

People-to-People Exchanges in Chinese Diplomacy: Evolutions, Strategies, and Social Practice*

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In recent years, China has been reiterating in its diplomatic discourse and behaviour the significance of people-to-people exchanges in foreign relations. To understand this, it is imperative to take a historical-cultural approach to it as interstate relations in the 21st century, which is more economically globalised, politically democratised, and technologically advanced than previous ones, tend to extend further to people-to-people or ethnic-to-ethnic relations. Retrospectively, the emphasis of the public's role in foreign affairs, now defined as people-to-people exchange (PPE), can be traced in the evolution of China's foreign policy discourse and behaviour. When the PPE and diplomacy are linked to formulate a people-to-people diplomacy, at least three assumptions can be made about it. First, it is fundamentally about communicative activities; second, it makes possible more entities as players in diplomacy; and third, it is about production, management and distribution of public goods. Three aspects may also affect the quality of the PPE among nations, and China has to commit more efforts to perfect them. They are the thinking of strategic arrangements, the optimisation of operating mechanisms, and the enhancement of communication competence. The PPE between China and the United States in recent years has shown how instrumentally useful it is to better the two countries' mutual understanding and cooperation through civil communication. It also indicates that problems may also arise in the unfolding process of the PPE.

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In recent years, Chinese foreign policy has been reiterating the importance of people-to-people exchanges in its foreign policy discourse and behaviour.¹ Bringing

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¹ Entering the 21st century, Chinese leaders and decision makers increasingly address critical roles of people-to-people communications in Chinese relations with other countries. In its diplomatic practice, China initiated mechanisms of people-to-people exchanges with a number of countries successively: the launch of China–Russia People-to-People and Cultural Exchange Committee of Cooperation in 2007, the establishment of China–US High Level Consultation on People-to-People Exchanges in 2010, the initiatives of the

the people-to-people exchange (PPE) back into its relationship with other countries is a remarkable aspect, among others, in Chinese diplomacy today. And it has attracted increasing interest in the study of it. The research that has been done so far centres on two interrelated aspects. One is focusing on conceptual understanding of PPE's role in Chinese diplomacy, arguing that the idea of the PPE has been cherished in the tradition of Chinese diplomacy with its far-reaching strategic significance and values.² Another is devoted to empirical explanation of the practice of the PPE in Chinese diplomacy, contending that the public is playing critical roles in facilitating the country's overall foreign policy in general and in serving its long-and-medium term national mission of a recently proclaimed 'One Road One Belt' initiative in particular.³

Indeed, it is imperative to take a conceptual and empirical look at the role of the public in foreign policy. On the one hand, a due (re)consideration and (re)discovery of the value of people-to-people communications in international relations (IR) may broaden views and perspectives in understanding and explanation of the nature of increasingly complicated world politics, and thus transcend dominant yet narrow perceptions that put more concerns with and emphasis on merely distribution of material capabilities among states but downplay cultural and normative elements as secondary factors in IR.

On the other hand, with an unprecedented expansion of economic globalisation in the world along with the process of political democratisation and technological advancement, IR has increasingly shown itself, among others, as people-to-people relations, including interactions of ethnic groups to ethnic groups and races to races. Taking a social and cultural, not merely physical, perspective in IR studies is to highlight a humanistic nature in the 21st century global politics.

mechanisms of China–UK, and then China–EU High Level People-to-People Exchanges in 2012, and the setup of the High Level People-to-People Exchange mechanism between China and France in 2014. In other words, as one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, China has established mechanisms of people-to-people exchanges with the other four permanent members.

² See: Dong Manyuan, 'Tuijin "ruanshili" jianshe, jiaqiang renwen waijiao' (Promote the Construction of 'Soft Power' and Strengthen People-to-People Diplomacy), *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu (Study of International Affairs)*, 2009, No. 9; Qi Danlin, 'Zhongguo waijiao lujing de xintansuo – renwen waijiao' (New Exploration of Chinese Diplomatic Approaches – People-to-People and Cultural Diplomacy), *Suzhou Jiaoyu Xueyuan Xuebao (Journal of Suzhou Institute of Education)*, 2010, No. 6; Jin Zhengkun and Tang Nina, 'Dangdai Zhongguo Waijiao de Xinlujin: "Renwen Waijiao" Chutan' (New Approaches of Diplomacy in Modern China: A Tentative Study of 'People-to-People Diplomacy'), *Jiaoxue yu Yanjiu (Teaching and Research)*, 2009, No. 8; Jiang Meiyang, 'Zhongguo renwen waijiao de youshi yu wenhua yuanyuan' (Privileges and Cultural Traditions of People-to-People Diplomacy in China), *Shandong Shenhui Kexue (Shandong Social Sciences)*, 2010, No. 1; Ye Qing, 'Qianxi zhongguo tese renwen waijiao' (A Study of People-to-People Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics), *Guoji Zhanwang (International Review)*, 2010, No. 1; Zhao Kejin, 'Quanqiuhua shidai de xin waijiao xingtai' (People-to-People Diplomacy: New Form of Diplomacy in a Globalized Age), *Waijiao Pinglun (Foreign Affairs Review)*, 2011, No.6.

³ Ma Lirong, *Siluxue yanjiu: jiyu zhongguo renwen waijiao de chanshi kuangjia (The Silk Road Studies: An Interpretive Framework Based on Chinese People-to-People Diplomacy)*, Beijing: Shishi Publishing House, 2014.

As the PPE involves broad aspects of social, cultural as well as humanistic elements in it, both conceptual studies and empirical analyses are methodologically imperative and meaningful. The former seek to answer ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions, while the latter intend to interpret issues raised by ‘how’ questions. For example, what is the PPE and its proper relations with cultural diplomacy? How are diplomatic ideas and behaviours regarding the PPE traced in the evolution of China’s diplomacy? And why does China intend to enhance its PPE with other countries through its strategic management and institutional construction? This essay attempts to explore and answer these questions.

The article is divided into four major sections. In the first section, a conceptual understanding of the PPE and its relationship with diplomacy is provided. Then it traces an evolutionary track of the PPE in various forms at different stages in Chinese diplomacy. The third section is devoted to the understanding of the aspects of Chinese strategies, institutional and capability build-up in its PPE with other countries. Finally, the article takes an empirical look at the role of PPE in IR by putting it in the context of the current China–US relationship.

1. Bringing human factors back into IR

In Chinese tradition, people and culture have a significant place in social life. It was contended in ancient China that one can ‘learn about the change of seasons through observing natural phenomena while fostering social development through studying human phenomena’.⁴ Here both nature and culture were taken as equally important factors in terms of their power to shape and change social life. That was an early awareness in China of unique functions of social learning, skills and culture in making human civilisations and driving the advancement of history forward.

The human phenomenon is a dynamic conception and can be referred to collectively as ‘all cultural phenomena in human society’. Culture is about knowledge and experiences that are accumulated gradually by human beings in the process of their maturing related to their lives and survival and is the embodiment of their adaptability to the natural world or surrounding environments. In human society, culture is about external aspects of human life such as food, clothing, housing and moving as well as its internal psychic and mental activities defined as ideas, values and norms, which are socially and discursively constructed. Given the existence of different ways of living and customs in the world, people are culturally and cognitively divergent. It is contended here that humanities are usually associated with those that are regarded culturally as the advanced, scientific, excellent, and healthy in social life. If the human being is the

⁴ The idea of unity of man and heaven was expressed in *Yijing (or I Ching)*, allegedly the earliest Chinese classic of philosophy, more than two thousand years ago. See *I Ching (Yijing): The Book of Change*, translated with an introduction and commentary by John Minford, New York: Viking, 2014; Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Unearth the Changes: Recently Discovered Manuscripts of Yijing (I Ching) and Related Texts*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

centre of all things, the PPE can be arguably regarded as the most attractive exchange among all other kinds of exchanges in the world as it is an exchange between hearts. A sincere and candid communication between human souls constitutes a unique aspect of its attraction in the PPE.

However, one analytical perspective that has long been dominant in IR studies puts emphasis on the distribution of material capabilities among nation-states, arguing that the nature of international politics is largely shaped by the positions of those nation-states' physical power in the international system, which is fundamentally anarchic due to the imperfectness of human reasoning. So the relationship between nation-states is conventionally assumed to be the business of politicians in high office.⁵ This state-centric perspective has grasped crucial aspects of international politics but has been 'paradoxical and problematic' as it overstates physical power while marginalising and even ignoring broad social and cultural contexts in which IR is unfolding.⁶ In reality, with globalisation and technological advances that connect people and ideas at lightning speed, people-to-people connections are playing an even more instrumental role in interstate relationships. In this context, official diplomacy tends to act more as a service to individual citizen's needs for better contacts and engagements with people in other countries.

So it is imperative to bring people's roles back into IR. As one Chinese saying goes, human relationships, if made merely based on material interests, social power or emotions, may break up as soon as those interests are gone, the power fallen, or the emotions parted; they can stay long only if rooted in sincere heart-to-heart communications among people. One desirable goal of the PPE is to enhance mutual understanding and trust of people from different civilisations and cultivate long-term friendships through sincere and candid dialogues among them. It can be argued that many a positive experience and insight is obtained through people's exchanges in a broad sense. Another desirable goal is to solidify social bases of public opinions in interstate relationships, to facilitate the resolution of potential conflicts between countries, and to reduce or even prevent negative effects occasioned by unintended happenings on international politics and thus to make those relationships more durable.

The PPE contains at least three meanings. First, the PPE is metaphorically a pavement stone, which lays a solid foundation of social and public opinions for a sound development of interstate relationship. If war is the last resort in international politics, culture is always a tool that is calculated to be employed first. Second, the PPE is a delicate way with more flavours of humanities in it compared with other ways like

⁵ In the field of IR theories, political realism, especially neorealist ideology, takes this perspective. See: Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: Norton, 2001.

⁶ John Hoffman, 'Reconstructing diplomacy', *British Journal of Political and International Relations*, 2003, Vol. 5, No. 4, p. 526. Also see: Costas M. Constantinou, 'Between Statecraft and Humanism: Diplomacy and Its Forms of Knowledge', *International Studies Review*, 2013, Vol. 15, pp. 141–162.

trade transactions and military contacts. Third, the PPE is a social practice that can hardly be substituted. Compared again with trade and the military, it is less costly but covers wider and broader areas and scales with bigger numbers of players participating in it. It can be argued that the PPE unfolds with fewer restrictions of space and time and thus is likely to be more conducive to forging sound social bases for public opinions between the countries involved.

Given the fact that the PPE is taking people as key actors in interstates relationships, governments can retreat functionally to the background, encouraging more civil forces to play in the foreground. This may arguably help reduce suspicions of political and ideological propaganda during mutual communications and avoid unnecessary links, cost, and even abuses or manipulations of information as often seen in the flow of ideas between countries. Moreover, it is easier to maximise mutual understanding and trust while minimising mutual suspicions, making common people develop their attractions of distant cultures and foster goodwill with other countries.

Bringing the humanistic factors back into IR, however, raises a compelling question regarding the linkage of the PPE and diplomacy. For some, people-to-people communication can be categorised as an integral part of (public) diplomacy, as diplomacy is usually taken as an institutional activity of communication and conducted between/among states and their peoples that are internationally recognised.⁷ That said, people-to-people communication, or the PPE in this context, has some aspects characteristic of its focusing on the importance of open communication at grassroots levels and nongovernmental performances. Also, it is a two-way rather than one-way communication, as tends to be the case with public diplomacy.

Three assumptions can be suggested regarding the PPE in relation to diplomacy. One assumption is that the PPE is primary about grassroots communication activities. More specifically, it is a communication that is highly institutional, as communicators (say, professional diplomats and common people) usually follow, and are conditioned by, a number of communicative rules and norms. The content of the communication includes cultural and ideational products. As a rule, diplomacy favours communication and dialogue rather than military violence in the resolution of conflicts and hostilities. But this does not mean that diplomacy and the military are not interrelated. On the contrary, physical capabilities can be a guarantee of diplomacy, as an old adage holds it that conducting diplomacy requires equipment with military preparations (*wen shi wu bei*).⁸ By the same token, it has to be made clear that diplomacy as 'a notoriously tricky term' is sometimes manipulated instrumentally to serve ignoble goals.⁹ A declaration

⁷ J. Gregory Payne, 'Diplomacy: People-to-People Communication', *American Behavioural Scientist*, 2009, Vol. 53, No. 4, p. 579.

⁸ The idea of *wen shi wu wei* is allegedly conceived by Confucius, and is quoted in Sima Qian (145 BC–90 BC)'s magnum opus *Shi Ji* (*Historical Records*), chapter of 'Kongzi shijia' (*Confucius' family*).

⁹ Paul Sharp, 'Herbert Butterfield, the English School and the civilising virtues of diplomacy', *International Affairs*, 2003, Vol. 79, No. 3, p. 857.

of war, like mediations and negotiations, is a highly institutionalised interpersonal behaviour of communication. In order to launch a war, seeking an international or multinational coalition through diplomatic persuasion is a typical example.

Another assumption is that the PPE between different cultures allows more social entities to participate in events that may produce effects, directly or indirectly, on diplomacy. It is acknowledged that politicians in high office and professional diplomats are conventionally recognised as major players in diplomacy. Yet it does not mean that overall diplomacy in such a complicated world can be practised only by those politicians or a cluster of foreign policy wonks. An ambassador to another country is apparently an internationally recognised player in diplomacy on behalf of his/her home country. By the same token, entrepreneurs, artists, writers or intellectuals, when working or paying a visit overseas, are equally recognised as messengers of their home countries. As one commentator suggests in his study, it makes sense that ordinary people can be ‘citizens diplomats’ and ‘international actors’.¹⁰ With a sea change in the globalised world, the definition as to who will be internationally recognised as players in diplomacy is changing as well. That makes the identity of players participating in diplomatic activities increasingly inclusive and subject to (re)definition.

It is also assumed that the PPE is about production, management and distribution of public goods. In other words, public goods such as shared values, common languages, collective identities, which are produced by the PPE, may bring about well-being to the countries, regions and even the whole world. When some people in a given society benefit from these public goods, it does not mean that other people in the society are excluded from obtaining equally the same public goods. People realise gradually that public goods obtained through diplomatic channels have been increasingly interconnected. Put it another way, the process of globalisation is redefining a given public goods as global public goods. Some traditionally national concerns such as environment, health, security and justice are becoming global concerns. This change makes diplomacy an instrument no longer narrowly for the achievement of national interests but more for the resolution of global and regional issues. Diplomacy, it can be argued, is committing more efforts to make efficient management and distribution of benefits brought about by diplomacy itself on international and regional levels.

Then one may ask, which one should be underscored in the process of doing the PPE – human communication or diplomacy? How does the PPE serve diplomacy that in return adds new meanings to the PPE? These are inquiries worthy of exploring in both conceptual and empirical terms. Pragmatically, diplomacy is about political persuasion, moral power, and finally national interests. If diplomacy itself, in which the PPE is employed as a tool merely for national interests, is overemphasised, the PPE is likely to be impaired and manipulated. Ideally, the performative function of the

¹⁰ Paul Sharp, ‘Making Sense of Citizen Diplomats: The People of Duluth, Minnesota, as International Actors’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 2001, No. 2, pp.131–250.

PPE is to embrace a broad vision of taking the global into concern, rather than confine itself myopically within national interest or interstate interest. There is a need to have a noble spirit of making the whole world a better place for all and to connect the PPE with diplomacy in a way that is natural and harmonious. That is, arguably, the highest realm towards which the PPE is expected to progress.

2. People's role in Chinese diplomacy

Given its features, functions, and meanings discussed above, the PPE is developing into a new highlight in Chinese diplomacy of the 21st century. The relationship between countries is determined by not only mutual trust through political dialogue and win-win benefits through economic cooperation but also social connections through their civil communications. A positive PPE is anticipated to produce long-term impacts on interstate relationship. One argument is that if the seeds of mutual goodwill, understandings and tolerance between countries are planted and nurtured in the hearts of their people, favourable and positive forces can be formed among social grassroots and will gradually move upwards and finally influence decision-making on governmental levels. In this sense, China regards the PPE as strategically important in its relations with other countries.

Retrospectively, the people's role in diplomacy can be traced in the evolution of Chinese foreign policy discourse and behaviour. Folk diplomacy has constituted an integral part of China's overall diplomacy. Since 1949 when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded, Chinese leaders in their successive generations have attached importance to the people's role in diplomacy and articulated a number of ideas and concepts of people's diplomacy in broad contexts in which world politics was unfolding. Four major phases can be classified as follows.

The First Phase (1949–1977). In the early years of the founding of the PRC, in the shadow of a cold-war bipolar structure, the newly-established Chinese government faced challenges of gaining wider recognition of its legitimacy from more countries around the world. The first generation of Chinese leaders, headed by Mao Zedong, adopted a policy of 'people going ahead and pushing the government' in diplomacy, later known as 'folk diplomacy', believing that seeking recognition of other countries could start with people-to-people contacts, which may facilitate further contacts between their governments.

Folk diplomacy was at that time also employed to form a wide international front of anti-imperialism and anti-revisionism. During the heyday of the Cold War, the tense military and ideological rivalry of two superpowers made the whole world live in the shadow of a nuclear war. To prevent the war, Mao and his colleagues' revolutionary diplomacy placed hopes on the people around the world by uniting them to commit to world peace and security in radical ways.

In that period, one question, which is meaningful even today, was raised by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai: Is diplomacy about interstate relationship or about people-to-people relationship? In other words, who should be taken as the object of diplomacy, the state or the people? ‘We need to unite peoples around the world’, Zhou contended, ‘and win the support from the peoples not only in our brotherly countries but also in former colonial or semi-colonial or capitalist countries. Diplomacy is practised in the form of interstates relationship, but its foothold is to influence and win the support of the people. It is dialectical. We must make it clear’.¹¹ On many occasions, Zhou argued that Chinese diplomatic activities should not be restricted to the government; common people are entitled to participate in them, ‘the relationship of two countries cannot be linked merely through professional diplomats, but should rely more on people themselves directly’.¹² These words demonstrate Zhou’s in-depth thinking and conception regarding the nature of diplomacy.

It is based on this understanding and awareness of diplomacy that both Mao and Zhou contended that relationship between two countries is not necessarily initiated always first by their governments but may start with contacts and exchanges established by their peoples, who in turn facilitate contacts and later developments of the bilateral relationship on governmental levels. Thanks to some decisive changes favourable to Chinese foreign policy including the normalisation of diplomatic ties between the PRC and the United States in the late 1970s, when the former engaged in another wave of setting up diplomatic relations with foreign countries, specifically those from a capitalist world, the Chinese leaders articulated timely an idea that ‘both government and people are equally critical’ in diplomacy, arguing that official diplomacy provides more favourable conditions for the unfolding of folk diplomacy. All walks of life in China, as Zhou contended, ‘should be interconnected, the same businesses and enterprises should share a common language, and Chinese people in different occupations should attach importance to foreign affairs’.¹³ It can be argued that an idea of ‘big diplomacy’ or ‘comprehensive diplomacy’ had been conceived and impregnated in China at that time.

The Second Phase (1978–1989). After the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee in 1978, the Chinese government decided to launch its opening to the outside world again, this time mainly to industrial and developed countries.¹⁴ Since then, Deng Xiaoping mentioned several times that China’s primary task and priority

¹¹ Zhou Enlai, ‘Women de waijiao fangzhen he renwu’ (Our Diplomatic Guiding Principles and Tasks) (30 April 1952), in *Zhou Enlai Wenxuan (A Selection of Zhou Enlai’s Essays) (II)*, Beijing: Renmin Publishing House, 1984, p. 88.

¹² Waijiaobu waijiaoshi yanjiushi (Office of Diplomatic History of Ministry of Foreign Affairs) (ed.), *Zhou Enlai waijiao huodong dashiji (Major Events of Zhou Enlai’s Diplomacy) (1949–1975)*, Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Publishing House, 1993, p. 212.

¹³ Quoted from Su Shumin, ‘Xin zhongguo minjian waijiao sixiang de fazhan jiqi yuanyuan’ (Evolution and Sources of Folk Diplomacy Ideas in New China), *Renmin Luntan (People’s Forum)*, 2014, No. 8, p. 56.

¹⁴ A previous opening to the outside world campaign in China was launched in the early 1950s when the country adopted a policy of ‘leaning to one side’, that is, to embrace largely the camp of socialist countries.

in politics was to concentrate on the country's economic development and that all the other tasks (including diplomacy) should be in service of this primary task.¹⁵ China's diplomacy started to undergo a critical shift from 'economy in service of diplomacy' to 'diplomacy in service of economy'.

In this period, folk diplomacy continued to be in a position of high importance as earlier in Chinese relations with other countries. The second generation of Chinese leaders led by Deng realised that if relationship between countries was conducted merely by governments while downplaying the role of people, that relationship could hardly go any further as its basis was not socially and culturally solid. A consensus was that China's opening to the outside world needs to win the assistance and support of foreign peoples through civil channels, making full use of both domestic and international markets and resources, and absorbing and learning all the cultural products of civilisations in the world, in order to quicken the speed at early realisation of four modernisations in China.

With tremendous changes of the world in the following years, folk diplomacy began to develop beyond ideological restraints. Speaking of the basic principles and goals of Chinese diplomacy, Deng insisted that China should not participate in any international interest groups but establish diplomatic contacts with all countries.¹⁶ That implies that China does not haggle over differences of social systems and ideologies of countries but focuses on its own long-term strategic interests. China's diplomacy was then measured along the a criteria of 'three favours' (*san ge you li yu*), that is it should be favourable to China's reconstruction of its modernisations, to its social stability and development, and to its upholding of world peace.

The Third Phase (1990–2011). After the end of the Cold War, China continued to develop and underwent tremendous changes as a rising peaceful power. The third and fourth generations of Chinese leaders inherited the practice of folk diplomacy by advocating such concepts as 'putting people first' (*yi ren wei ben*) and 'harmonious world' (*hexie shijie*), which implied the continuity of the ideas and practices of folk diplomacy in China in a more complicated yet interdependent world.¹⁷

These conceptions, especially that of 'putting people first', have shown an evolution of Chinese diplomatic philosophy from the state-centralism of defending its overall national interests to taking more concerns of the civil interests of individual citizens. The aim of folk diplomacy in this phase involves two aspects: diplomacy is in service of people's cardinal interests and of national economic reconstruction; people are the backing stones of diplomacy. They reassured the idea of 'participation of the subject'

¹⁵ See Deng Xiaoping *Wenxuan* (*A Selection of Deng Xiaoping's Essays*) (III), Beijing: Renmin Publishing House, 1994, pp. 211, 265, 266.

¹⁶ Ye Zicheng and Li Hongjie (eds), *Zhongguo dawaijiao* (*Chinese Big Diplomacy*), Beijing: Dangdai shijie Publishing House, 2009, p. 38.

¹⁷ David Scott, "China's Public Diplomacy Rhetoric, 1990–2012: Pragmatic Image-Crafting", *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 2015, Vol. 26, Issue 2, p. 249.

(*zhuti canyu*), that is, in a world that is increasingly open and democratic, there is an urgent need to have a mechanism for the expression of common people's interests in, demands for, and concerns with foreign affairs, which are having increasing impact on their daily lives. That requires more transparency of Chinese foreign policy, so that the public in general can better understand the making and execution of a concrete foreign policy, and act as social bases and bolsters in Chinese diplomacy.

The Fourth Phase (2012–onwards). In the wake of successful holding of the Olympic Games in Beijing and then the World Exposition in Shanghai, China reasserted the efforts to strengthen people-to-people connections in its relations with other countries. In the report of the 18th National Congress of Chinese Communist Party (CPC), the PPE is lifted to a position of strategic importance in Chinese foreign relations. As one commentator put it, 'the presentation of diplomacy in the 18th National Congress of CPC's report 'show the new thoughts of China's diplomatic development'.¹⁸ Since then, the conception of the PPE has found its way into Chinese foreign policy discourse.

As a continuity and development of folk diplomacy in the 21st century, the PPE has its clear trait in China. Its basic thinking and idea is to highlight the value and role of human beings in international relations and combine the intellectual essences of cultural diplomacy and folk diplomacy. In terms of the actors of diplomacy, the PPE puts emphasis on the participation of social forces, nongovernmental and civil groups as well as individuals in the activities of diplomacy. In terms of the scope of diplomacy, the PPE covers almost all the areas that are relevant to people's livelihood, such as education, health, technology, culture, sports, social media, tourism, women and youth. In terms of the goal of diplomacy, the PPE aims at spreading Chinese culture so as to make the world understand China better and, in turn, China embrace the world more profoundly. And in terms of the idea of diplomacy, the PPE articulates both the uniqueness of Chinese culture and the universal values of 'putting people first'.

The idea of the PPE is linked with that of constructing a 'harmonious world'. If the latter stresses the role of folk diplomacy, the former reiterates that role through people-to-people contacts and communications, as one ancient Chinese saying goes that among the harmony of all things in the world, the most valuable is the harmony of human beings. The core value of a harmonious society is the harmony and peaceful coexistence of peoples who are culturally and ethnically distant. The highest level of human identity is taking the whole world as one family. That requires peoples with different cultures, races, religious beliefs, and languages to share common values. In this sense, the PPE is an important channel for all the countries to reach a consensus on establishing a desirable international order and norms.

Eager to promote the PPE in its foreign relations, China has found itself shifting from a kind of typical 'small diplomacy' in the past to 'big or comprehensive diplomacy'

¹⁸ Yang Yang, 'Interpretations of New Diplomatic Thoughts in the Report of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China', *Journal of Politics and Law*, 2014, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 35.

now. In the early years of the PRC, although much attention was paid to folk diplomacy and much was done in this aspect, China was conditioned physically and ideationally by the structures both at home and abroad, its diplomacy was generally featured as a typical 'small diplomacy', that is, national interest was achieved, maintained, and expanded mainly through the commitments of political leaders and a small group of centralised and cloistered elites in the country. After its opening to the outside world in economic and social terms, along with tremendous changes and restructuring of the world order, China has witnessed the need of its foreign policy ideas and behaviours responding to those changes and reshaping, thus expanding from 'small diplomacy' to 'big diplomacy', that is, besides politicians in high offices and government agencies, social institutions, economic and cultural groups, and even individual citizens are encouraged to participate in activities related to diplomacy.

3. Three aspects affecting the PPE

As an integral part of comprehensive diplomacy and perceived from its practices in the recent years, the PPE has increasingly become a new highlight in Chinese diplomacy of the early 21st century. On the one hand, it shows that Chinese society has been more opening and inclusive in the process of its embracing the rest of the world. On the other hand, it indicates that against the background of globalisation, international relations today tend to present themselves more as relationships of people to people and ethnic groups to ethnic groups. In this sense, a performative structure that is inclusive, multileveled, and dynamic is desirable, in which both the government and society are collectively taking part in. In this process, the guidance of government is a necessary precondition and the presence of the public is an indispensable determinant. And that makes possible the PPE moving towards a consistent goal under an overall strategy.

How to proceed the PPE effectively then? For China, three aspects have to be taken into account: the thinking of strategic arrangements, the optimisation of operating mechanisms, and the enhancement of communication competence. And above these all, China needs to have itself rooted in its own culture and national traits.

For strategic arrangements, it involves strategic resources, strategic planning, and strategic purposes. In terms of strategic resources, there are roughly three kinds of resources that China can make use of. One is the resource of Chinese traditional culture, which is rooted in its rich history. Another resource stems from Chinese social sciences and humanities, which have produced numerous intellectual staff and literature so far. Yet another is a resource from foreign civilisations that can be learned and assimilated. Putting all the three together can form unique and wealthy resources that are conducive to the PPE between China and other countries.

In the strategic planning, both long-term and short-term plans need to work out. Once the plans are designed, a key issue, among others, is with whom the exchange should be conducted. The objective should of course be the largest numbers of people

in targeted societies or countries. But the question is to whom China should get closer in communication. It is agreed that China needs to get close not only to overseas Chinese but also original people in the target society or country, as well as those who are friendly or unfriendly to China.

As for the strategic purpose, it aims to promote equal communications and dialogue between Chinese culture and other cultures in order to make the world understand and know more about China, while China contributes to the world its ideas of governance and humanistic values. If new sets of ideas, new shared languages, principles and norms can be produced and developed through the people to people exchanges, that will contribute to the reconstruction of a peaceful and stable international order in the 21st century.

For operating mechanisms, a success in the PPE depends on constant improvement of institutional construction. In this aspect, there is a need to set up an agency to coordinate departmental execution of PPE policies, which involve different fields responsible for different agencies. In other words, such policies and their goals and means to achieve those goals, including the distributions of financial and human resources, are made and regulated on top levels of the government, while social communities like business enterprises, grassroots groups, universities and colleges, and other institutions are encouraged to play active roles in the implementation of those policies.

Finally, as for communicative competence, two aspects are involved and constitute challenges that China faces and has to overcome in the process of its people-to-people exchanges with other countries. One is about the capacity-building of communications, which is related to the issue of what Chinese people can communicate and exchange with people from other countries. In this aspect, rediscovery and enrichment of China's traditional as well as modern arts of humanities are requested. People outside of China are curious about this country's ancient and mysterious past and may be more interested in the remarkable changes that the country underwent in previous decades thanks to its opening to the outside world. They want to know how all these changes make China as it is today, including its people and their ideas and dreams. China may continue to tell the world its own past, its historical experiences and tremendous changes that make the country unique as it is. China also needs to talk about the things – including values, rules and norms – that are universally pursued and shared by human beings on the planet. As is known, the PPE is a two-way communication. There is a need to listen to and respect the voices and stories or experiences uttered by peoples who are culturally and linguistically distant, from which China may learn and draw merits and inspirations.

Another is about a knack for communicating. It involves the issue of how to tell a story and tell it well. Linguistic skills matter in the process of the PPE; one commentator argues that 'a carefully calibrated language' may allow 'cross-cultural

communication with a minimum of unnecessary misunderstanding'.¹⁹ It is equally crucial that communication is conducted between hearts (hear-to-heart). While talking about the uniqueness of its reality, China also needs to talk about the commonality and shared values between China and other countries, about the values and dreams that most people share wherever they are. It is easy to accept the story told this way; one old saying goes that people are happy because they understand each other's hearts. In other words, in communication it is critical to grasp the hearts of speakers and audiences and to convince people by moral persuasion.

In most circumstances, the players of the PPE, besides government officials and professional diplomats, are largely grassroots people in the society and institutions that are formed by them. In international relations, speeches and statements made by politicians and diplomats are important. It is equally important that a poem is recited by a renown poet, a paragraph of a novel read by its author, or a movie shown on the screen in another country. This grassroots expression is a way more easily accepted by international audiences. So, if Chinese culture is expressed and articulated by the concrete words and deeds of its ordinary citizens, then the whole society, whether it is the government, institutions or individuals, needs to reinforce the spirit and ethos contained in Chinese culture. Meanwhile, China needs to have a broad vision of understanding other countries' cultures and thus make each of its citizens become a practitioner and advocate of the PPE between China and other countries.

4. The PPE in China–US relationship

On 25 May 2010, Chinese and American governments signed a memorandum of understanding on establishing a mechanism aiming at deepening people-to-people connections between the two countries and then launched the first round of China–US High Level Consultation on People-to-People Exchanges (CPE), a gathering of high-level officials and members of civil society to bolster both diplomacy and cultural power in an effort to strengthen China–US relations. It is perceived that the CPE is paralleled with an annually-based Sino-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) started in 2009, so that people-to-people exchanges, along with mutual political trust, and economic trade cooperation, constitute three pillars of China–US relationship.

The PPE between China and the United States, whose aim is to enhance and strengthen ties between the citizens of the two countries, has developed with a promising future. First, the PPE has been conceived by the governments of the two countries as an important and integral part in the bilateral relationship. Six rounds of the CPE have been held so far in the capital cities of respective countries with each round co-chaired by the two countries' ministerial officials. Ministerial-level

¹⁹ Christer Jönsson, 'Communication: An Essential Aspect of Diplomacy', *International Studies Perspectives*, 2003, No. 4, p. 202.

institutions such as the Ministry of Culture of China and the US Department of State have been committed to the designing and initiating of PPE programs. During the sixth CPE, held in Washington in June 2015, the two sides underlined the importance of and their continued commitment to the PPE between the two countries. US Secretary of State John Kerry stressed during the joint opening session the benefits of ‘fully reciprocal and unfettered’ contacts between the citizens of the two countries. ‘These contacts can take many forms. Frankly this is diplomacy on a retail basis’, Kerry remarked, ‘and it’s some of the most important diplomacy that we can do. It’s how we forge a comprehensive partnership out of smaller friendship’.²⁰ Echoing the belief in the long-term benefits of exchanges between the two countries, Chinese Vice Premier Liu Yandong articulated that China is ‘looking forward to working together with the U.S. side to build more platforms for mutual understanding of our two peoples and create conditions for mutual learning between civilisations from East and West’.²¹

Second, the scale of the PPE have been expanding rapidly. The PPE between the two countries started in four areas with 13 programs in 2010, when the first round of the CPE was held, and then developed horizontally into six areas with 104 programs, and in 2015 into seven areas including education, science and technology, culture, health, sports, women’s issues, and youth’s issues with 119 programs. They have been facilitating and promoting pragmatic cooperation, which benefits hundreds of thousands of citizens of the two countries. For instance, increasing numbers of students from both China and the United States are benefiting from such programs as the ‘Three Ten-Thousand’, and ‘100, 000 Strong’ initiative.²²

Third, the level of cooperation in the PPE has been improving. In recent years, the PPE has extended vertically from the national level to local levels. 240 sister provinces/states and cities between the two countries have been associated as pairs, and ‘Sino-U.S. Governors Forum’, ‘Sino-U.S. Mayors Forum’, ‘China-U.S. Young Scientists Forum’, and ‘China-U.S. Women’s Leadership Exchange and Dialogue’ (Women LESD) have been initiated successively. As Chinese State Councillor Yang Jiechi put it, China ‘will further encourage people-to-people exchanges and exchanges in other

²⁰ ‘The U.S.-China Strategic & Economic Dialogue/ Consultation on People-to-People Exchange’ (23 June 2015), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/06/244120.htm> (accessed on 15 September 2015).

²¹ ‘The U.S.-China Strategic & Economic Dialogue/ Consultation on People-to-People Exchange’ (23 June 2015), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/06/244120.htm> (accessed on 15 September 2015).

²² The ‘Three Ten-Thousand’ program, launched by the Chinese government, is referred to as ten thousand Chinese students going to the United States to obtain PhD degrees, ten thousand Americans coming to China to do research, and ten thousand scholarships for China–US people-to-people exchanges. ‘The 100,000 Strong’ initiative was announced by US President Barack Obama in 2009 when he was visiting China and talked about the strategic importance of the US–China relationship. It is a national effort designed to increase dramatically the number and diversity of American students studying in China.

areas that serve the fundamental interests of the two people'.²³ Kerry also noted, in his closing statement of the sixth CPE, the necessity of deepening the cooperation of the PPE between the two countries, which 'are working to ensure the inclusion of women in the economic success of our countries and expanding the reach of our educational programs, including minority and community colleges'.²⁴

Admittedly, unpleasant episodes happen in the process of the PPE. On 25 September 2014 the University of Chicago announced a statement that it would not renew its agreement with the Confucius Institute after the end of the first agreement, which would expire in the same month.

In the statement, the University of Chicago stated that '[S]ince 2009 the University of Chicago and *Hanban* have worked in partnership to develop the Confucius Institute at the University of Chicago (CIUC), which has benefited research on China and collaboration between the University of Chicago and academic institutions in China. The University and *Hanban* have engaged in several months of good faith efforts and steady progress toward a new agreement,' it then began to complain in the statement, 'However, recently published comments about UChicago [*sic*] in an article about the director-general of *Hanban* are incompatible with a continued equal partnership.' The statement continued, 'The University is therefore suspending negotiations for the renewal of the agreement at this time. The University of Chicago remains committed to supporting the strong connections and longstanding collaborations between University of Chicago faculty and students and Chinese scholars, students, and institutions'.²⁵

What is that article that makes the University of Chicago believe that the 'equal partnership' is violated and decide to sever its ties with the Confucius Institute? It refers to an interview with the Confucius Institute headquarters chief, Xu Lin, that was published in the Chinese-language *Jiefang Daily* on 19 September 2014. The background of conducting this interview is that there was a petition on the campus of the University of Chicago earlier in spring of the same year, when more than 100 faculty members called for closing the local Confucius Institute, raising concerns that in hosting the Chinese government-funded centre for research and language teaching, Chicago was ceding control over faculty hiring, course content, and programming to Confucius Institute headquarters in Beijing, which is also known as *Hanban*. Now back to the interview published in the Chinese press. The article informed that after the faculty petition Xu wrote a letter to the University of Chicago's president and phoned

²³ 'The Strategic & economic Dialogue/Consultation on People-to-People Exchange Closing Statements' (24 June 2015), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/06/244208.htm> (accessed on 15 September 2015).

²⁴ 'The Strategic & economic Dialogue/Consultation on People-to-People Exchange Closing Statements' (24 June 2015), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/06/244208.htm> (accessed on 15 September 2015).

²⁵ 'Statement on the Confucius Institute at the University of Chicago' (25 September 2014), <http://news.uchicago.edu/article/2014/09/25/statement-confucius-institute-university-chicago> (accessed on 20 September 2015).

the university representative in Beijing, ‘with only one line; if your school decides to withdraw, I will agree to it’. Her words made the other side anxious and respond quickly that it would continue to properly manage the Confucius Institute.

After the announcement of the University of Chicago’s decision, *Hanban* responded in a written statement: ‘*Hanban* thinks it’s a pity that the University of Chicago has made the public statement before finding out the truth. Since Confucius Institute is a collaboration program, both sides can make a choice’.²⁶ When asked about this incident, the spokeswoman of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the Confucius Institutes ‘never impose anything on others, and therefore are unlikely to threaten the academic freedom and integrity of universities’.²⁷

In fact, the Confucius Institute, which since its onset in 2004 has grown to have centres and classrooms in more than 123 countries, is a cultural exchange program that serves ‘increasing global interest in and demand for Chinese language and culture’ rather than any political ideologies.²⁸ It draws inspirations and experiences from countries such as England, France, Germany, and Spain in spreading their cultures and languages. From the Chinese point of view, the Confucius Institute is intended for people around the world to learn Chinese and appreciate Chinese culture so as to improve mutual understanding and friendship between the people of China and of other countries.

5. Conclusion

The article has taken a historical-cultural approach to the examination and dissection of the revival of folk diplomacy, now termed as ‘people-to-people exchanges’, in Chinese foreign policy discourse and behaviour today.

Indeed, with its remarkable changes over past decades, China has found itself engaging the world in unprecedented depth and breadth. By the same token, more countries are developing and strengthening their contacts and cooperation with China while taking more interests in and having more concerns about China’s position and influence in the world. To facilitate the complex interactions unfolding between China and the world, the PPE is expected to play an instrumental role in advancing mutual understanding and mutual appreciation between Chinese culture and other cultures through sincere heart-to-heart communication. It follows from the case of the PPE in China–US relationship, which is widely perceived as important but difficult to handle, that people-to-people contacts between countries are needed and meaningful; that

²⁶ Quoted from Elizabeth Redden, ‘Chicago to Close Confucius Institute’ (26 September 2014), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/09/26/chicago-severs-ties-chinese-government-funded-confucius-institute> (accessed on 20 September 2015).

²⁷ ‘Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on September 29, 2014’, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/t1196569.shtml (accessed on 20 September 2015).

²⁸ Falk Hartig, ‘Communicating China to the World: Confucius Institutes and China’s Strategic Narratives’, *Politics*, 2015, Vol. 35, No. 3–4, p. 255.

further commitment to the efforts as to how to make the PPE move forward smoothly are anticipated.

There are two caveats, however, that need mentioning here. One of them is that the emphasis of the PPE does not mean that IR can be reduced to or understood merely as people-to-people relations. In reality, IR consists of different important relationships in such areas as politics, business and trade, military, and others. The crux of the argument in this essay is that it is the people-to-people relations that lay the foundations for these other relationships between countries. Another reservation is that regarding complicated contract relationship between governments and their people in the society, which may give rise to mutual resistances, conflicts, compromises, and even coordination between them, social power exercised by peoples can be either constructive or destructive in IR, depending on how it is exploited by or imposes impacts on its government in question.

