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**CHINA'S PANDA DIPLOMACY: EVOLUTION, PUBLIC
PERCEPTION, AND SOFT POWER CHALLENGES IN THE
21ST CENTURY**



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**MASTER OF GOVERNMENT AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
UNIVERSITI UTARA MALAYSIA
2025**

**CHINA'S PANDA DIPLOMACY: EVOLUTION, PUBLIC
PERCEPTION, AND SOFT POWER CHALLENGES IN THE
21ST CENTURY**



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**A thesis submitted to the Ghazali Shafie Graduate School of Government in
fulfilment of the requirement for the Master of Arts
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ABSTRAK

Tesis ini meneliti evolusi, penerimaan, dan keterbatasan Diplomasi Panda (DP) China sebagai instrumen kuasa lembut dalam hubungan antarabangsa kontemporari. Kajian ini memberi tumpuan kepada tiga persoalan utama: (1) Bagaimanakah DP berkembang merentasi era politik yang berbeza? (2) Bagaimanakah DP mempengaruhi persepsi awam terhadap China di negara tuan rumah terpilih? (3) Apakah cabaran dan batasan utama yang menjejaskan keberkesanannya? Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kaedah campuran, yang merangkumi analisis sejarah, tinjauan persepsi awam, serta kajian kes rentas negara melibatkan Malaysia, Jepun, dan Amerika Syarikat. Perbincangan dimulakan dengan mengupas evolusi DP—daripada hadiah diplomatik pada era Mao, kepada komersialisasi dan penekanan terhadap pemuliharaan serta kerjasama saintifik dalam era pasca-reformasi, hinggalah kepada penggunaannya secara strategik di bawah kepimpinan Xi Jinping. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa DP masih mempunyai nilai simbolik dan emosi yang kuat, khususnya dalam konteks hubungan dua hala yang mesra. Di Malaysia, DP berjaya menyumbang kepada sentimen awam yang positif dan memperkuat hubungan diplomatik. Namun begitu, di Jepun dan Amerika Syarikat, ketidakpercayaan yang mendalam serta persaingan geopolitik menghadkan keupayaan DP untuk mempengaruhi persepsi nasional terhadap China secara berkesan. Selain itu, kajian ini turut mengenal pasti beberapa cabaran utama terhadap kelangsungan jangka panjang DP, termasuk peningkatan unsur politisasi, kos kewangan dan logistik yang tinggi kepada negara tuan rumah, serta kebimbangan etika berkaitan kredibiliti pemuliharaan dan kebajikan haiwan. Kesimpulannya, walaupun DP kekal sebagai isyarat simbolik yang berpengaruh, keberkesanannya sebagai alat kuasa lembut bergantung kepada kepekaan strategi dan konteks dua hala. Justeru, masa depan DP terletak pada kemampuannya untuk menyesuaikan diri dengan konteks tempatan, menekankan keaslian dalam aspek pemuliharaan dan pertukaran budaya, serta mengekalkan jarak daripada agenda politik yang ketara. Secara keseluruhan, kajian ini menyumbang kepada wacana akademik mengenai kuasa lembut dan dimensi baharu dalam penglibatan global China.

Kata Kunci: Diplomasi panda, Kuasa lembut, Dasar luar china, Persepsi awam, Hubungan antarabangsa

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the evolution, reception, and limitations of China's panda diplomacy (PD) as a soft power instrument in contemporary international relations. It addresses three core research questions: (1) How has PD evolved across different political eras? (2) How has PD influenced public perceptions of China in selected host countries? (3) What are the main challenges and limitations that undermine its effectiveness? The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining historical analysis, public perception surveys, and cross-national case studies of Malaysia, Japan, and the United States. The discussion begins by outlining the evolution of PD, starting with its use as a diplomatic gift during the Mao era, moving through its commercialization and emphasis on conservation and scientific collaboration in the post-reform years, and resulting in its strategic application under Xi Jinping. Findings reveal that PD continues to generate symbolic and emotional appeal, particularly in contexts with favourable bilateral relations. In Malaysia, PD contributed to positive public sentiment and reinforced diplomatic ties. However, in Japan and the United States, deep-rooted mistrust and geopolitical rivalry limited its ability to reshape national perceptions of China. In addition, this thesis identifies critical challenges to PD's long-term viability. These include growing politicization, high financial and logistical costs for host countries, and ethical concerns about conservation credibility and animal welfare. This study concludes that, while PD remains a potent symbolic gesture, its soft power effectiveness is contingent upon strategic reading and bilateral context. Thus, PD's future depends on whether or not it can adapt to local contexts, emphasize authentic conservation and cultural exchange, and remain detached from overt political agendas. All in all, this study contributes to the broader literature on soft power and the evolving dimensions of China's global engagement.

Keywords: Panda diplomacy, Soft power, China's foreign policy, Public perception, International Relations.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Since the late 20th century, global politics has shifted from state-centric dominance to a more complex and diffuse landscape, shaped by growing economic, social, and ecological interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1987). These changes have expanded global linkages and rendered the use of force as a foreign policy (FP) instrument increasingly unattractive. This is because such action entails significant economic costs, disrupts global supply chains, and provokes public opposition worldwide (Keohane & Nye, 1987). Meanwhile, the rise of the digital age has now put the public in the driver's seat and taken the shine off hard power in global politics (Rogerson, 2000).

As the limits of hard power have become apparent, states now turn to non-coercive means to influence global audiences. Among the tools employed is “soft power”, defined as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion. Coined by Joseph Nye, the concept has gained significant prominence, with its strength rooted in resources such as: ‘culture’, ‘values’, and ‘policies’ that are perceived as legitimate. (Nye, 2002, 2005). Public diplomacy (PD), which allows states to engage directly with foreign publics, has become its key instrument (Nye, 2008; Melissen, 2011).

China, as a rising global power, has actively embraced soft power strategies to reshape its global image and remove suspicions regarding its political and economic ambitions

(Gill & Huang, 2023). Among its diverse soft power initiatives, panda diplomacy (hereafter referred to as PD) stands out as one the most iconic and emotionally resonant (Zreik, 2022; Hyland, 2020). This practice, which involves the strategic loan or gifting of giant pandas, mirrors China's historical role as the 'Middle Kingdom,' which sought tribute and recognition from its neighbours through cultural and moral leadership" (Ioannidou, 2020).

PD can be traced back to the Cold War era, particularly during the 1950s and 1970s, when Chinese leaders offered giant pandas to allies as a token of friendship. However, the practice has evolved over time. What began as a symbolic gesture of goodwill during the Maoist has developed into more complex strategic soft power device. As noted by many scholars; today, PD functions not only as kit of bilateral diplomacy but also as a means of advancing China's conservation narrative, and strengthening its global image (Zreik, 2022; Reed, 2022; Yang & Lin, 2022; (Huang & Wang, 2020).

This FP practice is deeply rooted in historical precedent. Panda diplomacy (PD) can be traced to the Cold War period, particularly during the 1950s and 1970s, when China gifted pandas to strategic allies as symbols of goodwill. While these early gestures reflected Maoist ideals of friendship and solidarity, the practice has since evolved into a more calculated form of soft power. Today, PD serves multiple functions: it fosters bilateral relations, supports China's cultural outreach alongside conservation narrative, and contributes to the broader project of enhancing China's global image and reputation (Zreik, 2022; Reed, 2022; Yang & Lin, 2022; Huang & Wang, 2020).

While much has been written about the symbolic power and strategic uses of PD in China's FP, less attention has been paid to how it is interpreted and received by global audiences — a crucial factor in determining the actual effectiveness of soft power initiatives.

1.2 Problem Statement:

Set against the backdrop of China's rise as a global power and its strategic embrace of soft power, a growing body of literature has emerged to examine how soft power is employed within Chinese context and what objectives China seeks to achieve (Shambaugh, 2015; Gill & Huang, 2023; Mingjiang, 2008). Much of the discussion centred on the Confucius Institute (CI), which has taken 'centre' stage in China's efforts to promote its language and culture abroad (Zhou & Luk, 2016; Pan, 2013; Yang, 2010). This focus has not only yielded valuable insights the function of the CI. Yet, what is conspicuously lacking is a discussion of the 'symbolic' form of soft power—that is, panda diplomacy, which has emerged as a 'subtle' yet significant tool in China's recent FP efforts.

Few studies have explored the symbolic and emotional appeal of the panda, and how it can serve as a soft power tools for China (Hartig, 2013; Hyland, 2020; Xing, 2010). Yet, these analysis remain largely descriptive, focusing on China's diplomatic intentions rather than how PD evolve and received by foreign publics. While some scholars have examined its links to conservation efforts and state branding narratives—which reflect an evolution from earlier practices (Buckingham et al., 2013; Harrington, 2024), discussion remains limited, and little research has investigated how international audiences perceive and interpret PD.

A closer look at the existing literature reveals that, although some studies on the reception of panda diplomacy exist, their scope remains limited. Most case studies focus on individual countries—such as the United States, France, Germany, Qatar, South Korea, and Indonesia—while overlooking regions like Southeast Asia, where China’s influence is expanding. Further, comparative, audience-cantered analyses remain scarce, particularly studies that assess the ‘effectiveness’ of PD in shaping public opinion and soft power outcomes.

Hence, this thesis seeks to address these gaps by examining how panda diplomacy has evolved and how it is received in three distinct national contexts: the United States, Japan, and Malaysia. These countries represent diverse diplomatic histories, regional positions, and domestic socio-political environments. By analysing media narratives and public perceptions of the symbolic meanings attached to PD in each context, the study aims to evaluate its function as a soft power strategy and to identify its limitations.

Malaysia, for instance, has received relatively little scholarly attention despite its strategic significance in China’s regional diplomacy. Similarly, while the United States and Japan are more frequently discussed, few in-depth comparative studies have examined how domestic public discourse and cultural interpretations of panda diplomacy differ across national contexts. This is a critical oversight, given that audience reception plays a central role in determining the effectiveness of any soft power initiative. Without a clear understanding of how such diplomacy is perceived by the publics it targets, conclusions about its success remain largely speculative.

1.3 Research Question

Set against the above context, this thesis sought to assess China's panda diplomacy (PD) as a soft power instrument. To achieve this, the study is structured around the following core research questions:

1. How has PD evolved across different political eras in China, from the Mao era to the present under Xi Jinping?
2. How is panda diplomacy perceived in Malaysia, Japan, and the United States, and what do the similarities and differences in public perception reveal about its effectiveness as a soft power tool?
3. What are the challenges of PD as China's soft power instruments?

1.4 Research Objective:

1. To examine the evolution of panda diplomacy across different political eras in China, from the Mao era to the present leadership under Xi Jinping.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of panda diplomacy in shaping public perceptions of China in host countries.
3. To explore the challenges of PD as a soft power instrument.

1.5 Research Significance

This study provides meaningful insights into how soft power and China's global engagement efforts converge, as shown through the case of PD. As global politics increasingly depend on perception management and non-coercive influence, understanding the mechanisms and effectiveness of soft power tools becomes important, not least for a global actor like China whose rise is often met with mixed feelings.

To begin with, this study adds to the conversation on soft power by examining a real-world, culturally grounded example. While it isn't entirely theoretical, it offers new perspectives on how PD serves not just as a symbol, but also as a tangible means of shaping international relationships and influencing how China is perceived.

Second, the study provides a comparative perspective by analysing how PD is received in different national contexts—Malaysia, Japan, and the United States. These countries represent varied geographical scopes and alignments, historical ties with China, and levels of bilateral trust, making them ideal cases for assessing the nuances of PD's soft power potential and its limitations.

Third, the study holds practical value for policymakers and cultural diplomats, both within and outside of China. By identifying the conditions under which PD succeeds or fails, the research offers 'evidence-based' recommendations for how cultural diplomacy can be designed to foster genuine global goodwill, rather than superficial or short-term influence.

In sum, this research not only fills a gap in the academic literature but also provides a nuanced framework for evaluating one of China's most unique and visible soft power strategies in the 21st century.

1.6 Research Scope

This study focuses on China's panda diplomacy (PD) as a soft power instrument in contemporary international relations. It explores PD's historical evolution, public reception, and strategic limitations across three key dimensions:

1. Temporal Scope:

The research covers the period from the Mao era (1950s–1970s), when PD emerged as a form of gift diplomacy, to the present day under Xi Jinping, where it is increasingly linked to conservation, science, and geopolitical strategy.

2. Geographical Scope

The study examines PD in three case countries—Malaysia, Japan, and the United States—selected for their differing diplomatic relationships with China and contrasting public attitudes. These cases allow for a comparative analysis of how PD functions in diverse political and cultural contexts.

3. Thematic Scope:

The thesis addresses three core themes:

The evolution of PD as a diplomatic practice.

The influence of PD on public perception of China in host countries.

The limitations and challenges that affect the effectiveness and sustainability of PD.

1.7 Limitations

While this study aims to provide a thorough and balanced analysis, several limitations must be acknowledged:

1. Case Selection and Generalizability:

The three selected countries provide depth and contrast, but the findings may not be fully generalizable to all countries that have hosted pandas.

Contextual differences, such as media systems, political ideologies, and civil society engagement, may influence results.

2. Data Availability and Reliability:

Public perception data is drawn from a mix of surveys, media reports, and secondary sources. In some cases, consistent or recent survey data specific to panda diplomacy may be limited or unavailable, requiring the use of broader sentiment measures.

3. Language and Cultural Interpretation:

While efforts are made to accurately interpret local responses and media coverage, language barriers and cultural nuances—particularly in Japan and Malaysia—pose potential risks of misinterpretation or oversimplification.

4. Time Constraints and Access:

As a graduate-level thesis, the research is limited by time and resource constraints, which restrict opportunities for extended fieldwork, interviews with officials, or longitudinal analysis.

1.8 Structure of the thesis:

This thesis is organized into seven chapters, each addressing a key aspect of the research and contributing to a comprehensive understanding of China's panda diplomacy as a soft power instrument. The structure is as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research topic, including the background and context, problem statement, research questions, significance of the study, scope and limitations, and an outline of the thesis structure.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews existing academic literature on soft power, cultural diplomacy, and animal diplomacy, with a specific focus on China's soft power strategies. It also introduces the theoretical framework guiding the study, including Joseph Nye's concept of soft power and models of public diplomacy.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the mixed-methods approach employed in the research. It explains the rationale for combining historical analysis, public perception data, and cross-national case studies. The chapter also discusses data collection methods, case selection, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4: The Evolution of Panda Diplomacy

This chapter explores how panda diplomacy has evolved over time—from its early role as a goodwill gesture during the Mao era, to its commercialization and conservation framing in the reform period, and eventually to its more strategic use under Xi Jinping's leadership.

Chapter 5: Public Perception and Case Study Analysis

Focusing on Malaysia, Japan, and the United States, this chapter presents a comparative analysis of how PD has influenced public perceptions of China. It draws on media reports, public opinion surveys, and bilateral dynamic in each context.

Chapter 6: Challenges and Limitations of Panda Diplomacy

Chapter 6 critically examines the main obstacles that undermine the effectiveness of PD. These include the politicization of PD, the high financial and logistical burdens placed on host countries, and growing ethical and conservation-related concerns.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

The final chapter summarizes the key findings of the research, reflects on their implications for soft power theory and China's FP, and offers practical recommendations for enhancing the PD. Suggestions for future research are also presented.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Soft Power

The concept of soft power, first coined by Joseph Nye (1990), refers to a country's ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce or entice through material incentives. For Nye, soft power plays a vital role in a globalized world where influence is often achieved through 'attraction' rather than through 'force (hard power) or payment (economic power). This form of attraction, he explains derives from three primary sources: a nation's culture, political values, and foreign policy—when each is viewed as legitimate, credible and morally appealing (Nye, 2004). Simply put, for Nye, Soft power works when the message it conveys aligned with the values and expectations of the global audience.

However, since its debut in 1990, the notion of soft power has invited heated debate among scholars on both its definition and application. Some argues that any resource can be soft power provided it is socially endorsed for a specific purpose—putting the emphasis more on its strategic use and reception by foreign audiences rather than merely on the possession of attractive assets. For instance, Li (2009) contends that what matters in the 'discourse' of power is not the resources but how those are used. According to Li, soft power should be interpreted as the "soft use of power."

Similarly, Mattern (2005) asserts that attraction is not inherent to certain resources, but rather socially constructed through discourse, which highlights the performative and constructed nature of soft power. Building on these critiques, Ding (2008) further

argues that Nye's framework lacks clarity on how intangible sources of soft power—such as cultural appeal—are actually converted into tangible diplomatic outcomes. This aperture underlines the need for a more operational understanding of how soft power functions in practice, particularly in terms of its influence on FP outcomes.

To overcome the limitations of soft power in practice, many scholars have increasingly focused on PD as the key channel through which influence is exercised. According to Nye (2004), PD allows governments to turn their cultural and political appeal into real influence by engaging with foreign publics. Likewise, Melissen (2005) describes PD as “one of soft power's key instruments,” while Gilboa (2008) views it as an official tool for implementing soft power in FP. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that for Nye and others, PD plays a central role in connecting soft power assets with actual policy outcomes. The next section will briefly explore this concept to better understand how it functions in the broader soft power framework.

Coined by Edmund Gullion in 1965, public diplomacy involves efforts by the government to shape foreign public opinion and foster greater understanding of its culture, values and FP. Gullion's definition stretch beyond official diplomatic interaction to include the involvement of private actors across borders and the significant role of the media in the process. Over time, scholars have expanded this definition, moving from one sided persuasion to collaborative communication. For instance, Tuch (1990) defines public diplomacy as an act of communicating national goals and values to foreign audiences. Frederick (1992) emphasis on the role of education, culture, and information exchange, while Sharp (2005) views it as directs interaction with foreign publics to promote national interests and project its values

abroad. At the same time, Melissen (2005) describes PD as a “two-way street,” highlighting the importance of mutual dialogue and active listening. These clearly distinguish it from traditional forms of top-down propaganda.

Otherwise put, once largely limited to one-way communication, public diplomacy has now gradually shifted toward a more collaborative mode. This shift reflects a growing recognition that influence is no longer achieved through message control alone, but through genuine engagement with foreign publics. Zaharna (2004) and Fitzpatrick (2010) highlight the need for mutual understanding and long-term relationship-building as essential to public diplomacy’s effectiveness. Rather than viewing foreign audiences as passive targets, these approaches treat them as active stakeholders in the communication process.

Taken together, these perspectives affirm that public diplomacy provide the crucial link between soft power resources and tangible outcomes. It explains how cultural symbols or values—can be leveraged to generate influence abroad. This understanding is relevant to China’s soft power strategy, especially its use of panda diplomacy, which will be reviewed in the subsequent section. Yet, it offers limited insight into the effectiveness of soft power, which remains highly subjective and context dependent. As previous studies have noted, soft power outcomes depend not only on the sender’s intentions but also on the audience’s interpretation, shaped by historical conditions.

2.2 Effectiveness of Public Diplomacy

Although public diplomacy is often described as the operational arm of soft power, its effectiveness is far from straightforward. Scholars generally distinguish between three

levels of evaluation: outputs (immediate activities and reach, such as exchanges or cultural events), outcomes (short-term changes in awareness, trust, or attitudes among foreign publics), and impacts (longer-term alignment with policy preferences and cooperative behavior) (Pamment, 2014; Sevin, 2017). Because many external factors shape public opinion, researchers often stress that PD should be evaluated as a contributory rather than a fully causal factor.

Evidence by instrument. Studies suggest that different PD instruments vary in their effectiveness. Educational and cultural exchanges are widely regarded as the most durable, producing alumni networks that sustain cooperation and goodwill over decades (Cull, 2008; Zaharna, Arsenault & Fisher, 2014). Cultural diplomacy projects foster trust in contexts where overt political advocacy might be discounted, while international broadcasting has the greatest impact in media-restricted environments, provided credibility is maintained (Osipova-Stocker, 2021). Digital diplomacy has expanded reach and interactivity, but research shows that its persuasive impact depends heavily on narrative coherence, credibility, and third-party amplification (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Sevin, 2018).

Influencing factors. The literature emphasizes that PD effectiveness is highly context-dependent. The most critical factor is credibility—messages that are inconsistent with a state’s actual behavior often lose traction (Nye, 2004; Mor, 2012). Audience predispositions, media environment, and historical relations also strongly shape reception (Zaharna, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2010). Recent experimental studies show that when publics perceive PD as insincere or strategically manipulative, its positive effects may evaporate or even backfire (Rhee et al., 2023). Domestic political constraints, resource continuity, and competition from adversarial narratives or “sharp power” tactics further condition outcomes (Cull, 2009; CSIS, 2024).

Implications. Collectively, these findings suggest that PD is most effective when it is credible, relational, and consistent with broader policy behavior. This has direct relevance for panda diplomacy: while the panda's global appeal is undeniable, its effectiveness as public diplomacy ultimately depends on how foreign audiences interpret the gesture, whether they view it as genuine or transactional, and how it aligns with China's wider foreign policy conduct.

2.3 China & Soft Power

Discussion on China and soft power has garnered significant academic and strategic attention as the country seeks to reshape its global image through non-coercive means. Drawing from Nye's (2004) framework—which defines soft power as the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment—China has, at least since the introduction of its "peaceful rise" doctrine, actively mobilized its resources to engage foreign audiences and project influence. These efforts have intensified under President Xi Jinping who in 2014 explicitly emphasized the importance of enhancing China's soft power: "we should expand China's soft power, portray a proper Chinese narrative, and better relay China's message to the world" (Kang, 2017; Zeik, 2022). Nye (2012) asserts that China's deployment of soft power aims to cultivate the image of a responsible global stakeholder.

Similarly, Zhou and Esteban (2018) emphasize that China's soft power strategy seeks to legitimize its rise by persuading others to accept its growing role in global affairs as benign and constructive. Zeik (2022) further adds that, in building its soft power, China has sought to promote a positive national image, enhance understanding of its political system and global initiatives, and influence foreign governments.

To that end, China has invested in a range of soft power initiatives. These include, among others, the establishment of Confucius Institutes, health and education partnerships with developing nations, the expansion of its global media presence, and the promotion of Chinese cultural exports (Kurlantzick, 2007). Of all these, panda diplomacy (PD) stands out as a uniquely recognizable and emotionally resonant instrument of soft power. Indeed, the cross-cultural appeal of pandas has been strategically harnessed to enhance China's image abroad and foster goodwill through symbolic exchanges (Jepson & Barua, 2015).

Thus, the following section explores the relevant literature on this in greater depth, situating it within the broader context of China's public diplomacy to serve as a background for this study.

2.4 Giant Panda as a Diplomatic Symbols

China maintains a strong and enduring association with the giant panda, which is found only within its borders (Zhou, 2019). The Chinese leaders recognize the significance of the giant panda and has long used it as part of its foreign policy (Pacher, 2017). A well-known early example dates back to 685 AD, when the Tang Dynasty gifted two pandas to the emperor of Japan (Xing, 2010). Such practices have evolved over centuries into China's soft power instruments. As Xing (2010) explains, China lends pandas to other countries as acts of goodwill. The objective is among others, to strengthen diplomatic ties. PD is not just a cultural gift—it is also a mean for China to garner the attention of target audience in other countries and make it easier to reach its diplomatic goals. As a PD instrument, Xing posits that pandas present a friendly image of the PRC, which in turn, fosters more positive views of China among its targeted audiences.

Following this rationale, scholars have explored ‘why’ giant panda is well-positioned to serve as a diplomatic ambassador for China. Hartig (2013) provide two reasons for this; the panda's global appeal and the fact that it is only found in China. Similarly, Mullan and Marvin (1999) observe that pandas is widely admired for its universal charm. This broad appeal stems from panda’s soft, non-threatening look—often described as cute, innocent, friendly, and playful. Furthermore, Ramona and Desmond Morris (1982) argues that panda’s being ‘cuddly, friendly, and sexless’ contribute to its broad emotional appeal.

Hartig (2013) adds that the panda reflects Kindchenschema, or childlike features, which naturally trigger feelings of care and protection, making it a highly effective symbol in China’s PD. The panda’s round face, oversized black eye patches, and clumsy movements further reinforce its image as a gentle and innocent creature (Schaller, 1993).

The second reason why PD holds strategic value for China is the panda’s status as a ‘rare’ and ‘endangered’ species, as well as the fact that it can only be found in China—particularly in the western regions. Simply put, all pandas in the world belong to China. According to Xing (2010) this exclusivity allows China to position the panda as a national icon, effectively using it to promote soft power and shape a positive image through PD. This symbolic ownership reinforces the panda’s effectiveness as a diplomatic tools. As Cushing and Markwell (2009) point out, diplomacy that involves symbolic creatures is most effective when the species is exclusively tied to its country of origin.

Hence, while the panda's identity contributes to its global appeal, it is its connection to China that makes it an effective tool for the country's FP. This symbolic connection allows the panda to act as a proxy for China's intended image abroad. As Chellaney (2011) describes, the panda is "China's key cultural icon and a symbol of friendship and peace," noting that its gentle and endearing image conveys goodwill. Similarly, Hartig (2013) contends that the panda projects an unmistakable message on behalf of China. Because the giant panda is so strongly associated with the country, it enables China to express values such as gentle, friendly and peaceful coexistence.

A further factor identified in the literature on panda diplomacy's effectiveness is the unique setting in which the pandas are presented—namely, public zoos. Unlike other instruments of China's cultural diplomacy, such as Confucius Institutes, museum exhibitions, or academic exchanges, which often appeal to more limited or formal audiences, zoos serve as universally accessible spaces associated with leisure, family, and emotional enjoyment. As noted by Xing (2010), zoos provide a light-hearted environment where visitors from all walks of life can laugh, bond, and share in the wonder of seeing giant pandas.

This contrasts with the more effortful or formal associations linked to learning environments, which may limit emotional engagement. Moreover, zoos—being accessible public spaces—enable PD to reach across cultural and social divides more effectively than conventional diplomatic efforts. As Xing (2010) notes, the informal setting of zoos, free from language and status barriers, allows pandas to engage a wider and more diverse audience, strengthening China's ability to connect with international publics.

To sum up, existing studies highlight several factors that contribute to the effectiveness of PD as a soft power tool. These include the giant panda's universal appeal, its exclusivity to China, the significant media attention it generates, and the zoo setting which enable it to reach diverse audiences regardless of social status. By offering a setting that is both emotionally engaging and easy to access, PD stands out as a distinct and often underrated form of cultural engagement.

2.5 Panda Diplomacy: A Public Diplomacy Tool

More recently, a growing body of academic work has underlined the significance of PD as a unique and effective instrument of China's public engagement. More and more scholars now see PD not just as a conservation or cultural effort, but as an integral part of China's wider soft power approach.

Xing (2010) is among the key scholars who highlight the public diplomacy potential of PD. He calls it "a long-overlooked power resource" and points to the panda's broad, cross-cultural appeal as a unique tool that helps China engage with global audiences. Xing argues that China's method differs from the traditional model of soft power proposed by Joseph Nye, who originally introduced the term. Since Nye's framework is based largely on Western democratic values, Xing contends it doesn't fully reflect the distinctive nature of China's approach. He suggests that "China's soft power arsenal...is beyond Nye's categorization," implying that tools like PD, while unconventional, are nonetheless effective.

More importantly, Xing ties PD directly to China's goals in public diplomacy. He sees pandas as goodwill messengers who attract global interest and favorable attention—resources China can use to support its diplomatic efforts. In his view, PD improves

China's global image, strengthens bilateral ties, and can even reduce friction with former rivals. This perspective frames PD not simply as a temporary PR move, but as a long-term diplomatic strategy.

Building on this view, Hartig (2013) also emphasizes the diplomatic value of PD. While he notes that China often highlights the scientific and conservation aspects of panda exchanges, he argues that the soft power benefits are equally, if not more, important. According to Hartig, pandas represent a "public diplomacy goldmine" because of their ability to attract media coverage and public interest on a global scale. He suggests that the success of PD should be judged by how far its message travels and how it is received—and by these measures, PD performs exceptionally well, consistently drawing large crowds and generating positive attention for China.

Adding another layer to the discussion, Buckingham et al. (2013) describe PD as operating within a complex intersection of politics, markets, and conservation strategies. Their analysis implies that the diplomatic role of pandas cannot be disentangled from broader strategic and geopolitical considerations. Similarly, Lin (2009) reinforces the panda's symbolic power, noting that these animals have become integral to China's soft power efforts by capturing the affections of foreign publics and thereby cultivating goodwill toward China.

Collectively, these scholars argue that PD serves far more than conservation objectives. It plays a vital role in enhancing China's international visibility, cultivating positive foreign perceptions, and fostering diplomatic ties. Hence, as China continues

to pursue ambitious public diplomacy goals, the strategic deployment of pandas is likely to remain a key asset in its soft power tools.

2.6 Assessing the Gap in the Existing Literature

Although the existing literature provides a foundational understanding of panda diplomacy as a component of China's soft power strategy, significant gaps remain—particularly in relation to its historical evolution, influence on public opinion, and practical limitations. These gaps highlight the need for more current, context-sensitive, and evidence-based inquiry into panda diplomacy's role within China's evolving public diplomacy framework.

First, there is a noticeable temporal gap in the literature. Much of the discussion surrounding the evolution of panda diplomacy focuses on its early historical instances or its development during the Cold War, with relatively little attention paid to its transformation under the leadership of President Xi Jinping. For example, scholars such as Xing (2010), Hartig (2013), and Songster (2020) provide valuable insights into the cultural and political symbolism of panda diplomacy, but they do not fully capture the intensified and more strategic application of public diplomacy under Xi's administration.

This is especially relevant considering Xi's 2014 directive to “expand China's soft power, tell China's stories well, and project a positive image of China” (Zeik, 2022; Kang, 2017). Under Xi, public diplomacy has shifted from a passive cultural gesture to a more deliberate and structured component of foreign policy. Yet, the literature has

not sufficiently kept pace with this evolution, making this an underexplored area in need of updated analysis.

Second, there is a functional gap in the way panda diplomacy's effect on public opinion in host countries is examined. While the existing literature affirms the symbolic and emotional appeal of pandas as soft power assets (Hartig, 2013; Ramona & Morris, 1982; Xing, 2010), few studies empirically assess whether this appeal translates into positive shifts in foreign public opinion or long-term diplomatic benefits. The role of public diplomacy—which centres on engaging foreign publics and influencing their perceptions—is acknowledged in theory (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2004), but its practical relationship to panda diplomacy is often underdeveloped in research.

This is particularly problematic given the well-established understanding in public diplomacy literature that soft power is context-dependent—that is, its effectiveness depends not just on the sender's intent, but on the host country's media, political climate, cultural norms, and existing attitudes toward China (Zaharna, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2010). Despite this, there is little empirical work that investigates how panda diplomacy is actually received across different cultural or political contexts, or whether it generates measurable changes in public sentiment or bilateral relations.

Third, the limitations and challenges of PD remain underexplored. The literature often highlights the strengths of panda diplomacy—its charm, media appeal, and emotional symbolism—without addressing its vulnerabilities. Few scholars have examined how panda diplomacy fares in times of political tension, how it is affected by ethical concerns over animal rights and zoo conditions, or how the practice might be perceived

as commercialized or manipulative diplomacy (Buckingham et al., 2013; Chellaney, 2011).

For instance, when pandas are recalled during diplomatic disputes or when high costs of panda loans attract domestic criticism, the symbolic value of the panda can be diminished. Such symbolic fatigue or political backlash can undermine the very soft power gains the practice is intended to achieve. Yet, this side of panda diplomacy—its risks and limitations—remains an understudied dimension in both soft power and public diplomacy literature.

In light of these temporal, functional, and practical gaps, this study seeks to re-examine panda diplomacy with a focus on its evolution, influence, and challenges in contemporary international relations. By conducting a comparative case study analysis of Malaysia, Japan, and the United States, the research investigates how panda diplomacy has developed over time, how it is perceived by the public in different cultural and political contexts, and what obstacles it faces as a form of symbolic diplomacy in the 21st century. In doing so, the study contributes a timely, empirically grounded, and context-aware understanding of panda diplomacy's role within China's broader public diplomacy strategy.

2.7 Conceptual Framework:

This study draws on two closely related frameworks within international relations—Soft Power Theory and Public Diplomacy—to critically examine panda diplomacy (PD) as a tool of Chinese foreign policy. These frameworks provide the conceptual basis for analysing how PD functions, how it is communicated to and interpreted by foreign audiences, and what limits its effectiveness as a form of symbolic statecraft.

2.7.1 Soft Power Theory

While Nye didn't develop his soft power theory with PD in mind, his framework still helps explain how it works. PD aligns most clearly with the cultural aspect of soft power. Pandas, admired around the world, help China build goodwill and emotional connection—key elements in shaping opinions through attraction. The initiative also reflects broader values like peace, friendship, and care for the environment. These ideas are often emphasized when pandas are sent abroad, especially in the context of conservation efforts or major diplomatic moments. By using an animal that carries both cultural and ecological meaning, China finds a subtle but effective way to engage international audiences—something that fits within Nye's idea of soft power, even if the approach looks different from Western examples.

Even though PD reflects many of the values tied to soft power—like cultural appeal and environmental concern—how it's received still plays a major role in how effective it actually is. Nye points out that soft power only works when it feels genuine and free from pressure. This leads to a key issue: the way PD is interpreted, especially when it coincides with trade deals or is introduced during tense political moments. As China faces increasing international attention and criticism, some may begin to question the sincerity behind these gestures. If seen as calculated rather than heartfelt, PD may struggle to deliver the influence it's meant to create.

2.7.2 Public Diplomacy

A concept closely tied to soft power is public diplomacy, which focuses on how governments engage with people beyond their borders to shape opinions and foster long-term goodwill. As outlined by scholars like Cull (2009) and Melissen (2005), this

involves a range of activities—everything from cultural exchanges and educational initiatives to international broadcasting and symbolic gestures.

PD fits within this space, acting as a cultural form of public diplomacy that helps China reach global audiences on an emotional level (Hartig, 2013; Yin, 2021). The arrival of pandas is rarely a quiet affair—it's typically marked by official ceremonies, extensive media coverage, and public programming, all designed to leave a lasting, positive impression of China (Hartig, 2013). Unlike conventional diplomacy, which tends to occur out of the public eye, PD thrives on visibility and symbolism. This makes it a compelling tool—but one that also carries certain risks (Hartig, 2013). Importantly, public diplomacy theory reminds us that communication is not one-way. Foreign publics don't passively accept soft power messages—they interpret, question, and sometimes push back (Hartig, 2013). In countries with friendly ties to China, PD may reinforce mutual curiosity and deepen cultural bonds. But in places where mistrust or historical grievances persist, these gestures may be met with doubt or dismissed as surface-level efforts to shift attention away from more contentious issues (Hartig, 2013).

Another critical factor is credibility—how sincere and consistent the message appears. If PD is seen as too calculated, too aligned with strategic goals, or disconnected from China's broader actions, it can easily backfire (Huang & Wang, 2019; 2020; Xiao, 2023). This is especially relevant in China's case, where the distinction between cultural diplomacy and political messaging often feels blurred. Understanding this dynamic is key to evaluating how—and when—PD succeeds as a soft power instrument.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research method used to examine China's panda diplomacy (PD). At its core, this study seeks to understand three key aspects: how PD has evolved, how it is received in host countries, and the challenges that limit its effectiveness as a soft power tool. Given the nature of these inquiries, this study employed a mixed methods, grounded in a pragmatic constructivist paradigm to capture the complexity and nuance of PD as both a diplomatic instruments and a cultural artifact.

The following section describes the philosophical orientation, research design, case selection rationale, data collection and analysis methods, ethical considerations, and acknowledged limitations. By engaging with various types of data—historical records, survey responses, and media discourse—this methodology constructs a comprehensive view of how PD functions and how it is interpreted in diverse geopolitical settings. Rather than seeking to provide a definitive model, the approach reflects a reasoned, context-sensitive process tailored to the complex nature of the research questions.

3.2 Philosophical Orientation: Pragmatic Constructivism

The study is grounded in pragmatic constructivism, which combines the constructivist belief that meanings are socially constructed (Wendt, 1992; William, 2024) with a pragmatic focus on real-world application. Constructivism holds that diplomatic gestures, including PD (author own emphasis), gain significance through social interpretation and are contextually defined. Hence, this perspective aligns

with PD's symbolic and performative nature, where meaning is shaped by context, audience, and narrative, as illustrated in this study.

Pragmatism permits flexibility in method choice, allowing the researcher to adapt tools according to the research questions rather than allegiance to a single paradigm (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Biesta, 2010; Morgan, 2014). Historical analysis tracks the evolution of PD over time, while surveys and media discourse analysis explore how PD is received; by elites and the general public, as well as what challenges arise across different national contexts. Together, these methods offer deeper insight into the changing nature, public reception, and contextual barriers of PD.

3.3 Research Design: Mixed Methods

To explore the complexity of PD, a convergent mixed-methods strategy (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) was adopted. This design involves collecting both qualitative and quantitative data in parallel, analysing them separately, and then integrating the findings to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the research problems. The rationale behind this choice stems from the multidimensional nature of PD—it functions not only as a diplomatic gesture but also as a cultural symbol and a subject of public and media discourse.

A single methodological approach would risk flattening these layers of meaning. The mixed-methods framework offers some advantages. That is, it allows the strengths of one method to compensate for the limitations of another. For instance, while survey data can provide measurable insights into public perception, they may lack contextual

depth. On the other hand, Media discourse analysis can capture framing and national narratives but cannot directly measure audience reception. By bringing these two together, the study constructs a more balanced and nuanced picture.

The convergent structure also enabled a recursive research process, where findings from one method informed and enriched the interpretation of the others. Rather than following a rigid, step-by-step sequence, the methods were used interactively. This allowed for ongoing adjustments, making the analysis even more accurate.

The key research questions were:

1. How has China's panda diplomacy evolved over time?
2. How is PD received by the public in selected countries?
3. What challenges or limitations affect the effectiveness of PD as a soft power strategy?

3.4 Case Selection

The cases of Malaysia, Japan, and the United States were chosen through purposeful sampling (Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2018), guided by the principle of 'maximum' variation. This strategy ensures the inclusion of diverse contexts that differ politically, culturally, and diplomatically in their relationships with China. The goal was not statistical generalization but rather analytical depth—each case offering distinctive insights into how panda diplomacy operates and is received.

1. Malaysia offers a clear example of how PD operates in a regionally cooperative and diplomatically aligned environment. As a member of ASEAN with deep economic and infrastructure ties to China—particularly

through projects tied to the Belt and Road Initiative—Malaysia tends to frame its reception of pandas within a broader story of partnership and goodwill. This makes it a fitting case to examine how PD functions in a setting where bilateral relations are largely positive.

2. Japan, by contrast, presents a more layered situation. Although pandas are immensely popular and widely celebrated in Japanese culture, the political relationship between Tokyo and Beijing remains cautious, shaped by historical disputes and strategic rivalry. In this context, Japan illustrates how PD can thrive at a cultural level even when political trust is limited—highlighting the disconnect that can exist between symbolic acceptance and geopolitical skepticism.
3. The United States provides a unique long-term view, having been one of the first countries to receive pandas during the Cold War era. U.S.–China relations have shifted dramatically—from cooperation to competition—and these changes are reflected in how PD has been framed over time. While pandas once symbolized diplomatic warming in the 1970s, today they are often viewed through the lens of strategic rivalry. The American case sheds light on how soft power tools like PD can lose influence or take on new meanings when the broader relationship becomes tense.

These cases were selected not as global benchmarks, but as analytically rich contexts that allow for both contrast and comparison. Together, they help uncover patterns, divergences, and contextual factors that shape how PD is framed, received, and challenged across different settings.

3.5 Method of Data Collection and Analysis

To address the research questions concerning the evolution, reception, and limitations of PD, this study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining historical-documentary analysis, public surveys, and the examination of secondary sources such as journal articles, media reports, and expert commentary. Each method was chosen for its relevance to a specific dimension of PD and its ability to generate context-rich insights.

3.5.1 Historical and Documentary Analysis

To explore how PD has changed over time, this study relied on historical and documentary analysis, drawing from a variety of secondary materials. These included official statements, state-run media, academic articles, policy papers, news reports, and expert opinions. On a few occasions, remarks made by political figures—quoted in the media—were used to illustrate how PD was interpreted or framed at certain key points. The goal was to trace how the role, messaging, and strategic use of PD have shifted over the years.

The analysis followed a chronological structure, focusing on changes in how PD was presented and applied, especially in relation to evolving trends in China's foreign policy. Three distinct periods were considered:

1. The Mao era, when pandas were given as symbolic gifts of ideological friendship.
2. The Reform era, which saw a move toward leasing arrangements and a focus on conservation.
3. The current Xi Jinping era, where PD has taken on a more strategic role in shaping China's international image.

This method provided a clear picture of how PD has developed in step with broader political and diplomatic transformations.

3.5.2 Public Perception Surveys

To capture audience reception, online surveys were conducted in Malaysia, Japan, and the United States between July 2024 and January 2025. The instrument consisted of closed-ended questions across five dimensions identified in the literature (Nye, 2004; Zaharna, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2010), supplemented by the author's own reasoning.

While prior studies highlight credibility, symbolism, and audience interpretation as central to the effectiveness of soft power, this study further refined these elements into dimensions specifically relevant to panda diplomacy: awareness and engagement, emotional and symbolic appeal, impact on perceptions of China, interpretation of motives, and overall support. This combination ensures both theoretical grounding and contextual relevance.

A non-probability sampling approach was adopted, combining convenience sampling (80% recruited via social media) with snowball sampling (20% recruited through the researcher's network in China, with friends in Malaysia, Japan, and the

United States invited to share the survey). Although not statistically representative, this approach was pragmatic given time and access constraints.

A total of 300 respondents (approximately 100 per country) provided sufficient diversity for cross-national comparison. Demographic variables were not systematically analysed, as the primary objective of the survey was to capture broad patterns of audience reception across national contexts rather than within-group variation.

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentages) to identify trends. No inferential testing was conducted, as the aim was to reveal patterns rather than establish causality. Each country case was analysed separately before undertaking thematic comparison across cases, thereby allowing both within-case depth and cross-case insights.

3.5.3 Use of Media Reports for Contextual Support

As part of this research, selected news articles were consulted to provide contextual background on how panda diplomacy (PD) is represented in public discourse. These materials were not drawn from a structured sampling process, nor were they subjected to formal coding or statistical analysis. Rather, they were employed flexibly to illustrate and enrich themes emerging from the historical and survey findings. For instance, when the survey data revealed strong support for, or notable scepticism toward, PD, relevant news articles were referenced to demonstrate how such attitudes were reflected in broader public debate. In this way, news reporting served to situate the study's results within their wider political and cultural context.

The selection of news articles was guided primarily by relevance to the study's research questions and their potential to deepen contextual understanding of PD. Instead of applying rigid analytical frameworks, this approach relied on interpretive reading, allowing for a more nuanced engagement with public narratives. Accordingly, news coverage functioned as a supplementary layer of analysis—used selectively to highlight, question, or extend the insights derived from the historical review and survey data.

3.5.4 Comparative Case Synthesis

To assess how panda diplomacy (PD) is received across different national contexts—and to explore its effectiveness as a soft power tool—this study adopted a multi-phase analytical framework. Findings were first examined within their respective country cases. These within-case results were then brought together in a comparative synthesis, structured thematically around elements such as emotional resonance, perceived political intent, support for PD etc.

This comparative analysis addressed the 'second' research question by examining how PD is interpreted and received in different settings. In doing so, it also provided a foundation for engaging with the 'third' research question, offering a critical lens through which to evaluate the broader challenges and limitations of PD as a mechanism of soft power.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Careful measures were taken to uphold ethical standards and safeguard participants. The survey was conducted online, and participation was entirely voluntary. Prior to

beginning, each respondent was provided with a clear explanation of the study's aims, the intended use of their responses, and their rights as participants. No personal or identifying information was collected, and all responses remained fully anonymous. The data were stored securely and used exclusively for academic purposes, in accordance with established research ethics (Bryman, 2016).

3.7 Limitation

Research Design: The lack of interviews or focus group discussions is a notable limitation of this study. While surveys and media analysis offer valuable insights into public and discursive responses, they do not capture the perspectives of key stakeholders such as policymakers, cultural diplomats, zoo administrators, or representatives from NGOs and other relevant institutions. Direct engagement with these actors could have provided important institutional and strategic context, enriching the analysis with a deeper understanding of the intentions behind public diplomacy initiatives as well as the logistical and policy-level challenges involved.

Case Studies Selection: Another consideration involves both case study selection and the cross-national comparative design. The choice of Malaysia, Japan, and the United States—while strategically diverse—excludes other regions where panda diplomacy has also played a significant role, such as Europe, Latin America, or Africa. This selection limits the study's ability to offer a truly global assessment of PD's reception and effectiveness.

Although the cases were chosen for their analytical richness and relevance to the research questions, they may not capture the full spectrum of geopolitical and cultural

responses to PD worldwide. Moreover, while comparative design brings contrast and complexity, it also risks oversimplification. The analytical balance between depth (within-case analysis) and breadth (cross-case synthesis) remains delicate (George & Bennett, 2005). In some areas, depth may have been sacrificed for the sake of comparative insight, and the findings should therefore be interpreted with that trade-off in mind.

Content analysis scope: The content analysis relied primarily on English-language or translated sources. This was partly due to accessibility constraints and the researcher's linguistic limitations. Consequently, domestic narratives appearing in vernacular or local-language outlets may not be fully captured. Given that media in each country also varies by political leaning and audience orientation, the view may not reflect the full range of available perspectives.

Temporal Scope: The scope of this study is limited to data gathered up to 2025. Although the findings provide fresh look at the phenomenon, this temporal boundary presents a notable limitation, as global political dynamics—particularly those involving China and the United States—continue to evolve rapidly. Public perception of PD, which may be viewed positively in one context or time period, can shift significantly as tensions rise or narratives change. Thus, what is seen as an act of cultural goodwill today might be reinterpreted tomorrow as a strategic manoeuvre, depending on the broader geopolitical climate.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVOLUTION OF PANDA DIPLOMACY

4.1 Introduction

This section aims to examine how panda diplomacy has evolved over time, addressing Research Question 1 of this study: How has panda diplomacy developed as a soft power strategy within China's foreign policy? By tracing its transformation from symbolic gifting to a strategic instrument of international engagement, this chapter provides the historical and political context necessary for understanding how panda diplomacy functions today and sets the foundation for its reception analysis in later chapters.

4.1.1 Panda Diplomacy: The Formative Stage

China's use of pandas as diplomatic symbols dates back over a thousand years, but the modern version of this tradition was revived under Mao Zedong. During the early years of the People's Republic of China (PRC), pandas were deliberately used to express goodwill and foster ties with countries aligned with Beijing's political interests (Buckingham et al., 2013). The first modern instance occurred in 1957, when China gifted a pair of pandas to the Soviet Union. This gesture was both a thank-you—recognizing Moscow as the first to formally acknowledge the PRC—and a signal of China's intent to deepen its relationship with a key ally (China Daily, 2013).

At the time, the Cold War was intensifying, and China viewed the Soviet Union as a natural partner in countering Western influence. The panda gift symbolized the strong bond between the two nations during the 1950s. However, the alliance quickly

deteriorated. By the 1960s, ideological differences and power struggles within the communist bloc triggered the Sino-Soviet split. As tensions rose, the use of PD in that relationship came to an abrupt end.

After the breakdown in relations with Moscow, China shifted its foreign policy focus to other socialist partners. Among them, North Korea stood out, especially given the two countries' shared history during the Korean War. Pyongyang became the second recipient of giant pandas from China. Between 1965 and 1980, China gifted North Korea a total of five pandas as a gesture of diplomatic goodwill (China Daily, 2013). During this period, PD was limited to China's fellow communist states, reflecting the country's ideological priorities at the time. But as tensions with the Soviet Union escalated—particularly over contested border issues—Beijing began rethinking its foreign policy strategy. This shift laid the groundwork for a more expansive use of PD in the years that followed.

Table 4.1
List of Panda Receiving Countries

Country	Year	Context
Soviet Union	1957	First panda gift; showed early socialist solidarity between China and USSR
North Korea	1965	Reinforced ideological and political alliance during regional tensions
United States	1972	Gift after President Nixon's visit—symbolized normalization of Sino-U.S. relations
Japan	1972	After normalization of China-Japan diplomatic relations
France	1973	Gifted following President Georges Pompidou's visit to China
United Kingdom	1974	Reflecting warming UK-China ties post-recognition in 1950
Mexico	1975	As part of expanding China's diplomatic outreach to Latin America
Spain	1978	Marked growing bilateral cooperation during Spain's post-Franco diplomatic realignment
Germany (West)	1980	Celebrated improving Sino-West German relations amid China's opening-up reforms

A clear pattern can be observed in the selection of countries that received pandas from China as illustrated in the table above: PD was no longer confined to communist allies but was deployed more broadly to facilitate normalization of diplomatic ties. Indeed, all of these countries had either recently established or significantly improved diplomatic relations with China.

Among these cases, the most prominent one took place in 1972, when China gifted a pair of giant pandas to the United States (U.S), following President Nixon's historic visit to Beijing (MacMillan, 2008). This gesture formed part of the PRC's broader strategy to facilitate diplomatic engagement amidst fluid global power dynamics and laid the 'groundwork' for its reform and opening-up policies.

More than a symbolic exchange between governments, the pandas' arrival in Washington, D.C. were greeted with massive public fanfare (Solly, 2025) and became powerful tools of public relations. Thousands flocked to the National Zoo in Washington to see the panda pair, who captured the heart of the public and soon became a symbols of goodwill and warmth. The gift effectively projected a more benevolent image of China to American audience still wary after decades of anti-Communist sentiment (Collard, 2013).

Set against this positive reception, China deployed PD to great effect in rebuilding relations with Japan in 1972. Two giant pandas were sent to Tokyo as a 'token' of renewed friendship and to mark the normalization of diplomatic ties (The Japan Times, 2011). Public enthusiasm was overwhelming: millions flocked to 'Ueno Zoo', and the pandas were fast off the mark to become Japanese cultural icons (The Japan News,

2022). This surge in ‘goodwill’ was also reflected in Japan’s attitudes toward China. According to Cabinet Office poll 79% registered positive views (China Daily, 2022). Builds on this success, China panda gift was also extended to other major Western powers. For instance, France received a pair of pandas from China in 1973, followed by the United Kingdom in 1974 and West Germany in 1980 (Wong, 2023). These symbolic gestures followed each country’s recognition of the PRC over the Republic of China (Taiwan) and served as symbolic affirmation of enhanced bilateral relations.

Collectively, these early cases show how PD functioned as a form of cultural diplomacy, allowing China to cultivate goodwill, strengthen newly established diplomatic ties. Further, PD was largely reserved for major powers that had formally recognized the PRC, and with whom Beijing aimed to foster closer bilateral relationships. Therefore, the gifting of pandas served not merely as a gesture of appreciation, but as a deliberate act of diplomatic gesture—subtly conveying China’s intent to build lasting partnerships on the global stage.

4.1.2 Phase 2: Post-Reform Era (1980s–2000s) - Leasing model and economic framing

Unlike the previous era, the forms of PD changes under Deng Xiaoping leadership. Under Deng’s economic reforms, China embraced elements of market economics and sought foreign exchange and investment as part of its ‘reform’ and ‘opening up’ policy (Sung, 1991). These market principles were soon applied to PD where Pandas were no longer offered as diplomatic gifts but were instead leased to foreign countries for a fee. Further, the purpose of PD also shifted from primary emphasis on diplomacy to a focus on markets (Buckingham et al., 2013).

This phase began in 1984; when the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUNC) listed the giant panda as an endangered species, which provide China with a pretext to modify its PD model since gifting panda violate this emerging norms on wildlife conservation. The first instance of this practice came during the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, when China loaned two pandas to the U.S. for a fee of ‘\$50,000’ per panda per month (Telegraph, 2023). From this moment, pandas came to function as both diplomatic token and economic revenue for China.

Despite the financial and diplomatic advantages, this new model soon drew criticism from conservationists. Leasing endangered animals for profit appeared to contravene the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. which restricts such exchanges to ‘scientific’ research or ‘conservation’ purposes (CITES, 1982). In 1990s, China adjusted its approach and begun to frame it as a part of cooperative conservation programmes (Buckingham et al, 2013). Typically, this updated model of panda diplomacy which introduced a new kind of long-term leasing arrangement. It typically spans to a decade with reportedly have an annual fee reaching up to \$1 million per panda (Reuters, 2024). Even though the cub was born abroad, it is solely the property of China. Therefore, whether they are born or raised, the ownership of these pandas will always be Chinas’.

This reconfiguration brought with it several strategic advantages for China’s foreign policy. For instance, China’s panda diplomacy comes to alignment with global norms. This helps to deflect earlier criticisms that the program was simply a commercial exploitation and ultimately will enhance their global soft power image. China found a new way to deepen its scientific collaborations with leading zoological institutions,

including those in US, UK, Japan and beyond to portray themselves as a responsible partner in species conservation. These partnership laid a groundwork for broader cultural and diplomatic engagement with China's strategic partners.

To make an illustration during the post-reform period, the table below shows the key panda transfers. Where pandas were permanently gifted, like in the earlier phase, this period approach the newer approach which are the short-term exhibition and long-term conservation lease that are often tied to specific key diplomatic or cultural events. As an example, in the United States, as part of the Los Angeles Olympics (1988), Canada hosted pandas during a limited 100-day display and during 1988 Calgary Olympics, which aims fostering goodwill. Reflecting the shift towards scientifically framed partnership, Thailand and UK engaged in 10-year conservation leases. Symbolic pandas were designed to promote domestic political narratives and to reinforce national unity in Hongkong (1999, 2007) and Taiwan (2008). These underscores how panda diplomacy became multifaceted instrument and flexible of Chinese Foreign Policy.

A turning point in the logic and practice of panda diplomacy reflects during the post-reform era (1980 – 2008). Panda diplomacy which once become a largely symbolic gifting, become something far more strategic and structured soft power that merged conservation, foreign policy and commercial logic. China gradually repositioned the panda as a calculated instrument of international engagement after carefully negotiated leases and narrative of scientific cooperation. This paves the way for the more assertive, and image-conscious panda diplomacy of the Xi Jinping era after this transformation.

Table 4.2

List of Post-Reform Era Countries

Country	Year	Nature of Transfer	Diplomatic Context
United States	1984	Loan (exhibition)	Special visitors for LA Olympics; cementing U.S.–China relations
Canada (Toronto)	1985	Loan (exhibition)	100-day exhibit; boost Canada–China goodwill
New Zealand	1988	Loan (3-month)	Short-term exhibition loan; first pandas in NZ, symbolizing goodwill
Canada (Calgary)	1988	Loan (exhibition)	Year-long loan during Calgary Olympics; public diplomacy
United Kingdom	1991	Lease (breeding loan, 10yr)	Long-term conservation/breeding partnership; UK–China collaboration
Hong Kong (SAR)	1999	Gift	Handover goodwill: donated by PRC on Hong Kong's establishment
Thailand	2003	Lease (10yr)	Conservation loan seen as diplomatic goodwill gesture
Hong Kong (SAR)	2007	Gift	10th anniversary of Handover; symbol of continued friendship
Taiwan	2008	Gift	Cross-strait “reunion” gesture during warmer relations

4.1.3 Phase 3:

PD under Xi Jinping has undergone a notable transformation, evolving from symbolic gifting and scientific exchange into a sophisticated instrument of China's FP strategy. This shift is closely tied to Xi's overarching visions: the “Chinese Dream” of national rejuvenation and the creation of a “community of shared future for mankind.” The former reinforces China's aspiration to reclaim its historical status as a global power, while the latter seeks to portray its rise as peaceful and collaborative (Zhang, 2018).

Both visions align with the concept of China's “peaceful rise,” a narrative designed to counter the “China threat” thesis, which has gained traction as China's global influence continues to expand. Set against this, PD has been elevated from symbolic gesture to strategic instrument—used to project China's soft power. This reflects China's

recognition that hard power alone cannot build enduring partnerships, particularly in ‘democracies’ where public opinion shapes FP. While some embraced China’s rise for trade and investment, others—especially in the West—have grown increasingly cautious of its strategic intentions (Sue-Ann, 2024).

The BRI which forms China’s pathway to great power status, has received support from many government, yet it has also deepened public concerns over economic dependency (Choong, 2024). Looking at it from this angle, PD offers a soft counter-narrative—projecting a peaceful and culturally resonant image of China. As Xi explicitly said, “China must give a good Chinese narrative” and effectively communicate it to the world, calling for a stronger national effort to link China’s likeability to its meteoric rise (Albert, 2018).

Indeed, it is within Xi’s tenure, PD has evolved into a more strategically calculated form of soft power. Moving beyond its earlier focus on major Western nations, the practice has now been integrated into China’s broader foreign policy vision—particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—to further strengthen diplomatic ties, project a peaceful national image, and foster people-to-people connections across the globe (See table X). The fact that, much of these exchange coincided with state visits, trade negotiations or cultural agreements attests to the strategic nature of PD and its growing role in China’s FP (a further discussion will be dealt with later).

Table 4.3

Asian Countries

Country	Type	Date	Diplomatic Context
Malaysia	New Pandas	May 21, 2014	40th anniversary of diplomatic ties; delayed due to MH370 incident.
South Korea	New Pandas	March 3, 2016	Gift promised by Xi Jinping during 2014 summit with President Park Geun-hye.
Indonesia	New Pandas	September 28, 2017	Commemorating 60 years of diplomatic relations.
Qatar	New Pandas	October 19, 2022	Ahead of 2022 FIFA World Cup; first panda loan to the Middle East.
Thailand	Extension/Renewal	Ongoing since 2003	Continued collaboration in wildlife conservation.
Singapore	Extension/Renewal	September 2012	Initial 10-year loan; renewed in 2022 to strengthen bilateral ties.
Japan	Extension/Renewal	Ongoing	Long-standing panda loans; continued cultural exchange and goodwill.

Table 4.4

European Countries

Country	Type	Date	Diplomatic Context
France	New Pandas	January 15, 2012	50th anniversary of diplomatic relations.
Belgium	New Pandas	February 23, 2014	Strengthening China-Belgium ties.
Germany	New Pandas	June 24, 2017	Coincided with Xi Jinping's visit to Berlin.
Netherlands	New Pandas	April 12, 2017	First-ever panda loan to the Netherlands.
Finland	New Pandas	January 18, 2018	Xi Jinping's state visit to Finland.
Russia	New Pandas	June 5, 2019	70th anniversary of diplomatic relations.
Denmark	New Pandas	April 4, 2019	Arrival of Mao Sun and Xing Er at Copenhagen Zoo; deal signed in 2017 during Danish PM visit to China.
Austria	Extension/Renewal	Ongoing	Continued panda presence since 2003.
United Kingdom	Extension/Renewal	Ongoing since 2011	Edinburgh Zoo pandas.
Spain	Extension/Renewal	Ongoing since 2007	Madrid Zoo breeding program.

Table 4.5

North American Countries

Country	Type	Date	Diplomatic Context
Canada	New Pandas	March 25, 2013	10-year loan agreement; pandas split time between Toronto and Calgary.
United States	New Pandas	August 8, 2024	Pandas Bao Li and Qing Bao arrived at San Diego Zoo; symbolizing renewed cooperation.
United States	Extension/Renewal	2024	New 10-year agreement signed; pandas to reside at Smithsonian's National Zoo.

Table 4.6

Oceania Countries

Country	Type	Date	Diplomatic Context
Australia	New Pandas	Expected in 2025	Announcement made during Premier Li Qiang's visit; marking improved bilateral relations.
Australia	Extension/Renewal	November 2023	Renewal of panda loan agreement; reflecting strengthened ties.

One of the major differences in China's PD under Xi's administration is its growing role China's FP. Indeed, PD has become even more formalized and strategic designed to support the broader vision of China's global rise. Otherwise put, it has shifted from a largely symbolic gesture or source of revenue to a well-managed instrument of soft power, embedded in his agenda to project China as benevolent and responsible global leader. Leasing agreements are no longer merely about fostering goodwill; they are now tied to clear conservation goals, scientific collaboration, and nation branding efforts that aligned with China's outward-facing policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Public relations campaigns surrounding panda arrivals often 'coincide' with trade negotiations, diplomatic visits and major bilateral agreements, which suggest a carefully choreographed use of pandas to reinforce China's international narratives (Oxford, 2013).

These efforts serve Xi's broader aim of reshaping global perceptions of China—not simply as an economic power, but as a guardian of global biodiversity and a promoter of mutual development. The increased visibility of panda-related events in state media and foreign press highlights the centrality of PD in Xi's image-building strategy. In this way, PD under Xi is no longer just cultural diplomacy—it is statecraft.

4.2 Geographical expansion:

While panda diplomacy during the pre-Xi era largely concentrated on long-standing Western partners such as the US, UK and Japan, the Xi Jinping era has witnessed a deliberate geographic diversification. Pandas have been dispatched to emerging economies in Southeast Asia, which are in Malaysia (2014) and Indonesia (2017). Another country in the Middle East is Qatar (2022), as well as Northern Europe, which are in Finland (2018) and Denmark (2019). Both countries hold a strategic importance which is growing for China in Arctic Engagement, trade access and diplomatic influence within the EU. Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aimed at building influence across both developing and developed nations has been an expanding diplomatic ambitions for a broader distribution of Beijing expanding diplomatic ambitions.

Under President Xi, a significant evolution is its extensions to areas that have historically received less attention in China's foreign policy horizons which are the non-traditional regions but increase in its importance under the BRI, which is the best case in this scenario is Qatar. The 2022 panda loan to Qatar illustrates this shift, making it the first and only Middle Eastern country to host giant pandas (Kevin, 2022). The decision was far from arbitrary; Qatar's strong economic strength alongside stable

political situation and commitment to wildlife conservation made it sound recipient (Niu & Wang, 2024).

Moreover, its neutral stance in regional geopolitics provides China with a unique opportunity to further extend its soft power in the Gulf without becoming entangled in local rivalries. Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup—a high-profile global event—further elevated its 'attraction' as an ideal destination. This is because, by sending pandas, China can strategically leverage Qatar's global visibility to strengthen its image and goodwill abroad, thereby aligning its soft power outreach with a moment of heightened global attention.

4.3 Diplomatic Timing and Symbolism

A key evolution in PD under Xi Jinping is the deliberate alignment of panda transfers with diplomatic milestones, which point to a more calculated use of soft power. Unlike earlier eras, where panda exchanges were often symbolic gestures of friendship, recent deployments have increasingly coincided with anniversaries of bilateral relations, high-level state visits, or major global events. For instance, the 2014 panda loan to Malaysia marked the 40th anniversary of diplomatic ties (Malay Mail, 2014), while a similar gesture toward Indonesia in 2017 commemorated 60 years of relations (SCMP, 2017). China also sent pandas to Qatar just before the FIFA World Cup in 2022 to enhance its visibility in the Middle East during a high-profile global event (Al Jazeera, 2022). Additionally, panda transfers to Germany and Finland during official state visits by President Xi signalled the high diplomatic value China places on these relationships.

Taken together, these cases reflect a strategic recalibration under Xi: PD has become a tool not only for cultural outreach, but also for political signalling—timed to reinforce, reward or commemorate moments of heightened bilateral significance, while benefitting from extensive global media coverage.

4.4.1 Strategic and Economic Linkage:

Beyond symbolism, another defining feature of PD under Xi is its growing integration with China's economic and resource-based FP. For instance, a study conducted by Oxford University in 2023 found that; panda lease to Canada, Australia and France coincided with major uranium deals and contracts between the two countries (BBC, 2024) Here, pandas may serve as diplomatic 'sweeteners'—used to reward economic cooperation or convey China's political goodwill in the context of resource access and investment agreements (UnHerd, 2023).

This economic dimension is also evident in Southeast Asia. Panda loans to Malaysia and Indonesia closely followed the signing of free trade deals and other economic agreements, undertaken as part of China's broader BRI strategy (Reuters, 2023). A comparable pattern can be seen in the case of Qatar, where the arrival of pandas was followed by the major long-term LNG deal with China (Reuters, 2022).

Collectively, these examples illustrate a deliberate recalibration of panda diplomacy. No longer merely symbols of goodwill, pandas have become tools of economic statecraft, deployed to support China's strategic interests and to foster deeper economic partnerships.

4.4.2 Cultural Linkage and Scientific Cooperation.

Further, another feature of PD under President Xi is the deliberate coupling of cultural and scientific programming aimed at fostering long-term people-to-people ties, enhancing China's international image, and promoting mutual understanding (Brady, 2015; Callahan, 2013). This shift reflects China's broader soft power agenda, emphasizing the export of cultural symbols and narratives as a complement to economic and geopolitical influence (Zhang, 2018).

While scientific cooperation—especially in the areas of breeding, habitat research, and veterinary exchange—remains a core justification for panda loans, the cultural dimension of PD has significantly expanded under Xi's leadership. For instance, panda arrivals often accompanied by cultural events, language class and school programs. Host countries have integrated panda-themed educational programs, exhibitions, and festivals into their public outreach, further embedding the panda as a symbol of friendship and mutual understanding. These cultural efforts help reinforce China's soft power by generating positive public sentiment and deepening cultural ties. For example, in Scotland the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland runs a “Beyond the Panda” education initiative (in partnership with a Confucius Institute) that uses the pandas at Edinburgh Zoo to teach Chinese language, and ecology to children.

4.4.3 Re-engagement with Strategic Rivals

Under Xi Jinping, PD has been repurposed as a strategic tool not only to celebrate friendships, as noted earlier, but also to manage difficult relationships and ease tensions with rival states. A clear example is the case of U.S. Despite ongoing geopolitical strains, China resumed panda loans in 2024—after a prolonged hiatus—

sending pairs to both the San Diego Zoo and the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. (New York Times, 2024). Likewise, panda exchange continued in Japan despite recurring diplomatic frictions over historical grievances and territorial disputes. The 2024 arrival of a new panda pair at Adelaide Zoo in Australia further illustrates this trend, given their fluctuating bilateral ties marked by political and economic disagreements (Global Times, 2024).

Of particular note in the case above, however, is the lapse between the expiration of leases and the eventual renewal of panda loans, which has led some observer to dismiss it as evidence of a new trend in China's use of PD—namely, the withholding of pandas from countries critical of its government (May, 2024). Nonetheless, I argue that such delays plausibly function as temporary 'signals' of diplomatic 'displeasure rather than permanent suspensions, particularly given that PD remains active in these countries. Regardless, this development points to a broader shift under President Xi: that is, PD has evolved into a strategic instrument used not only to deepen partnerships, but also to navigate rivalries and maintain channels of communication through the deliberate exercise of soft power.

4.4.4 Formalization and Strategic Structuring

That aside, PD has also become more formalized. Most transfers now occur under long-term leasing agreements, often tied to conservation or breeding goals, and are accompanied by significant public relations efforts. These developments point to the growing role of PD as a structured soft power instrument—integrated into China's broader strategy of nation branding.

4.5 Conclusion: Continuities and Changes Over Time

The evolution of panda diplomacy reflects broader transformations in China's foreign policy priorities and diplomatic posture. From the ideological gifting of the Mao era to the economically rationalized leasing of the reform period, and finally to the strategic deployment under Xi, panda diplomacy has remained a flexible tool in China's soft power arsenal. What remains consistent, however, is the panda's symbolic resonance—its universal appeal as a peaceful, rare, and endearing creature. What has changed, however, is the strategic intent and institutionalization behind its deployment. The panda has evolved from a passive symbol of friendship into an active agent of diplomacy—capable of both charm and calculation. Nevertheless, as the next chapter will demonstrate, the effectiveness of PD depends not only on the policies of the Chinese government, but also on how these gestures are interpreted by foreign publics, media, and policymakers—a subject of increasing relevance in today's polarized geopolitical environment.

CHAPTER FIVE

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PANDA DIPLOMACY

5.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates how panda diplomacy (PD) is received and interpreted by foreign publics in three distinct national contexts: Malaysia, Japan, and the United States. While earlier chapters outlined the strategic evolution and intended symbolism of PD within China's soft power arsenal, this section addresses Research Question 2: How is panda diplomacy received by the public in host countries?

By analysing public perceptions through survey data, this chapter seeks to determine whether panda diplomacy fosters goodwill, improves China's image, or is met with scepticism—especially in relation to political context and media framing. These three countries were selected to reflect a range of geopolitical dynamics: Malaysia, a key partner in China's regional diplomacy; Japan, a culturally engaged but strategically wary neighbour; and the U.S., a strategic rival with a long-standing PD history. This comparative approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how PD is filtered through national narratives and public sentiment.

5.2 Methodology Review

The data presented in this chapter was collected through an online public survey conducted between July 2024 to January 2025 in Malaysia, Japan, and the United States. The survey was designed to explore five key dimensions of public perception:

1. Awareness and engagement with panda diplomacy
2. Emotional and symbolic appeal of the pandas

3. Impact on perceptions of China
4. Interpretation of China's motives
5. Public support for continued panda diplomacy

This study employed a mixed 'non-probability' sampling approach, combining 'convenience' and 'snowball' samplings. Approximately 80% of participants were recruited through open distribution on social media platforms, allowing for broad and accessible participation across Malaysia, Japan, and the United States. The remaining 20% were recruited through snowball sampling, beginning with author's network of friends (Malaysian, American, and Japanese) based in China, who were invited to participate and share the survey within their networks.

A total of 300 individuals took part in the survey, with roughly 100 respondents each from Malaysia, Japan, and the United States. This sample size allows for meaningful cross-national comparison while remaining feasible within the constraints of time and access. Although the sample is not statistically representative of each national population, it provides a robust basis for exploring trends and patterns in public perceptions of panda diplomacy across diverse cultural and geopolitical contexts.

5.3 Malaysia: Survey Findings and Interpretation

5.3.1 Public Awareness and Engagement

For Malaysia, the survey results reveal a relatively high level of public awareness surrounding China's PD. Around 65% recognized that the giant pandas at Zoo Negara were on loan from China as part of a diplomatic agreement—a figure that suggests the initiative has achieved remarkable visibility. Interestingly, 40% of respondents

reported having seen the pandas in person—a notable level of engagement, given the fact that Malaysia has only hosted them for less than ten years. Furthermore, media exposure appears to have played a major role in building this familiarity, with many participants mentioning they first encountered pandas through TV, newspapers, or social media. This indicates that PD has gained broad visibility in Malaysia, reaching people through both digital and traditional media channels.

This high level of public engagement can be partially attributed to the symbolic significance of the pandas' arrival in 2014, which marked the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The event received widespread media coverage and was framed by the government in both countries as a testament to strong bilateral ties (Malay Mail, 2024; The New Straits Times, 2025). Moreover, the Malaysian government's consistent portrayal of the pandas as a token of 'friendship' may have further reinforced public recognition of the animals as diplomatic symbols rather than merely conservation assets (The Edge Malaysia, 2019; Bernama, 2025).

That aside, public awareness has also been strengthened by extensive media attention surrounding the highly publicized births of three panda cubs. These events were not only biological milestones but also major media moments—framed as symbols of national success that elevated Zoo Negara's global profile (Bernama, 2024). The fact that Zoo Negara reported a 60% increase in visitors within the first year alone is a clear indicator of strong public engagement (The Star, 2024), given that, as noted earlier, Malaysia's experience with panda diplomacy is relatively recent compared to that of Japan and the United States.

5.3.2 Symbolic and Emotional Appeal

Table 5.1

What emotions did you feel when you first saw or heard about Chinese pandas in your country?

Response	Percentage (%)
Curiosity about China	43 %
Admiration	50 %
Joy/Excitement	76 %
Indifference	9 %
Suspicion of Political Motives	8 %

Table 5.2

What do Pandas symbolize most to you?

Response	Percentage (%)
Conservation and Science	26%
Chinese cultural outreach	27%
A gesture of Chinese goodwill	43%
No particular meaning.	14%

Surveys also found that, Malaysian respondents were the most emotionally receptive to PD. A large majority (76%) reported feelings of joy or excitement upon seeing or learning about pandas, 43% expressed curiosity, and 50% felt admiration. Only 8% reported feeling of suspicion regarding China's political motives. These figures indicate that PD in Malaysia effectively generates emotional engagement.

When asked about the symbolic significance of the pandas, 70% linked them to Chinese goodwill and cultural outreach, while only 26% viewed them primarily through a conservation lens. This distribution of data indicates that PD is perceived as a soft power instrument; capable of fostering diplomatic ties rather than just cultural and conservation efforts. These positive association is not far-fetched. The pandas' arrival in the context of Malaysia coincided with the 40th anniversary of Malaysia–China diplomatic relations—and was, as noted earlier publicly framed by both

governments as a symbol of friendship—clearly influenced how the public interpreted their symbolic meaning. Overall, these findings suggest that China’s intended symbolic message has been by and large received and accepted by the Malaysian public.

5.3.3 Impact on Perception of China

Malaysian broadly positive emotional responses, when examined alongside perception-based questions, indicates that PD has achieved a degree of success in enhancing China’s national image.

Table 5.3

Do you think China appears more friendly or peaceful because of panda diplomacy?

Response	Percentage (%)
Much More Friendly	33 %
Slightly More Friendly	36 %
No Change	20 %
Slightly Less Friendly	7 %
Much Less Friendly	4 %

Table 5.4

Has Panda Diplomacy changed your personal opinion of China?

Response	Percentage (%)
More Positive	47 %
No Change	43 %
More Negative	10 %

Table 5.5

Do you believe panda diplomacy is effective in improving China's international relations?

Response	Percentage (%)
Very Effective	35 %
Somewhat Effective	40 %
Not Effective	15 %
Not Sure	10 %

For instance, a combined 69% of Malaysian respondents reported that China appeared either “much more friendly” or “slightly more friendly” with panda’s exchange program. Moreover, nearly half (47%) stated that their personal opinion of China had become more positive, with only 10% indicating any form of negative shift. These results demonstrate that emotional appeal in the Malaysian context is not merely aesthetic but politically meaningful as it contributes to China's soft power. That said, 43% of respondents reported no change in opinion. This suggests that while PD has a positive effect on many, its influence is limited, especially among those with firmly established view of China.

5.3.4 Perception of Motives

Table 5.6

In your opinion, why does China send pandas to other countries?

Response	Percentage (%)
Wildlife Conservation	22 %
Cultural/Educational Exchange	30 %
Improve Diplomatic Ties	58 %
Promote China's Image	43 %
Economic/Trade Influence	12 %
Other	3 %

Table 5.7

Do you view panda diplomacy as a genuine act of goodwill or a political strategy?

Response	Percentage (%)
Mostly Goodwill	9 %
Mostly Political	63 %
A Mix of Both	23 %
Not Sure	5 %

A critical test of PD soft power impact lies in how the public interprets China’s intentions. In the case of Malaysia, the result is broadly positive; a majority (58%) viewed PD as a way to improve diplomatic ties, while 43% saw it as a strategy to

promote China's image. Smaller ratios associated it with cultural or educational exchange (30%) and wildlife conservation (22%). These indicates that while soft and symbolic elements are recognized, political intent remains central to public interpretation.

This reading becomes even more apparent in a follow-up question on whether PD is perceived as a genuine act of goodwill or a political strategy. Only 9% saw it as mostly goodwill, while 63% described it as primarily political. A further 23% viewed PD as a mix of both. These results suggest that although emotional responses to panda diplomacy are largely positive, a substantial portion of the public remains cautious about China's intentions—highlighting a tension between affective appeal and geopolitical scepticism.

Nevertheless, this political awareness does not appear to undermine the emotional effectiveness of the program (as shown earlier). Malaysia's generally warm diplomatic ties with China—bolstered by strong economic cooperation, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative—likely contribute to a context where the strategic nature of PD is accepted. The sustained media framing and officials' narratives of 'friendship', along with the absence of major conflicts, have helped ensure that the initiative, while broadly seen as politically motivated, is still well received.

5.3.5 Public Support for Future Engagement

Table 5.8

Do you support the continuation of Panda Loan program?

Response Option	Percentage (%)
Yes	81%

No	8%
Not sure	11%

Table 5.9

Reason for supporting Panda Loan program

Reason Selected	Percentage (%)
Tourism and economic benefits	22%
Conservation and environmental awareness	16%
Cultural exchange	18%
Enhance Malaysia–China diplomatic ties	32%
Educational or scientific collaboration	12

Table 5.10

PD contribute to stronger bilateral ties

Response Option	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree / Agree	75%
Neutral	20%
Disagree / Strongly disagree	5%

The survey proceeded to examine public support for Malaysia’s continued hosting of pandas, focusing on long-term perceptions of value and sustainability. Results show strong support for the continuation or renewal of panda loans: 81% of respondents favoured extending the agreement with China, while only 8% were opposed and 11% remained unsure.

When asked why they supported the program, the most frequently cited reason was its role in enhancing Malaysia–China diplomatic ties (32%), followed by tourism and economic benefits (22%), cultural exchange (18%), conservation awareness (16%), and educational or scientific collaboration (12%). These findings suggest that Malaysians see the PD program as more than just symbolic — they view it as a practical and diplomatic platform for deeper bilateral engagement.

Consistently, 75% of respondents agreed that PD contributes to stronger Malaysia–China relations. Taken together, these results reflect broad public backing not only for the pandas themselves but also for the broader diplomatic objectives they are seen to support.

5.3.6 Interpretation: Warm Reception, Strategic Awareness

Malaysia’s experience with PD reveals a unique convergence of emotional receptiveness and diplomatic alignment. Survey results demonstrate that Malaysian respondents are among the most emotionally responsive to the presence of pandas—76% expressed joy or excitement, and a majority associated the animals with goodwill and cultural significance. These reactions reflect how PD has successfully tapped into public sentiment, aided by strong media visibility and consistent government framing of the pandas as symbols of friendship and celebration, especially in connection with major diplomatic milestones like the 40th anniversary of Malaysia–China relations.

Yet this cultural affection does not equate to blind acceptance. While the symbolic narrative has clearly resonated, the Malaysian public also shows a measured understanding of PD’s political function. A majority (63%) viewed PD as a primarily strategic gesture, and 43% identified it as part of China’s image-building efforts. In short, the public recognizes that pandas serve not only as conservation icons or cultural ambassadors, but also as instruments of soft power and diplomatic influence.

What distinguishes Malaysia, however, is that this strategic awareness does not undermine the program’s popularity or effectiveness. On the contrary, PD is embraced as a mutually beneficial arrangement. With 81% supporting the continuation of the

panda loan and 75% agreeing that PD strengthens bilateral ties, the program is clearly seen as a valuable component of Malaysia–China relations. Factors such as the absence of high-profile geopolitical disputes, strong economic cooperation (especially under the Belt and Road Initiative), and positive framing by Malaysian media and officials have all contributed to this favourable environment.

In essence, the Malaysian case shows that PD can be highly effective when introduced in a context of diplomatic goodwill and cultural openness. The pandas are welcomed not only as beloved animals, but also as symbolic conduits for sustained engagement. Even when recognized as strategically motivated, PD in Malaysia functions as a credible and emotionally resonant form of soft power—one that complements, rather than competes with, the broader diplomatic relationship.

5.4 Japan: Findings and Interpretation

5.4.1 Public Awareness & Exposure

Japan displayed the highest level of public awareness and engagement with China's PD among the three countries. Around 83% of respondents were aware that the pandas housed at facilities such as Ueno Zoo in Tokyo and Adventure World in Wakayama were on loan from China. Zoo visitation was also notably high, with 65% reported having visited pandas in person at least once. This high level of public engagement reflects their decades-long relationship with panda. Ever since their arrivals at Ueno Zoo in 1972, pandas have been deeply absorbed into the cultural fabric—frequently featured in media, school materials, and public celebrations (Shimada, 2019; Asahi, 2024).

Recent events, such as the birth of a panda cub in early 2017 and the relocation of some pandas from Ueno Zoo, have also attracted significant media coverage (Kyodo News, 2017; The Japan Times, 2024; Asahi, 2024). Notably, despite recurring historical tensions and territorial disputes, Japanese enthusiasm for pandas has largely remained unaffected—demonstrating how PD can transcend diplomatic friction and continue to foster cultural exchange and societal-level engagement.

5.4.2 Emotional Appeal and Dual Symbolism

Table 5.11

What emotions did you feel when you first saw or heard about Chinese pandas in your country?

Response	Percentage (%)
Curiosity about China	41 %
Admiration	53 %
Excitement	81 %
Indifference	7 %
Suspicion of Political Motives	12 %

Table 5.12

What do Pandas symbolize most to you?

Response	Percentage (%)
Conservation and Science	30%
Chinese cultural outreach	32 %
A gesture of Chinese goodwill	28%
No particular meaning.	8 %

Japanese respondents expressed very strong appreciation for Chinese PD. A majority reported positive feelings upon seeing or learning about the pandas, reinforcing the notion that pandas occupy a distinctive place in Japanese popular culture. The range of positive emotional responses—excitement (81%), admiration (53%), and curiosity (41%)—highlights the program’s ability to draw public attention to China’s cultural outreach, particularly during periods of diplomatic tension. As Takenaka (2017) noted,

even amid ongoing territorial disputes in the East China Sea (ECS), the 2011 panda loan from China generated favourable media coverage.

While scepticism toward panda diplomacy was not entirely absent—12% of respondents expressed doubt about China’s political motives, and 7% remained unsure—these views represented only a small segment of public opinion. More revealing, however, is how the Japanese public interprets the symbolism associated with the pandas.

When asked what pandas most represent, the largest share of respondents chose Chinese cultural outreach (32%) and conservation and science (30%). These responses suggest that pandas are primarily seen through cultural and ecological lenses, aligning with their visible roles in zoos, media, and conservation partnerships. By contrast, only 28% viewed pandas as a gesture of goodwill, which reflects a more restrained acceptance of China’s intended diplomatic message. In other words, while the Japanese public warmly receives the animals and acknowledges their cultural and scientific value, fewer embrace the pandas as symbols of peace or friendship between nations.

This pattern illustrates a subtle form of selective engagement: the panda is welcomed as a cultural and environmental icon, but its strategic use as a diplomatic overture is received with caution. Taken together, these findings suggest that although some critical views exist, pandas are by and large embraced as positive and apolitical symbols in Japan. Rather than being seen primarily as gestures of goodwill, most

respondents perceived them as representations of cultural exchange and scientific cooperation

5.4.3 Impact on Perception of China

Table 5.13

Do you think China appears more friendly or peaceful because of panda diplomacy?

Response	Percentage (%)
Much More Friendly	15 %
Slightly More Friendly	42 %
No Change	30 %
Slightly Less Friendly	9 %
Much Less Friendly	4 %

Table 5.14

Has Panda Diplomacy changed your personal opinion of China?

Response	Percentage (%)
More Positive	24 %
No Change	69 %
More Negative	7 %

Table 5.15

Do you believe panda diplomacy is effective in improving China's foreign relations?

Response	Percentage (%)
Very Effective	22 %
Somewhat Effective	45 %
Not Effective	13 %
Not Sure	10 %

At the surface level, the survey shows that, the PD strong appeals to the Japanese helps soften China's cultural image. A combined 57% pandas made China appear more peaceful or friendly. However, this symbolic shift remains modest and often superficial, failing to 'translate' into deeper political trust. In fact, only 24% said their views of China improved because of PD, while a majority (69%) reported no change. This shows that while PD generate cultural warmth, it can do little to shift underlying

views of China, shaped by territorial disputes, historical grievances, and strategic rivalry.

That aside, despite the lack of trust in PD, many in Japan still view it as diplomatically useful. Around 67% of respondents saw it as effective in improving China’s foreign relations—likely because, PD function as a non-threatening, low-risk tool that helps maintain dialogue, especially when formal diplomacy breaks down. A clear example of this can be seen in 2024, when China offered to lease pandas to a Japanese zoo despite strained relations. This gesture, though symbolic, showed goodwill without asking for compromise (Kyodo News, 2024). Put differently, while PD doesn’t solve conflicts, it creates space for dialogue and helps reduce tension through cultural exchange.

5.4.4 Political Motive

Table 5.16

In your opinion, why does China send pandas to other countries?

Response	Percentage (%)
Wildlife Conservation	24 %
Cultural/Educational Exchange	31 %
Improve Diplomatic Ties	47 %
Promote China's Image	49 %
Economic/Trade Influence	15 %
Other	2 %

Table 5.17

Do you view panda diplomacy as a genuine act of goodwill or a political strategy?

Response	Percentage (%)
Mostly Goodwill	20 %
Mostly Political	27 %
A Mix of Both	48 %
Not Sure	5 %

Survey results suggest that the Japanese public views panda diplomacy (PD) through a dual lens—as both a cultural gesture and a strategic tool. While 24% associated PD with wildlife conservation and 31% with cultural or educational exchange, a larger portion linked it to more calculated motives: 47% cited its role in improving diplomatic ties, and 49% viewed it as a means to promote China’s global image. Additionally, 15% saw economic influence as a contributing factor. This tendency to interpret PD in strategic terms pose a challenge to PD because such framing dilutes its emotional resonance; when cultural outreach is perceived as politically driven, it becomes less effective in building trust or altering public perceptions.

These findings were further reinforced by responses to a follow-up question concerning perceptions of China’s motivations. When asked to evaluate the intent behind the panda loan program, 20% of respondents interpreted it as an act of goodwill, while 27% saw it primarily as a strategy to influence foreign perceptions. Notably, the largest segment—48%—identified it as a combination of both: a gesture that is simultaneously strategic and friendly. This distribution suggests that the Japanese public does not outright reject PD, even when it is viewed through a sceptical lens. Rather, the response pattern points to an attitude of ambivalent acceptance—an appreciation for the symbolic and cultural value of pandas, tempered by critical awareness of the strategic motive.

5.4.5 Public Support for Future Engagement

Table 5.18

Do you support the continuation of panda loan program

Response Option	Percentage (%)
Yes	68%
No	14%

Not sure	18%
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Table 5.19

Reason for support panda loan program

Reason Selected	Percentage (%)
Tourism and economic benefits	30%
Cultural and conservation awareness	35%
Enhance diplomatic ties	25%
Educational or scientific collaboration	10%

Table 5.20

Do you agree than panda program contribute to strong bilateral ties?

Response Option	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree / Agree	64%
Neutral	22%
Disagree / Strongly disagree	14%

Despite Japanese hold mixed views on China's intentions, support for the continuation of panda loans remains strong. About 68% favoured renewing panda agreements, citing benefits such as tourism, cultural exchange and conservation awareness. Only 14% opposed continued collaboration and 18% were undecided. Further, 64% of the respondents believed that PD contribute to strong bilateral relations. Simply put, PD in Japan is not seen as politically harmful or unwanted, but rather as a valuable channel for 'symbolic' cooperation and long-term engagement.

5.4.6 Interpretation: Cultural Affection Meets Strategic Realism

The Japanese case illustrates a key paradox of PD: emotional attachment does not automatically translate into political trust. While the Japanese public strongly embraces pandas as 'cultural' figures, their perception of China remains heavily mediated by historical memory and current strategic concerns. The dual framing of PD—as both sincere and strategic—indicates that Japan recognizes its symbolic utility

while keeping a cautious view of China's broader geopolitical agenda. Viewed in this context PD in Japan functions less as a transformative tool and more as a stabilizing mechanism—capable of sustaining soft cultural ties and mutual visibility even amid recurring political tensions. It reinforces the idea that cultural diplomacy alone cannot alter fundamental perceptions, but it can help preserve the space for dialogue in otherwise strained environments.

5.5 United States: Survey Findings and Interpretation

5.5.1 Public Awareness and Limited Engagement

Table 5.21

Have you heard of the term “Panda Diplomacy” before?

Response	Percentage (%)
Yes	78 %
No	10 %
Not Sure	12 %

Table 5.22

Where did you first learn about Panda Diplomacy? (Select one)

Response	Percentage (%)
Television/News	44 %
Social media	12 %
School/University	10 %
Zoo Visit	26 %
Family / Friends	8 %
Others	0 %

Table 5.23

Have you ever visited a zoo that hosts pandas on loan from China?

Response	Percentage (%)
Yes	48 %
No	52 %

The U.S. has the longest engagement with PD. The arrival of the first giant pandas in 1972, following President Nixon’s landmark visit to China, marked a significant diplomatic breakthrough and symbolized a new chapter in U.S.–China relations. Since then, Chinese leaders have portrayed it as symbols of enduring friendship between the two countries (CNN, 2023; China Daily, 2024).

However, compared to Malaysia and Japan, the level of public awareness and direct engagement with PD in the U.S. was slightly lower. While 78% of respondents were aware that the pandas at institutions such as the Smithsonian National Zoo in Washington, D.C. and the San Diego Zoo were part of China’s loan program, only 48% had personally visited these pandas. This lower level of engagement may be partly attributed to the geographic dispersion of panda-hosting zoos across a vast nation and temporary return of all pandas to China in late 2023, which may have contributed to diminished visibility (Washington Post, 2023). Additionally, U.S. media coverage of PD tends to frame the practice in relation to broader U.S.–China tensions, often emphasizing the political implications over the cultural or conservation aspects (Washington Post, 2019; CNN 2023).

5.5.2 Emotional Response and Conservation Framing

Table 5.24

What emotions did you feel when you first saw or heard about Chinese pandas in your country?

Response	Percentage (%)
Curiosity about China	35 %
Admiration	50 %
Excitement	70 %
Indifference	20 %
Suspicion of Political Motives	30 %

Table 5.25

What do pandas symbolize most to you?

Response	Percentage (%)
Conservation and Science	47%
Chinese cultural outreach	23 %
A gesture of Chinese goodwill	18%
No particular meaning	12 %

Despite the declining political ties, pandas continue evoke broadly positive emotions among the American public. 70% reported excitement, 50% admiration, and 35% curiosity about China, indicating strong affective appeal and some interest in cultural diplomacy. However, unlike in Malaysia and Japan—where pandas are widely viewed as ‘diplomatic’ symbols—American respondents were more likely to associate the animals with wildlife conservation rather than diplomacy. When asked what the pandas symbolized to them, 47% chose ‘conservation and science,’ 23% selected ‘cultural outreach,’ and only 18% considered them a ‘gesture of Chinese goodwill.’ Another 30% were uncertain or felt the pandas had no particular symbolic meaning beyond their zoological appeal. All in, the results illustrate that China’s intended symbolic message of PD (peace & friendship) is not widely embraced by American audience. Media in the U.S. often emphasize the panda’s conservation success as a result of ‘scientific’ collaboration between the two nations (The Washington Post, 2022).

5.5.3 Limited Impact on Perception of China

Table 5.26

Do you think China appears more friendly or peaceful because of panda diplomacy?

Response	Percentage (%)
More Friendly	28 %
No Change	56 %
Less Friendly	16 %

Table 5.27

Has Panda Diplomacy changed your personal opinion of China?

Response	Percentage (%)
More Positive	15 %
No Change	75 %
More Negative	10 %

Table 5.28

Do you believe panda diplomacy is effective in improving China's foreign relations?

Response	Percentage (%)
Very Effective	13 %
Somewhat Effective	15 %
Not Effective	60 %
Not Sure	12 %

The survey findings indicate that panda diplomacy (PD) has had a limited impact on improving the overall public perception of China in the United States. Although 28% of respondents said that PD made China appear more friendly, only 15% reported that the presence of pandas had positively influenced their personal view of the country. In contrast, a significant 75% stated that their opinion remained unchanged, while 10% noted that PD had actually worsened their perception—highlighting ongoing suspicion toward China’s political intentions.

When asked about the broader effectiveness of PD, only 13% considered it very effective and 15% somewhat effective, whereas a majority (60%) viewed it as ineffective. These results underscore a critical point: while PD may generate public interest, it does not function in isolation from the political environment. In the United States, dominant narratives—shaped by concerns over trade imbalances, cybersecurity threats, and human rights issues—tend to overshadow symbolic gestures. As a result, initiatives like PD struggle to meaningfully shift public sentiment in a context where strategic distrust prevails (Washington Post, 2018, 2025).

5.5.4 Perception of Motives & Strategic Cynicism

Table 5.29

In your opinion, why does China send pandas to other countries?

Response	Percentage (%)
Wildlife Conservation	18 %
Cultural/Educational Exchange	26 %
Improve Diplomatic Ties	36 %
Promote China's Image	43 %
Economic/Trade Influence	33 %
Other	5 %

Table 5.30

Do you view panda diplomacy as a genuine act of goodwill or a political strategy?

Response	Percentage (%)
Mostly Goodwill	13 %
Mostly Political	48 %
A Mix of Both	35 %
Not Sure	4 %

The American public exhibits considerable scepticism regarding China's motives behind PD. When asked why they believe China sends pandas abroad, the most selected reasons included: promoting China's image (43%), improving diplomatic ties (36%), and economic/trade influence (33%). Conservation (18%) and cultural exchange (26%) were less frequently cited, suggesting a belief that strategic objectives outweigh altruistic or cultural motives.

Further reinforcing this view, 48% of respondents saw PD as mostly political, while only 13% regarded it as a genuine act of goodwill. An additional 35% perceived it as a mix of both. This high level of strategic suspicion reflects broader public distrust toward China, a sentiment that has been exacerbated by years of political polarization and bipartisan scepticism over China's global ambitions (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Such perceptions undermine the symbolic utility of panda diplomacy. As Joseph Nye (2004) emphasized, soft power depends not only on emotional attraction, but also on the perceived authenticity and sincerity of the gesture. In the U.S., the symbolic message behind PD appears clouded by geopolitical rivalry.

5.5.5 Waning Support for Continuation

Table 5.31

Do you support the continuation of Panda Loan program?

Response Option	Percentage (%)
Yes	52%
No	25%
Not sure	23%

Table 5.32

Reason for supporting Panda Loan Programme

Reason Selected	Percentage (%)
Tourism and economic benefits	20%
Conservation and scientific collaborations	43%
Cultural exchange	22%
Enhance U.S.–China diplomatic ties	15%

Table 5.33

PD contribute to stronger bilateral ties

Response Option	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree / Agree	26%
Neutral	41%
Disagree / Strongly disagree	33%

Table 5.34

Reason for not supporting Panda Diplomacy

Response Option	Percentage (%)
Animal welfare concerns	24%

A tool for political influence rather than goodwill	36%
Prefer concrete cooperation over symbolic gestures	22%
Too costly / offers little benefit to the U.S.	18%

Public opinion on the continuation of panda diplomacy in the U.S. is divided. While 52% of respondents supported renewing panda loan agreements, 25% opposed the idea, and 23% were undecided.

Among supporters, the most common rationale was scientific collaboration and conservation (43%), followed by cultural exchange (22%) and tourism or economic benefits (20%). These responses suggest that practical benefits hold greater weight than symbolic diplomacy in garnering support.

Conversely, opposition to PD stemmed largely from concerns about political manipulation (36%), animal welfare (24%), and a belief that the U.S. should prioritize concrete cooperation over symbolic gestures (22%). A further 18% cited cost-benefit concerns.

Though symbolic diplomacy alone may not win broad support, the data indicate that Americans are more receptive to initiatives framed around scientific, environmental, or educational cooperation. These areas offer more credible and pragmatic foundations for engagement.

5.5.6 Interpretation: Emotional Disconnect and the Limits of Symbolic

Diplomacy

The American case shows the limitations of PD in more combative geopolitical environments. Although pandas retain emotional appeal, their symbolic association with Chinese diplomacy is rather weak and public interpretation of their presence is clouded by political scepticism. Unlike the case of Malaysia and to the least extent Japan, where pandas are widely received as diplomatic goodwill, American public tend to view panda through the lens of strategic and narrative manipulation. Indeed, For American panda symbolize conservation efforts more than anything else.

This reveals a fundamental challenge for China's soft power projection: symbolic gestures such as panda loans cannot override entrenched public distrust. Simply put, emotionally appealing symbols like pandas may stir affection, but their ability to influence trust or reshape narratives remains constrained, especially in the geopolitically tense environment.

Ultimately, the U.S. case suggests that panda diplomacy is least effective when deployed in contexts where China is framed as a geopolitical rival, and where public discourse is saturated with narratives of competition, suspicion, and ideological divergence. While panda diplomacy may soften edges and keep informal ties alive, it cannot repair or transform hostile perceptions without complementary policy and relationship-building at the governmental level.

5.6 Cross National Comparison

To consolidate the findings across Malaysia, Japan, and the United States, the table below compares public perceptions of panda diplomacy across the five dimensions outlined in the research design: awareness and engagement, emotional/symbolic appeal, impact on perceptions of China, interpretation of China's motives, and public support for continuation. Presenting the results in this format provides a concise overview of similarities and differences, making it easier to trace recurring patterns and divergences across contexts. This comparative snapshot also serves as a bridge to the following section, which identifies and discusses the broader thematic conditions under which panda diplomacy succeeds—or fails—as a soft power instrument.

Dimension	Malaysia	Japan	United States	Cross-National Insight
1) Awareness & Engagement	Awareness: 65% knew pandas are on loan. Engagement: 40% visited.	Awareness: 83% knew loan status. Engagement: 65% visited (decades-long exposure).	Awareness: 78% had heard of PD. Engagement: 48% visited.	All three publics are well aware of PD; Japan highest due to long cultural presence; U.S. engagement dampened by geography/recency of returns.
2) Emotional & Symbolic Appeal	Emotions: Joy/Excitement 76%, Admiration 50%, Curiosity 43%, Suspicion 8%. Symbolism: Goodwill 43%, Cultural outreach 27%, Conservation 26%.	Emotions: Excitement 81%, Admiration 53%, Curiosity 41%, Suspicion 12%. Symbolism: Cultural outreach 32%, Conservation 30%, Goodwill 28%.	Emotions: Excitement 70%, Admiration 50%, Curiosity 35%, Suspicion 30%. Symbolism: Conservation 47%, Cultural outreach 23%, Goodwill 18%.	Strong positive emotion everywhere , but symbolic reading differs : MY reads goodwill; JP reads culture/science; US reads conservation (weak diplomatic symbolism).
3) Impact on Perceptions of China	China more friendly/peaceful: 69% (33% much + 36% slightly). Personal opinion more positive: 47% (No change 43%).	China more friendly/peaceful: 57% (15% + 42%). Personal opinion more positive: 24% (No change 69%).	China more friendly/peaceful: 28%. Personal opinion more positive: 15% (No change 75%).	Emotional warmth doesn't automatically shift attitudes : biggest movement in Malaysia , modest in Japan , minimal in U.S.
4) Interpretation of China's Motives	Why pandas? Improve ties 58%, Promote image 43%, Cultural 30%, Conservation 22%. Goodwill vs politics: Mostly political 63%, Goodwill 9%, Mix 23%.	Why pandas? Promote image 49%, Improve ties 47%, Cultural 31%, Conservation 24%. Goodwill vs politics: Political 27%, Goodwill 20%, Mix 48% .	Why pandas? Promote image 43%, Improve ties 36%, Economic 33%, Cultural 26%, Conservation 18%. Goodwill vs politics: Political 48% , Goodwill 13%, Mix 35%.	Strategic readings are common ; JP shows ambivalent acceptance ("mix"), MY accepts strategy but still positive; U.S. leans strategic/cynical .

5) Public Support for Continuation	Support renewal: 81% yes (No 8%). Why support? Enhance ties 32%, Tourism 22%, Cultural 18%, Conservation 16%, Education/Science 12%. PD strengthens ties: 75% agree.	Support renewal: 68% yes (No 14%). Why support? Cultural & conservation 35%, Tourism 30%, Enhance ties 25%, Education/Science 10%. PD strengthens ties: 64% agree.	Support renewal: 52% yes (No 25%; Unsure 23%). Why support? Conservation/Science 43%, Cultural 22%, Tourism 20%, Enhance ties 15%. PD strengthens ties: 26% agree (33% disagree).	Support is highest where perceived benefits are clear & reciprocal: diplomacy (MY), culture/tourism (JP), science (US). Geopolitics moderates support.
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5.7 Cross-National Thematic Analysis: Conditions Shaping the Effectiveness of Panda Diplomacy

Based on the country-level analyses above, it is evident that the effectiveness of PD as a soft power tool is highly contingent on bilateral or national context. That is, while the emotional appeal of pandas is relatively consistent, their diplomatic or political symbolism, perceived sincerity, and influence on China's image vary considerably across Malaysia, Japan, and the United States. This section presents five overarching themes that emerge from the comparative data, offering a synthesized interpretation of the conditions under which panda diplomacy succeeds—or fails—as an instrument of soft power

5.7.1 Context Matters: Soft Power Resonates More Where Political Ties Are Stable

The survey results shows that PD is most effective in countries where political relations with China are relatively stable and mutually beneficial. Malaysia exemplifies this case. The panda loan was framed around the celebration of 40 years of bilateral diplomatic relations, backed by positive government narrative and media coverage. Respondents show high level of awareness and largely accepted the pandas

as genuine symbols of goodwill, which in turn contributed to a marked improvement in their perceptions of China.

This infers that PD functions at its optimum in environments characterized by cordial diplomatic ties, non-adversarial media framing, and active public engagement. Also, it shows that for PD to be effective emotional appeal must be embedded in a broader structure – one where political trust, cultural openness and positive framing reinforce the message. Indeed, despite Malaysia's recognition of China's political motive, public support remains strong, suggesting that strategic intent does not necessarily undermine emotional appeal when the broader bilateral relationship is framed positively and perceived as mutually beneficial.

5.7.2 Emotional Appeal Does Not Always Translate into Trust

While all (3) three publics expressed broadly positive emotional reactions to pandas, these feelings did not consistently lead to improved perception of China. The case of Japan exemplifies this dis-alignment. For instance, while Japanese respondents reported high levels of affection for pandas and higher zoo visitation, this emotional attachment did not lead to symbolic trust or confidence in China. This was evident in ... where most Japanese tend to view Panda more as China's cultural outreach and conservation ... rather than a gesture of goodwill Further, most (69%) reported no change in their views of China.

Put differently, while most welcome PD as part of China's cultural outreach, this is often accompanied by a reserved outlook—one that remains cautious of its potential political or strategic undertones. This dualism underscores the limitations of PD as a

soft power tool in contexts where historical grievances or geopolitical tensions remain unresolved. As such, for Japan, PD serves more as a symbol of diplomatic continuity rather than a catalyst for transformation.

5.7.3 Limited Effectiveness in Politically Tense Environments

The US represent a case where PD face structural constraints. Of all three countries PD yielded the least positive influence on American publics. Although pandas were not linked to any sincere expression of goodwill from China. A significant portion of respondents viewed PD as a strategic ploy, embedded within a broader context of rising suspicion toward China's global intentions. Further, most respondents (75%) also reported no change in their views of China and only 23% agreed that PD contribute to stronger bilateral ties.

The low level of support for renewing panda agreements (52%) in the United States—compared to higher levels in Japan (68%) and Malaysia (81%)—along with widespread scepticism about China's motives, underscores the challenges of deploying cultural diplomacy in adversarial geopolitical climates. This shows the limitations of PD in hostile or mistrustful settings. Otherwise put, without a baseline of political goodwill or shared values, symbolic gestures are unlikely to yield substantial soft power returns.

5.7.4 The Strategy Has Uneven Reception: Emotional Success vs. Political Suspicion

Across all three countries, the survey revealed a consistent pattern; pandas evoke positive emotions, but this does not lead to a more favourable views of China. Indeed,

the above cases shows that public attitude is largely influenced by broader historical and political context. In Malaysia, where the political landscape is by and large cooperative, PD is viewed favourably and helps reinforce China's positive image. In Japan the emotional appeal of PD is tempered by historical and strategic tension, thereby failing to produce the desirable outcome. In the US, emotion is largely overshadowed by political distrust, and result in symbolic detachment. A significant share of American respondents perceived PD as a soft power tactic with strategic undertones rather than an authentic cultural gesture.

This findings illustrate that while the panda may excel at drawing attention and cultural softening, it struggles to build symbolic trust when broader bilateral relations are strained. Put differently where audiences are politically sceptical, PD may fail to generate symbolic trust.

5.7.5 Public Support Depends on National Context

Public support for PD tends to be strongest when it is perceived as delivering clear and reciprocal benefits, such as cultural enrichment, tourism revenue, or conservation gains. In Japan, support for continuing panda loans was highest (81%), reflecting decades of public familiarity and integration of pandas into popular culture and the tourism economy. The long-standing presence of PD, coupled with its perceived contributions to education and scientific collaboration, has helped normalize the practice as a valued component of cultural diplomacy, despite ongoing political caution.

Meanwhile, support for PD in Malaysia was robust (70%), with many respondents viewing PD as a symbol of diplomatic goodwill and national prestige. The program's launch during the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations, as well as the birth of panda cubs, as noted earlier, has attracted positive media attention. However, as a less wealthy host, the perceived benefits may be outweighed by the financial burden of hosting pandas. Malaysia, being less affluent than Japan, may view the costs as a more significant consideration in evaluating the overall value of PD.

In the U.S., support was comparatively low (52%). While many Americans welcomed the mutual benefits of the arrangement, the broader geopolitical conflict with China may have influenced public sentiment. Put differently, although interest in scientific cooperation remained, symbolic diplomacy alone appeared insufficient to sustain widespread support.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the reception and perceived effectiveness of China's PD across three host countries—Malaysia, Japan, and the United States—through a comparative analysis of survey data. It has sought to answer the core research question: To what extent does PD influence public perceptions of China in recipient countries?

The findings confirm that PD retains emotional appeal and symbolic visibility, but its political impact is highly context dependent. For instance, in Malaysia, where bilateral ties with China are stable and generally viewed positively, PD functions as an effective soft power tool. The pandas are widely recognized as a gesture of goodwill, which contribute to improved public perception of China and strong support for continued

cultural cooperation. Emotional resonance is reinforced by favourable diplomatic framing and sustained societal engagement.

Japan presents a more ambivalent case in this research. Although emotional attachment to pandas is exceptionally strong, the public demonstrates a nuanced understanding of their ‘dual’ symbolism—viewing them simultaneously as cultural icons and diplomatic tools. The impact of PD on trust in China is restrained, shaped by a broader history of unresolved territorial disputes and persistent nationalistic narratives. Nevertheless, the pandas appear to act as cultural stabilizers, softening public hostility and preserving a space for continued engagement even during periods of political friction.

In contrast, the United States offers a clear illustration of the limits of PD in adversarial environments. While pandas remain popular as conservation symbols, their association with Chinese diplomacy is weak, and public trust in China’s motives is low. A significant portion of the American public views PD as a strategic tool designed to influence foreign opinion, rather than as a sincere gesture of friendship. Support for renewing panda agreements is limited, and emotional affinity fails to translate into improved national image or symbolic trust.

Across all three countries, a consistent pattern emerges: that is, PD generates positive emotions, but these do not automatically lead to more favourable perceptions of China. The symbolic power of the panda is often mediated—if not constrained—by local political discourse, historical memory, media framing, and the broader geopolitical climate. Emotional appeal alone is insufficient to build trust or reshape strategic

attitudes. Rather, PD is most effective when deployed in tandem with broader public diplomacy efforts and situated within a cooperative political context.

The comparative insights of this chapter reaffirm the extent literature on soft power; that PD are not universally effective, but contingent upon the reception environment. Hence, these findings set the stage for the discussion in the next chapter, which explores the broader challenges to PD as a tool for image-building for China.



CHAPTER SIX

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

While PD has long been hailed as a hallmark of China's soft power, it has not been without its criticisms. This chapter examines the possible challenges and limitations that may hinder its effectiveness. I argue that, despite the global appeal of pandas and their success in generating emotional attachment, PD faces a number of barriers that constrain its utility as a soft power instrument. Drawing on the earlier findings from the survey (Chapter 4), media reports, and recent literatures on the subject, this chapter outlines the major issues that may erode the credibility and influence of PD over time.

6.1 Geopolitical Suspicion & Politicization of PD

One of the most significant challenges to panda diplomacy is the growing scepticism among policymakers and foreign publics. Although pandas are widely beloved, many have chosen to view panda loans more as instruments of China's geopolitical outreach than as acts of pure goodwill, particularly in the context of its assertive FP posture – marked by the shift from 'keeping a low profile' to 'striving for achievement' (Yan, 2014; May 2024). Put differently, PD is now increasingly filtered through a strategic lens, which may, in turn, undercut its charms as a soft power, capable of fostering positive views of China.

Americans acknowledge the pandas' cuteness, but many see them as “the face of China's soft power” (Summers, 2023) and remain cognizant that this soft power operates in service of Beijing's national interests.

In the U.S. despite widespread affection for Panda, the symbolic value of PD often conflicts with dominant political narratives, which include, among others, criticism of China's FP behaviour, trade practices and human rights violations (CNN, 2024; Myers, 2022). For instance.... A closer look at American media outlets shows that; panda exchange often construed within the broader narrative of Sino-US strategic competition rather than apolitical gesture (Jackson, 2015; Wan, 2023). As noted by Global Times (2024), American critics now perceive pandas as politicized symbol, representing China's soft power and are motivated to reject them to undercut China's influence, consistent with its logic of containment. This points to the difficulty of retaining pandas soft power appeal especially when strategic mistrust and political tensions overshadowed symbolic gestures.

Examples of this are not difficult to spot; even high-profile panda arrivals or departures often spark debates not about cultural exchange or wildlife conservation, but about 'political influence', 'soft power', and the 'motives' behind China's PD outreach. For instance, Beijing's decision to recall two U.S.-born pandas in 2010— shortly after President Obama met with the Dalai Lama—and the more recent withdrawal of a 'giant' panda in 2023 after 20 years on loan, amid frosty bilateral ties, were framed as punitive gestures by the Chinese government (Reuters, 2024; The Washington Post, 2024).

Further, the growing perception that panda loans initiative serves political interests rather than genuine cultural or conservation purposes undercut the soft power appeal of PD. This sentiment is well captured in a CNN (2024) headline, "Let pandas be pandas instead of diplomatic trophies", which reflects growing skepticism over the

symbolic use of pandas as political instruments. This scepticism was also reflected in the survey responses (Chapter 4), where a majority of American respondents expressed growing doubts about the true intent of PD. The fact that strategic motives were ranked above cultural or conservation motives—across all three countries albeit to a different degree as shown in the previous chapter further indicate that many view the initiative through a political lens.

Viewed in this vein, the ability of PD to operate as an apolitical gesture is presumably constrained, tempered by a more critical awareness of China's broader geopolitical aims. Such interpretations align with Joseph Nye's caution that when soft power becomes visibly instrumental, it risks being dismissed as 'propaganda' rather than embraced as attraction (Nye, 2004).

6.2 The Limits of PD in Easing Bilateral Tension:

Further, there is no evidence that PD can do much to ease tensions with other countries, despite its early symbolic appeal. For instance, China loaned two pandas to Ueno Zoo in 2011; nonetheless, the China–Japan conflict over the Senkaku Islands escalated the following year (Fujita, 2012). This suggests that political tensions overshadowed the pandas' cultural symbolism, revealing the difficulty of using emotional symbols to bridge deeply entrenched mistrust. Notably, the birth of a new panda in Japan in 2021—despite extensive positive media coverage—did little to improve Sino-Japanese relations. Tensions flared over Japan's support for Taiwan's membership in the TPP, which Beijing viewed as a violation of the One China principle (Kyodo News, 2021). Polls in Japan have consistently shown low levels of trust and favourable views.

For example, a Pew Research Centre survey in 2024 revealed that only 15% of Japanese held a positive view of China—marking a record low (Kudo, 2021).

Likewise, recent panda loans to zoos in Washington and San Diego have had little to no effect on U.S. policy toward China (CNN, 2024; Tang, 2024). Earlier surveys in this study show that, for many Americans, positive feelings toward pandas did not easily translate into improved perceptions of China. Core areas of contention—such as trade deficits, technological rivalry, and human rights issues—have persisted and, in many cases, intensified. Public sentiment in the U.S. also reflects growing scepticism toward China. According to Pew Research Centre (2024), only 21% of Americans expressed favourable views of China, while 75% reported having little or no confidence in President Xi Jinping to do the right thing regarding world affairs—likely a reflection of concerns over China’s global ambitions and domestic policies.

Similarly, in Australia, the extension of the panda loan agreement in 2019—initially hailed as a gesture of goodwill—failed to prevent a major diplomatic breakdown the following year. Canberra’s call for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19 (ABC News, 2021), which Beijing strongly opposed, led to retaliatory trade restrictions on major Australian exports.

Meanwhile, even in countries generally seen as friendly toward China, such as Russia and Malaysia, the symbolic diplomacy of pandas appears to play a supplementary rather than central role in shaping bilateral ties. In Russia, the 2019 panda loan to the Moscow Zoo was celebrated as a sign of deepening SP. However, this move merely reflected ‘existing’ geopolitical alignments rather than transforming bilateral ties.

Russia's pro-China stance—particularly in response to Western sanctions and diplomatic isolation—was driven more by strategic necessity and economic calculus than by cultural gestures. While the pandas were warmly received by the public and media, they functioned more as a soft power accessory to already converging political interests. Likewise, in Malaysia, the 2014 arrival of pandas coincided with a period of expanding economic ties, increased tourism, and cultural exchange with China. However, Malaysia's broader foreign policy stance remained shaped by enduring structural factors—such as economic dependence, tensions in the SCS, and the need to balance regional relationships. While PD helped to foster a more positive public image of China, it did not significantly influence Malaysia's cautious position on sensitive issues such as SCS. This shows the limits of PD: while it can enhance diplomatic atmospherics, it rarely alters core policy positions or strategic behaviour.

To maintain the relevance of PD, China must continuously refine its approach—addressing concerns over strategic motives while placing greater emphasis on themes such as friendship, environmental cooperation, and cultural exchange. The enduring appeal of pandas can only be sustained if China remains attentive to the political sensitivities of each host country. By aligning the symbolic value of PD with genuine local engagement, it may continue to serve as a credible tool for improving China's global image and promoting mutual understanding in a world that is increasingly interconnected—and increasingly sceptical. Without such recalibration, PD risks diminishing in influence as part of China's soft power strategy.

6.3 Financial and Logistical Burdens on Host Countries

In addition to problems with perception and image, host nations also have to deal with the substantial institutional and financial strains associated with housing giant pandas. These responsibilities can make PD a double-edged sword: the attraction of owning pandas frequently entails significant expenses and commitments that put a strain on zoos and public coffers. Due to this financial strain, tough choices have had to be made, like returning pandas or re-evaluating the enterprise's overall worth.

One of the key challenges of panda diplomacy is financial sustainability. Hosting giant pandas is a costly undertaking. China typically charges up to USD 1 million for each pair of giant pandas (Liang, 2023), and host countries are also responsible for funding the construction of specialised enclosures, employing veterinary staff, and adhering to strict conservation and reporting requirements. These obligations significantly increase the overall cost. According to Nikkei Asia report (2024), pandas are 5 times more expensive to care for than elephants, making them the costliest animals in zoos. To be sure, many zoos are unable to bear these costs, not without corporate sponsorships or government subsidies to fund their panda programmes (Associated Press, 2024). These high operational expenses put considerable strain on institutional budgets, frequently provoke public debates, and—in some cases—complicate diplomatic relations with China, especially when it results in early return of pandas.

While pandas may attract public attention and can increase zoo attendance at first, this effect is often temporary. As Chen (2024) observed, the ‘novelty’ tends to wear off, and as public interest fades, so does the financial return for the panda investment. Critics have begun to question whether PD genuinely serves the public good or merely

functions as an expensive symbolic gesture. To be sure, these concerns are far from ‘hypothetical’. Several case studies illustrate how the financial strain of hosting pandas has provoked debate in some countries with varying level of wealth. Earlier survey (Chapter 4) shows that economic factors also emerge as a source of concern in all three countries with Malaysia being the most prominent, largely due its more ‘limited’ resources. Nonetheless, the fact that these issues also found resonance in across all panda hosting countries indicates that concerns over cost are not confined to poorer nations but reflect broader questions about the value of PD.

This is particularly true given the fact that China remains the sole owner of all pandas—regardless of birthplace or duration of stay abroad—which some argues to be of one-sided rather than a mutual exchange. (Ding, 2019, Rowan, 2024). The publicly stated benefit includes boosted tourism, improved diplomatic ties, scientific collaboration, conservation education, domestic economic gains, yet whether these outcome do materialize and can compensate the associated cost varied across countries.

That aside, of noteworthy here however is the fact that the issue as noted earlier has stirred debate in some countries. For instance, some US zoos have lamented the high cost of rending pandas from China, combined with the expense of housing and feeding animals – which as noted earlier 5 times the cost of elephant (Mott, 2006). Edinburgh Zoo in Scotland reportedly faced public backlash over the high costs of keeping its two pandas during a time of budget cuts to public services (The Guardian, 2019). Cases like these show that when budgets get tight, even beloved animals like pandas can lose their shine in the public eye. A recent and striking example comes from Finland, where

Ähtäri Zoo decided in 2024 to terminate its panda loan agreement ahead of schedule due to inflation-driven financial constraints.

The decision followed the Finnish government's refusal to provide further funding, responding to growing public calls to prioritise domestic spending. Consequently, the zoo was forced to return the pandas to China (BBC News, 2025). Similar concerns also emerged in Malaysia, where parts of the public and associations called for the pandas to be returned, citing high maintenance costs (Malay Mail, 2020). However, unlike the case of Finland, Malaysian government chose to maintain the panda-lending agreement by state funding, likely due to the importance of preserving diplomatic ties with China—its largest trading partner and a major source of FDI.

The above discussion shows the complexities of using PD as an instrument of soft power. While initiatives like panda exchange can generate significant symbolic value and strengthen bilateral ties, their effectiveness is closely tied to the host country's domestic circumstances—particularly economic conditions and public sentiment. When the perceived costs begin to outweigh the diplomatic benefits, especially during periods of fiscal strain, governments may struggle to justify and sustain such commitments. Put differently, there is a risk that host nations may judge they are funding China's soft power than receiving any concrete returns.

Beyond financial concerns, panda diplomacy also suffers from limited accessibility. Only a select number of countries are offered pandas, based on their strategic values and the ability to meet the programme's financial and logistical demands. As a result, lower-income or developing countries are effectively excluded, regardless of their

political goodwill toward China. This economic barrier creates an exclusive model of engagement, capping the global reach of PD and reducing its effectiveness as an inclusive and scalable soft power instrument.

6.4 Ethical and Conservation Concerns

PD also attracts ethical criticism from animal welfare and conservation advocates. The practice of using captive pandas as diplomatic tools raises questions about both their wellbeing and the genuine conservation value of the exchange program.

Although China frames the panda exchange program as part of its ‘wildlife’ protection efforts, and the overall panda population has increased due to captive breeding, which led the IUCN to upgrade the panda’s status from ‘endangered’ to ‘vulnerable,’ critics argue that; the success is largely due to efforts within China’s borders, as fewer than 20 panda cubs have been reportedly born abroad (Bull, 2023). Such views, while not necessarily dominant, provoke counterarguments in the public sphere, prompting concerns among conservationists, policymakers, and the informed public about whether the millions invested by zoos worldwide in hosting pandas truly contribute to meaningful conservation outcomes or merely serve as symbolic gestures with limited ecological impact.

Set against this, some critics also raise concerns that the disproportionate resources and attention given to panda conservation may come at the expense of protecting other endangered animals (Bull, 2023), especially when its overall conservation benefit is unclear. One American ecologist starkly put it; “We pulled pandas back from the brink of extinction. Meanwhile, the rest of nature collapsed” (Vox, 2023).

A similar critique has emerged in Malaysia, where observers question the allocation of substantial funds to foreign species while native endangered animals — such as the orangutan — continue to struggle for survival (DAP, 2012; The Sun, 2023; The Edge, 2019). Indeed, there is a doubt among few as to whether the panda programme has offered genuine conservation value or merely served as a prestige project (The Malaysian Insider, 2014).

While such concerns remain on the fringe of public debate across three chosen countries (see chapter 4) these issues can tilt the scale against further investment in panda's conservation efforts. As reported in The Diplomat (2023), one of the reasons the Finnish government ended panda funding is the combined costs of upkeep and China's high leasing fees far exceeded Finland's investment in its own endangered species.

Further, although PD is frequently justified under the banner of 'public education' and 'environmental awareness', evidence in support of its long-term influence on conservation literacy remains weak. Critics argue that hosting exotic animals in foreign zoos does little to influence public understanding or behaviour toward ecological sustainability (Bull, 2023). Though such claims may not necessarily hold true in all contexts, their presence in the public sphere reflects a recurring challenge for China's PD—namely, the scepticism over its actual 'conservation' value and 'opportunity' costs. As the UK-based NGO succinctly put it, despite the panda's tenure cost over £1M per year in rent and feeding, their expected "roles in promoting education, conservation and research [were] difficult to quantify", which challenge the value of such arrangement (Bornfree, 2023).

More broadly, the frequent pairing of panda loans agreement with major economic and trade deals can also fuel public perceptions that PD is less about conservation and more about strategic influence. In many cases—including Russia, Canada, France, Australia, and even Malaysia—panda exchanges coincided with significant agreements, such as uranium contracts and infrastructure projects. This pattern while benefit China's soft power risked being seen function more as a diplomatic incentive to reinforce economic relations, rather than a purely altruistic gesture of wildlife conservation.

Beyond strategic intent, ethical questions also emerge around the treatment of the pandas themselves. Groups like PETA have criticised PD for turning pandas into symbols of diplomacy, often kept in artificial settings that serve display more than habitat. Conservationists further stress that, despite years of breeding efforts, very few pandas have made it back to the wild, calling into question just how much PD contributes to real conservation (HKFP, 2024; EHN, 2024).

In short, while PD may enhance China's image, its ethical credibility is increasingly questioned by foreign audience. Without addressing these concerns, PD risks being seen not as instrument for conservation, but as soft power wrapped in symbolism which in turn diminished its intended effect. If panda loans are meant to project a positive, responsible image of China as a conservation leader, then allegations of hidden agendas, skewed conservation priorities, and welfare mishaps directly undermine that message. Host country publics and global audiences who heed these critiques might view panda diplomacy as a superficially cute practice that belies serious ethical compromises. This can blunt the soft power impact – or even create

backlash – among those who prioritize animal rights and biodiversity. For China, ignoring these concerns could diminish the long-term legitimacy of its soft-power efforts.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter examined the key structural and political barriers that continue to limit the reach and influence of panda diplomacy (PD) as a soft power initiative. While pandas often generate public interest and emotional appeal at first, this study shows that such positive reactions don't always translate into long-term diplomatic gains. Increasingly, the effectiveness of PD is shaped—and at times diminished—by broader forces that operate well beyond the symbolic setting of the zoo.

One of the main hurdles is the rise in geopolitical mistrust, especially in places like the United States and Japan. Survey findings reveal that many respondents in these countries view panda loans not as friendly gestures, but as calculated moves meant to sway public opinion or serve political interests. This sense of skepticism chips away at the authenticity of PD and weakens the emotional connection it is supposed to foster. Hosting pandas also brings practical challenges.

While often celebrated as a marker of diplomatic closeness, the program can be costly. Expenses tied to leasing agreements, animal care, and upkeep have sparked questions about whether the benefits of PD are worth the investment. These concerns aren't confined to less wealthy nations—even countries with strong economies have begun reassessing their participation, especially when budgets are tight or public priorities shift.

In addition, PD faces mounting scrutiny from an ethical and conservation standpoint. Although the initiative is publicly framed as part of China's commitment to wildlife preservation, critics—including conservation experts and animal rights advocates—have expressed doubts. Some question whether captive panda programs truly help the species, while others raise concerns about using endangered animals as diplomatic tools—particularly when loans are linked to political or trade deals.

Taken together, the findings highlight the limitations of PD in today's climate. Despite the panda's strong emotional appeal and global recognition, these qualities alone may not be enough to overcome mistrust, criticism, or shifting political moods. In contexts where public confidence is fragile or strategic tensions run high, the influence of PD is noticeably diminished.

To stay relevant, PD will need to adapt. China might consider moving toward a more open, conservation-driven model that offers real, shared benefits. This could include stronger partnerships with host countries focused on research, education, and community involvement. If PD continues to be seen as a tool for soft messaging or image repair, its credibility will likely suffer. In a world where China's motives are under increasing scrutiny, symbolic diplomacy must be backed by consistent, trustworthy, and locally meaningful actions if it is to maintain its soft power potential.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the evolution, reception, and limitations of panda diplomacy (PD) as a dimension of China's soft power strategy. Four guiding questions shaped the study: how PD has transformed over time; how it is perceived in different national contexts; what structural challenges constrain its effectiveness; and what implications these findings hold for theory and practice. By employing a historically informed, comparative, and multi-method approach, this research has illuminated the dynamics through which symbolic diplomacy operates within contemporary international relations.

The findings suggest that panda diplomacy retains significant symbolic value, largely due to the panda's global appeal as a cultural and ecological icon. However, the capacity of PD to influence public attitudes is highly conditional. It proves most effective where bilateral relations are already cooperative and where cultural initiatives are aligned with broader economic and diplomatic engagement. Conversely, in settings characterized by rivalry or mistrust, its impact is limited and often reframed as strategic manipulation. The evidence therefore positions PD not as an autonomous driver of soft power but as a conditional amplifier, capable of reinforcing existing goodwill yet insufficient to transform entrenched perceptions.

7.1 Evolution of Panda Diplomacy: From Gift to Strategic Asset

The first research question asked how panda diplomacy has developed over time. The analysis reveals a trajectory closely tied to shifts in China's foreign policy priorities and global positioning.

During the Maoist era (1950s–1970s), pandas were presented as gifts to states recognizing the People's Republic of China. These gestures symbolized goodwill and friendship, serving as diplomatic tokens to break China's international isolation.

In the post-reform period (1980s–1990s), gifting was replaced by leasing, a model that emphasized scientific collaboration and conservation. This reframing projected China as a responsible steward of biodiversity while broadening the symbolic function of pandas from political icons to ecological ambassadors.

In the Xi Jinping era (2010s–present), panda diplomacy has become further institutionalized and strategically integrated into initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Pandas are now positioned as instruments of nation branding, ecological diplomacy, and geopolitical signaling.

This progression demonstrates that panda diplomacy has evolved from an informal cultural practice into a deliberate, structured component of China's soft power toolkit.

It therefore provides a clear response to the first research question.

7.2 Influence on Public Perception: Conditional and Context-Dependent

The second research question concerned how panda diplomacy is received in different host societies. Comparative evidence from Malaysia, Japan, and the United States demonstrates that while pandas elicit affection and cultural interest, their broader political impact depends heavily on national context.

In Malaysia, the arrival of pandas was widely interpreted as a gesture of friendship and peaceful intent. Surveys revealed strong associations with bilateral cooperation, reflecting how PD effectively reinforced already favorable relations.

In Japan, pandas continued to attract significant public attention and cultural enthusiasm, yet their influence on attitudes toward China was negligible. Longstanding historical disputes, unresolved territorial tensions, and persistent mistrust overshadowed the symbolic appeal of the animals, reducing PD to a temporary cultural distraction.

In the United States, responses were mixed. While pandas were admired as cultural icons, many perceived the program as a calculated soft power maneuver rather than a genuine act of goodwill. In an environment of escalating strategic rivalry, the ability of PD to generate lasting goodwill was minimal.

These cases collectively illustrate that panda diplomacy is not universally effective. Its reception is mediated by political climates, historical legacies, and bilateral dynamics. This finding directly answers the second research question by highlighting the conditional nature of symbolic diplomacy.

7.3 Challenges and Limitations: The Fragility of Symbolic Diplomacy

The third research question examined the constraints undermining panda diplomacy. While this study affirms that PD remains an emotionally powerful cultural icon, it also reveals that its effectiveness is highly fragile. Three interrelated challenges stand out—politicization, economic sustainability, and ethical legitimacy—each of which carries broader lessons about the limits of symbolic diplomacy.

Politicization and credibility.

The most persistent challenge is the increasing politicization of panda diplomacy. Once celebrated as neutral gestures of goodwill, panda loans are now frequently interpreted as strategic instruments of Chinese foreign policy. When panda arrivals coincide with major trade negotiations, infrastructure projects, or security dialogues, their symbolic meaning shifts from cultural ambassador to diplomatic bargaining chip. This undermines the very basis of soft power, which rests on voluntary attraction and credibility rather than suspicion of manipulation. The case studies highlight this clearly: in the United States and Japan, audiences often viewed pandas as calculated distractions rather than authentic gestures. Such perceptions illustrate Nye's (2004) argument that soft power succeeds only when the source is seen as genuine and consistent with broader foreign policy behavior. Once credibility is lost, symbolic diplomacy risks backfiring, deepening mistrust rather than alleviating it.

Economic sustainability.

A second challenge is the significant cost of hosting pandas. Annual leasing fees often exceed one million USD, while construction of specialized enclosures, veterinary

training, and long-term care add further expenses. Although panda arrivals can generate short-term spikes in tourism revenue, the long-term balance is frequently negative. In countries such as the United Kingdom, Finland, and the United States, debates have emerged about whether pandas are worth the expense. What was once a symbol of goodwill can quickly become a symbol of financial strain, eroding public enthusiasm. This highlights a broader dilemma of symbolic diplomacy: when cultural gestures impose disproportionate costs, they may foster resentment rather than goodwill.

Ethical and conservation concerns.

The third challenge involves ethical legitimacy. While PD is framed as contributing to species conservation, critics note that few captive-bred pandas are released into the wild and question whether the program advances genuine biodiversity protection. Others argue that it commodifies an endangered animal, diverting attention and resources away from local conservation priorities. In societies where animal-rights advocacy is strong, such criticisms can quickly transform pandas from icons of peace into symbols of exploitation. This ethical dimension further complicates PD's credibility, raising doubts about whether conservation is a sincere goal or simply a rhetorical shield for political objectives.

Broader implications.

Together, these challenges demonstrate the fragility of symbolic diplomacy. Unlike material instruments of power, cultural symbols depend almost entirely on how they are perceived and framed. They generate soft power only when publics interpret them as authentic, apolitical, and mutually beneficial. Once framed as manipulative, costly,

or ethically questionable, their effectiveness diminishes rapidly. Moreover, the analysis reveals an asymmetry between **short-term visibility and long-term trust**. Pandas consistently generate media attention and cultural fascination, but such effects are fleeting unless embedded in credible policies and sustained cooperation. Without this foundation, symbolic diplomacy risks becoming a spectacle—highly visible but politically inconsequential.

These constraints not only limit the current effectiveness of PD but also hold important lessons for policymakers. If panda diplomacy is to remain viable in the twenty-first century, it must be restructured in ways that address these vulnerabilities. The next section turns to the policy implications of these findings.

7.4 Policy Implications

For China

To sustain the symbolic appeal of panda diplomacy, Chinese policymakers must recalibrate the program around principles of transparency, authenticity, and cooperation. While the panda remains a potent cultural icon, its soft power value diminishes when publics perceive it as a geopolitical bargaining tool. PD is more likely to generate goodwill if framed as a platform for genuine conservation partnerships, scientific collaboration, and cultural exchange. Practical steps include publishing clear leasing terms, foregrounding mutual benefits, and co-managing research and educational programs with host institutions. Just as importantly, China must avoid using pandas in contexts of political tension, where they risk being reframed as tools of coercion. By anchoring PD in ecological and cultural collaboration rather than

strategic signaling, China can rebuild credibility and ensure that the panda retains its status as an apolitical ambassador of friendship.

For host countries.

The results also suggest that host countries should not treat PD merely as a symbolic gesture or a source of tourism. Properly leveraged, panda programs can serve as platforms for broader objectives, including biodiversity cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and academic exchange. Importantly, they can also function as an entry point for broader economic engagement and strategic dialogue with China. The visibility of panda diplomacy often coincides with high-level bilateral exchanges, creating political openings that host countries can use to negotiate on trade, investment, or infrastructure projects. By linking PD with broader agendas—such as expanding market access, attracting Chinese investment, or securing technology transfer—host governments can transform symbolic diplomacy into tangible economic benefits.

For Global audience

At a broader level, panda diplomacy illustrates both the opportunities and risks of symbolic diplomacy in an era of heightened geopolitical rivalry. Symbols can open channels of dialogue and generate goodwill, but they are vulnerable to politicization, ethical critique, and credibility gaps. The lesson is clear: symbols succeed only when supported by substance. If cultural gestures are decoupled from genuine cooperation and consistent foreign policy behavior, their appeal quickly fades. Conversely, when embedded in transparent partnerships and framed as contributions to global public goods, symbolic diplomacy retains the potential to build trust across divides.

These policy implications flow directly from the challenges identified earlier. They suggest that the viability of panda diplomacy—and symbolic diplomacy more broadly—rests on finding a delicate balance between visibility, credibility, and substance.

7.5 Significance of the Study

Beyond immediate policy lessons, the study also makes important theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of soft power and public diplomacy.

Theoretical contributions.

This research refines understandings of soft power by testing Nye's (2004) proposition that attraction depends on credibility and audience reception. It shows that cultural symbols like the panda do not inherently generate influence; their effectiveness is relational and context-dependent. By foregrounding audience interpretation, the study contributes to debates on whether soft power is a resource to be possessed or a process to be enacted through dialogue, trust, and credibility. In this way, it advances theoretical discussions that have long struggled to operationalize Nye's abstract categories.

Empirical contributions.

The thesis also makes a novel empirical contribution by drawing on original survey data from Malaysia, Japan, and the United States. These cases, representing cooperative, ambivalent, and rivalrous contexts, highlight the conditional nature of symbolic diplomacy. The comparative approach reveals how publics differ in their awareness, emotional engagement, and political interpretations of PD, and it provides rare evidence of cross-national variation in soft power reception. Few studies have

systematically compared panda diplomacy across multiple settings; this research therefore fills a significant gap in the literature.

Practical contributions.

Finally, the study offers practical significance for policymakers and practitioners of public diplomacy. By showing that publics may warmly embrace pandas as cultural and conservation icons yet remain skeptical of political motives, it underscores both the opportunities and limits of symbolic diplomacy. For China, the findings highlight the necessity of aligning cultural outreach with consistent and credible foreign policy behavior. For other states, the results offer lessons on how symbolic diplomacy can reinforce cooperation in friendly contexts but is constrained in adversarial environments.

In sum, this study enriches theoretical, empirical, and practical understandings of soft power by demonstrating that while pandas can generate emotion, visibility, and cultural resonance, their ability to shape trust and improve national image is ultimately contingent. By situating panda diplomacy within broader debates on soft power, it contributes not only to the study of Chinese foreign policy but also to the evolving field of public diplomacy in international relations.

7.6 Limitations of the Study

While this research has offered valuable insights into the dynamics and challenges of panda diplomacy, it is not without limitations.

First, the survey-based approach, while useful in capturing public sentiment, may be constrained by sampling biases, limited demographic representation, and the inherent

limitations of self-reported data. Public perceptions are also dynamic and subject to external influences, such as political developments, media framing, or international events that occurred before or after the data collection period.

Second, the case study scope was limited to three countries: Malaysia, Japan, and the United States. While these cases were chosen for their strategic relevance and regional diversity, they do not reflect the full spectrum of countries engaged in panda diplomacy—particularly in Africa, Latin America, or smaller Asian states where China's influence is growing and PD may function differently.

Third, this study focused primarily on public perception. While this is a critical dimension of soft power, it does not capture the views of foreign policy elites, conservation experts, or Chinese policymakers themselves. A more holistic picture of PD would benefit from incorporating these perspectives.

Finally, while the study examined or media reports and survey results, it did not conduct in-depth content analysis of domestic political narratives or educational program effectiveness, both of which could further illuminate how PD is framed, internalized, and acted upon over time.

7.7 Directions for Future Research

Future research could build on the findings of this study by expanding its geographical, methodological, and analytical scope.

1. Geographically, subsequent studies might examine PD in underexplored contexts such as African and Latin American countries, where China has

made significant diplomatic and economic inroads but where less is known about the reception and interpretation of PD.

2. Methodologically, future scholars could complement survey-based findings with qualitative interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic studies involving zoo visitors, conservation staff, educators, and policymakers. Such approaches would provide a deeper, more granular understanding of how PD is experienced and understood across different societal segments.
3. Thematically, comparative research on PD alongside other Chinese soft power initiatives—such as Confucius Institutes, state media expansion, or Belt and Road cultural programs—could help assess how PD functions relative to or in conjunction with other instruments of image-building.
4. Digitally, research on how PD is portrayed and received on social media platforms could be especially valuable, particularly among younger demographics who may interact with PD through memes, zoo livestreams, or influencer commentary rather than traditional diplomacy or education.
5. Finally, studies could explore the long-term impact of PD on conservation literacy, bilateral trust, and cultural familiarity, including whether panda-related educational programs have enduring effects on public attitudes or if they fade once the symbolic novelty dissipates.

7.8 Final Reflection

Panda diplomacy remains one of the most unique and recognizable tools in China's soft power arsenal. Its enduring popularity, cultural symbolism, and emotional resonance make it a powerful vehicle for engagement. Yet as this study has shown, PD

is not immune to the geopolitical, economic, and ethical complexities that define international relations today. Its future effectiveness will depend less on the animal's charm and more on the transparency, sincerity, and adaptability of the diplomacy it represents. In a world of growing strategic rivalry, authentic symbols of goodwill are needed more than ever—but only if they are received as genuine, not calculated.



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