Yeah, crowded, lots of people. Pollution, I think they are trying to reduce that image.” Students said the reason for China’s extreme pollution was the lack of environmental regulation and the lack of enforcement:

MS: I am pretty sure they don’t have any regulation on pollution in China. I am pretty sure that’s a major problem going on right now.
FS2: Yeah. I think so.
MS: I think they are trying to change their ways possibly, I don’t know. I was kind of reading something on it. But I know it’s a major problem China is extremely polluted but I don’t think they really have the laws and regulations. Not that we are doing much better. But they are really looking out for environmental issues.

Along the pollution discussion, students have also compared how China and the U.S. were similar and different in terms of environmental protection. A common theme was that they identify both countries as top polluters. The difference was that the U.S. preserved more while China just maximized their use of land because of the population growth. The following
conversation between a female and a male student talked about the environmental issues from a
comparative perspective:

FS2: I feel like here we don’t always have a conscious. When I throw away stuff I am not always thinking of where it’s gonna go. I don’t, I feel like they are kind of the same way…they carry umbrellas, they take care of themselves. I think it’s kind of similar to here. There are some people that are super aware of nature, aware of the sustainability efforts, there’s other people that are polluting. The U.S. is definitely a top polluter too.

MS: I also feel like we do probably more to actually preserve certain wild habitat, we have national parks and national forests. I feel like they really have to maximize their use of their land. They really have to for so many people they are supplying for.

“In Touch with Nature”

Interestingly, within a predominantly negative view of China being extremely polluted, one student offered an opposing view that imagined China as being very close to nature. The following conversation from an ASU group illustrated the two opposing views:

M: What do you think China’s relationship with nature?
FS1: I feel like they don’t have one.
MS: Yeah, they don’t really…
FS1: They have a lot of pollution. They don’t really have, I mean, if they have environmental standards, they don’t follow them, they don’t reinforce it, they just…
FS2: I don’t know. I feel like kind of the opposite, I always think the Chinese are more in touch with nature, just more gentle and spiritual, like, as a stereotype, I don’t know, also as you see them wear face masks and stuff, they don’t want to pollute, and also like they walk a lot and bike a lot. As a whole I see them as more like health conscious.
MS: Well, a lot of that is just because there are so many people. No one wants to pollute, they ride the bikes and stuff because they have so many cars at one point there was a week-long traffic jam on highway. I mean I feel like that’s based on necessity. In fact, there was a week-long traffic jam, how much pollutant in the air, I feel like they are conscious of environment as the air, they are more prone not to preserve it to make it better, but not to make it way worse, way faster.
Uncertain Environmental Future

Regarding what the future holds for the world environmentally, participants expressed a range of views. Some argued China would be overpopulated, suggesting a much worse scenario. For example, a female student from GSU said:

They are starting to tear the forest faster than they have created, but that’s just because they are expanding population, they have to have room for people. I mean like it’s awful they are deforesting, there are so many people. You cannot but expand.

Others believed that China would be a better place, because in China laws are being implemented “a lot quicker than we could, for, like cleaning up”.

Yet, another view was that both China and the U.S. were top polluters and should not be the environmental stewards. One male student expressed such a view:

I mean per country, yes, they put out more, but per person, we like quadruple times 10 what they put out per person. So under their stewardship not good, under ours, not good. Under really anyone but the Nordic countries, not good.

Consumerism, Perfectionism, and Otherness

The fourth research question asked what generalized views American college students have about China. The five focus groups’ discussions covered a wide range of ideas ranging from more traditional views to some newer ideas about China. The extensive discussions were distilled into three major themes: Consumerism, Perfectionism, and Ultimate Otherness.

Consumerism

Consumerism emerged as a rather new and surprising theme in terms of how American college students think of today’s China. Unlike the more traditional views of China as a family oriented collectivist culture, a Communist country, and the one-child policy, etc., American
students have begun to view Chinese people as lavish consumers. As a result, they view the


country as very materialistic, having big divide between the rich and the poor.

The consumerism theme was based on observations of Chinese students living a
luxurious lifestyle which is not appropriate for college life. Fancy cars (e.g. Lamborhinis),
shopping bags, and the exaggerating use of technology in classrooms were examples mentioned
by student participants. For instance, in three of the five groups, the fancy cars driven by Chinese
students were brought up. In both West Coast and East Coast discussions student participants
noted a number of Chinese students having “the nicest cars” in town. The following conversation
from one of the PSU groups illustrated the point:

FS2: This is relevant to Penn State. A lot of them have really nice cars.
FS5: There are a lot of them that live there. Like, every day, there is like, new cars being
driven by them. It’s a new one every day.

Similarly, the same idea of consumerism came up in one of the ASU groups:

MS: Or just there is a bigger distribution of wealth.
FS2: Yeah, I imagine a big divide between the rich and poor.
MS: Cause a lot of the exchange students I see here like have the nicest cars.
FS1: Yeah.
FS3: My roommate was actually Chinese. She came back with shopping bags and
shopping bags.
MS: And they just don’t care. That’s only the ones that can come over here.

Participants also brought up how much Chinese students had been using smart phones
and iPads in classroom. One female participant from ASU noted:

Like in class they are almost all over them [electronic devices] it feels like a lot of them
are using computers and technologies as opposed to people taking hand written notes. I
don’t know maybe they grow up with technology more. That contributes my image of
them, like they are more tech savvy.

The conspicuous consumerism theme also came up in a personal revelation of working
experience in a “gentlemen’s club.” According to one female participant, Chinese businessmen,
most of whom did not speak a word of English, were the most welcomed consumers in the adult
entertainment industry. This participant noted, “those Chinese businessmen… those were my
bread and butter…” During the conversation, the student participant was comparing the
ostentatiously wealthy Chinese businessmen with other men including professional football
players:

I mean like a couple of athletes but I mean like it was like the Chinese guys they were
really the guys that spent that money. And they had the big money… I mean those guys
they spent some serious money… And they are so much easier to persuade. They were so
much easier to persuade. Well, they may not speak English, but you just walk up to them
and you just like, they’ll just like [laughing]. I already know what kind of card they
have… you think of black cards they have, black cards are a big deal and these guys have
something bigger than that. you know whatever it is.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism suggested that American college students viewed the Chinese people and
China in general as having a mindset that everything they do must reach the level of perfection.
They believed there was little tolerance to imperfection. This theme was evident in various levels
as American students discussed China, ranging from the individual level, to the small group level,
the family level, and finally, the state level.

At the individual level, this perfectionism theme was evident in, for example, a student’s
unpleasant memory of being drilled by a very intense ballet teacher from China:

This teacher, and ah… we were just always, it was like always drilled into us like we were
lazy, we did not try hard enough, we did not care enough, (“Wow” from group).
We… like this would have never flown in China, like we were trying hard, our body
would never flow in China, that’s like always what I was told from when I was a little. So
I always have a kind of a negative perception of it. Cause I thought it was just like, total,
like, I don’t know, craziness, it was like, cause I thought I had a pretty intense dance
upbringing, so like the fact that we were so underwhelming to this lady from China.

Another example of this perfectionism theme at the small group level was in an American
student’s experience of playing basketball with a group of Chinese students. A male ASU
participant recalled:

When I go play basketball at SRC they were like playing a championship… The space
deal, how aggressive they are, it’s scary. They get right upon you. That pisses me off.
At the family level, perfectionism emerged in the discussion of how Chinese parents had high expectations on their children’s schoolwork. For example, many participants noted the long hours Chinese students were in school and how their parents had been like “the foot on the paddle” in terms of expecting their children to work hard and get exceptional academic achievement. One male participant from ASU recalled one of the Chinese friends complained about how he grew up hearing his parents comparing him to the highest kid in school. Another female participant from ASU, recalling her personal interactions with Chinese students in high school, said, “I don’t remember any of my Chinese friends being the slacker.”

At the state level, the discussion of the Beijing Olympics often evoked the perfectionism theme. The exact drum sequence at the opening ceremony, the lip-synching singing of the little girl, and the cheating during women’s gymnastics all indicated the perfection-driven mindset in China. In the participants’ views, China is probably one of the very few countries in the world that has a very high attention to details. In order to reach perfection, the state will do whatever it takes to make sure a perfect show. The lip-synching scandal at the opening ceremony seemed to have become a collective negative memory about the “perfect” opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics.

There was the controversy around the opening ceremony, there was, I can’t remember the whole part but there was this one part where this little girl was singing. She had the voice of the angel and everyone was freaking out about her, oh my God, and then it was released that it was fake and it was a voice recording because the real girl that was singing was too fat and ugly to be on TV.

Otherness

The Ultimate Otherness theme conveyed the fundamental difference with which American students viewed China, the society, culture, and its people. With an underlying notion
of untrustworthiness, subthemes including threat, restrictiveness, self-isolation, and a mirror image emerged.

**Threat: China is “killing us”**.

Within the larger context of the inter-dependent economic relations between the United States and China, participants viewed China as the next power challenging the U.S. world status in economics and technology. The debt issue and economic co-dependence between the two countries were salient topics conveying the threat subtheme.

More often student participants used very visual words such as “frenemy”, “killing us”, and “nipping on our heels” to convey the idea. For instance, one female participant from PSU commented on the debt issue between the U.S. and China:

Yes, that’s what I mean. I think, being a threat, like they are surpassing us. Like, overall, like power, like, control of the world because for the longest time we were pretty much the strongest force in the world, and now it’s pretty much I mean, I think we probably, pretty much we have a little more influence over, like, socially over other countries than they do but when it comes to pure economics, they are totally, like, killing us. So, I don’t know, it would be interesting to see but I also think, not that it is a good thing but I think it could be interesting for all of us to know that we don’t owe everything.

In another group discussion in addition to the debt concern, student participants also suspected that China would equal America in terms of innovation and technology. A male participant from ASU articulated such a concern:

I mean, Yes, manufacturing they blow us but in terms of research and innovation, progression, I think we still take that. But only, it’s like slimming down on that gap. You know they are coming, they are nipping on our heels that fast. I think we are freaking out about that.

The economic challenge from China also had an impact at the personal level. Many student participants expressed concern that China was taking jobs, which posed a direct threat to
them as they were going into the workforce after college. In a response to whether their views of China have changed over time, one female participant from ASU noted:

I think my view has changed but in the way that now, like this is horrible, I perceive them more as a threat than before. Threat is probably not the right word. Like before you would hear about it and it was like oh, the sweatshops and all that stuff, and now you hear about like they are taking the jobs and, ‘oh, no, what are we gonna do, we need to catch up with China’, like more competitively economically, than necessarily socially. Ah, so I don’t know I guess my perception changed or maybe I am more knowledgeable about the economics how the world works. And you know oh, I will be looking for a job in the next few years …like pertains to me more than when I was younger.

Restrictiveness: China is “no fun”.

Restrictiveness was a common thread in student participants’ discussion of China as they looked at the country and the society from the U.S. perspectives. To use a phrase expressed by a couple participants, China is “no fun.” In the following conversation of one of the ASU groups, students expressed how they think of China as a very restrictive society.

MS: And you hear stories a lot about how they like talking about how the news they are getting, they kind of monitor, censor news, how Google has been considering pulling out of China because they just censor search engines. They are legal if manufactured in China. That blows my mind. You can’t have Xbox in China but they can make it there.
FS1: Why?
MS: You just can’t have Xbox in China.
FS1: No fun.
MS: You may have a Math book, it’s horrible.
FS2: That I feel like is a big stereotype as far as how good they are so good at stuff.

The idea of China being a very restrictive society where Americans would feel out of place was evident in discussions about considering a study abroad program in China. One female student from PSU expressed the level of discomfort very vividly:

I feel like if I would be in China I would be like a fish out of water, and very obvious that I was not part of the culture… I feel like we would violate a lot of norms…Cause we are, I mean we have norms but it’s not as strictly enforced as harsh penalties. I would need a class that everything these are the things that are not offensive to everybody there…. It’s like intimidating.
The one-child policy was often brought up in various groups’ conversation, which indicated a strong negative view among American college students. In three out of five of the groups, some participants mentioned their best friends were adopted from China because of the one-child policy. One female participant from PSU said:

I just want to… I watched a documentary once because I forgot to bring this up earlier. One of my good friends was adopted from China. Now I am thinking like but she is so Americanized…She was just like abandoned on a bus when she was like 2 days old. They just left her there.

In an extreme case, one female student from ASU jokingly said she would be afraid of getting arrested in China because it was such a restrictive and different society:

M: What do you think it would be like working for a Chinese company?
MS: Too serious.
FS: I don't think living in China, I don’t mean to say that was like bad, like me in another country, that like, … like… yeah I feel I would be arrested or something, [laughing]
MS: You never know what’s gonna happen.
FS: If I was arrested in China, it would stay on my record till like you go back to the U.S. and figure out the court system. [Laughing]. But no, I mean like I just feel just things work very differently, very differently.

The restrictiveness subtheme conveyed a deep level of distrust and discomfort as the American college students were thinking of China. When asked whether they would visit or study abroad or intern in China, many of them indicated a very high level of unwillingness because they felt they would be like “fish out of water” or “violating a lot of rules”, or “arrested.” The only student that actually visited China as a tourist suggested a sense of danger. When asked what it was like visiting China, this student said: “Well, I’ve been to nice part of it. I refused to go to the market and stuff. It’s just very scary. You never know what’s gonna happen. Just stick with the tourists.”
*Self-isolation: “No one is experiencing American culture”.*

Self-isolation referred to the idea of otherness initiated by the Chinese themselves. There were two levels of such self-isolation. At the individual level, self-isolation was evident in the way that Chinese students studying in the U.S. don’t interact with their American peers, partly because of language and cultural barriers and partly because of an enclave that the Chinese students build around themselves.

A common complaint from the participants in ASU and PSU groups was that they expected their Chinese peers to speak English well but often they were surprised how English became a barrier between them and their Chinese peers. This view of the Chinese (and maybe other Asian students) came mostly from interactions in group projects. One experience of a male participant indicated such an issue:

Yeah, one girl in particular, she, I think this is her first semester, she can’t speak that good English but she is like extremely introverted, like I tried to talk to her, like speak slow cause I know it’s easier to understand if you speak slower to her. But she, like, it’s really hard to get her like being engaged in the conversation, I guess.

The self-isolation was more evident when the participants described how the Chinese students always hang out together and don’t interact with local culture. One male participant from ASU described the isolated daily life of the Chinese students:

They just stick to what they know. As far as I know, the group of Chinese kids… they would just go to school, hanging out, playing basketball themselves, go to Karaoke. No one is experiencing American culture, American people.

In another quote, the Chinese students became a little pack standing out in a living complex. A female participant from ASU said:

I grew up right down the street… I just realized they are all Chinese like in the complex they live, they all stick together because around the corner there is a Chinese market, so like Friday night or something that will be packed. They are always taking walks in the complex. Yeah, you can kind of tell if they are not there cause they are always walking.
Other than the language and cultural barrier issue, the self-isolation phenomenon may also be caused by an obsessive reliance on technology, rather than human communication. When talking about the use of electronic devices, participants observed that they found the Chinese students were “looking at their phones more than we do” and “in class they never look at the teacher.”

At the state level, there was also the evidence of such a self-isolation subtheme. In discussions of international issues, participants indicated that they see China as not interacting with the United States as other countries did. Commenting on recent international news, the ISIS situation and Ebola, one female participant from ASU indicated that China did not express its views as explicitly as other countries did:

Things like ISIS, every country has spoken about it… even Korea is totally reactionary. For the last 100 plus years they did not get involved until we put forces. You just don’t see them come up on global news as much as you see interactions with other countries. You just see them come up in things on China.

The self-isolation subtheme suggested a disinterest in communication on the part of the Chinese people studying in the U.S. The following conversation indicated such a view:

FS2: I was working in an Engineering department, but I am just like an administrative assistant. There is a Chinese guy, and I don’t know exactly what he does. He always opens up his computer and techy stuff, so I guess that kind of reinforces the image of very studious, serious, when you are working, working, working that I am not. My job does involve a lot more interactions with people. His job involves more of the computer stuff. That reinforces the whole techy thing. I kind of they are not great with communication skills, that reinforces that idea in the workplace.
M: So a lot of them are not great with communication skills?
FS1: Yeah, definitely.
MS: No, they come here and they don’t speak the language well enough. I don’t see that much of effort as they put in other areas.
FS1: I don’t see much of opinions when they were asked questions, opinion question they were like … I don’t know, which kind of makes you wonder.
MS: Exactly.
While China was viewed as an economic threat to the U.S., a very different and restrictive society with a self-isolation tendency in a foreign setting, which suggested a negative Otherness from the American college students’ views, there was also a level of positive Otherness manifested in the subtheme of a mirror image of the U.S. in future China.

The mirror image theme implied that China would be like the United States in the future after going through necessary phases in the course of China’s economic and social development. In discussions about China’s poor labor conditions, some expressed the view that China is just undergoing this specific stage that America also went through. One female participant from ASU commented on the poor working conditions and sweatshops in China:

I was like well they have not gotten there yet. You can’t eliminate that. You are slowly getting there. At least you have a job now but maybe slowly they will be able to fix it. It took a long time for us too.

In a rather extreme case, one female student participant cited the American Declaration of Independence to explain what she thought the future generations of the Chinese people will want:

FS1: I feel like because the kids are of our age and want a new China. And a lot I watched TED talks, there was a cool woman she was the first she hosted back in the 90s that was the first woman that hosted a non-scripted Chinese show. And she talked about the youth wanted a new China. And I feel like the kids are, age of our generation they don’t want communism. I really feel like that you know, when the older generation when they move, pass away, it’s gonna be different.

MS: Yeah, I feel like our people are gonna take over. I know it sounds bad but …

M: What do you mean by that, like Americans are gonna take over?

FS1: No, you know, the kids of our age, the young adults, the new China they want something better. You know they see what we have, kids we’ve had, our age want to be there, cause they want that. They might not necessarily want to live in the U.S. but they may want what we have over there, and they are gonna do what it takes to change their country.

M: So just to follow up on that question cause that’s really interesting. What are the things that they want in the U.S.? We mentioned various things in this discussion like culture, kind of the economics, freedom, what is it that do you think the Chinese come here looking for what it wants when they come to the U.S.?

FS1: Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.
[Laughing]
Chapter 6
Discussion

Interpreting the Limited Public Diplomacy Effects

The rationale for establishing the Confucius Institutes (CI), displaying promotional ads, and hosting the world’s most spectacular sports event converges in the hope of shaping a favorable national image for China. Despite that the Chinese government has tried to portray and shape a favorable image of China overseas, especially in the West, the findings of this study suggested that there was an overall limited effect of the various public diplomacy programs. The ill-alignment between the initiatives and their target audience, the change of information dissemination, and the cultural differences between the Chinese and American people all contribute to the unsurprisingly limited and mixed public diplomacy effects.

The Confucius Institutes: For the Public or the Elite?

According to my findings, despite the huge investment of the Chinese government, the Confucius Institutes have had virtually no impact on the broad student body of two universities to which they were home. In fact, only two students among the 38 interviewed had even heard of the institutes, and none had attended any China-specific programming. The fact that Arizona State University has a working CI on its flagship Tempe campus and yet none of the student participants had ever heard of it may speak to the orientation of the CIs. According to the Arizona State University’s CI website, the program was opened in 2007 with the goal of promoting Chinese language and culture. The ASU CI indicated the program was targeting “schools as well
as Arizona’s general public” (Confucius Institute at ASU, 2015). Browsing the programs offered by the ASU CI, one can find a paid beginning Mandarin language program targeting the general public listed on its website. Their recruiting ad clearly listed business, travel, and culture as the three main reasons to learn Mandarin. Different from previous travel and cultural appeals, business stands out as a very practical reason to attract business people in the Western United States to learn the language and make business connections with China.

Perhaps surprisingly given their locations on university campuses around the world, the business orientation seems to be one of the most important reasons for the CIs. While most CIs operating around the globe share the common goal of promoting the Chinese language and culture, some CIs have a clear business and elite orientation. For instance, The Confucius Institute for Business London (CIBL) at The London School of Economics is targeting the business community in London. Established through a partnership between the LSE and Tsinghua University, the CIBL defines itself with an elite orientation in its annual brochure, targeting “business people in London, senior company staff, LSE students and staff, anyone who wishes to do business in China” (CIBL, 2014, p. 4).

Therefore, the almost zero awareness of the CI among college students may not be surprising. The program would only be known to those who had some interest in the Chinese language and culture. With the CI’s has increasingly elite orientation, it appears there maybe less outreach to the general public, including students. Though the CI program has created a global network in the past ten years, the program can hardly be regarded as a public oriented cultural and language program. Unlike the British Council, which is the cultural outpost of the British government overseas and often works as an affiliated cultural office of the embassy or the general consulate, the CIs are embedded in foreign universities. The placement within universities certainly limits CI’s outreach ability because universities in any societies are ivory towers that set themselves apart from the general public.
While there are advantages of having the CI placed in universities, such as building partnership and relationships with Western universities, there are also disadvantages. The recent closings of two CIs at two American universities made the CI look controversial on mainstream Western media. The University of Chicago and The Pennsylvania State University closed their respective CI in 2014, after the program ran its first four years. For the University of Chicago, based on a media report, faculty and staff had concerns about the CI and the Chinese government affecting academic freedom. Since the CIs are funded by Hanban, which is affiliated with the Chinese government, some fear that the CI could impact research and speech freedom. Regarding this issue, people who were involved in the operations of CI expressed mixed opinions. Some think the CI was a propaganda outpost while others said the CI had no problem with politically sensitive discussions on campus (Levine et al., 2014).

Although the CI program claims to be a highly centralized network with the purpose of promoting the teaching of the Chinese language and culture with a long term social orientation (Zaharna, 2013), the network does not seem to have created any substantial level of local awareness, at least from the focus groups’ interviews in this study. The CI did not seem to seek a wide publicity of its existence. Secondly, the recent two closures of the CI reflected an overall distrust of the program, suspecting a potential influence from the Chinese Communist government. No matter how the CI says its mission, it is considered a Communist Party’s propaganda outpost. With a very low awareness among the locals and a somewhat susceptible role, it was not surprising that the CIs were unknown to the college students participated in the focus groups.
Interpreting the Olympics: Clash of Cultures?

The Beijing Olympics was so far the only event that has invoked strong emotions and reactions among American college students in this study. I argue that the strong emotion was out of a clash of cultures between the two societies. According to the country comparison interactive chart available at The Hofstede Center (2015), China and the U.S. are both very strong masculine cultures. However, the U.S. is extremely individualistic while China is very collectivist in their respective national culture (See Figure 6-1).

![Comparing National Culture between China and the U.S.](http://geert-hofstede.com/china.html)

**Figure 6-1**: Comparing National Culture between China and the U.S.


According to Hofstede’s model of national culture (The Hofstede Center, 2015), the masculinity dimension refers to the level of a society that is driven by competition and success. The high score of 66 indicates a very masculine Chinese culture, even a little higher than the U.S. which scores at 62. When the focus group discussants were recalling the Beijing Olympics, they
conveyed an overall sense of recognition of the well organization and implementation of the event on the Chinese side. However, there was also a sense of rivalry as they commented on the Games as “very grand”, “very over the top”, and “they (China and the Chinese) were there to win”. The U.S. team has been the world best in many kinds of sports. The U.S. team has been dominating the Olympics medal count for many years. However, the Beijing Games were a home game to China. China outnumbered the U.S. in terms of the number of gold medals but still followed the U.S. in terms of the total medal count. With two very masculine cultures competing at the world highest level of sports, one might imagine the intensity of competition going on between the two teams.

The discussants’ memory of the grand opening ceremony also indicated a clash between an individualistic culture versus a collectivist culture, manifested in the impressive and very masculine drum show. The drum show was at the very beginning of the opening ceremony. It served as China’s grand welcome to the world. In fact, according to a documentary about the making of the opening ceremony (CCTV, 2008), the drummers were 2008 soldiers selected from major commands of the People’s Liberation Army. The 2008 male soldiers were all between 1.8 meters and 1.85 meters tall (which is considered an ideal height for men in China). The chief director, Zhang Jigang, an internationally acclaimed Chinese choreographer, was in charge of the creation and presentation of the drum show. Mr. Zhang is also a Lieutenant General in the PLA. According to the documentary, Mr. Zhang and his colleagues took a long painstaking search to finally come up with the exact satisfying drum choreography that would achieve the level of impressing the global audience. The instrument, the Fou drum, was a music instrument in ancient China to be used in grand welcoming ceremonies, according to the documentary. However, beating drums has also been historically symbolizing the beginning of fighting. With 2008 Chinese men beating 2008 drums in exactly precise moves and chanting the Confucius words in
Chinese, the foreign audience who came from an individualistic cultural background would feel kind of intimidating.

To most foreign audiences, it wasn’t clear the drummers were soldiers in active duty. The masculine side as displayed in the welcoming show seemed to have created an unintended result: more intimidating than welcoming. The NBC commentators while showing the opening ceremony to the American audience said: “Population of 1.3 billion putting on a show like this and people at home are not alone if think that what they are seeing is both awe-inspiring and perhaps a little intimidating” (as cited in Luo et al., 2012, p. 192). In a comparative analysis of the opening ceremony represented by CCTV and NBC, Schiffman (2012) confirmed that the exact precision of all the drummers did invoke a sense of threat and intimidation. He wrote, “For the American eye, untrained in seeing difference in the faces and bodies of Asians, the sight of 2,008 drummers working in unison could hail an unfamiliar and potentially unsettling threat from a labor force that can move in lockstep” (p. 204).

For the U.S. audience who were accustomed to the expression of individuality, the drum show which was presented in the least format of individuality, translated a totally opposite cultural message. The precise moves made by the 2008 drummers represented nothing but submitting individuality to collectivity. This suggested a visual and psychological opposition to the individualistic culture.

For the Chinese, the Olympics symbolized a significant turn in the Chinese national sports history and Chinese national history. The masculinity implied in the welcoming drum show suggested that China wanted to convey its competitiveness ethic (Caffrey, 2009). After suffering at the hands of Japan and the West during the century of humiliation (1840s-1940s), China was finally able to put on this grand show and to say goodbye to the past. For the 2008 Olympics, the intended audience is definitely both domestic and international. For the Chinese domestic audience, this game was historically and politically significant. It was a symbol that a new page
of the sports history and national history has been turned; China is no longer the “Sick Man of East Asia”, which was applied to China and had been in the Chinese imagination of their national identity (Brownell, 2008). At the Olympics, the old image of China has been transformed for the Chinese audience.

**The Ads: Who is the Audience?**

As for the two mass media based campaigns, apparently none of the 38 participants could remember being exposed to them either. Changing media patterns may explain why the two mass media campaigns did not seem to have gotten any public attention. First of all, in today’s social media era information gets disseminated in a networked fashion, which is radically different from the traditional mass media dissemination. For this age group, Facebook and Twitter are probably the places where they get their news and information on a daily and even hourly basis. Young people nowadays are more likely to get information from a Facebook friend’s posting rather than from any of the traditional media. Therefore, the zero exposure to the two ads was not surprising because both ads were aired on traditional TV networks, which may have been ignored by the young college students.

After the participants watched the two ads during the focus group interviews, their interpretation of the ads did not suggest any substantial effects of the intended message. In addition to the negative interpretation of the *Made in China* ad with an underlying message of China being a cheap labor provider, the discussants also showed that there was a very low recognition of the Chinese consumer products brands. During the focus group interviews, one question was asking participants to name some Chinese consumer products brands. Surprisingly, no one seemed to be able to name just one. In contrast, some Japanese and Korean brands were easily recognizable, for instance, Toyota and Samsung. Only one student mentioned Air China.
The lack of any recognized Chinese consumer brands suggested that at least in American market, China has not built a substantial brand like Japan and South Korea have.

A recent global survey conducted by China International Publishing Group (CIPG) along with Millward Brown ACSR and Lightspeed GMI found that some Chinese brands including Legend, Huawei, Air China, Haier, and Alibaba were well known overseas (CIPG, 2015). The survey also found that these Chinese brands were more recognized in developing countries than developed countries.

The CIPG survey findings supported low brand recognition in the United States. Compared with Japanese and Korean brands, China’s high-end consumer products have yet to come to the U.S. market and make themselves recognizable among the American consumers. Though Made in China products have flooded Wal-Mart, Target, and other major super markets in the U.S., China has yet to change its image as a producer of cheap and low quality products. In this context, it is no wonder participants had a negative view of the Made in China ad; the ad reinforced the negative image of China as a cheap labor provider, not a high-quality products innovator.

The high-profile Experience China advertisement suggested a more sophisticated public diplomacy campaign on the Chinese side. Within the larger economic context that the U.S. and China are interlocked in their mutual economic interdependence, I argue that this ad was targeting elite audience on Wall Street than the ordinary pedestrians that happened to walk by Times Square. The ad, given that all people on the ad were Chinese celebrities and ordinary people, could hardly be recognized, not to mention identified by any foreign audience. Except the basketball player Yao Ming, who might be familiar to a sizable American audience, other people shown on the ad were totally meaningless to the American and other foreign audience. Therefore, just as one of the participants in the focus group discussions said, it was an ad for the Chinese
people who might find a piece of home in New York. The ad was targeting the Chinese people overseas rather than foreign public in general.

The timing of the ad was also important. The ad came along with the then Chinese President Hu Jintao’s state visit to the U.S. in the mid of growing economic and trade frictions between the U.S. and China. *A Washington Post* story said Hu’s visit was “to reaffirm China’s position as a rising power but also to calm fears over its intentions” (Wilgoren & Pomfret, 2011). China chose to put the *Experience China* ad on the giant bulletin boards in Times Square. The selection of Times Square in New York City was a careful decision, because New York is the financial capital of the United States and the world. Playing the ad there definitely delivered a clear message that China was now a rising economic power at the global stage (Connolly-Ahern & Ma, 2014). Also, the ad was played repeatedly during the U.S.-China summit where the U.S. media would otherwise focus on the newsworthy issues regarding China – human rights violation, manipulation of the currency, taking over U.S. jobs. However, because of this creative use of this pseudo-event at the right time and right place, the ad grabbed American media attention by circumventing the normal news cycle, thus influenced the media agenda while the summit was going on in Washington D.C. (Connolly-Ahern & Ma, 2014). The focus group participants, who understood the ad without knowing the political context, certainly interpreted the ad as a “weird tourist ad.”

*Mulan and the People: The Definer of the Chinese Image*

For the student participants in the focus group study, their age determined that their earliest views of China were strongly influenced by the Disney cartoon movie *Mulan*. The Disney movie was released in 1998 when most of the discussants were probably just starting grade school. They immediately recalled *Mulan* as the source for their earliest image of China – the
lanterns, Mushu the dragon, and the Chinese culture in general. Some said that Mulan only served as the source for an innocent view of China because their views changed and matured as they grew up.

The mentioning of Mulan among this age group indicated the power of mass media and pop culture in shaping the images of a different culture, without any concern about the accuracy and authenticity of the representation. In her critique of the Disney version of Mulan, Yin (2011) argued that the original Mulan story was “abstracted from Chinese cultural context and then injected into a Western frame” (p. 54). The original Mulan was contextualized as a girl living in the Chinese culture that emphasized filial piety and loyalty to the state. However, the Disney appropriation portrayed the girl Mulan as conforming to the individualistic and feministic self-realization (Yin, 2011). Primarily, Disney made the movie for an American audience, which explained why many of the discussants in the focus groups remembered the movie and had a strong liking for the character.

While Mulan left an earlier impression of China for many of the discussants, they are increasingly aware that their views of China now are based more on their personal interactions with incoming Chinese students and visitors to the U.S. for education, business, and other purposes. According to some statistics, the number of visitors from China to the United States has seen a sharp jump from 0.2 million in 2002 to 2.24 million in 2014. Some estimates predict that the number of Chinese visitors to the United States would jump to 4.9 million in 2019 (Statista, 2015).

Presumably people will still rely on the mass media to learn about China. However, the American public will be more likely to form their views of China based on their exposure to and interactions with the increasing number of Chinese visitors to the U.S.
Pollution and the Neoliberal World

Viewing China as becoming an extremely polluted place, the discussants indicated that environmental concern has been added as another layer to the Chinese national image. The focus groups’ discussion of China in the context of its relationship with nature and the environment suggest a broader discussion of the dominant global economic model. What China has done in the past three decades when the Chinese economy took off was somewhat similar to other developed countries, namely, they faced a tradeoff between industrialization and environment. Probably few people would argue that the Chinese economic miracle within the past three decades was a pattern of path dependence – China is just following the way that other advanced economies, European countries, the U.S., and the East Asian economies, namely, Japan and the Asian Tigers. What happened to them in the past is now happening to China. We could also safely predict that what is happening to China may be likely to happen to other later comers in the global economic ladder.

Earlier this year, right before the annual political sessions in China, a Chinese journalist well-known for her investigative work released a self-funded documentary about the severe air pollution in China. Chai Jing’s documentary created wide media attention and social discussion about environmental pollution in China. Her documentary also caught attention among mainstream Western media. A look at the comments posted by bloggers in response to New York Times reporting of Chai’s documentary suggested a critique of the dominant neoliberal economic model globally. One comment left by a blogger by the name of Hugo Penteado from Brazil argued: “China replicates US disastrous consumption driven economic model. Clearly China also exhausted its own Nature and to get more supplies, they are investing in Africa and South America, buying land or increasing trade relations” (Buckley, 2015). Another blogger by the name of Adam wrote:
If we point our fingers at China for the terrible air pollution, we need to point fingers at ourselves as well. We ask China to be the world’s manufacturer for everything from electronics to bridges, in order to keep the cost down. They’ve done that, but at a cost to the environment that we’ve willingly ignored. It’s everyone’s responsibility to clean up this problem. (Buckley, 2015, Comment by “Adam”)

What China is experiencing in terms of environmental degradation seems to have historical precedents. The Economist used the 2013 smog that blanketed Beijing as what was called an environmental event that “dramatises to the population the ecological consequences of growth” (The Economist, 2013). To America, that event was the 1969 Cuyahoga river fire; to Japan, that event was the pollution along the bay of Minamata in the 1970s (The Economist, 2013). The focus groups’ discussants view of China as an extremely polluted place is a historically contextualized view.

**Consumerism and Wealth Resentment**

Consumerism was the first and perhaps most important theme emerged in this study. As I was revising this dissertation, an observation at the University Park’s Pattee Transit Center (the main bus stop on campus) made an excellent illustration of how consumerism and wealth resentment played out before my eyes.

At about 4:30 pm on March 17, I was waiting for the bus to take me to the parking lot. A light blue car drove by, making a sort of loud and different noise, in front of students waiting for their buses at the stop. Both the color and the noise of that car could not be missed by the many eyes and ears at the stop. I paid extra attention as the car drove by because my sense told me it might be a fancy car possibly driven by an Asian, Chinese-looking guy. The stuff hanging in the front window of that car reinforced my belief that the driver was a Chinese student. I read
somewhere that Chinese people like to hang all kinds of stuff in the front of the car. I heard one
guy next to me say something, obviously commenting on the car and the car driver. I was very
curious about what he said so I approached him.

“Excuse me. What kind of car is that?” I asked.

“It is an Audi R8, but it is a P… car,” he responded.

“What is that?” I asked. I did not really catch what he said in his latter half of the sentence, starting with the letter p.

“It is a P… car. Sorry that is a bad joke,” said the guy. Still, I did not catch the P word he used. I was very persistent because I sensed that the word I missed was very important giving that he said it was a bad joke.

“I am sorry but my paper is about this, so I need to know what you said about the car,” I was not giving up on the key term.

The guy was so nice that he suggested writing it down for me so that I could know what he just said. I gave him a sticky notepad and a pen. He wrote down four parallel lines in capitalized letters.

“AUDI R8”

“PENIS ENVY”

“SUPER CAR”

“HYPER CAR”

Then our conversation continued. Thinking of my committee members’ suggestion at my defense, I asked the guy how he thought of the car and the car driver; whether it was offensive to him to see such a car on campus. The guy said it was offensive to him as an automobile fan but not as an individual person to see someone showing off. “If the kid’s family is so rich, they could have sent him to a much more expensive school, like Harvard or something,” the guy said. I
expressed my agreement. His last comment was that these kids were driving the wrong car in the wrong place.

A girl who heard our conversation joined in this interesting conversation, making a very disdainful comment on the car and the car driver. Apparently, the girl was an “expert” of fancy cars. To her, the light blue color was like off-putting. She simply laughed at the fact that these fancy cars should be driven manually but the ones driven by the wealthy kids were automatic. The guy also suggested that the light blue color was probably not the original color. The blue color was repainted after the car was purchased.

This little incident clearly indicated how the conspicuous consumeristic behavior of the rich kids has been interpreted by the locals. The consumerism theme emerged in the focus groups’ discussions was kind of expected. Driven by an economic model that only cares about the GDP growth for 30 years, the Chinese society has been transformed from a poor country to a country of great income disparity. Starting in recent years, “tuhao” (土豪), which can be roughly translated into “nouveau riche,” has become a popular word in the Chinese language (BBC, 2013). People use the term to refer to those who are extremely rich and who are constantly flaunting their wealth both online and offline. The rich kids driving Audis, Lamborghini, and Maseratis in college towns similarly revealed the ostentatious mindset of the quickly turned nouveau riche in China.

Domestically, there have been many cases of this ostentatious and shameless flaunting of wealth. One young woman by the name of Guo Meimei had garnered nearly two million followers online by showing off of her luxury bags, cars, and other fancy stuff online. Her ostentatious showing off caused people to question the source of her wealth. She claimed that all the stuff were given to her by her boyfriend who once worked at the Red Cross in China (which turned out to be something she made up). The drama finally played out when Miss Guo was
arrested during a crackdown on illegal online betting. She was considered China’s most brazen professional mistress (Wen, 2014).

Understanding the issue of consumerism and flaunting of wealth also needs to take a historical and global perspective. Historically, nations that have achieved their economic peak level, all experienced different stages of wealth flaunting. For instance, Thorstein Veblen’s ([1899]1994) *The Theory of the Leisure Class* was a scathing criticism of the “conspicuous consumption” of modern America in the late 19th century. Ironically, what Veblen wrote more than a century ago seems exactly applicable to today’s Chinese society. According to a HSBC report, China is now at the “show-off” stage when consumers started to buy luxury products to symbolize their social status and identity “in a conspicuous manner” (Zeveloff, 2011). According to the same report, China is ahead of India but behind Japan in terms of the various stages of luxury evolution.

**Tiger Moms and Perfectionism**

The second theme –perfectionism – that emerged in the participants’ view of China reminded me of Amy Chua’s (2011) book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. In her vivid account of her relationship with her two daughters, Chua (2011) argued that Chinese parents were different from Western parents. A major way that tells the Chinese and Western parents apart is that Chinese parents are not concerned about their children’s self-esteem as much as Western parents are. As reflected in parents’ response to children’s school work, Chinese parents believe their children can get perfect grades as long as they work hard.

Both Chua’s (2011) memoir of raising two daughters and American college students’ view of the Chinese students as well as their parents indicated a strong perfection-driven mindset of the Chinese culture. Perfectionism can be defined as a compulsive striving to achieve high
standard from a psychological perspective (Fong & Yuen, 2012). At the individual level, many participants in this study indicated how their Chinese friends worked longer hours, got high grades in school work, and played hard in sports. One personal memory of a Chinese ballet teacher drilling her and her peers strongly indicated a perfection mindset of the Chinese culture. Regarding the teacher-student relationship, there is a Chinese saying that goes like this: Strict teachers produce outstanding students. In the traditional Chinese cultural context, teachers are supposed to be strict and students are supposed to be listening to and respecting their teachers.

At the state level, perfectionism was seen in the staging of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. As revealed by the documentary about the making of the show (CCTV, 2008), one of the main choreographers was just about to give up because he was under extreme pressure and he could not come up with the ideal moves to achieve the most ideal effect. The intensity and pressure in the process of searching for the right move again showed the perfectionism theme identified in the focus groups’ discussions. Just as Chua (2011) and other Chinese parents believed that their children can get the highest grade if they work hard enough, the drum show director Mr. Zhang Jigang believed that his subordinates could find the perfectly right drum moves for the most important part of the opening ceremony.

However, to American people from an individualistic culture, their understanding of the Chinese perfectionism would necessarily convey a negative meaning. When it comes to the Beijing Olympics, despite a general view of the splendidness of the show, many students also remembered the controversial lip-synching of the singing girl. For the Chinese, the Olympics and its opening ceremony was a critical venue to deliver a perfect image of the country. From the organizers’ perspective, the replacement of the singing girl (because of her buck teeth) at the opening ceremony was intended to present a perfect show (Cui, 2013). However, from the Western public’s perspective, the idea of playing a lip-synching was rather ethnically
unacceptable (Cui, 2013). Supported by the perfectionism theme identified in this research, the lip-synching scandal damaged the image of China exactly because of this perfection mindset.

The Ultimate Otherness

The otherness theme suggested a very complex meaning making regarding China in the contemporary global context. On the one hand, this is an old frame in the Western discourse about China found in the literature. On the other hand, this old frame has accrued nuanced historical meaning in the changing geopolitical context.

First, otherness as manifested in the threat subtheme was a historical repetition because Japan was once framed as the threat to the U.S. when Japan’s economy reached its peak in the 1980s. John Langone (1994) examined how the Americans perceived Japan, which suggested a strong similarity with how Americans view China in the early 21st century.

They have been called greedy, untrustworthy, unfair traders, slave drivers (by their American employees), and a threat. They have been blamed for America’s economic downturn and for its high unemployment… Not only have the Japanese been verbally bashed, but their cars have been literally bashed by angry, sledgehammer-wielding, U.S. autoworkers who have lost their jobs because Americans like Japanese cars. (Langone, 1994, p. 141)

While the college students did not seem to have any historical knowledge about the intense trade relations between the United States and Japan back in the 1980s, their ideas about China today were very similar to how their predecessors viewed Japan. Students believe China is “killing us” economically and China is “nipping on our heels”. This finding was expected because there has been a media discourse about China being the threat to the U.S. economic interests. The symbolic language used by the participants, such as “killing” and “nipping on”
suggested a high level of accepted reading of the American media portrayal of China. A continuity of the old threatening otherness frame is evident in the contemporary discussion about China vis-à-vis the United States.

Similarly, the restrictiveness subtheme was another manifestation of the ultimate otherness frame. It suggested an accepted reading of the Western media production and representation of China. The mentioning of censored media in China, the one-child policy, the general idea of China being a very restrictive place with a lot of rules all conformed to the traditional Western media discourse of China. A controlled media system along with a government policy intervening into the most private aspect of people’s life are two examples of how China exists in opposition to the fundamental values of the American culture. The United States is proud of having one of the freest media systems in the world. America is also an extremely individualistic country where personal freedom is valued. Therefore, knowing China’s government intervention into the free flow of information and how many children a family can have made the American people easily associate human rights concerns with China. Forced abortions in China were often covered in U.S. media. More importantly, some participants had a closer look at the one-child policy. Participants in three out of the five focus groups told personal stories that they had female friends who were adopted from China because of the one-child policy. With such close contact with people who were actually victims of such a policy, the idea of China being a “no fun” place is salient among these American college students.

This dimension of China being very restrictive suggested an opposite decoding to the encoded messages from the Chinese side. When China aired the Made in China ad, the underlying message, as stated in the ad, was “made with the world” and being part of the world. The Beijing Olympics was also intended to convey the idea that China is integrating into the “One World”, as symbolized in the Games slogan “One World One Dream”. The production and representation of China in the two ads, the Olympics, and the Confucius Institutes, attempted to
encode an overall message of a friendly and inviting China. However, the public’s perception of China as a very restrictive place based on their personal experiences rendered any of the intended messages encoded in the public diplomacy efforts invisible.

The self-isolation subtheme, however, suggested an opposite reading of China based on personal observations and the lack of interaction between Chinese and Americans. Contrary to the intended meaning of China now arising to the global stage and connecting with outside via trade, education, and business, China is regarded as imposing self-isolation, both at the individual level and the state level. Though the Chinese government has deployed modern mass media to reach out, built educational programs, and hosted global events to engage China to the world, increasingly large numbers of Chinese students, who are physically outside of China but building a social and cultural enclave isolating themselves from the local population, have betrayed an engaging national image. The way that these younger Chinese nationals live overseas appears as though they are building up a social and cultural Great Wall to separate themselves in the countries in which they study. The self-imposed isolation put an obvious damper on how the country perceives China. The self-isolation image was sharp in one American participant’s description of her best friend’s experience. The participant’s friend was a girl adopted from China. “…Like she tries like hang out with Asian people but actually they rejected her because she is so like Americanized, not anything like them.”

At the state level, self-isolation was also in place when American students saw that China was not interacting with the United States on global issues. This self-isolation at the state level was contradictory to the message encoded in, for example, the grand Beijing Olympics. If China wants to engage the world, China must also break down barriers that keep it isolated from the world. Historically, China was an isolated place considering the building of the Great Wall from ancient time. In the late Ming Dynasty, the Chinese Ming government issued a policy that prohibited any trade along the coastal areas. The somewhat self-imposed isolation from the rest of
the world could not hold anymore when the industrial powers led by the British used gun and
boat to open China’s borders in the middle of the 19th century.

Lastly, the mirror image subtheme suggested a negotiated reading of China. Despite a
concern that China is “killing us” economically and taking over jobs, some American college
students showed a promising view regarding the future of China, one which acknowledges
America’s own history as a new power on the world stage. They believed that the Chinese youth
generation identified with the American youth culture and the American way of life. The
compelling quote from the Declaration of Independence “life, liberty and the pursuit of
happiness” demonstrated how they viewed future generations of the Chinese people would want
the same things as the Americans. Underlying this notion of believing the future China would be
just like the U.S. may reflect more self-admiration of the American younger generation than
likely conditions in China’s future. Perceiving China and the future China through the lens of
America makes the frame of an ultimate otherness all the more salient.

Implications for Public Diplomacy

The findings of this study indicated very limited public diplomacy effects and the three
major themes that emerged reflected some continuity and change of the views American people
have about China. For Chinese public diplomats, the notion of China being a threat in the
economic and technological fronts is exactly the image they want to avoid. Essentially, Chinese
public diplomacy initiatives were based on the notion of dissuading the international publics from
viewing China as a threat. In this regard, Chinese public diplomacy so far seemed to have not
been very successful. Based on the focus groups’ discussions, I argue that the change of
information dissemination, the difference in cultural values, as well as the evolution of mass
medium, all suggest a research-supported grounded approach to public diplomacy in the future.
First, the information approach to public diplomacy appears to be the least effective means to engage foreign publics, at least in the U.S. The fact that none of the 38 American college students participated in the research had ever watched the two ads suggested that media having the magic power of reaching global audience is a myth. Without even reaching the target publics, there is no point of talking about shaping the public’s view. In the Internet age when communication is largely done on the web, especially among the younger generation, the use of the traditional mass media to spread an intended message seems the wrong approach.

The findings of the study suggested that people got their ideas about China from many different sources, with direct sources giving them stronger impressions which usually last longer. The intense ballet teacher from China, the interactions with Chinese students, and in the one participant’s experience with Chinese businessmen in adult entertainment, all served as direct sources in forming ideas about China, despite any public diplomacy efforts to shape a favorable view of the country. As Galtung and Ruge (1965) pointed out, the national image of a country is not shaped by mass media alone. There are many different sources that help shape such an image.

Second, the very limited effects of the Chinese public diplomacy initiatives seemed to suggest that public diplomacy would benefit from a more research-based, bottom-up approach rather than a traditional top-down approach. The Made in China ad was a great example to show at least the ad was aired without any focus group research. The whole encoded message was negatively decoded: China does not have innovation but cheap labor. China is nothing but an assembly line. If any future mass media campaigns promoting the Chinese national image overseas, grounded and social science research should be conducted before making any campaigns. Apparently, the two ads did not seem to register much with the American people. It was safe to say that focus group research would be very helpful to any future ad campaigns targeting foreign audience.
Unlike the mass media based informational approach to engaging the foreign public via ads, the Confucius Institutes can be understood as a relational approach to influencing foreign publics. However, based on the findings of this study, it is ironic that although the creators of the CIs had universities and college students in mind when they set up partnerships between domestic and foreign universities, participants from both ASU and PSU, who had a CI on campus (the PSU one just closed at the time of writing this dissertation) did not seem to know what it was. The extremely low awareness of the existence of the CI was also found in Japan. In a semi-structured interview study of the impact of China’s public diplomacy to shape its image in Japan, Dinnie and Lio (2010) found that the interviewees who were Japanese elites showed very low awareness of the program.

Regarding the perceived intimidating drum show at the very beginning of the Beijing Olympics’ opening ceremony, I argue that more grounded social science research is needed. This show, though impressive, may not be the right type of event for shaping a favorable image of China from the public diplomacy perspective. Because of the different cultural values people have, public diplomats need to consider how foreign audience may receive the intended message.

Third, with the increasingly large number of Chinese people in the West for education, tourism, and business, Chinese nationals have become the most direct and effective medium to shape China’s national image. A new reciprocal visa policy was announced and enacted on Nov. 12, 2014 between the United States and China, during the APEC meeting held in Beijing. The new visa policy increased the validity of tourist and business visas from one to ten years for citizens from each country. For students, the visa validity extended from one year to five years. According to a White House (2014) press release, this new visa arrangement “will strengthen our ever-broadening economic and people-to-people ties” (para. 1). The White House press release also predicted that the new visa policy will attract an estimated 7.3 million Chinese travelers to visit the U.S. by 2021. Among the 7.3 million Chinese travelers a large number of them will be
Chinese students seeking education in America, which makes students a very important medium to tell their American peers about China.

Chinese people visiting the United States have become de facto public diplomats, interacting with the citizens of their host country. The close contact and face-to-face interactions will be the best public diplomacy avenue to reach and engage with the American public. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that the future image of China among American public is going to be largely determined by the Chinese people visiting, living, and studying in America, rather than any government sponsored public diplomacy efforts.

Fourth, there needs to be an awareness and recognition of what governments can do through public diplomacy efforts and what governments cannot do. In this case, the image of China is being constructed in a process that involves different moments. For the production and representation moments, China has certain levels of control over; they can encode certain meanings and select ways to deliver those messages. However, for the consumption moment, it is the public that has control. People have the autonomy and creativity in decoding whatever message they are exposed to. Even if a mass mediated message was received by the target public, there is no way to guarantee an intended reading of the message. For example, the Made in China ad was largely decoded as negative, exactly opposite to the encoded meaning. A common response from the participants to the ad was the least desired interpretation – China being incapable of innovation and design; China not intelligent to come up with designs, when it comes to consumer products, ranging from refrigerator to MP3. It must be assumed that the Made in China ad campaign did not subject the advertisement to any focus group research before they launched such a campaign.

Ultimately, as suggested by the findings of this study, the national image of China is more and more delivered by Chinese nationals overseas. How they behave, interact with or isolate from, and communicate with the locals is going to impact how the locals view China. This direct
influence will override any government efforts to shape a favorable view internationally. Therefore, rather than spending billions of dollars on mass mediated public diplomacy campaigns, it would be better to invest in the domestic public, focusing on education and changing from inside, to hopefully generate a better international public image.

Lately, in addition to increasing number of Chinese students, another large number of outbound Chinese people are tourists. Thanks to increased disposable income at hand, more Chinese tourists are able to visit overseas from Asia, Europe, to America and Australia. While tourist destinations welcome the money the Chinese tourists bring in, they have also been frustrated by the unruly behaviors of the Chinese tourists. Reportage of the unpleasant behavior of Chinese tourists has recently appeared on news media (A. Li, 2014). Loud, culturally insensitive, uncouth behaviors were frequently reported.

The most recent government response was made by the Chinese Tourism Ministry. According to media report, inappropriate tourist behaviors would be kept on file, which would function like a public shame in order to hopefully change the problematic behaviors (Chai, 2015). In addition to administrative intervention, China has also used public educational campaigns in the past to raise public awareness and hopefully to change public behaviors. Earlier in the 1980s at the beginning of the One-Child Policy, slogans like “It is good to just have one child” were seen painted on the walls as well as in newspapers in the form of comics. Later when AIDS became a public health concern in China, the government involved celebrities and the mass media to campaign for safe sex and healthy lifestyle. Public service announcements against AIDS have been widely used on Chinese television. Before the Beijing Olympics, PSAs promoting appropriate citizen behaviors were also aired on TV, involving celebrities and the public. As the world will see increasing numbers of Chinese tourists visiting various countries, there needs to be some combination of efforts to educate and promote appropriate tourists’ manners and behaviors because the Chinese tourists will be the most direct medium to send the message about China.
Limitation and Future Research

This was a small scale focus group study to investigate a very large topic, so it is true that there were some limitations of this study. First, student participants came from only three universities. Though geographically and culturally different, they are nonetheless all public universities. The student group makeup will be different from students of private universities. It is possible that a focus group in a private university would add new layers of meaning to the data. Second, many of the participants came from communication majors because of my limited access while recruiting participants. Different majors would also contribute to their knowledge body and their views regarding a foreign country. Political science majors would probably have a different view from communication majors in regards to China. Third, because there were three different moderators that conducted the actual interviews, the level of probes and follow-up prompts might influence how participants responded in each of the interviews.

For future studies of China’s national image in the U.S., the focus groups could extend to other segments of the American public, based on profession, age, racial difference, first-hand experience with China. For example, a focus group of American businessmen would definitely provide different views from the student groups because the way businessmen access information and process information would be different from college students. Focus groups with American people who have direct exposure to China, e.g. travel, professional associations, scholarship, etc. would give different interpretations of China as well. With the new visa policy between the two countries in place, we should witness an increase of bilateral visits by citizens on both sides. Therefore, a future focus group study of Americans who have visited China would provide new frontiers in regards to how American people think of China.
Conclusion

The Chinese national image is a constantly evolving construct, because it is always going to be constructed in historical, geopolitical, as well as cultural contexts. Just as Japan was once viewed as a threat to the U.S. in the 1980s, China, given its current economic size, is inevitably becoming the threatening “other” to the U.S. from an economical perspective. As indicated by the focus group discussants, China is perceived more as a threat to American economic and technological interests. However, socially and culturally, China does not pose any threat to Americans. The nearly zero awareness of the Confucius Institutes and Chinese brands indicated that China is far from being able to exert any cultural and social influence among American people. In contrast, the United States has been very successful in terms of influencing the Chinese public. American brands and cultural symbols ranging from McDonald’s to Mickey Mouse to KFC are everywhere in China. Apple devices command a large number of followers in China. English is the most popular foreign language in China, offered starting at the grade school level all the way up to college level. Going to the U.S. for college and/or graduate school is a dream held by many young people in China.

A favorable national image should be considered “a byproduct of quality actions and related information, which includes foreign policies and exchange of values and cultures to cultivate quality relationships with foreign publics” (Golan & Yang, 2013, p. 9). A positive national image is based on the combined views of a million things, ranging from a positive view of the products made in your country to good behaviors of people from your country, and an agreement with your foreign policies. When your own citizens are breathing under the dome of severe smog, when food safety is a daily concern, when people is seeing less upper mobility in the society because of an increasing divide between the extremely rich and extremely poor, how can you convince people that China is an attractive place?
Therefore, more efforts to address domestic issues ranging from reducing the gap between the rich and the poor to cleaning up the environment are needed. Witnessing the negative consequences of 30 years of fast GDP growth which brought a widely divided society in terms of income distribution, rampant corruption, and environmental damage, perhaps China needs to correct these social ills first before it worries about its national image among foreign publics. Still, convincing Chinese travelers to behave less conspicuously while abroad might make a world of difference in the way China is viewed by the world.
Appendix

Interview Guide

Opening statement/verbal consent:

This is a study that is looking at how college students in America view a foreign country. In other words, what kind of national images you have regarding a foreign country. Specifically, we are going to talk about what kind of images you have about China. I am the moderator of today’s group discussion of China. I am going to ask questions, follow up prompts to encourage all of you to have a rich conversation. There is no right or wrong answer; any opinions or ideas or thoughts or experiences that you may have in regard to China are welcome. Feel free to talk and feel free to express your opinions. You may skip questions that you don’t feel like to answer. Your participation is voluntary. You can opt to leave any time.

This conversation will only be audio recorded for the analysis of the transcripts; no identifiable personal information will be disclosed. The research has been reviewed and approved by the Penn State IRB office.

Grand tour questions, non-directive questions about a general view of China:

1. When you hear I say “China”, what comes into your mind first? What kind of images, thoughts, ideas would come into your mind?
2. What do you think China is like? What do you think it would be like to live in China?
3. Has anyone visited China before? What was that like?
4. Can you tell me what you remember about China when you were growing up? When is the first time you remember hearing about it?
5. Can you remember any particular stories you’ve heard about people living and working in China?
   Compared with America, what is China similar and different?
6. If I ask you to describe America’s national images, what would that be?
7. If I ask you to describe China’s national images, what would that be?
8. What do Chinese and American people have in common? What do you think is different about Chinese and American people?

9. How does Chinese culture differ from American culture?

10. What are some of the cultural phenomena that you would associate with China?

11. What are some of the topics related to China that might come up in your conversation with your friends, colleagues or family members? Can you please give me an example?

   Sources of information or knowledge of China

12. Where do you get information about China? (Prompts, if necessary: News? Movies? Other people?) What do you think is a good source of information about China? How do you evaluate the information you get from these sources? Are they credible or not? Do you believe what these sources tell you about China? For instance, some of the political and economic topics such as the trade tension, currency issue, or any other issues that you hear or learn.

13. Do you have any friends from China? What kind of stories do you hear from your friends from China about their country? What do you think of such stories?

14. Do you have Facebook friends that are from China? Have you ever involved in any Facebook discussion in regard to China?

15. We have (a large number of) students coming from abroad that are studying at Georgia Southern. How does meeting and working with students from another country help shape your feelings about that country?

16. Do you have any specific experience working with Chinese students at Georgia Southern?

17. Do you ever discuss China in your classes here at Georgia Southern? It could be in lectures, class discussion, or assignments or projects. If so, how China was discussed and how you
perceived China related to your class topic? What do you think the faculties here at Georgia Southern think about China?

18. Have you ever taken a class where China was part of the class content? If so, what you studied in that class about China? How did you think of China from that class?

19. If I ask you to think about the sources based on which you form your opinions of China, what is the most important or most influential source? How so?

20. What would be the least influential source in shaping your views of China? Why?

The shifting of images over time

21. If I ask you to talk about your views of China over time, what would you say? Is it changing or not so much? If it is changing, how different is it? Can you give me specific examples of how your views of China have changed over time?

22. What would be the oldest story about China that you ever heard of? What would be the most recent story you heard of about China?

Effects of public diplomacy initiatives or activities; image management efforts

23. Have you seen the Beijing Olympics? On TV or online? How do you like the games? Has it changed your images of China? If so, how did it change your view?

24. Have you ever seen an ad for China?

25. (Play Experience China ad) How does that ad make you feel about China?

26. Did you find this ad appealing to you in terms of affecting your views of China? Why or why not?

27. The Chinese government played this ad on 6 huge billboards in New York’s Times Square. Why do you think they did that? What do you think New Yorkers thought of the ads?

28. Are you aware of any other Chinese efforts to shape a favorable image of China? What do you think of them?
29. Have you ever heard of a Confucius Institute? (If no, prompt: It is a language and culture program that is designed to teach the Chinese language around the world.)

   Effects of nation branding; image management efforts; country of origin

30. If I ask you to name a couple Chinese brands, what would they be? How do you think of those products? How do you think those brands make you think of the country where they come from?

31. Have you ever watched a commercial called “Made in China, Made with the World”? (Play Made in China Made with the World ad)

32. What kind of message do you think the ad is trying to get across? Was it effective, in your opinion?

33. Can you think of some Chinese companies? Have you ever thought of working for a Chinese company? Would you like to work for a Chinese company?

   Future oriented estimation; foreign policy perspective;

34. What do you think the Chinese relationship is with nature?

35. Do you believe that China is a “green country”? 

36. Will the world be a better place in 100 years because of China’s environmental stewardship?

37. What do you think China will be like 10 years from now? 20 years from now?

38. What would you say about the U.S.’s relationship with China?

39. What is your view of the so-called the rise of China? Tell me your opinion about this.

40. Would you think China is a threat to the U.S. in any way? Why?

   General views again;

41. Anyone thinking of going to China in the future? What would you want to do if you went there? Why?
42. Would you go to China for a study abroad program? Why?

43. If the Chinese government wanted to convince you that China was a good place to live and work and invest in, what would they have to do?

Is there anything that we’ve missed that would be important to talk about?
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