

THE PHENOMENON OF THE GIANT PANDA IN CHINESE CULTURE AND DIPLOMACY



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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of the giant panda as one of the important symbols of modern Chinese identity and an instrument of soft power. The study analyzes cultural, philosophical and the diplomatic significance of a panda in shaping international image of China. Particular attention is paid to a connection of the giant panda to the traditional Chinese perceptions of a harmony, balance and peaceful co-existence. The article also explores the role of panda-diplomacy in development of China's international relations and cultural ties with other nations. The article analyzes how the giant panda turned from a rare animal and a subject of environmental protection into a global political and cultural symbol, which reflects China's national identity, strategy of public diplomacy and pursuit to form an attractive international image. It is concluded that the significance of panda goes beyond biology and ecology, becoming an important element of a public diplomacy and intercultural communication in the modern world.

Keywords: *China, panda-diplomacy, the giant panda, soft power, cultural diplomacy, national identity, international image, symbolic politics, Chinese philosophy.*

Introduction

In modern world states are competing for influence through symbols and culture. International image of a state is becoming part of the politics, states are trying to build trust, interest and sympathy to them by forming their own attractive image in the eyes of the whole world [Nye 2004, p. 5]. There is special category of symbols that through time do not belong only to nature, history or culture and turn into reflection of the state itself. They start to express national nature, political ideas, collective memory and how the state wants to see its own place in the world. For China such symbol is the giant panda. China was able to turn the giant panda, a

rare animal which lives in forests of Sichuan province, into one of the most known political and cultural symbols of XXI century. Today pandas are not just object of nature conservation but they became a part of a Chinese national identity, a part of diplomacy, important instrument of soft power and reflection of China's image, which they are trying to promote to the world [Kurlantzick 2007, p. 3]. Why specifically pandas became “representatives” of China? China also has many powerful cultural symbols such as tigers, dragon symbols, phoenixes, leopards, ancient culture and philosophy but particularly pandas became worldwide symbol of China. At first it may seem surprising why this slow, vulnerable-looking animal turned into one of the main images of Chinese civilization. However, the significance of pandas for China is much deeper than it may seem at the first glance. Today the giant pandas are not considered only as rare animals or popular object of a world culture. Pandas are a way to project to the world Chinese self-view as a peaceful, cultural, harmonious and responsible state. That is why the significance of pandas goes beyond just biology or ecology. They are political and cultural phenomena.

The unique thing about the panda as a symbol is that it is inseparable from China itself. Historically, the giant pandas inhabited only the territories of China, first of all in mountain regions of Sichuan, Shaanxi and Gansu. It created a feeling of unique belonging; pandas are considered not as an animal that lives in China but as a part of Chinese civilizational space. This unique connection between animals and the state played huge role in formation of symbolic significance of pandas. Many countries have their own animals-symbols or rare animals, however, not all of them are so closely connected with specific territory, civilization or national image [Thussu 2018, p. 120]. Panda is viewed as something only Chinese, and that is why its image became so valuable to the country.

However, just geographical connection solely could not transform pandas unto national symbol of such scale. What is interesting is that, panda's image is surprisingly aligns with the traditional Chinese philosophy. In Chinese culture for a long period of time ideas of harmony, balance, avoidance of destructive conflict and co-existence of contradictions were dominating. Traditional Chinese philosophy, especially Confucianism and Daoism, viewed the world as a system of interconnected elements where sustainability is achieved through balance, not through constant struggle [Melissen 2005, p. 11]. Even external look of pandas is viewed as symbolic combination of contradictions. Black and white coloring of a panda inevitably calls associations with the philosophical concept of yin and yang, which is one of the most important and central ideas of the Chinese philosophy, based on a balance of contradictions. Yin and yang do not reflect struggle between good and evil but in contrast to this, it reflects the idea of complementary forces that exist only in unity with each other. Light does not exist without dark, softness without power, stillness without movements. For sure, panda is not official symbol of yin and yang, but its visual image of pandas indeed embodies traditional Chinese views of a harmony, softness, balance and philosophical balance: black and white

do not conflict with each other but form one harmonic unity. That is why panda naturally became part of Chinese cultural consciousness and turn into the cultural and symbolic image of China.

Furthermore, a behavior of these animals is much more important than its external look. What emotional and cultural image pandas create is much more important. Panda is not predatory animal as we traditionally understand. Even though pandas belong to the family of bears, they look as a peaceful, slow and calm species. In Chinese perspective this gains special meaning. In many cultures state's power is associated with aggressive animals or symbols of domination, such as lions, tigers or eagles, but China made specifically pandas, that do not cause fears, as one of its main symbols, they leave completely different impression. It looks as soft, non-aggressive and even unprotected animal. This is especially crucial if we consider historical and cultural background of China and in the context of the image which China is pursuing to form at the international arena. For a long period of time Chinese civilization considered stability as its highest value. After periods of wars, revolutions and political instability, the idea of harmony became one of the central ones in public mindset. That is why panda became so much close symbolically to Chinese view about perfect world, it represents peace and internal balance instead of aggression and domination. During last decades China turned to one of the powerful and greatest countries in the world. Economic rise of the state, its technological development and political influence evokes both awe and apprehension. Many states view China's rise as potential challenge to the existing international order. In such situation image of panda becomes “soft face” of Chinese power. With pandas, China demonstrates to the world harmony and a peaceful development, not a threat.

Pandas gained the biggest significance in the field of international relations. So-called “panda-diplomacy” became one of the most popular instruments of China's foreign policy. Gifting pandas to the other countries exist for many decades. Especially it was actively developing in the second half of XX century, when China started sending pandas to the states that it was trying to strengthen political relations. Pandas were given to the USSR, the USA, Japan and other countries as a symbol of trust and friendship. The most famous panda-gifting happened after historical visit of Richard Nixon to China in 1972. With tense international environment and long period of isolation between countries, emergence of Chinese pandas in the zoos of the USA became real big political event. Millions of people came to see these unique animals, pandas turned into symbol of new stage of relations between two great powers. Another recent event happened in 2026, when China got back its pandas from Japan amid the tensions in bilateral ties. People of Japan came to the zoo to see pandas for the last time to say goodbye with tears in their eyes. These two situations demonstrate how the unique power of panda-diplomacy worked, it did not just effect on politicians but it also had impact on public emotions.

At first glance it may seem as unusual diplomatic gesture. However, the effectiveness of panda-diplomacy is not linked to just diplomatic gesture or direct propaganda but to emotional impact. It influences public emotions. When Chinese pandas emerge in the foreign zoos, this creates huge public interest. People go in queues just to see them, mass media actively reflect the event, China itself starts to be associated not only with economic or political power, communistic ideology or geopolitical competition, but also with something that evokes sympathy and emotional attachment. By this, pandas become the instrument of formation of the state's positive image. Through times pandas turned into part of a global national brand of China. In the modern world states are more often pursuing creation of known international images, that can evoke specific associations and emotional reactions [Nye 2004, p. 10]. In this context, panda became visual representation of China. Its image is actively used in international exhibitions, tourism advertisement, souvenir industry, and media space. Panda gradually turned into universal symbol through which China makes its own image more famous, attractive and emotionally close to its world audience. In political science such influence is considered “soft power”. In contrast to military or economic pressure, soft power is focused on capability of the state to attract people and create interest. China actively developing its soft power through culture, education, international media, institutes of Confucius and cultural diplomacy. However, particularly panda became one of the most successful and famous instruments of this influence. It is clear to the people of different cultures, it does not create fears or tensions and works initially through emotions by forming sense of warmth, security and trust. Paradoxically, exactly this softness has huge power of panda's image. One of the most powerful states of the modern world did not choose predator animal or military power's image as a main international symbol but chose peaceful and vulnerable-looking animal for it. This creates unusual contrast between real geopolitical power of China and the image that the country pursues to demonstrate to the world. The stronger China gets in economic and geopolitical context, the more important becomes demonstration of softness and calmness, rather than demonstration of power or aggression. Special power of panda's image is also about how it is almost a “depoliticized” symbol. In comparison to political slogans, ideology or state propaganda, pandas are considered out of political context by people. Even those countries or societies that critically view China's policy still continue feeling strong emotional sympathy to the image of pandas. And that is where uniqueness of this symbol lies: it is able to bypass political tensions and impact directly on emotions of people. Panda does not evoke associations with threats, conflicts of competition, that is why it is becoming special effective instrument of soft power. Through this China forms emotional closeness even where political trust remains limited. To some extent panda helps soften fears in front of China, forming more friendly impression of this country.

Important to note, that after some time China changed its approach to panda-sending. Previously animals could be only gifted but today pandas are mainly sent to the foreign zoos on the conditions of long-term lease. Even so, all pandas over

the world officially belong to China and are legally considered as the property of China. Children of pandas that are born abroad also belong to China. This fact is especially important, as it shows that panda is not just an animal but a strategically significant national symbol under the control of the state.

Ecological significance of pandas is also crucial. For a long period the giant pandas were under the threat of extinction. Deforestation, reduction of natural environment for pandas and low birth rate of pandas placed this species to vulnerable position. China had to invest significant resources to the programs of panda preservation, created nature reserves, tried captive breeding, developed scientific centers, environmental protections. Preservation of pandas gradually became a part of the international image of China. The loss of such symbol would be considered not just as ecological catastrophe but also as a cultural loss of the entire nation. The country protects not just rare biological species but also one the most important images of its own civilization. Struggle for preserving pandas turned into struggle for preserving parts of national identity.

The phenomenon of the giant panda cannot be explained only with its biological uniqueness or external attraction. Panda's significance for China is much deeper. It became some reflection of the image which is being created by the country within and abroad. Through pandas China combines culture, philosophy, ecology, diplomacy and politics to the one single symbolic image. History of the giant panda shows that even in the modern world, an animal's image can become an instrument for global influence. China was able to turn rare inhabitant of the forests into the international symbol of the state, which combines national identity, cultural tradition and political strategy. That is why pandas today are not just a part of Chinese nature but also an important element of how China builds its place in the modern world. The phenomenon of the giant panda is unique: the animal, which initially did not have image of power, image of domination, was able to become one of the most effective symbols of the modern China. Panda became an example of how cultural image in XXI century can be transformed into full political resource, that influences international perception of the country almost as much as economy or diplomacy.

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