From a Global Perspective to a Chinese Perspective: A Comprehensive Analysis of Chinese Research Articles on Public Diplomacy

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Abstract

This study is a systematic and scientific examination of 1,268 Chinese-language public diplomacy research articles published between 1997 and 2022. By uncovering trends in development and theme and a variety of Chinese characteristics, this analysis fills a gap left by previous reviews focused on English-language research. Using a comprehensive coding scheme, we described the academic rigor, thematic evolution, and alignment with Chinese national interests and directives in public diplomacy studies in China. Our findings indicate a notable deficiency in academic rigor and theoretical depth, a strong political orientation toward national directives, and a shift from a global to a China-centric perspective. Numerous scholars described and introduced phenomena, primarily offering policy recommendations. Moreover, increasing alignment with official narratives and provision of state funding suggest a significant political influence on academic inquiry. These findings not only deepen understanding of public diplomacy research done by Chinese scholars but also highlight a need for stronger scientific methodology and theoretical exploration in future research.

Keywords: public diplomacy, China, academic rigor, Chinese characteristics, political orientationSpain

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Introduction

The dynamic development of public diplomacy (PD) practice and academic research calls for thorough analysis and review of existing scholarship in the field. However, previous reviews of PD research have tended to focus on papers published in English. Given that academic diversity exposes scholars to non-Western perspectives and that Chinese scholars have made vital contributions to the field, a systematic review of PD research written in Chinese is overdue. Important inquiries include the overall picture of PD research in Chinese, its changes and trends, its primary research topics, and the elements that demonstrate unique Chinese characteristics. Examining these ideas will deepen understanding of China's PD policies and practices and the current status of PD research in Chinese.

To achieve this goal, we conducted a systematic and scientific review of PD research published in Chinese. The aim was to elucidate the development and current state of PD research in Chinese, thereby filling knowledge gaps in the domain of PD scholarship review.

Recent Reviews of PD Research

Pan and Zhong (2017) conducted a bibliometric analysis of PD research found in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) database between 1976 and 2015. They found that PD, as an emerging field, had rapidly developed, that the United States and the United Kingdom played central roles in the geographical landscape of PD knowledge production, and that China had emerged as the most discussed country in recent years. They also found that the core group of authors in PD research was not well-defined, featuring a low percentage of prolific contributors. While the field of PD has clear interdisciplinary research traits, its theoretical underpinnings remain relatively underdeveloped, lacking historical depth.

Sevin et al. (2019) performed a meta-analysis of English-language, peer-reviewed articles that shed light on shifting trends in PD scholarship since 1965. Their review highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in PD research, advocating for a comprehensive, integrative approach to enhance PD scholarship by amalgamating concepts across various fields. Additionally, they regarded the absence of a singular, unifying theory in PD as advantageous, encouraging a receptivity to a range of theoretical viewpoints. They suggested that scholars explore how theoretical frameworks relevant to PD in order to address persistent inquiries and to identify core concepts.

Moreover, through a bibliometric analysis of studies in SSCI and the Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI) between 1976 and 2016, Chen (2018) found that from 2008 to 2016, communication studies outpaced international relations and political science with the highest number of publications in PD research, in the selected indexes.

Vanc and Fitzpatrick (2016) investigated the scope and status of PD research by public

relations scholars from 1990 to 2014. They found a growing interest in making significant contributions to PD both intellectually and practically. Their findings show how the principles of public relations could enhance PD scholarship, particularly in strategic development by governments in international relations and national branding. The diversity of theoretical approaches and methodologies, along with in-depth studies on specific topics, underscored the need for a coherent research framework in the field of PD. Their emphasis on future empirical research highlights the importance of exploring the theoretical and practical synergy between public relations and PD.

These review studies on PD research indicate that China has become a primary object of study. However, the scholars focused solely on academic works published in English, neglecting those published in Chinese. Therefore, we searched in particular for reviews of Chinese-language scholarly works on PD. Finding none published in English, we examined Chinese-language review papers found in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database.

Lei (2011) summarized Chinese PD research since 2000 and suggested that Chinese scholars prioritize analysis of current and future characteristics of China's PD. The goal, according to Lei, was to determine best practices for maximizing national benefit through several academic tasks: (a) developing a PD model with Chinese characteristics, (b) drawing lessons from PD in the United States, Japan, and South Korea, and (c) constructing a strategic framework for Chinese PD. Wu (2012) pointed out several goals for Chinese PD scholarship: (a) initiate research on the participation of social organizations in PD, (b) summarize how developed countries have effectively applied short-term PD strategies during times of crisis, (c) shift attention from historical descriptions of PD in various countries to future trends and from the importance of Chinese PD to its existing problems and possible solutions, and (d) analyze the effectiveness of PD using empirical methods. However, neither Lei (2011) nor Wu (2012) specified the time frame, quantity, or types of studies reviewed.

Scholars have also conducted annual reviews of Chinese PD research for the years 2019, 2020, and 2021. Zhao and Xie (2019) highlighted that Chinese PD research in 2019 actively responded to several national initiatives: the Belt and Road Initiative, telling China's stories well, and enhancing national soft power. Studies from 2019 contain substantial findings in areas such as PD within the Belt and Road framework, media PD, and cultural PD, integrating new media, new environments, and new changes. Zhao and Xie (2020) noted that Chinese PD research in 2020 primarily addressed the COVID-19 pandemic, the Belt and Road Initiative and cross-cultural communication, PD in the new media environment, and PD in a multi-interactive context. Scholars also conducted research on PD in countries such as the United States, Germany, and Russia for reference. Chen and Xie (2021) stated that in 2021, Chinese international communication and PD faced severe challenges and new opportunities. During this time, scholars focused on building international communication capacity and national image, PD practices in the context of digitalization, and cultural exchanges in PD.

However, these three review articles have similar shortcomings. The authors (a) did not clearly explain their data sources, mentioning only that they reviewed hundreds of articles, (b) did not provide reference lists, and (c) primarily summarized and generalized.

Ma and Gao (2018) conducted a review of Chinese PD research from 2002 to 2016. They statistically analyzed the annual number of publications, authors, journals, and keyword classifications, with a particular focus on summarizing Chinese PD research within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, they allocated more space to analyzing Chinese PD practices instead of Chinese PD research. Apart from some descriptive statistics, they did not analyze or discuss Chinese PD research in depth.

In existing review studies, scholars addressed earlier periods or were narrow in scope, not fully capturing recent shifts in Chinese scholarly research. Based on the discussion above, we posed the following research question:

RQ1. What are the overall trends in publication activity among Chinese-language PD studies?

Vanc and Fitzpatrick (2016) examined methodologies in PD research to understand how scholars approached their respective topics. We conducted a similar assessment of academic rigor. However, we did not find any reviews in Chinese specifically about academic rigor in PD research. Given the interdisciplinary nature of PD, a significant portion of Chinese PD studies relate to journalism and communication. Therefore, we referred to academic standards from those fields. Dong and Chang (2010) analyzed articles published between 2000 and 2009 in the Chinese-language *Journalism & Communication* (《新闻与传播研究》) and the English-language *Journal of Communication*. They found that Chinese journalism and communication studies were primarily qualitative (80.8%), whereas articles in *Journal of Communication* were primarily quantitative (63.4%). They suggested that Chinese journalism and communication research could benefit from greater data precision and methodological rigor. Liao et al. (2019) assessed the state of Chinese journalism and communication studies from 1998 to 2017, focusing particularly on research methods and theories. They observed that more than 90% of the 38,697 papers reviewed lacked research methods; a similar number did not mention theories, indicating a critical need for improvement in research quality. Based on the discussion above, we proposed the following research question:

RQ2. What is the level of academic rigor in Chinese PD studies?

PD Research and Chinese Characteristics

PD research is closely relevant to PD practice. The emergence of PD research relates to shifts in U.S. foreign policy following the events of 9/11. Studies in international journals keenly address recent developments in China's PD efforts. For instance, in the realm of digital PD, Chinese diplomats have markedly increased their activity on platforms such as Twitter

(Huang & Wang, 2019). Moreover, China's PD practices during significant events have gained scholarly attention, including the U.S.-China trade war (Huang & Wang, 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic (Huang & Wang, 2023; Wang & Xu, 2023), and domestic diplomacy via the Belt and Road Initiative (Wang & Huang, 2023). Accordingly, we proposed the following research questions:

RQ3. What are the primary research aims in Chinese PD studies?

RQ4. What are the predominant issues in Chinese PD studies?

Moreover, the majority of Chinese scholars conducting PD research work at Chinese universities and research institutions, which are predominantly public organizations that serve national interests. The Ministry of Education of China (2022) mandates that universities make national strategic needs their foremost priority. This policy suggests that Chinese PD research might also serve this mandate, a possibility worth investigating.

China's national initiative differs significantly from the Western world. For instance, China's foreign policy mirrors the intentions of its highest leadership. In recent years, President Xi Jinping has introduced several novel foreign policy concepts, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (Xi, 2013a) and the idea of building a community with a shared future for mankind (Xi, 2013b). We sought to understand whether these innovations align with the products of Chinese PD research. Additionally, China employs distinctive narrative styles, as well as anti-Western rhetoric. Whether these narrative approaches appear in Chinese PD research findings is worth examining. Furthermore, the public nature of Chinese research institutions suggests that government-funded research grants act as indicators of research priorities. Research funding applications in China invariably start with a commitment to adhering to Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era (National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences, 2023). This stronger emphasis on PD among China's leaders might have directly influenced research funding amounts for PD studies. Accordingly, we proposed the following research question:

RQ5. Which Chinese characteristics have shaped Chinese PD studies?

Methods

We investigated research articles in Chinese published in Chinese academic journals. The most significant and academically recognized database in China is CNKI, known in Chinese as Zhiwang (知网). In May 2023, using this database, we downloaded all articles from Chinese academic journals that included the term "public diplomacy" (公共外交) in their keywords.[1] After reviewing the content and excluding unrelated pieces (e.g., conference

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1) During the preliminary research phase, we experimented with several different methods, such as using keyword searches or searches that included "public diplomacy" (公共外交) in the abstracts. Upon manually reviewing the search results, we found

news published in academic journals),[2] we analyzed 1,268 research articles. The earliest paper in the set was published in 1997 and was the only one paper published that year. No papers appeared from 1998 to 2002. The publication of PD papers resumed in 2003 and continued through the end of 2022, the final year of our review. The gap between 1998 and 2002 reflects the historical trajectory of the term "public diplomacy" in both practice and academia. Edmund Gullion first introduced the term in 1965 (Sevin et al., 2019; Tang & Wang, 2003). However, it did not gain widespread usage until after the September 11, 2001 attacks, which brought renewed attention to the concept from both practitioners and scholars (Tang & Wang, 2003; Zhao, 2003). This shift is also evident in the number of academic publications. Similar gaps exist in the English-language literature. Sevin et al. (2019) found that from 1965 to 2001, only 75 English papers appeared.

For results retrieved from CNKI, users can batch export metadata, including title, journal name, publication date, authors, author affiliations, keywords, abstract, page numbers, and funding information. To address the research questions, we developed a codebook covering four coding categories:

(1) Research paradigms and structure: This category refers to scholarly rigor. During the coding process, we determined the research paradigm to which each paper belonged (1 = positivist paradigm, 2 = interpretive paradigm, 3 = critical and speculative paradigm, or 0 = none of the above), following the approach in Deng (2021). We also assessed whether the paper included the following sections: Introduction, Literature Review, Research Questions, Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion.[3] Furthermore, in our coding, we assessed the following questions: Does the paper explicitly mention specific academic theories? Does the paper contain one or more clear and explicit research questions and/or hypotheses (or at the very least, the aim of the study, articulated in a specific and direct way)?[4] What type of research method did the author(s) use in the paper? What are the specific research methods in the approach? Does the paper explicitly address the significance and/or contribution of the findings?

(2) PD research field(s): This category refers to the particular area of PD study. In our coding, we assessed the following question: What is the PD research field of the paper? We established these fields incrementally through an emerging coding process as we reviewed the papers. Whenever a new PD research field emerged, we added it to the coding options until

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that many papers retrieved through the abstract method were not actually studies on public diplomacy; the authors merely mentioned "public diplomacy" (公共外交). Consequently, we opted for a more conservative yet accurate approach, selecting papers that contained "public diplomacy" (公共外交) in their keywords.

2) We only selected academic research papers published in journals, excluding book chapters and conference news published in journals. First, in China, some published books do not maintain high academic standards, and the academic value of book chapters is generally considered lower than journal articles. Second, some journals in China use peer review, but not all do. Some editorial boards insist that their expert editorial review process is superior to peer review.

3) We acknowledge that papers within the interpretivist and the critical and speculative paradigms do not strictly adhere to these structures. We considered this issue in our evaluation.

4) In the codebook, these two questions appear as binary yes vs. no.

the set of options was comprehensive and stable, thus completing the construction of the codebook. These fields include (a) theoretical exploration and construction in PD, (b) comparative studies of PD experiences in other countries, (c) China's national image, (d) propositions and practices proposed by China, (e) talent cultivation, (f) sports diplomacy, (g) cultural diplomacy, (h) city diplomacy and place branding, (i) economy and PD, (j) think tanks, (k) military diplomacy, (l) general summaries and explorations of Chinese diplomacy, and (99) other.

(3) Research purpose: This category refers to authorial intent in publishing the paper: (a) academically oriented—presenting new discoveries through research, exploring or verifying theories, or advancing the research field; (b) think tank consulting—providing intellectual support for endeavors such as China's PD or international communication and offering strategic advice; or (c) integrating theoretical and practical purposes.

(4) Research background: This category addresses Chinese characteristics: whether the paper makes or emphasizes anti-Western statements, whether it references directives or discourses from China's top national leaders as the background or theoretical source, and whether it received support from research projects or funding.

Two graduate student coders underwent three rounds of training using 80 articles, achieving intercoder reliability standard (Krippendorff's Alpha 0.785 and above; at least 95% agreement). Subsequently, the two coders independently coded the remaining articles.

Results

Overall State of Chinese PD Research

Our dataset consisted of 1,268 Chinese-language journal articles on PD, published in 1997 and between 2003 and 2022. As depicted in Figure 1, an annual increase in publication volume began in 2004, with a significant surge beginning in 2009 and peaking in 2013, when 143 papers appeared. After this peak, a yearly decline in number of publications began.

These papers primarily appeared in academic journals specializing in international relations and communication studies. The journal with the highest number of publications (n = 172) is *Public Diplomacy Quarterly* (《公共外交季刊》), which launched on March 1, 2010, becoming China's first journal dedicated exclusively to PD issues. This journal is sponsored by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and is managed by the Charhar Institute, an independent think tank in China specializing in diplomacy, international relations, PD, and peace studies. Other Chinese journals that have published often on PD include *International Communications* (《对外传播》) (n = 52), *Contemporary International Relations* (《现代国际关系》) (n = 23), *Foreign Affairs Review* (《外交评论》) (n = 15), *International Studies*

(《国际问题研究》) (*n* = 15), *Modern Communication* (*Journal of Communication University of China*) (《现代传播 (中国传媒大学学报)》) (*n* = 15), *World Affairs* (《世界知识》) (*n* = 13), *Youth Journalist* (《青年记者》) (*n* = 13), *Theory Research* (《学理论》) (*n* = 12), and *Contemporary World* (《当代世界》) (*n* = 12).
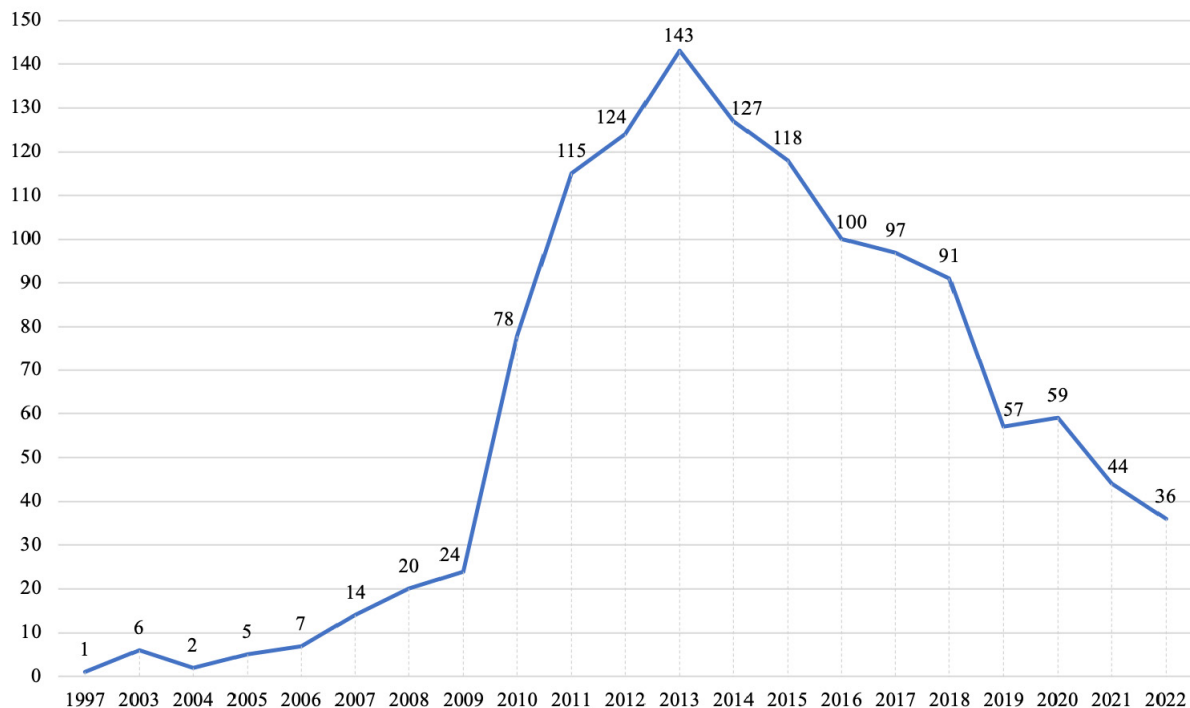
Figure 1. Annual number of Chinese PD research papers.

The institution leading in the number of publications is the School of Journalism at Renmin University of China (*n* = 46), followed the Charhar Institute (*n* = 43), Communication University of China (*n* = 36), School of Journalism and Communication at Tsinghua University (*n* = 30), School of International Studies at Renmin University of China (*n* = 19), School of International Relations and Public Affairs at Fudan University (*n* = 14), School of International Relations at the University of International Business and Economics (*n* = 13), School of International Studies at Peking University (*n* = 11), and the Center for American Studies at Fudan University (*n* = 11).[5]

The most prolific author is Tang Xiaosong[6] (*n* = 27) from the School of International Relations at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, followed by Zhao Qizheng (*n* = 22), who has served as Director of the State Council Information Office of China and Dean of the School of Journalism at Renmin University of China. Other prolific authors include Wang Yiwei (*n* = 17) from the School of International Studies at Renmin University of China,

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5) For papers co-authored by individuals from different institutions, we accounted for each of their institutions.
6) In this section, all the names maintain the original Chinese naming order (i.e., surname first).

Zhong Xin ($n = 15$) from the School of Journalism at Renmin University of China, Zhou Xinyu ($n = 11$) from the School of International Relations at Beijing Foreign Studies University, Zhou Qing'an ($n = 11$) and Shi Anbin ($n = 10$) from the School of Journalism and Communication at Tsinghua University, Wang Lili ($n = 10$) from the School of Journalism at Renmin University of China, Zhao Xinli ($n = 10$) from the School of Advertising at the Communication University of China, Li Defang ($n = 10$) from the School of Politics and Public Administration at Liaocheng University, and Zhao Kejin ($n = 9$) from the Department of International Relations at Tsinghua University.[7]

As these data show, scholars conducting research on PD in Chinese are primarily from the fields of international relations, as well as journalism and communication, and are associated with top-tier universities in China. For instance, Peking University, Tsinghua University, and Fudan University are the most prestigious comprehensive universities in China. Renmin University of China, Communication University of China, and Fudan University have the highest-ranked journalism and communication programs in China. Peking University, Fudan University, Renmin University of China, and Tsinghua University have the top-ranked political science programs in China (with international relations being a subfield of political science).

Academic Rigor of Chinese PD Research

Our coding results show, overall, significant room for improvement in the academic rigor of Chinese-language PD research papers. First, out of the 1,268 papers analyzed, we were unable to determine the research paradigm for 1,159 papers (91.4%). Among the 109 papers (8.6%) where the research paradigm was identifiable, the paradigms used were critical and speculative ($n = 43$), interpretive ($n = 35$), and positivist ($n = 31$). Furthermore, out of the 1,268 papers analyzed, only 120 papers (9.5%) explicitly mentioned a specific academic theory. The coding results concerning paper structure also indicate a severe lack of structural completeness. Specifically, out of the 1,268 papers analyzed, 1,031 papers (81.3%) included an introduction section, but only 89 papers (7.0%) contained a literature review, and only 210 papers (16.6%) listed clear research questions or hypotheses. Only 50 papers (3.9%) included a methods section. We determined in some papers that the authors used a particular research method, even though they did not explicitly list their methods. The most frequently used research method type was qualitative ($n = 63$), followed by quantitative ($n = 32$) and mixed methods ($n = 5$). However, for as many as 1,168 papers (92.1%), we were unable to determine whether any particular research method governed the study. Specifically, the most frequently used research methods were critical and speculative ($n = 35$), followed by content analysis (n

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7) For co-authored papers, we counted each author individually. In China, the proportion of papers published by solo authors is exceptionally high. One reason is that many Chinese universities, when assessing scholars' workloads, only count publications where the scholar is the sole or first author. Being a second author does not count toward their assessment, resulting in low incentive to collaborate among Chinese scholars.

= 15), literature analysis (n = 12), case study (n = 11), survey (n = 9), bibliometrics (n = 8), discourse analysis (n = 3), text analysis (n = 2), computational (n = 2), experimental (n = 1), in-depth interviews (n = 1), and focus groups (n = 1).

Additionally, we found that only 106 papers (8.4%) presented findings, 662 papers (52.2%) included a conclusion section, and 1,003 papers (79.1%) included a discussion section. We found that 354 papers (27.9%) did not mention contribution to the field, 818 papers (64.5%) only mentioned contributions at the level of policy recommendation and think tank consulting, 41 papers (3.2%) mentioned contributions to both theory and practice, 36 papers (2.8%) mentioned exclusively practical contributions, and only 19 papers (1.5%) discussed exclusively theoretical contributions.

We also compared yearly changes in the above metrics to examine whether academic rigor in Chinese-language PD research papers improved over time (see Table 1). We observed improvements in only a few areas. For instance, papers published after 2010 were generally more likely to include research questions, methods, and results than earlier publications. However, the overall levels remained low, and progress was modest.

Table 1. Statistical summary of structural elements in Chinese PD research papers.

Year	Introduction		Literature Review		Theory Mentioned		Research Questions		Methods		Results		Discussion		Conclusion		Annual Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
1997	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	100.0%	1
2003	4	66.7%	1	16.7%	1	16.7%	1	16.7%	0	0.0%	1	16.7%	5	83.3%	2	33.3%	6
2004	2	100.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	50.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	100.0%	2
2005	4	80.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	60.0%	3	60.0%	5
2006	7	100.0%	1	14.3%	3	42.9%	1	14.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	5	71.4%	6	85.7%	7
2007	12	85.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	7.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	11	78.6%	9	64.3%	14
2008	14	70.0%	2	10.0%	3	15.0%	4	20.0%	0	0.0%	2	10.0%	16	80.0%	10	50.0%	20
2009	18	75.0%	3	12.5%	4	16.7%	1	4.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	20	83.3%	8	33.3%	24
2010	64	82.1%	5	6.4%	4	5.1%	9	11.5%	2	2.6%	2	2.6%	57	73.1%	34	43.6%	78
2011	85	73.9%	5	4.3%	15	13.0%	16	13.9%	5	4.3%	10	8.7%	88	76.5%	45	39.1%	115
2012	95	76.6%	6	4.8%	9	7.3%	18	14.5%	7	5.6%	9	7.3%	103	83.1%	64	51.6%	124
2013	121	84.6%	15	10.5%	15	10.5%	17	11.9%	8	5.6%	16	11.2%	114	79.7%	74	51.7%	143
2014	102	80.3%	5	3.9%	10	7.9%	16	12.6%	4	3.1%	8	6.3%	96	75.6%	69	54.3%	127
2015	99	83.9%	2	1.7%	10	8.5%	17	14.4%	4	3.4%	9	7.6%	93	78.8%	59	50.0%	118
2016	77	77.0%	8	8.0%	11	11.0%	17	17.0%	4	4.0%	9	9.0%	82	82.0%	56	56.0%	100
2017	79	81.4%	9	9.3%	10	10.3%	16	16.5%	3	3.1%	6	6.2%	77	79.4%	53	54.6%	97
2018	71	78.0%	7	7.7%	4	4.4%	15	16.5%	4	4.4%	8	8.8%	73	80.2%	39	42.9%	91
2019	52	91.2%	6	10.5%	6	10.5%	21	36.8%	2	3.5%	7	12.3%	49	86.0%	40	70.2%	57
2020	51	86.4%	3	5.1%	6	10.2%	14	23.7%	2	3.4%	3	5.1%	45	76.3%	39	66.1%	59
2021	41	93.2%	5	11.4%	7	15.9%	14	31.8%	3	6.8%	8	18.2%	35	79.5%	27	61.4%	44
2022	33	91.7%	6	16.7%	2	5.6%	11	30.6%	2	5.6%	8	22.2%	31	86.1%	22	61.1%	36
Total	1031	81.3%	89	7.0%	120	9.5%	210	16.6%	50	3.9%	106	8.4%	1003	79.1%	662	52.2%	1268

Research Themes in Chinese PD Research

To explore Chinese PD research themes, we first performed a statistical analysis of keywords from Chinese PD papers. We grouped the papers by publication year, used Python to calculate the frequency of keywords in each one, and ranked the papers in each group by keyword frequency. For the years up to and including 2006, due to the low number of papers (less than ten per year) and consequently few total keywords, many of which appeared only once, we listed all the keywords for each year. For papers from 2007 onwards, we established a threshold for each year. For example, in 2007, aside from the term "public diplomacy,"[8] the terms "historical issues," "China," "Japan," and "cultural exchange" each appeared three times, while 32 other keywords appeared once; thus, we set the threshold at three occurrences. We also applied this threshold method in subsequent years.

Over the course of 22 years, "national image" ranked among the highest in 13 years. Other keywords that frequently appeared in the annual rankings include "soft power" (11 years), "China" (8 years), "international communication" (8 years), and "Belt and Road" (6 years). Table 2 lists the annual highest frequency keywords for each year. We also presented this information using a word cloud (see Figure 2).

Table 2. Most frequent keywords annually in Chinese PD research papers.

Year	Keywords
1997	diplomatic methods, multilateral diplomacy, summit diplomacy, economic diplomacy, preventive diplomacy
2003	U.S. diplomacy, September 11 attacks, traditional diplomacy, intergovernmental diplomacy, Three Represents, strategy, theory of international relations, U.S.-Soviet Relations, interference in internal affairs, peaceful coexistence
2004	information revolution, information age, media diplomacy, operational mechanism, modern diplomacy, national strategy, tool
2005	propaganda, Iraq War, U.S. foreign policy, Bush administration, United States, war, diplomacy, civil society, peaceful rise, China-Japan relations, gradual progress, international image, exchange, diplomatic capability
2006	national image, international political communication, cultural exchange, japan, battle of ideas, counter-terrorism, cultural diplomacy, culture, government international public relations, media diplomacy, counter-public opinion, public opinion, elite theory of influence, soft power, Chinese diplomacy, historical issues
2007	historical issues, China, Japan, cultural exchange
2008	national image, United States, people-to-people diplomacy, sports diplomacy, Beijing Olympics
2009	soft power, national image, globalization
2010	Shanghai Expo, national image, Expo, non-governmental organizations
2011	national image, China, soft power, international communication, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, new media, Shanghai Expo, non-governmental organizations, China-U.S. relations, Southeast Asia

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8) Since we used "public diplomacy" as the keyword for data retrieval, it was naturally included in all the papers. Therefore, "public diplomacy" was not counted in the ranking of hot keywords because it is unnecessary. All the papers fall within the field of public diplomacy, and our aim is to explore which other keywords are most popular each year.

Year	Keywords
2012	national image, soft power, China, Confucius Institutes, cultural diplomacy, think tank, new media, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2013	national image, 18th National Congress, soft power, United States, diplomacy, diplomat, China threat theory, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2014	China, soft power, national image, international communication, cultural diplomacy, Chinese dream
2015	Belt and Road, national image, soft power, international relations, Chinese dream, United States, China
2016	Belt and Road, China, soft power, national image, First Lady, international communication, inspiration
2017	Belt and Road, national image, soft power, international communication, Japan, United Nations, city diplomacy
2018	Belt and Road, international communication, national image, soft power, China
2019	China, Belt and Road, Confucius Institutes, sports diplomacy, soft power, China diplomacy
2020	community with a shared future for mankind, international communication, COVID-19 pandemic, Russia, pandemic control, Belt and Road
2021	COVID-19 pandemic, national image, community with a shared future for mankind, international communication, strategic communication, South Korea, overseas Chinese, propaganda, media
2022	international communication, strategic communication, community with a shared future for mankind, global governance, blockchain, Metaverse, Web 3.0, discourse power

Figure 2. Word cloud of most frequent keywords annually in Chinese PD research papers.

The evolution of keywords over time, as outlined in Table 2, reflects a shift in the focus of Chinese-language PD research papers from a global perspective to a more China-centric perspective. We divided this shift into three stages.

Initially, before 2008, keywords frequently mentioned foreign entities such as the United States and Japan, as well as topics such as U.S. diplomacy, U.S. foreign policy, and significant global events such as the September 11 attacks, counter-terrorism, and the Iraq war. These keywords reflect an international outlook and desire to learn from the experiences of other countries and introduce these experiences to China.

The second stage marks a transition from a global perspective to a focus on China. From 2008 to 2014, events led by China began to gain scholarly attention. For instance, the 2008 Beijing Olympics spotlighted "sports diplomacy" and "Beijing Olympics" as prevalent keywords for that year. Similarly, the 2010 Shanghai Expo ascended to the top of the keyword list when China hosted that event. Such mega-events, transcending their immediate impact, deeply shaped national image. In fact, "national image" consistently ranked as a leading keyword from 2008 to 2018, securing the top spot from 2011 to 2013.

In the third stage, from 2015 to 2022, Chinese-language PD research became more exclusively focused on China. The keywords indicate research themes closely aligned with China's PD efforts and official narratives. With Xi Jinping's announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in late 2013, "Belt and Road" surged to prominence from 2015 to 2018, holding the leading position for four consecutive years and continuing its popularity into 2019 and 2020. "Chinese Dream," another concept introduced by Xi Jinping (2012), emerged as a key term in 2014 and 2015. Intense focus on Peng Liyuan, Xi Jinping's wife, by Chinese media and academia, propelled "First Lady" to a notable keyword in 2015 and 2016, though it later receded in academic prominence as focus on the First Lady concept waned. The notion of building a community with a shared future for mankind, as mentioned in the resolutions from the Fourth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 2019, quickly became a leading keyword in 2020, maintaining its relevance over the subsequent years. Moreover, the outbreak of COVID-19, becoming the most discussed keyword in 2021, shifted governmental and academic attention to strategic communication. While "international communication" was a recurring keyword across various years, "strategic communication" gained prominence once the pandemic arrived. Noteworthy is Xi Jinping's address on improving China's international communication capacity (Xi, 2021), marking a pivotal moment and propelling international communication to the forefront of keywords in 2022.

Chinese PD Research Fields

Next, we ranked the research fields in Chinese PD research papers (see Table 3). The predominant research field was comparative study or analysis of the experiences of other countries: (a) impact of German PD on China and (b) comparative analyses of PD concerning Arctic affairs among China, Japan, and Korea. Closely following are cultural diplomacy (e.g., film, animation, books, pandas, and education) and China's national image and influence

(e.g., communicating China's story, improving national image, and enhancing soft power and discourse power).

Table 3. Research fields in Chinese PD research papers.

| Rank	Research Field	*n*	%
1	Comparative Studies or Summaries of Experiences from Other Countries (implications of German PD for China; comparative study of PD in Arctic affairs by China, Japan, and Korea)	231	18.2%
2	Cultural Diplomacy (film, animation, books, pandas, education)	165	13.0%
3	China's National Image and Influence (telling China's story well, national image, enhancing soft power, discourse power)	98	7.7%
4	General Summaries and Explorations of Chinese Diplomacy	96	7.6%
5	Theoretical Exploration (theoretical exploration, construction of new communication systems under international changes, review of academic achievements, digitalization, networking, new media, mediatization)	66	5.2%
5	Propositions and Practices Proposed by China (Belt and Road Initiative, China-Africa Cooperation Forum, Confucius Institutes)	66	5.2%
7	City Diplomacy/Place Branding	55	4.3%
8	Economy and PD	54	4.3%
9	Sports Diplomacy	41	3.2%
10	Talent Cultivation (training of talents in China's PD field)	37	2.9%
11	Think Tanks	21	1.7%
12	Military Diplomacy	13	1.0%
/	Other or indeterminable	325	25.6%

We also coded for research purpose. The results indicate that the primary research purposes were description and introduction of certain phenomena, followed by think tank consulting. These two purposes account for 88.4% of the total. For a detailed breakdown of research purposes, see Table 4.

Table 4. Research purposes in Chinese PD research papers.

Rank	Research Purpose	Explanation	n	%
1	Introductory	describing phenomena, introducing experiences and phenomena	841	66.3%
2	Think Tank Consulting	providing intellectual support for practices such as China's PD or international communication, offering strategic advice	280	22.1%
3	Academic Orientation	seeking new discoveries through research, exploring or verifying theories, or advancing research in the field	51	4.0%
4	Equal Emphasis on Theory and Practice	the paper equally emphasizes theory and practice	48	3.8%
5	Commentary	some papers written in a style similar to media commentary, lacking theoretical research process	24	1.9%
5	Unspecified	unspecified or indeterminable research purpose	24	1.9%

### Chinese Characteristics in Chinese PD Research

We delved into various issues tied to Chinese characteristics. First, we calculated the count and percentage of papers containing mention of China's top leaders. During the coding process, we read the entire text, and if we encountered mention of China's top leaders anywhere, we coded the paper as "Yes." Figure 3 presents the count and percentage of papers that include such mentions. For example, if 40 of 100 papers in a given year mentioned China's top leaders, the count was 40, and the percentage was 40%. The results reveal an upward trend of in percentage with mentions (see Figure 3). This finding indicates that research in Chinese PD closely aligned with the directives of China's highest leaders. For example, Xi Jinping's foreign policy ideas emerged as prominent research keywords in the more recent years.
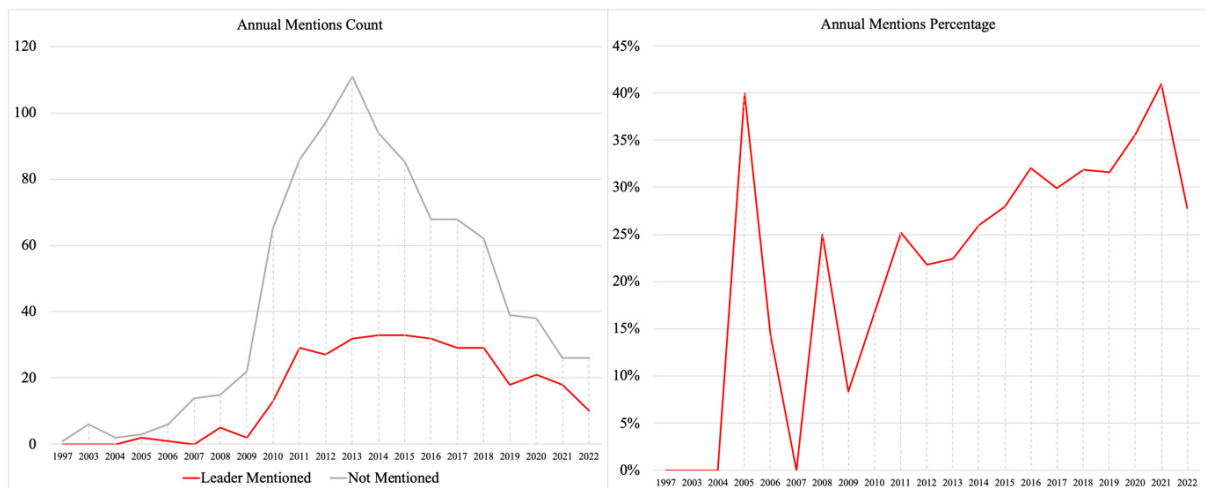
Figure 3. Frequency and percentage of Chinese national leader mentions.

Additionally, we calculated the count and percentage of papers containing anti-Western statements. During the coding process, we read the entire text, and if we encountered anti-Western discourse, we coded the paper as "Yes." Examples include "In response to the black propaganda from Western media, China needs to argue based on facts" (Nie, 2020, p. 13), "To attack China and tarnish its international image, Western media such as the BBC have long fabricated fake news topics about China's Xinjiang region" (Zhou & Liu, 2021, p. 45), and "The United States . . . discredits China and suppresses China's voice" (Li & Qiao, 2022, p. 129). While such expressions remained relatively stable over time, we observed a marked increase after 2019 (see Figure 4). This uptick reflects China's efforts to counter critiques and safeguard its image following the COVID-19 outbreak, mirroring a rise in assertive PD practices.
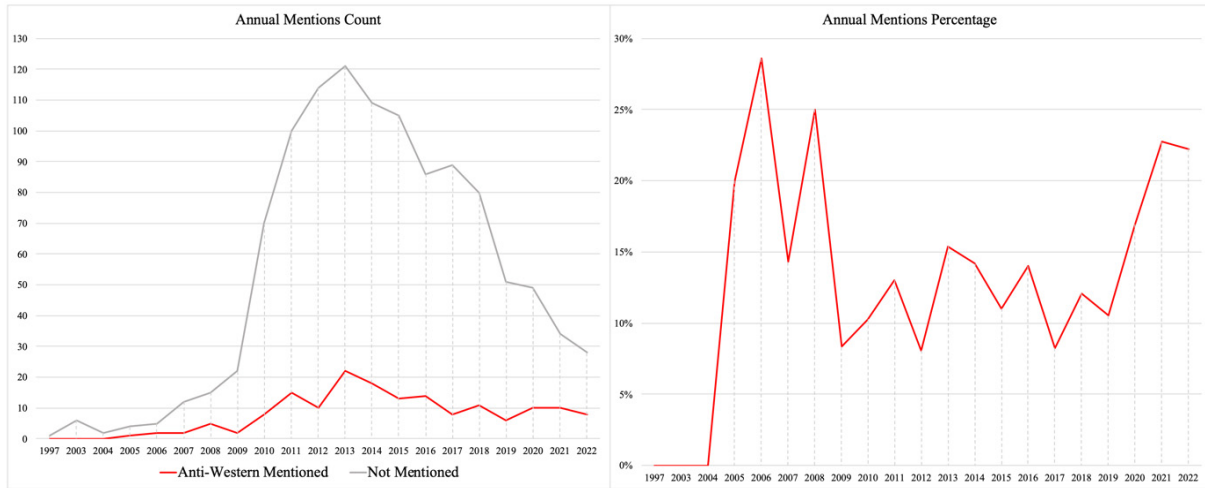
Figure 4. Frequency and percentage of anti-Western statements.

Finally, we evaluated the support that Chinese PD research papers received from official research funding across all levels within China (e.g., national, provincial/ministerial, and other). The results indicate a growing fraction of PD research securing funding (see Figure 5), coinciding with the Chinese government's heightened focus on PD in recent years. In funding application topic selection, research pertinent to PD has enjoyed a higher chance of receiving support. Additionally, we performed a cross-tabulation analysis of academic rigor with funding status. A series of chi-square tests show that, across different indicators of academic rigor, funded papers significantly outperformed those without funding. Regarding research paradigms, funded papers predominantly used interpretive and positivist paradigms over the critical and speculative paradigm, whereas unfunded papers tended to favor the critical and speculative paradigm over the interpretive and positivist paradigms.
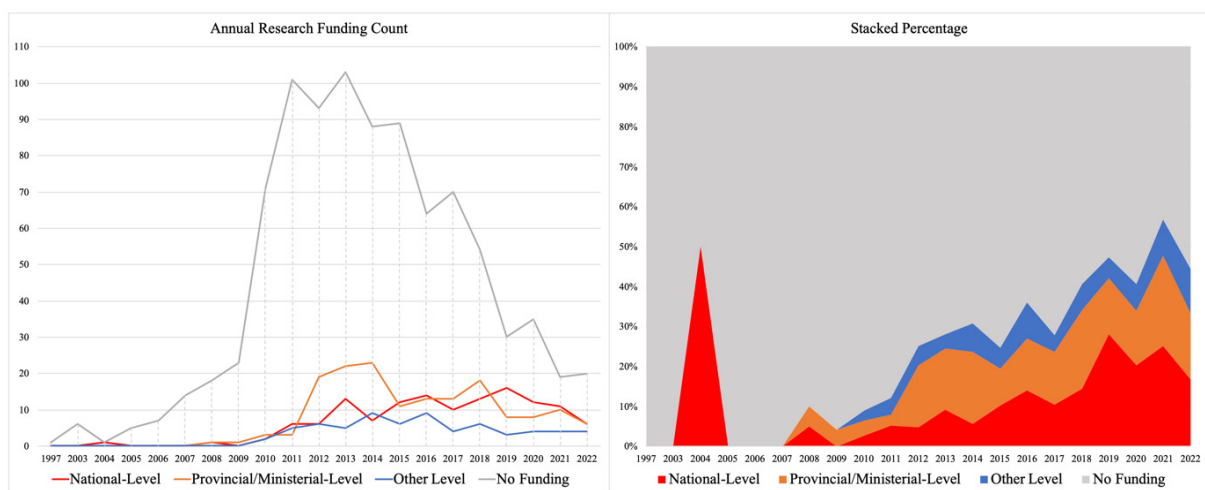
Figure 5. Frequency and percentage of Chinese PD research papers receiving funding.

Discussion

Our analysis of Chinese-language PD research papers led to several key insights. First, Chinese PD research papers exhibited a noticeable lack of academic rigor. Although the papers often presented numerous conclusions and discussions, they were frequently not grounded in scientific research methods, and the authors' subjectivity was evident. Adherence to academic standards was noticeably deficient, echoing the findings of Liao et al. (2019) about Chinese journalism and communication studies.

Second, Chinese PD research papers rarely engaged in theoretical exploration, typically focusing instead on describing phenomena. The papers demonstrated a pronounced preference for offering policy recommendations over academic inquiry and innovation.

Third, Chinese PD research papers demonstrated a marked political orientation by adopting directives from national leaders as guiding principles for research, thereby indicating a considerable dependence on political authority.

Finally, we observed a shift in Chinese PD research from an international to a China-centric perspective. Chinese scholars have transitioned from leveraging Western experiences to prioritizing a narrative centered on China. This evolution from employing Western notions (e.g., soft power) to distinctly Chinese initiatives (e.g., the Belt and Road Initiative and the concept of building a community with a shared future for mankind) closely mirrors China's diplomatic and international relations shift from integration into the global community in the early 20th century to a recent distancing from Western nations and highlighting China's stance.

Despite our comprehensive analysis of Chinese-language PD research, this study has limitations. First, our reliance on CNKI as the primary source of research papers might have excluded relevant studies published in less accessible journals, potentially constraining the comprehensiveness of our review. Second, the evaluation of academic rigor, research fields, and thematic focus was subject to our coding scheme and interpretations, which might have introduced bias despite efforts to maintain objectivity through intercoder reliability measures. Additionally, the political and cultural nuances inherent in analyzing Chinese PD might not be fully captured through quantitative analysis of keywords and research purposes. In future research, scholars should consider incorporating a broader range of databases, qualitative analyses, and more diverse methodological approaches to provide a more nuanced picture of the field.

Conclusion

This examination of the landscape of Chinese-language PD research uncovered several pivotal insights. These findings hold substantial implications for the scholarly exploration of

PD in China. Our findings highlight a prevalent lack of academic rigor and a theoretical deficiency within the field, underscoring a pressing need for a more scientific approach and deeper theoretical engagement. Furthermore, the pronounced political orientation and the shift to a China-centric stance in these papers reflect the evolving dynamics of China's engagement with the world.

The alignment of PD research with the directives of China's national leaders, while illustrating a strong political influence, raises questions about the independence and critical capacity of academic inquiry in this domain. Moreover, the transition from an international perspective to a focus on distinctly Chinese concepts and strategies suggests a recalibration of China's approach to engaging with global publics and shaping international discourse.

To advance the field of Chinese PD research specifically, scholars within this domain should strive to integrate more rigorous scientific methods and diverse theoretical frameworks. Doing so will not only enhance the academic quality of PD research in China but also contribute to the development of more nuanced and effective PD strategies that are responsive to the complexities of global engagement in the 21st century.

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