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# Public diplomacy in a networked society: The Chinese government–NGO coalition network on acquired immune deficiency syndrome prevention

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## Abstract

In the era of globalization, the line between domestic and international communication is becoming increasingly blurred. Public diplomacy communication is one such case. Public diplomacy has evolved from a focus on mass media to communication efforts to build transnational communication networks of relationships with respected international non-governmental organizations. This article explores how the Chinese government communicated with and collaborated with transnational human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome international non-governmental organizations. The findings of a network analysis of Chinese-international non-governmental organizations public diplomacy suggest that the Chinese government is strategically communicating with international organizations to help address a domestic issue. Additionally, the findings of a content analysis of international media coverage of China's management of the human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome issue suggest that more positive frames are occurring in the news. China is now viewed as making progress in its handling of the health crisis.

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**Keywords**

AIDS prevention, international communication, networks, NGOs, public diplomacy, soft power

**Introduction**

Public diplomacy is an important part of international and intercultural communication (DeMars, 2005; Nye, 2008). Governments across the world use public diplomacy communication and activities to build a positive image with publics of other nations. Public diplomacy efforts seek to influence foreign publics, so that they may influence their own government's actions toward another nation. Traditionally, public diplomacy efforts have blended both interpersonal and mass communication tactics. Governments have used mass communication including radio (Clark and Werder, 2007), satellite television (Fahmy et al., 2012), print opinion pieces, and editorials (Golan, 2012; Yang et al., 2012) to build positive national images. On the interpersonal side, cultural exchanges and travel tours (Nye, 2008) have also been used to build relations. Today, social media and social networking are included in a more diverse toolkit of tactics for nations to communicate with foreign citizens (Zaharna, 2013).

In a network society, governments are networked by communication and dependent on other actors (Castells, 2008). We argue that public diplomacy as a form of international communication can also be examined at the organizational level by studying the networks connecting governments and organizational actors. At the heart of this study, approach is to go beyond public diplomacy as a form of national image building technique, but also explores how governments build relationships with influential civil society actors at home and abroad (Fitzpatrick, 2007). As pointed out by Melissen (2005: 23), 'In order to safeguard their interests in a globalized world, countries need "permanent friends" in other nations'. As important actors in the international communication arena, nation states and NGOs are interdependent at multiple levels (Castells, 2009). Therefore, nation states' communication with NGOs is an important reflection of the globalization process with considerable social significance. A study of communicative actions between nation states and NGOs enriches our understanding of one important aspect of international communication.

We argue that for nation states, the strategic value of alignment with NGOs can best be explained through public diplomacy. Today, in the era of globalization, distinctions between domestic and international communication are often difficult to define. In this article, we propose the concept of the soft power network approach to public diplomacy and apply the concept to study how the Chinese government involves international actors in one domestic issue to boost China's international image. We examine a network approach to public diplomacy in a networked society: building strategic alliances with international NGOs. The emergence of a network approach to public diplomacy reflects a broad recognition of

the power and importance of international networks in the current network society. To demonstrate the network structure and its impact, we utilized two research methods: network analysis and a content analysis of international press coverage about China's human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) issue. The end result of the two studies provides a picture of the communication between the Chinese government and INGOs in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

## **Toward a soft power network approach of public diplomacy**

### *Public diplomacy: An overview*

The core idea of public diplomacy 'is one of direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking and, ultimately, that of their governments' (Malone, 1985: 199). During the Cold War era, a mass communication-oriented approach to public diplomacy emerged. After the Cold War ended, nations, organizations, as well as individuals found themselves living in a much more interconnected world; thanks to the accelerating trends of globalization and technology innovation. Mass media are no longer the only or default means to reach a mass audience as changes in global politics. Nation-states and diplomats need to explore a new approach that 'recognizes the complex architecture of the multi-hub, multi-directional networks that exist between communities around the world' (Zaharna et al., 2013: 1). These networks are created, sustained, and changed by various types of intercultural and international communication. In this article, we study an alternative approach to public diplomacy that addresses some of the aforementioned challenges to the mass communication approach to public diplomacy. By extending our understanding of communication from mass communication messages to communication networks, we contribute to an updated understanding of public diplomacy as an international communication phenomenon.

### *A soft power network approach to public diplomacy*

To properly understand the network approach to public diplomacy, it is necessary to first briefly introduce the discussion of global network society and the power of international communication networks. Castells (2008) argues that in the contemporary society, core communicative activities are globalized and networked. Castells (2002: 696) conceptualizes social processes and institutions as 'expressions of networks'. The comparative value of individuals, organizations, and nation states depends on if they can be included in important networks. What can be considered as valuable in networks is not static, but constantly 'programmed' in networks (Castells, 2008: 81).

In a network society, governments, like any other organizations, institutions, or individuals, are networked by communication and dependent on other actors (Castells, 2008; Chang et al., 2009). At the international level, governments are

members of governmental organizations and treaties and rely on the authorities of this international polity to advance their interests. Nation-states increasingly form dense networks of international institutions, supranational organizations, and networks of states to deal with global issues. Some nation states also actively form cooperative networks with NGOs. At the domestic level, governments are subject to pressure from business and interests groups, and their power is sometimes challenged by social movements. Even for semi-authoritarian governments such as the Chinese government, international pressure can be transmitted into a domestic force due to network interdependency.

From a public diplomacy standpoint, the legitimacy of many governments no longer solely depends on their internal factors but also on their relationships with other actors (Yang et al., 2012). For countries that seek to enhance their international influence and improve their image and recognition in the global public discourse, being imbedded in well-respected international networks can be crucial.

It is against the backdrop of global network society that we conceptualize the *Soft Power Network* approach to public diplomacy. This approach primarily aims at enhancing nation-states' soft power, and it achieves this goal by recognizing that there are many entities engaging in public diplomacy, and each diplomatic action can serve multiple objectives. Specifically, this approach acknowledges the instrumental value of non-state actors such as nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations (NGOs, hereafter). In addition, the Soft Power Network Approach maintains that to effectively engage NGOs, governments should shift their focus from sending out information to public in other nations to building a collaborative network that facilitates and fulfills the objectives of all of the partners.

First, enhancing a country's soft power can be understood as one important goal of public diplomacy. Nye (2004, 2009) coined the term, soft power, to refer to nations' ability to influence diplomatic decisions by shaping foreign public opinion on policies, international agreements, or trade pacts. It is often a change in a nation's *policies* that are the real end of public diplomacy messages and activities. Second, the Soft Power Network Approach recognizes that public diplomacy is not only conducted by nations, but also by organizations that operate globally (including multinational corporations such as Nike and international NGOs such as International Olympic Committee, World Health Organization (WHO), and Greenpeace).

International organizations engage governments and publics in other nations through many different types of communication—interpersonal, organizational, mediated, and mass. Zaharna (2013: 176) identified a network-based typology of public diplomacy tactics that:

'can range from creating awareness (e.g., raising public consciousness about a political or social issue), informing (e.g., circulating information on education, culture, science, or policy), influencing (e.g., shaping attitudes and behavioral preferences, cultivating shared norms or values), advocacy (e.g., calls to action around a policy agenda), collaboration (e.g., working together toward a shared outcome), or innovation (e.g., knowledge generation or problem solving)'.

One aspect of the Soft Power Network Approach is its emphasis on governments communicating with and creating relationships with international non-profit and non-government organizations (INGOs). The next section further discusses the role of NGOs in international relationships.

### *The role of NGOs in public diplomacy*

NGOs are not-for-profit and private organizations pursuing issues of societal and even global influence (Beckfield, 2003; Castells, 2004), and they are important parts of the global civil network (Alexander, 2006). The value of involving NGOs in public diplomacy efforts arises from NGOs' unique credibility, expertise, and access to local community and international resources. First, it is often difficult for governments to communicate with foreign publics, especially when there are great cultural or ideological differences between countries (e.g., Western countries and Middle Eastern countries). It is also difficult to ensure that information is received in the way that it was intended because people are inclined to be suspicious of foreign officials' motives.

Second, NGOs are often formed by experts in certain areas (Yang, 2012). Their expertise makes them relevant and credible to speak and act on a problem. When the situation involves specific knowledge (e.g., health, landmines and child labor), people are more likely to turn to experts rather than diplomats for information. Therefore, working with NGOs will help diplomatic messages be sent by perceived experts. The public perception of greater expertise may encourage greater acceptance of the message. The case study below explores one example of government public diplomacy that builds relationships with transnational organizations to improve its communicative relationships with citizens living in other nations.

## **Case description**

### *Public diplomacy efforts to enhance the international image of China*

China has undertaken an ambitious program of public diplomacy that uses traditional and new public diplomacy models (Kurlantzick, 2006). Yet, studies continue to find negative coverage of China by the Western media (Cao, 2012; Goodman, 1998; Liang, 2002; Peng, 2004). To improve its national image, the Chinese government has increased the investment in public diplomacy efforts (Yang et al., 2012). One issue addressed by public diplomacy is HIV/AIDS.

### *The HIV/AIDS issue in China*

The HIV (the virus that causes AIDS)/AIDS epidemic is a global public health issue. China, with the second largest HIV/AIDS population in Asia and the 14th in the world, faces a severe challenge. If and how the Chinese government can

effectively combat this epidemic will affect the international image of the country. In China, the first AIDS case was detected in 1985, and the number had risen to 840,000 by 2004 (Wu et al., 2004). After two decades, nearly 1 million people are affected. The HIV/AIDS epidemic in China mainly affects specific geographical areas and certain social groups (e.g., injection drug users, sex workers, homosexuals, and commercial plasma donors).

The government's initial response in the 1990s and early 2000s lacked honesty, transparency, and compassion. It marginalized those affected and persecuted activists that worked to bring the issue to national and international audiences. In the last decade, the government started to proactively address the issue by placing a higher priority on HIV/AIDS prevention and control and increasing government funds for AIDS control programs. The government also has recognized that the issue may provide opportunity for international cooperation and has invited organizations such as WHO, the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS, and the U.S. CDC to collaborate on projects (Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004). The next section of this article explores these partnerships.

### **Research questions**

The Chinese government engaged INGOs in its domestic HIV/AIDS battle. Working with respected INGOs provides several benefits. First, the Chinese government brings in the expertise and resources of INGOs. Second, it shows critics in other nations, and other national governments, that it is working on the problem. To better understand the communicative relationships amongst the Chinese government and INGOs, this case study inquires about the types of collaborations between the Chinese government and international NGOs.

RQ1: What types of collaborations are enacted between the Chinese government and the international NGO community on the AIDS topic?

The second research question explores if there has been any improved perceptions of the Chinese government's handling of the HIV/AIDS issue by the international press. Wu (2006) identified three negative frames that dominated Western media coverage of the HIV/AIDS issue in China. This study examines international media news stories about HIV/AIDS in China in 2012 to look for any changes or new frames.

RQ2: What frames have been used to describe the recent Chinese government response to HIV/AIDS in the international media?

Together, the answers to the research questions provide insight into the practices of Chinese public diplomacy around the HIV/AIDS issue and identify recent changes in media coverage. The methodology of the study is outlined below.

## Methods

### *Triangulating methods*

This article employed two methods to explore how the Chinese government communicated with HIV/AIDS INGOs: network analysis and content analysis.

### *Chinese government–NGOs' coalition network*

Network analysis methodology allows researchers to measure communication activities among organizations. To identify a comprehensive as possible list of international NGOs and partnership/projects, archive data about Chinese government's collaboration with NGOs were gathered from three information sources: the official website of The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, the official website of Ministry of Health of the People's Republic of China (the official governmental agency in charge of health related issues in China), and the official website of National Center for AIDS/STD Control and Prevention, China CDC (the official governmental agency in charge of AIDS/STD related issues in China). These government agencies lead AIDS prevention.

The researchers used the keywords: AIDS (Aizhibing) and international (Guoji) to search for government briefing/records about international collaborations on AIDS issues. Overall, 74 entries in 2012 were identified from the Government website, 17 article were found on the China CDC website, and 45 articles were downloaded from the Ministry of Health website.

The researchers read those articles to identify the names of INGOs/IGOs, Chinese NGOs, and collaborative activities/projects. Once the names of participating organizations and projects/initiatives were identified, the researchers constructed an affiliation network. Affiliation networks are two-mode networks that study the dual perspectives of actors and events (Borgatti and Halgin, 2011). Affiliation networks examine actors and events as a coherent system and show how social relationships among actors can be created through their participation in social events. This feature of the affiliation network helps to capture how the Chinese government created a public diplomatic network around the AIDS/HIV issue through hosting/participating social events/programs. The connections among different organizations are established based on their participation in the same activity, and the coding of the matrix is based on the following scheme

$$a_{ij} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if actor } i \text{ is affiliated with event } j \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Furthermore, to study the purpose of Chinese network initiatives, this project adopted Zaharna's (2013) analytic framework and coded three communication-based public diplomacy activities: (a) *Networks of awareness* are dedicated to disseminating information (e.g., educational programs). (b) *Networks of influence* aim

to change attitudes or behaviors (e.g., campaigns that involve the general publics or people with HIV and aim at changing their attitudes or behaviors). (c) *Networks of exchange* aim to facilitate the exchange of information and resources (e.g., conferences or meetings that facilitate the relationship building between the Chinese government and other organizations). Furthermore, as noted by Zaharna, 'A careful analysis should identify as many dimensions as possible, particularly the sponsor's and key stakeholders' underlying goals' (Zaharna, 2013: 176). Therefore, these categories are not mutually exclusive, and a collaborative initiative can serve multiple purposes across the three areas.

### *The international media's discourse about Chinese government's AIDS prevention*

Public diplomacy efforts seek to improve a country's national image (Peng, 2004), and most people learn about other nations from the media. The media play an important role in framing how citizens in one nation perceive the policies and actions of another country. Furthermore, news frames are embodied not necessarily in evaluative statements or judgments, but rather in 'key words, metaphors, concepts, symbols and visual images emphasized in a news narrative' (Entman, 1991: 7).

To understand how international media frame China's efforts in HIV/AIDS, the sample included international media articles about the HIV/AIDS issue in China (published between January 1, 2012 and December 31, 2012). Stories were retrieved from the online LexisNexis academic database. Search words of 'HIV/AIDS and China' were used. This study is a replication and extension of Wu (2006). Wu (2006) employed a qualitative method to analyze 29 Associated Press news articles reporting about China's handling of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Research has found a declining trend of HIV/AIDS coverage since the late-1980s, and in 2012, there were only a handful of AP articles covering AIDS in China. To gain a large enough sample for analysis, the researchers cast a wider net and found 23 articles in international outlets including the Associated Press, Agence France Press, Philippines News Agency, and Straits Times (Singapore).

The researchers conducted an intercoder reliability test to ensure that Wu's (2006) and any new categories were mutually exclusive and exhaustive. To ensure reliability, two independent coders analyzed six randomly selected news stories published in 2011 that met the criteria for selection ( $K\alpha = 8.28$ ).

Specifically, for HIV/AIDS issues, Wu (2006) found that three frames are often used by Western media to cover HIV/AIDS issues in China:

*Dishonesty/oppression frame.* Casting of the Chinese government's dishonest and oppressive nature in dealing with this crucial public health issue.

*Human rights abuser frame.* The social problem of HIV/AIDS in China is framed as the Chinese government's constant harassment of activists who have demanded



human rights for AIDS patients and truth about AIDS in China. The rights of HIV/AIDS victims are violated through detention, loss of jobs, and loss of basic human rights.

*Incompetence frame.* It depicts an incompetent and passive government in the face of social crisis. People are still ignorant about the basic knowledge of HIV/AIDS because of the government's passive reaction and insufficient efforts.

Additionally, two news frames were added to the content analysis reflecting potential changes in media coverage:

*Progress frame.* It depicts the Chinese government as working to improve services and treatment of HIV/AIDS victims. Articles identify changes to government policies, improved legal protection, and government leaders interact with people with HIV/AIDS.

*Engagement frame.* It depicts the Chinese government working directly with domestic or foreign NGOs to improve services for HIV victims. This frame includes discussions of joint activities such as conferences, meetings, and workshops. This frame also shows China working with the UN or helping African or neighboring nations in their struggle against AIDS.

Articles could include more than one frame or use a frame more than once. The researchers counted frames only once per story, even if the same frame occurred two or more times per story. A news story could include up to five frames. Together, the network and the content analyses provide insight into the Chinese government's relationships with INGOS and show how recent media reports in the English language press portrayed the government's management of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

## Results

RQ1 directs attention to the different types of collaborations that were enacted between the Chinese government and the international community on the AIDS topic. To answer this question, we adopted Zaharna's (2013) analytic framework for analyzing collaborative public diplomacy networks to explore the network structure, purpose of networks, and the communication dynamics.

### *Communication networks*

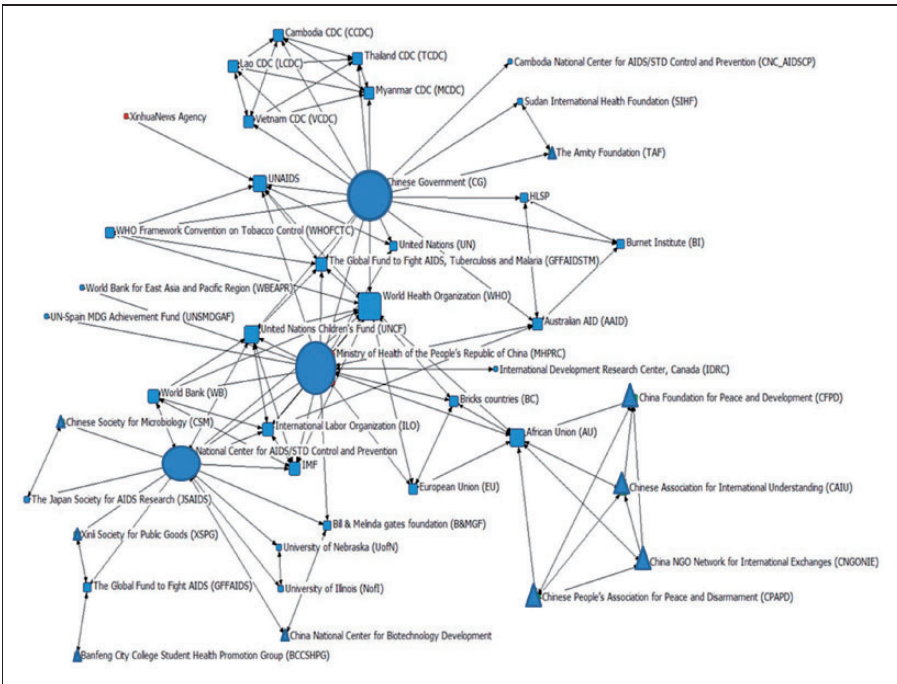
This analytic framework begins by identifying key participants and structural characteristics of a public diplomatic network. For the current study, three groups of key participants were identified through the Chinese government archive (see Table 1 and Figure 1 for details and illustration of actor's relationships). The three groups of key participants of this network include 4 Chinese government agencies, 31 INGOs and IGOs, and 9 Chinese NGOs. Furthermore, as illustrated

**Table 1.** Key participants of the Chinese government's AIDS/HIV Public Diplomacy Issue Network.

Chinese government agencies	International NGOs and GOs	Chinese NGOs
Chinese Government, Ministry of Health of the People's Republic of China, National Center for AIDS/STD Control and Prevention, Xinhua News Agency.	African Union, Australian AID, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Bricks Countries Health Institutions, Burnet Institute, Cambodia CDC, Cambodia National Center for AIDS/STD Control and Prevention, European Union, HLSP, International Development Research Center, Canada, International Labor Organization, International Monetary Fund, Lao CDC, Myanmar CDC, Sudan International Health Foundation, Thailand CDC, The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, The Japan Society for AIDS Research, United Nations, UNAIDS, United Nations Children's Fund, UN-Spain MDG Achievement Fund, University of Nebraska, University of Illinois, Vietnam CDC, World Bank, World Bank for East Asia and Pacific Region, WHO, WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.	Banfeng City College Student Health Promotion Group, China Foundation for Peace and Development, China NGO Network for International Exchanges, Chinese Anti-AIDS Association, Chinese Association for International Understanding, Chinese People's Association for Peace and Disarmament, Chinese Society for Microbiology, The Amity Foundation, Xinli Society for Public Goods.

in Figure 1, this public diplomatic network included both state and nonstate actors. Many of these actors, such as *WHO* and *United Nations Children's Fund*, were not passive audiences, but active network members who also attempted to accomplish their goals in this network. Three Chinese government agencies, the Central Chinese Government, Ministry of Health, and Chinese CDC, played 'sponsor' role in this network while coordinate with each other. A group of Chinese NGOs also play a small role in this network.

Furthermore, to understand the network's structural features of this affiliation network, several two-mode network-analytic procedures were performed. First, a



**Figure 1.** Key participants of the Chinese Government's AIDS/HIV public diplomatic issue network. \*Circle nodes designate chinese government agencies. Square nodes designate International NGOs and governmental organizations (GOs). Triangle nodes designate Chinese NGOs.

correspondence analysis was used to examine the underlying dimension of a two-mode network and scaled the similarity among events and actors based on their participation patterns. Since this dataset is binary, the distributional assumption of correspondence analysis is more appropriate than other methods (Borgatti and Halgin, 2011). The analysis suggests considerable dimensional complexity in the joint variance of actors and events, suggesting that actors and events cannot be grouped according to simple patterns. A total of 27 factors were identified and the first 10 factors only explain 52.4% of the variance. However, when separating events and actors, factor loading is much clearer for the events (coordination based on the co-participation of actors). As illustrated in Figure 2, the plot of actors and events shows roughly three dimensions. In the first dimension (left side of the figure), a group of Chinese NGOs (e.g., China Foundation for Peace and Development) and the African Union congregated around event such as China-Africa People Forum. On the top right, a group of South East Asian country government health institutions (e.g., Thailand CDC) and Chinese government groups collaborate around event such as the Great Mekong

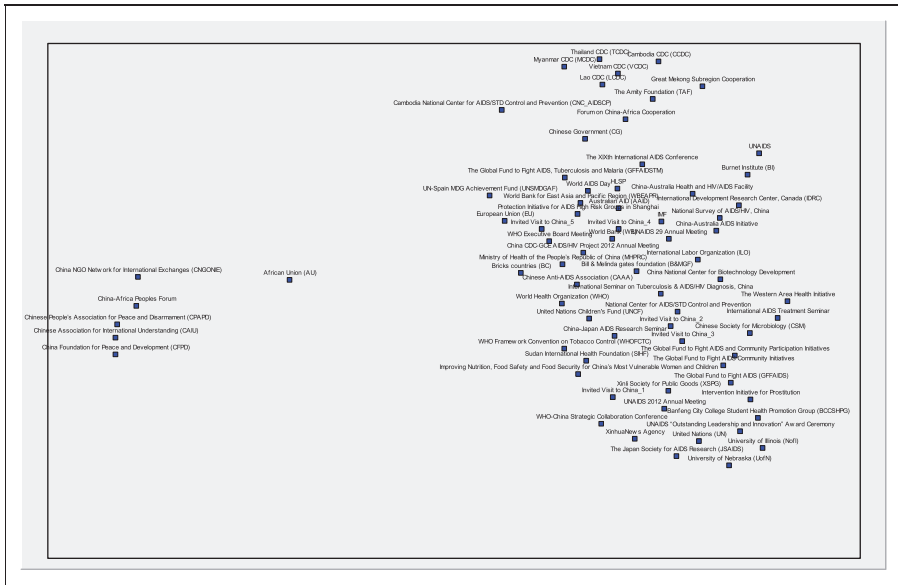


Figure 2. Correspondence analysis plot.

Subregion Cooperation. The majority of actors and events (on the lower right side) include a variety of INGOs from the West (e.g., WHO and World Bank).

Furthermore, to examine actors' participation patterns in different network events, a core-periphery block model analysis was utilized. The high-density (the core) block consists of actors having high density of relationships among themselves by sharing many events in common. The low-density (the periphery) block was formed by actors with less frequently attendance at events together. In this network, it seems that the three Chinese government agencies and major INGOs such as WHO, UNAIDS, and IMF tend to share similar participation patterns. It is likely that these INGOs are major recipient of the Chinese government's communication efforts.

Finally, a faction analysis was conducted to divide actors into in-groups and out-groups. Members of an in-group would share much more ties with other in-group members than with out-group members. The blocking placed about half of the actors in one faction with density of 0.128 and another half in a faction with density of 0.134, suggesting that the members of the same block share similar participation patterns, and such patterns differ significantly from block to block. The results suggest that actors in this network have distinctive and separate collaboration patterns. A close examination suggests that China deployed different public diplomatic strategies when involving actors from the global North and South. The first faction features actors such as the Chinese government agencies and mostly INGOs from the global North. China is positioned as an equal partner on the HIV/AIDS topic. The second faction included the Chinese CDC,

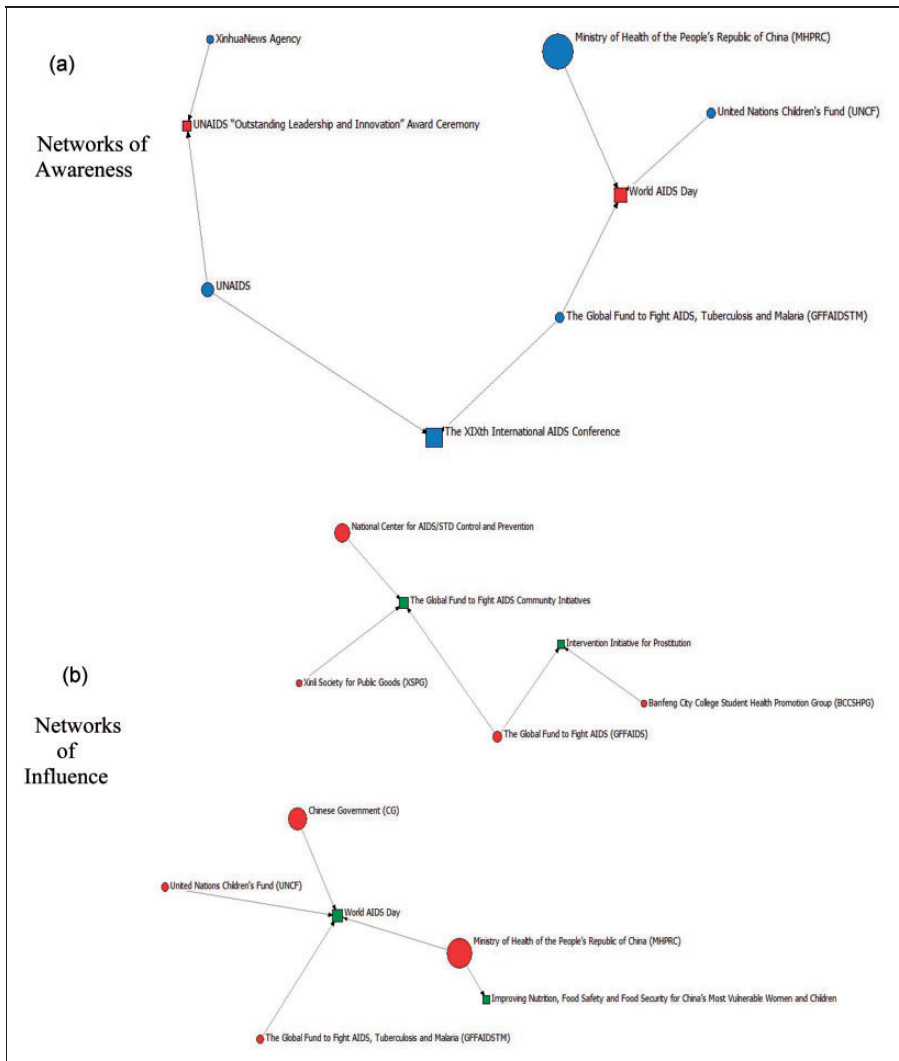
Chinese NGOs, and mostly IGOs from the global South. China is positioned as a regional partner on the HIV/AIDS topic. Overall, the core-periphery block-model and faction analyses show that the AIDS/HIV network is structurally divided, and the government's various public diplomacy strategic purposes may have shaped the communication structure. This finding may reveal an important feature of communication networks built around public diplomatic campaigns.

To further explore the underlying purposes of this AIDS network, the next step in Zaharna's (2013) analytic framework is to explore the purpose and communication patterns of public diplomacy initiatives. Based on Zaharna's (2013) framework, this study coded three communication purposes and constructed sub-networks serving different public diplomatic goals: networks of awareness, networks of influence, and networks of exchange (see Figure 3 for illustration). A comparison of these three networks illustrated which organizations tend to engage in certain communication activities and identify the main focus of the Chinese government's networking efforts.

Figure 3(a) shows the network of awareness created around two major symbolic events: UNAIDS 'Outstanding Leadership and Innovation' Award Ceremony and World AIDS Day. In the first event, UNAIDS recognized the leaders of Xinhua News Agency for their extensive coverage of AIDS/HIV issues in China, and in the second event, the Ministry of Health invited several INGOs to promote social awareness of AIDS issues. This network reflects both the goal of the Chinese government and that of nonstate actors such as UNAIDS. On the other hand, the Chinese government also showcased its effort in solving AIDS issues through engaging INGOs in World AIDS Day. Public relations tactics such as press conference, award ceremony, educational programs, and seminars were employed at this stage in the networking process.

Figure 3(b) shows the networks of influence. The analysis identified two separate networks serving the purpose of influencing the general public and AIDS patients' attitudes and behaviors. The first network was formed around two local community-based initiatives. This network (on the upper side of the figure) consists of a government agency (Chinese CDC), an INGO (The Global Fund to Fight AIDS), and two local Chinese NGOs. Xinli Society for Public Goods is a local NGO formed by villagers living in rural areas with a large number of AIDS patients, and Banfeng City College Student Health Promotion Group is an NGO formed by college students. Another network is formed around the World AIDS day (an event serves multiple purposes) and an international initiative to help children and babies born with HIV.

Figure 3(c) shows the networks of exchange. The analysis again identified two networks. The first network (on the upper side of the figure) features two Chinese government agencies engaged a group of INGOs in exchange programs through international conferences and initiatives. The second network involves the Chinese CDC and several INGOs and domestic NGOs for resource exchange at the local level. In terms of the communication pattern, most events in this network are symbolic in nature including meetings and conferences.



**Figure 3.** Networks with three different communication purposes.

*Media coverage shows more positive frames*

The second research question inquired: What frames have been used to describe the Chinese government’s actions in the HIV/AIDS issues? A total of 23 articles reporting on the HIV/AIDS issue in China were analyzed. A total of 51 frames emerged ( $M = 2.2$  per article). The most frequently appearing frame was the progress frame ( $n = 17$ ). More than 70% of the articles included a progress frame

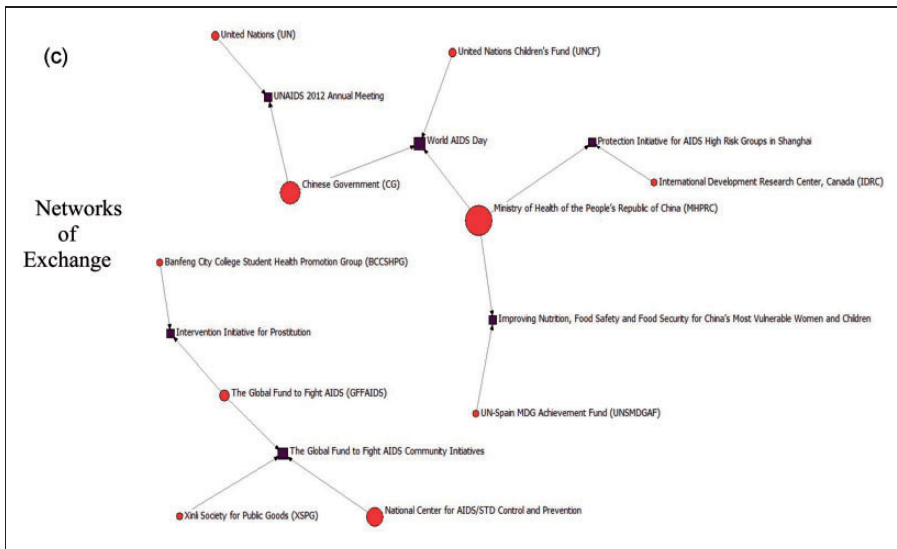


Figure 3. Continued.

noting that the Chinese government had improved how it deals with HIV/AIDS victims. Stories mentioned new laws to protect their rights, improved education, and a new commitment of resources. The engagement frame (n = 13, 56%) was also clear in the stories with reports of Chinese government officials meeting with local NGOs and international NGOs. The three dominant frames from the 2004 study, incompetence (n = 8, 34%), human rights abuser (n = 7, 30%) and dishonesty, and oppression (n = 6, 26%), continued to appear in stories though their presence was less frequent than Wu's (2006) study suggested. It appears that the negative frames have decreased and newer, and more positive frames have emerged to describe the NGO Chinese government actions on the HIV/AIDS issue. The next section discusses the communication between the Chinese government and INGOS that specialize in HIV/AIDS. It also explores how media coverage of China's handling of the issue has changed in the last 6 years.

### Discussion and conclusion

This study illustrated one example of how public diplomacy as an international communication activity is evolving from a one-dimensional mass communication-oriented approach to a relational, networked approach. The findings reveal the theoretical value of the soft power network approach of public diplomacy. The soft power network approach helps to explain why a powerful semi-authoritarian government engaged with international civil actors, and it helps to investigate and reveal the structure and dimensions of this government-NGO communication network. Additionally, the soft power network approach shows that although

relationship building with NGOs happened at the organizational level, the value of this strategic network may have spread to mass communication and affected international media coverage. Details of the values of the soft power network approach are discussed in the following sections.

### *Chinese government enters the global civil network*

The basic logic of the network society emphasizes the importance of being part of important networks (Castells, 2009). The primary value of the soft power network approach to public diplomacy lies in the fact that this approach positions nation states in networks with significant public diplomacy values. As previously discussed, civil actors such as NGOs are often perceived as more credible and trustworthy. Additionally, NGOs, especially international NGOs are often well-connected with important foreign publics. Being connected with NGOs allows nation states to tap into this pool of soft power. In other words, relationship networks with NGOs do not have functional values, but are also a form of symbolic action that signifies nations' commitment to international values.

The results of the network analysis show that China is using strategic networking in its efforts to address its HIV/AIDS crisis. However, our evidence suggests that the Chinese government's participation in AIDS activities is not focusing on enhancing awareness and influencing people's lives at home. Its high-profile interactions with African and Asian organizations help to position China as a valued world partner in health. Chinese government's connections with NGOs from the global North further provided opportunity for gaining public diplomacy outcomes.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the AIDS network serves three major purposes. The China-Africa sub-network focuses on how China helps African countries combat their AIDS issues. It further positions China as a supporter of African health issues without the heavy-handed tactics of other diplomatic efforts by Western countries telling Africans how to behave (Zaharna, 2007). The China-South East Asian countries network focuses on how China and these neighboring countries collaborate on AIDS issues. This set of relationships positions China as a leader in Asia that is collaborative rather than being a threat. Finally, the center of this AIDS network, the China-West network focuses on how China collaborates with or gets international aid from Western countries or supra national organizations like the UN and Global Fund.

### *Affecting global public discourse through obtaining strategic network positions*

Additionally, the soft power network approach emphasizes that in a network society, communication of all sorts is highly integrated. The effect of network building at the organizational level (NGO-government) is likely to spread out to other realms of communication. The results of the second method, content analysis, show that there has been a shift in the media coverage of the HIV/AIDS issue in China. Wu's study (2006: 280) 'identified a negative and stable anti-government



frame' in the international media coverage. This study found that positive frames dominated international media coverage, the Chinese government's management of the HIV/AIDS issue. However, our findings support previous research that suggests that frames are enduring as evidenced by repeated references to the Chinese government's early failures to address the disease appearing within what can be considered generally positive stories.

Wu (2006: 268) found that 'there is a deep-rooted distrust of the communist regime held by the Western liberal journalists who have focused their eyes upon the problems and evils of the communist country'. The findings of this 2012 study suggest that media coverage of China's management of the HIV/AIDS issue has evolved since 2004.

Two changes in media coverage are most evident. The progress frame, identified by Wu (2006) as appearing primarily in Xinhua news agency coverage of China's HIV/AIDS response, now appears regularly in the international media stories. The progress frame is now joined by an engagement frame showing the government working with local and international organizations. Together, the progress and engagement frames dominate international media coverage of China's management of the HIV/AIDS issue. Almost three quarters of the news stories published in 2012 acknowledge the Chinese government's improved capacity to address the health problem.

Second, the critical frames of incompetence and human rights abuser persist in the media coverage. Though, they are now used to provide historical context to the HIV/AIDS issue in China and serve as an anchor to the progress and engagement frames. Media coverage now includes more positive frames but those frames are tempered by the inclusion of the negative frames of incompetence, human rights abuser, and oppression. Today's progress on the issue is couched in terms of past mistakes.

The evolving media coverage suggests possible tangible effects of public diplomatic communication. Overall, the Chinese government's management of the HIV/AIDS issue reflects a network approach to public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is an integrated part of international communication, and the soft power network approach reflects a broad recognition of the power of international communication networks. How the Chinese government prioritizes networking efforts tells us a great deal about Chinese engagement on the AIDS topic. The networks of awareness and influence, which actually involved the general public and directly benefit HIV/AIDS patients, have received limited attention by the government. Although all of these networks contribute to domestic and public diplomacy outcomes, many of the relationships appear to be symbolic rather than action based. Some of the most frequently mentioned relationships occur around high-profile symbolic events such as World AIDS day, awards ceremonies, or conferences. These events help to position China as working toward progress in its HIV/AIDS management but the activities do little to help the impoverished farmer in Henan who struggles to get medical care or assistance for his family.

This study also brings to our attention that in the era of globalization, the line between domestic and international communication could be increasingly blurred.

The interplay between the state and international civil actors on domestic issues may have an effect on foreign news reporting. At the same time, it may be the tightening connections between international and local networks that put pressure on the Chinese government to recognize and adopt a network approach to enhance its international image. Future studies should examine if and how the communication networks among nation states and international civil actors.

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