

# Produced for Export, But Sold Domestically: China's Use of External Publicity at Home

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This paper is intended to answer one question: Why China is following an increasingly strident diplomatic approach over recent years, despite its apparent damage to the international image of China? I have proposed a new model in studying the relationship between China's diplomacy and domestic governance, namely the produced for export, but sold domestically (PESD) mode, which is characterized by the use of external publicity primarily targeted on foreign audience in China's domestic publicity and governance. By exploring the three important bases for the existence of the mode in China regarding politics, ideology, and organization, the paper seeks to present the reasoning behind the Chinese leadership. With all previous analysis, the paper then attempts to examine the policy effects and challenges of the PESD mode. Through the study on PESD, we are able to have a better understanding on both China's diplomatic style and domestic governance.

*Keywords:* Chinese diplomacy, publicity, domestic governance, Chinese nationalism

## Introduction

Since Xi Jinping was inaugurated as the paramount leader of China in 2013, the Chinese government has adopted an increasingly strident tone amid diplomatic confrontations, deviating from the previous "low-profile diplomacy" (taoguang yanghui) which the country has held for more than three decades. The external publicity system has been seen to play a pivotal role in Xi's direction of "effectively guiding and carrying out struggles over international public opinion" (Xinhuanet, 2021). China's new style of diplomacy, characterized by offensive diplomats and often confrontational reactions to defend China's national interests, was dubbed "wolf-warrior diplomacy" by Western media and scholars, named after the *Wolf Warriors* movie series, Chinese blockbusters featuring the heroic overseas rescue operations of Chinese special forces (Huang, 2022; Shumba, 2021; Zhu, 2020).

Though far from encompassing the panorama of the Chinese diplomatic apparatus, the wolf-warrior diplomacy has gone beyond the official level and attracted lots of attention within the Chinese society, as seen on social media in China. Brugier (2021) found China's shift to wolf-warrior diplomacy rather surprising, as a state's diplomacy usually seeks to win international public opinion, in contrast to the wolf-warrior mode that instead tends to tarnish China's public image due to its aggressive approaches. Furthermore, uncontrollable nationalistic sentiments, to which grassroots wolf warriors might easily turn upon certain diplomatic shocks, proves constraining foreign policy making of the leadership and tends to reduce diplomatic flexibility of the government. This limitation effect was particularly evident in the 1999 US bombing of Chinese embassy in

Belgrade (Shen, 2004), 2001 China-US aircraft collision incident (Weiss, 2013; Zhang, 2005), and Diaoyu Islands dispute with Japan (Downs & Saunders, 1999). In all three above cases, the Chinese government spared no efforts to pacify the surging domestic public opinion and to keep its policy from being influenced by those sentiments.

To address the contradiction, I argue that China's primary reasoning behind wolf-warrior diplomacy is to legitimize the rule of the Communist Party of China (CPC) at home, which precedes diplomatic goals in priority as perceived by the Chinese leaders. In this paper, I name the mode "produced for export, but sold domestically (PESD)", derived from a Chinese idiom *chukou zhuan neixiao*. Despite being intended for diplomatic purposes, many of China's wolf warrior campaigns have played a larger role in domestic publicity as a proof that China is not afraid to show its teeth and the party is resolute to lead the Chinese people against any external enemy.

This paper aims to dive deep into the PESD mode in China. The rest of the paper starts with an illustration on how the PESD mode is being used in China's domestic publicity today. Then, taking theoretical insights from the scholarship on Chinese nationalism and the legitimacy of CPC, the paper examines why the domestic use of external publicity has become the choice of the Chinese government and the CPC. The analysis will be unfolded in three dimensions which discuss the social, political, and institutional basis of the PESD mode in China respectively. On top of that, the paper will evaluate the effects of the PESD mode thus far and identify challenges facing it today. Through the study of the PESD mode, we are able to have a better understanding on both China's domestic governance and diplomatic strategies.

### **PESD Mode: Implication and Methodology**

As stated in the previous section, one primary purpose of the hard-line wolf-warrior diplomacy is to legitimize the CPC rule in the eyes of domestic Chinese population, despite the negative effects it brings to China in the international arena. Since Xi Jinping took power and demonstrated an intention of catering domestic nationalistic sentiment, three approaches have been adopted predominantly in nationwide publicity.

First, wolf warrior campaigns have been widely disseminated across national media as well as the largest social platforms in China, for example, Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin (Chinese version of Tik Tok). Some of the most popular topics for such media coverage include strident responses of foreign ministry spokespersons and other diplomats over perceived "foreign provocations", reciprocal punitive actions against unfriendly countries and entities (e.g. tariff imposition on the US amid the China-US trade war), and pro-China comments from prominent foreigners. Those contents are usually with an eye-catching title, and in a concise and often emotional manner for larger circulation. Apart from texts, alternative forms such as cartoons and videos are also used for more vivid illustration. The strategy proves to be effective, as many pieces created therein have reached over one million views, while the kind as a whole are also averaged at a remarkable readership of around 10 thousand.

Second, the Chinese government has constantly and subtly made reference to the "century of humiliation" in reaction to the discontent expressed by Western targets of the wolf warriors. In the party's narrative, wolf warrior diplomacy is frequently connected to China's "century of humiliation", including the European invasions of the Opium Wars and the Japanese invasion during the Second World War, before which China considered itself "the center of the world". The reference to historical events is intended to appeal to domestic nationalistic sentiments, reopen the narcissistic wound, and eventually direct the frustration and anger of

Chinese population against “external enemies” (Brugier, 2021). Some anti-Japanese and anti-Western remarks from and campaigns organized by the Chinese nationalists were found to have the government’s acquiescence and even its encouragement (Weiss, 2013). As the intended targets of this narrative are the Chinese population, it is useful to show strength of China today in comparison of it in the past. Those efforts include the country’s world-leading economic growth, efficiency in constructing infrastructure, and effectiveness in managing COVID-19 compared to the West. The reference made to the century of humiliation may not be well known to audience outside China; however, it is sensitive to the Chinese government insofar as it is important to the general public in China and plays a pivotal role in keeping the CPC in power.

Third, the Chinese government has sent periodic reminders of the cultural divide, emphasizing the unbridgeable gap between us (the Chinese people) and them (the West). This sort of argument serves as a classic lever of Chinese publicity. By highlighting the alleged cultural divide between China and the West, the Chinese authority puts forward the argument of cultural misunderstanding to defend itself from criticism made by Western media. One example, as put by Anne Cheng, a professor at the Collège de France, is that the Chinese government explained that China does not need Western democracy with cultural argument, pretexting such institution is not part of Chinese culture. Another prominent argument with regard to the cultural difference is to portray China’s diplomatic strikes as defensive, which the Chinese alleged to be part of Chinese strategic culture. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (2020) underlined this aspect by saying that “We do not pick fights or bully others, but we have principles and guts. We will push back against any deliberate insult to resolutely defend our national honor and dignity”.

With the three approaches combined, the Chinese government is able to establish a set of tactics in which diplomatic and foreign-related campaigns and policies serve as a source for domestic publicity. Nonetheless, it is still inadequate to answer why the government chooses to cater domestic nationalism by adopting the PESD mode and waging a publicity war in the cost of its relations with the West. The following sections will explore the underlying reasoning behind China’s choice, where the arguments focus on the three dimensions of the mode’s basis in China, namely the political, ideological, and organizational bases.

### **Political Basis: China’s Priority Over Domestic Governance**

The Chinese society has notably distinguished itself from other major civilizations and empires with its incredible degree of political centralization ever since the first successful attempt to unify entire China by Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, in 221 BC. Despite the oscillation between great unifications (dayitong) and war-torn divisions throughout the country’s 2,000-year imperial history, China managed to remain a highly stabilized, top-down administrative structure, primarily due to its relatively isolated geopolitical environment from other civilizations, well-developed communication and transportation lines within the Chinese territories, and the nature of ancient China as a great agricultural empire (Jin & Liu, 1992; Chen & Han, 2005). The highly stable system had been basically supported by several pillars including a team of professional bureaucrats, a centralized financial system, and the Confucianist ideology which emphasized the obedience and loyalty to the monarch. To maintain their dominance over the country, generations of Chinese rulers were driven to place most of their focus on domestic governance.

Guided by the principle, the diplomacy of ancient China, represented by the China-centered “tributary system” in East Asia, served more as a basis for legitimacy of the emperor’s rule at home, based on China as the fountainhead of more virtual and civilization, while Chinese rulers were as the governors of all under the

heaven (tianxia) (Khong, 2013). Even when the narrative of Chinese superiority could not be reconciled with China's actual foreign policy, as historians have observed, it was significant to be maintained for domestic politics. According to Joseph Fletcher (2013), the myth of world suzerainty per se was a crucial ideological instrument for ruling China,

The first decades of the People's Republic of China were accompanied by a spate of communist political movements under the direction of Mao Zedong, the country's founding leader and Chairman of the CPC. When the ideology-oriented years ended following Mao's death, China had been long torn by social unrest caused by large-scale mass movements, and was stuck in economic under-development. Party elders headed by Deng Xiaoping were finally able to take over national politics and began to restore economy and order nationwide. However, once traditional mechanisms of social control, such as the household registration system (hujia) and the employment control system (danwei) started to be weakened as a result of economic and social reforms, crime and protests had become more widespread compared with the Mao era, and combined to breed new challenges to the social order. Perceiving the growing social unrest as a threat to government authority and image, the Chinese leadership has taken strict measures to preserve social order.

Deng Xiaoping (1989) famously described his view on social order as "stability above all", noting that a stable domestic environment is imperative for China's development, which shall be the key to the country's most problems. For more than a decade since 1980s, the core elements of Chinese public policy came to be summarized as "strike hard" against crime and destabilizing factors or yanda. Three main waves of yanda were launched in 1983, 1996, and 2001 respectively by the central government of China (Benney, 2016). Along with yanda was the decisive and immediate repression of mass incidents, notably including two widespread student demonstrations in 1986 and 1989 (Pantsov & Levine, 2015; Vogel, 2011), and several riots by minority ethnics (Barnett, 2010; Gladney, 1996).

The "stability above all" guideline became even more significant when it matched with Deng's "low-profile diplomacy" which kept China distant from international affairs to concentrate on domestic governance (Liu, 2007). Nonetheless, diplomacy was still playing a role in China's domestic politics, as nationalism began to rise as a major source of legitimacy of the Chinese government, in place of the communist ideology during the Mao era.

When Xi Jinping's term as the paramount leader of China started in 2013, the domestic situation facing him was different from that of Deng. China had become the world's second largest economy after three decades of rapid growth and the life standard of ordinary Chinese been improved considerably. The stability of China was threatened, however, by intensified social conflicts from ubiquitous corruption of government officials, extensive brutal law enforcement, growing income inequality, among others (Kan, 2013). Their threat to social stability was further amplified with the rise of internet across China in early 2000s, which allows more timely spread of information. In response, Xi initiated his flagship anti-corruption campaigns (Brown, 2018; Tian, 2021) and anti-crime "sweeping black" campaign on the one hand, while he tried to mitigate social conflicts by provoking nationalism on the other. As Down (1999) suggested, nationalism, as a key source of the legitimacy of the Chinese government and CPC today, aims to keep China stable by convincing the Chinese population on two things: (1) The under-developed status of China today has been related to foreign invasions and hostility past and present; (2) China's problems are only temporary and bound to be solved under the leadership of the CPC, as demonstrated by the miraculous growth achieved over the past decades.

In all, the preference on domestic stability has been essential in analyzing the political logic of China. It is observed that China's diplomacy has been closely related to its domestic governance and served the legitimacy of those who govern. For this reason, there is no independent foreign policy in China. Instead, the influence of Chinese diplomatic practices is to be examined not only from the international perspective, but the domestic.

### **Ideological Basis: Nationalism as a Source of CPC Legitimacy**

Nationalism has been long serving the Communist Party of China as a pillar for its rule over China. As early as the party proclaimed the foundation of the People's Republic of China following its nationwide victory in the civil war, nationalism started to play a role in the legitimacy of the CPC, when the party described the result of the war a victory over imperialism and its agents in China. Throughout the first three decades of People's Republic of China (PRC) under the reign of Mao Zedong, nationalist rhetoric remained centered in the politics of China despite the rise of communist ideologies galvanized by political movements since the late 1950s. This culminated at China's split with the Soviet Union, a long-time ideological ally of the CPC back to the party's early years and "center of the (communist) world revolution", as Chinese leaders believed the Soviet leadership was trying to maintain the bilateral alliance in the cost of China's national interests (Shen, 2019; Zhu, 2001).

The dominance of nationalism was further consolidated since the rise of Deng Xiaoping and the series of far-reaching political and economic reforms initiated by the former since the late 1970s. Although the party still rhetorically insists Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong Thought as its guiding principle, there has been a wide consensus among scholars that such ideologies have become obsolete in China and the country's adherence to classic communist doctrines been largely devoid of economic content. As a result, efforts have been observed from the Chinese government to promote nationalism as an informal state belief (Downs & Saunders, 1999; Shen, 2004).

The traditional ideological focus on class struggle and state ownership of capital clashes with the government's policies emphasize the role of market and opening to foreign capital. Rampant corruption, widespread unemployment, and periodic inflation took place as China turned sharply into market system (Downs & Saunders, 1999). Therefore, the Chinese leaders had to look for a new source of legitimacy and nationalism proved to be the choice, though its meaning was upgraded from what had been interpreted in the Mao era. The government continues to highlight the party's success in repelling imperialism and building China into a powerful state. On the other hand, economic growth achieved since the market reform started to be emphasized to claim that the political stability under the CPC rule is necessary for further development of the country and continued improvement of Chinese people's living standard. In addition, the "century of humiliation" has been readdressed as a direct result of imperialist invasion, exploitation, and intervention, to counter any Western attempt to challenge the Chinese government in the public opinion front of China.

Since Xi Jinping was inaugurated in 2013, nationalism had been observed to take a larger weight within official rhetoric and publicity of the Chinese government. Chinese nationalism under Xi's term distinguishes itself with massive internet publicity campaigns and the rapid rise of cyber-nationalism. As a new type of nationalism, cyber-nationalism is characterized with nationalistic groups that gather online to perform defensive actions to their own countries and aggression to countries considered rivalry to the former (Jiang, 2012). The Chinese government's attitude towards cyber-nationalism is in general no different from that for other forms of nationalism. In short, patriotism (*aiguo zhuyi*) has been the officially preferred version to define

the nationalist sentiment of the Chinese people (Zhu, 2001). This again links nationalism to the loyalty to the CPC and the state amid conflicts with foreign rivals. One important feature that makes cyber-nationalism compelling to the Chinese authority is its extremely high accessibility, in particular after smartphone and mobile network becomes popular across China since 2010s (Wu, 2007; Zheng, 2020).

Nationalism has played an essential role in legitimizing the CPC rule upon the foundation of the communist regime. It became particularly relevant when China turned into a more pragmatic way of development since the Deng Xiaoping era and needed an alternative in place of the communist ideology. Combined with the harsh law enforcement, nationalism serves as the pillars for social stability of China today, the highest goal of Chinese politics as stated in the previous section.

### **Organizational Basis: The Dichotomy of China's Publicity System**

With all the necessity of including diplomacy in domestic governance, the PESD mode is only able to run with the support of China's publicity system (*xuanchuan xitong*), a set of sprawling bureaucratic institutions extending into nearly every government-related medium concerned with the dissemination of information (Shambaugh, 2017). Through an extensive state-running network of newspapers, radios, television channels, magazines, and other news and media departments, the publicity system transmits and conveys information to the people of China and the rest of the world. Originated from the publicity organs of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) back to the party's early years, China's publicity system continues to serve the interests of the CPC after the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and, as pointed out by the party's General Secretary Xi Jinping, act as the "publicity front" of the party and government" (Xinhuanet, 2018).

Empirically, the enormous Chinese publicity system is observed to be divided into two separate but interrelated sub-systems by several authoritative sources, namely internal and external publicity (Lian, 2016; Guo, 2012; Jiang, 2021) in accordance with the target audience of each medium, though not officially interpreted. Both sub-systems lie under the purview of the Central Publicity Department of the CPC, while the dichotomy can be found across the functions of the department. Both the internal and external fronts are set to "implement the party's principles and decisions for publicity work and formulate them into policies and development plans". The internal system, directed domestically, is charged to "coordinate ideological work", "analyze and guide public opinion" as well as "administer the work of press, radio, television, and coordinate the development of the cultural industry", while the external system, with a more slim and general description of functions, intends to "carry out external-oriented publicity, guide foreign cultural exchanges and coordinate the international promotion of Chinese culture" (CPC Central Committee, 2021).

The external publicity work in modern China is entrusted with four principal missions (Shambaugh, 2017): (1) to tell the world about the "China story" which primarily refers to Chinese government policies, perspectives, and culture; (2) to strike back foreign propaganda perceived to be anti-China; (3) to counter Taiwan independence initiatives in any form; and (4) to publicize China's foreign policy (Central Propaganda Department Cadre Bureau Writing Group, 2006). Out of the four missions, the second and the fourth are more relevant in the domestic-oriented PESD mode that intends to demonstrate the Chinese government's resolution in struggling with foreign provocations and defending China's interests.

The dichotomic arrangement can hardly work without the Chinese government ban over virtually all press and social media based outside mainland China, which is often referred to as the "Great Firewall of China" (Clayton, Murdoch, & Watson, 2006). With the existence of the ban, the government is able to effectively

dominate the narratives on foreign affairs by segregating the Chinese population from foreign sources and even China's own external publicity. Instead, international news is exclusively reported by the internal publicity institutions, where all reports and literatures that hold different opinions and narratives from the official tones are likely to be removed across the Chinese internet to keep the publicity dichotomy running (Griffiths, 2021).

To sum up, the dichotomy of internal and external publicity has designated missions for each of China's state-running media outlet, where the external department is put in charge of China's international public opinion struggle. Under the PESD mode, outputs of the external system are often recycled for domestic publicity. The arrangement is made running by the Great Firewall ban which has ensured the government monopoly on foreign affairs. The internal and external publicity organs combined have provided organizational support for the PESD mode.

### **Evaluation of the PESD Mode: Effects and Challenges**

The triad of bases regarding politics, ideology, and organization has been essential in the implementation of the PESD mode in China. The use of the mode is becoming increasingly compelling after Xi Jinping started his paramount leadership. Through empirical evidence from China, primarily effects of the PESD mode on China's public policy and public opinion, as well as relevant scholarly works, this section will evaluate how the PESD mode is working in China currently. The potential challenges facing the mode will also be elaborated for analysis.

First and foremost, the images of the Chinese government and the CPC have been greatly improved in Chinese public opinion. As Bhattacharya (2019) suggested, the Chinese nationalism was in parallel with the trend of globalization since 1990s, under the leadership of Xi Jinping's two predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Going along with the globalization in economy was the introduction of Western ideology that called for a more libertarian society and democratic political institution. Along with the widespread corruption and violent law enforcement, the popularity of the Chinese government was exacerbating, and the one-party institutions were under severe threats. Since the PESD mode was adopted as part of the Xi government's publicity campaigns, the authority of and domestic support to the government have been remarkably improved. The campaigns are so successful that a significant portion of the Chinese population, especially from the younger generations, has been converted into nationalistic loyalist to the government, a group often referred to as the "little pink" (xiaofenhong) (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Wang & Li, 2021).

The PESD mode has also made certain policies and government decisions easier to be accepted and win public support. The victory in the "public opinion battlefield" has provided the Chinese government with greater flexibility over domestic governance, as the Chinese people tend to have more acceptances on its policy making. For instance, with the domestic support unprecedented since the retirement of Deng Xiaoping and other party elders, Xi managed to complete a historical constructional revision that removed presidential term limits, in contrast to the political arrangement designed by Deng Xiaoping. Though having provoked tremendous shock home and abroad, a number of Chinese nationalists tried to legitimize the move with the benefits brought by the longer term to a potential war to capture Taiwan in the future (Han, 2021). Similar phenomenon was also found during the 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition protest, where most Chinese netizens appeared to be aligned with the Chinese government against the protesters, condemning the protester for "colluding with the West and betraying the motherland", and Western countries for taking double standards (Davidson, 2020; Outlook, 2021; Law, 2021).

Despite the huge benefits brought over, the PESD mode is far from a perfect one. A number of challenges and shortcomings are being observed facing the strategy. First, the extensive publicity boasting the superiority of China's institutions or the "China model" over the West has increased the expectation for the government, under which even a minor mistake within policy decision or execution is likely to raise widespread scepticism on the entire publicity system, and further towards the government per se. The 2022 COVID-19 outbreak in Shanghai has exemplified the concern, where millions of Chinese netizens were irritated by the Shanghai government's policy failure during the lockdown (Bloomberg News, 2022).

Second, the rising nationalism is limiting China's foreign policy making. Since 2018, the Chinese government has boycotted a few foreign companies and brands for their perceived "anti-China activities", including Dolce and Gabbana, NBA, and Adidas. When the government decided to restore relay for NBA games, the astonished netizens began to suspect the government's resolution and reputation (Shangmolvxingzhe, 2020; Conggushuoqiu, 2022).

Last, as the PESD mode is principally supported by censorship over media across China, the increasingly strict media control is generating discount. Since 2010s, China's publicity authority has gradually banned overseas social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. In 2021, WeChat, the most widely used social media in China with more than one billion users, was divided into two versions for users inside and outside Chinese mainland respectively according to their registered mobile number (Zhihu, 2021). One of the main targets of the PESD mode, the younger generations, is likely to be pissed off by the pervasive censorship, as they are better educated compared to their parents and grandparents, possess stronger consciousness of individual rights and freedom, and are more keen to know about the rest of the world.

### Conclusion

This paper has studied the origins, approaches, effects, and challenges of the PESD mode, a strategy adopted by the Chinese government in which the hardline "wolf-worrier" diplomacy is intended for domestic publicity. With its three bases inherent in Chinese politics and society, namely the priority over domestic governance, nationalism as a main source of legitimacy, and dichotomy of internal and external publicity, the PESD mode is able to be long sustained in the country. It is observed that the PESD mode has played a major role in increasing the domestic support for the Chinese government and the ruling CPC, and can promote certain government policies in the Chinese society. The mode is also facing a few challenges currently, which might be threats to the future implementation of the PESD mode.

Despite the contribution on studies over Chinese diplomacy and domestic governance, this paper is still among first attempts in marrying China's diplomatic practices to its domestic policy, and thus not further into more detailed analysis and research. Subsequent research is needed in the future to conceptualize the relationship between China's domestic governance and foreign policy with more theorized frameworks, instead merely based on empirical observations. Furthermore, the reverse effect, i.e. how domestic policy influences China's diplomacy, is yet to be explored. Through studies on the interaction of China's internal and external policy, we are able to better understand the uniqueness of the politics of China.

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