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## The Rise of Digital Diplomacy in China

By Wang Yuchen

### SYNOPSIS

*This commentary explores how China leverages digital diplomacy to shape its global image. China blends entertainment, culture, and commerce through social media, including YouTube, TikTok, and RedNote, to promote its international image while maintaining narrative control. It also highlights tensions between openness and control, arguing that balancing state control with greater communication freedom is crucial for effective digital diplomacy in modern society.*

### COMMENTARY

#### An “Unfiltered” China

Recently, the famous American YouTube blogger Darren Watkins Jr., known online as [IShowSpeed](#), went viral after he livestreamed his visits to several places in China, including Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, and Chongqing. Most of his videos garnered millions of views on YouTube, sparking discussions about China in recent weeks.

In his videos, the online star [praised](#) the people who greeted him enthusiastically, the clean streets, and internet connectivity on the subways. Subsequently, official media, such as China's state-run [Global Times](#), and [China's embassy in Washington](#), also made supportive comments that blended with Beijing's official narratives. The sudden popularity of the American internet star was a success for China in the age of social media.

#### The Success of Digital Diplomacy

Social media diplomacy, or [digital diplomacy](#), refers to “the use of social media platforms by diplomats, governments, and other actors to conduct international relations to achieve diplomatic objectives”. Compared to traditional diplomacy, it

emphasises the role of non-governmental actors – a gradual shift from “government-led + textbook-style” to “social media + immersive” formats – in expanding the audience and enhancing the image’s affinity, authenticity, and diversity. In recent years, the Chinese government has tried to use digital diplomacy to influence foreigners to support its foreign policy goals.

In the past, the Chinese government adopted traditional ways, including using Confucius Institutes, media propaganda, and academic exchanges to promote communication and pose positive images of China on the global stage. However, these activities’ swift and aggressive expansion has also raised intense criticism and suspicion. Some Western critics have labelled Confucius Institutes as “Trojan Horses”, “academic malware”, or a form of impression management. They argue that the institutes do not represent the real China, but rather a politically correct version of the country.

Nowadays, with rapid globalisation and the Internet, social media platforms have become an emerging channel for cultural communication – Key Opinion Leaders and content creators use social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and RedNote to spread culture in a relaxed, entertaining, and non-politicised way.

This approach is not government-led but forms a “decentralised” cultural identity through spontaneous user-generated content. In this context, the Chinese government has also turned to digital diplomacy to ramp up its engagement efforts, including the relaxing of its visa-free policy to attract foreign tourist bloggers, encouraging RedNote to “go overseas”, and even supporting the international operations of Chinese content creators on TikTok. This has created a new hybrid model combining state guidance with private vitality. While these platforms are commercially operated, their strategic alignment with state interests is evident.

These platforms bring Chinese culture to international audiences, including music, fashion, traditional festivals, cuisines, and language. The short videos on these platforms often feature Chinese artistic expressions, pop culture, and positive narratives about Chinese society. Although not always overtly political, these portrayals contribute to a more favourable image of China abroad.

In addition, these social media also cultivate a channel to demonstrate a curated vision of Chinese modernity and consumer culture. Influencers and brands promote products and experiences that reflect China’s rising cultural confidence. These social media offer international users a window into aspirational Chinese lifestyles, subtly reinforcing the nation’s soft power.

At the same time, the Chinese government maintains influence over content moderation and platform regulations, ensuring that sensitive topics are avoided while positive cultural themes are amplified. State-backed campaigns and partnerships further support the dissemination of preferred narratives.

As a result, the Chinese government can successfully manage social media, blending entertainment, commerce, and culture to promote China’s global image while subtly reinforcing political and social narratives aligned with the state’s interests.

## Can Openness and Control Coexist?

The livestreaming of IShowSpeed has sparked a wave of international interest, with some media [commenting](#) that the videos exposed “a side of China rarely highlighted in the US mainstream narratives”, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and Sino-US competition. However, we must also consider some challenges Chinese digital diplomacy faces, such as its unique handicaps regarding speech, political sensitivities, and openness.

Therefore, the Chinese government must cultivate a more open and inclusive communication environment to promote digital diplomacy and cultural exports. In practice, the government needs to reduce the state's control over speech and information and delineate the boundary between state intervention and personal freedom.

It should ensure that the public is allowed to do anything that is not prohibited by law, and the government is forbidden to do anything not authorised by law. This would promote the vitality of society and interactions between domestic and overseas audiences on digital platforms.

While traditional institutional setups could maintain a stable public opinion environment in the short term, they can easily be interpreted as opaque or lacking trust in international communication, creating doubts and weakening their efforts.

## Conclusion

IShowSpeed's trip to China was a turning point, marking a shift from traditional media to digital social media in Chinese diplomacy. The Chinese government should further promote the export of Chinese culture digitally, paving the way for cultural exchanges and digital diplomacy. This may be the key to building bridges and mutual understanding in the current context of protectionism and the so-called China threat.

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