

# Cross-Strait Authority Dynamics and Panda Diplomacy Gift-Giving Rituals

Written by Mia Westfere

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MIA WESTFERE, APR 30 2024

The giant panda is nothing less than a diplomatic darling. Endemic to China, adorable, and always a press favorite, over several decades the People's Republic of China (henceforth PRC) has to great effect demonstrated strategic soft power by gifting or leasing its native giant pandas in order to win the hearts and minds of foreign populaces and their leaders. The term "panda diplomacy" first captured worldwide and scholarly attention when Chairman Mao bestowed two of the precious bears to President Nixon in 1972. And while Chiang Kai Shek also gifted pandas internationally prior to the Chinese nationalists' retreat to Taiwan in 1949, the modern practice of panda diplomacy as practiced by the PRC can be divided into three phases. The era of pandas-as-gifts lasted until the 1980s, when pandas-as-commodity became the *modus operandi*, which lasted only a decade or so before evolving into the pandas-for-conservation- research mindset that persists today (Hartig, 2012). The PRC offered pandas to Taiwan throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and the offer made in 2005 came to fruition when Tuan Tuan and Yuan Yuan arrived at Taipei Zoo in the winter of 2008 (Songster, 2018). The PRC's attempts to engage Taiwan through panda diplomacy therefore intersected with all of the phases; however, the deviance in the Taiwan case stems from the fact that the PRC could not regard Taiwan as a state peer, and instead pursued panda diplomacy on the basis of compatriots or brothers.

The Taiwan case is also unique in the fact that the PRC had a tortuous journey trying to get the island to accept its offers. Other nations clamored to receive pandas, and Hong Kong, which has a similar status to Taiwan in relation to the mainland, proactively requested pandas. In scholarly circles, panda diplomacy is consistently held up as an exceptionally reliable and effective tool of Chinese foreign engagement. This area of study is essential to understanding what China is fully, diplomatically capable of. To what extent can the PRC influence its friends and charm its foes? How does the power of panda cuteness get converted into political capital? My inquiry focuses on Taiwan as one of the very few instances where panda diplomacy did not go as smoothly as planned, anticipating that this will help establish limits on the sociological processes that make panda diplomacy successful.

The literature on panda diplomacy has thoroughly investigated *whether* panda diplomacy is effective in public diplomacy campaigns, and a few scholars have even posited *why* a resounding affirmative is typically concluded to be the case. I now ask, with greater attention to fulfilling sociological conditions, *what explains* the extent of panda diplomacy's success. I draw from gift-giving ritual theories as my starting point in order to analyze pandas themselves as gifts because these conjectures, particularly those put forth by Kustermans (2019), describe conditions for both success and failure. Put into the context of cross-strait relations, my research question is precisely the following: *How do sociological mechanisms contribute to the extent that the application of panda diplomacy between China and Taiwan influences their dynamics of authority?*

In a broader sense, the failures of panda diplomacy are of greater interest within the broader discussion of China's growing power on the regional and international stage. Taking note of a particularly deviant case—that of Taiwan—may just be the exception that proves the rule of burgeoning Chinese authority. Performing research on panda diplomacy between the mainland and Taiwan furthermore carries implications for the future possibility of successful cross-strait diplomacy and the acceptable mediation of authority. After all, if even the most beloved of Beijing's bamboo-eating ambassadors cannot change the trajectory of Taiwanese public opinion, then this may

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evidence the inevitability of this flashpoint rupturing.

## Literature Review

My research sits at the convergence of several frameworks applied to explain the overlapping phenomena of diplomatic gift-giving, panda diplomacy, and cross-strait relations. The literature produced thus far is remarkably consistent in its explanations of the extent of panda diplomacy's success in fostering favorable foreign impressions of China. Panda diplomacy is studied within the larger context of public diplomacy and animal diplomacy; the former describes efforts to capture the hearts and minds of a given populace and the latter describes the use of fauna as symbolic state gifts. The effectiveness of any public diplomacy effort is impacted by the historical and political context of the diplomatic relationship, and its success is predicated upon contextual sociological associations. In this literature review, I will first broadly describe the sociological models of authority and hierarchy that inform the practice of state gift-giving, and then highlight with greater specificity the state of scholarship on panda diplomacy. Then, I will tie in frameworks for thinking about cross-strait relations. My research will explore one intersection of these related fields of study by asking how the application of panda diplomacy between China and Taiwan influences the dynamics of authority in cross-strait relations.

To begin with diplomatic gift-giving, scholarship on this subject has historically focused on relationships between leaders rather than the dimensions of public diplomacy and has also tended to favor retrospective inquiries over contemporary applications. One of the seminal works in the study of gift-giving, Marcel Mauss's 1925 essay titled "The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies," continues to set the tone when it comes to understanding the gift as either a gesture of goodwill and solidarity or a proclamation of superiority. Mauss's work also helps collapse this distinction, however, due to the emphasis his conclusions place on the inherent force induced by reciprocity. Gifts tie participants in the exchange together through the obligations of requital, and these ties are continuously defined and tested within the practice of gift-giving.

Currently, scholars who utilize gift-giving as a means to explain hierarchy and authority often feel the need to defend the continued relevance of gifts in our modern market societies. Leira and Neumann (2017), writing on the topic of "Beastly Diplomacy," remark that while gifting exotic animals has become less popular over time, panda diplomacy is the rare exception to this trend and continues to be associated with high levels of international attention and prestige (p. 353). Moreover, their overall work suggests that modern diplomatic gift-giving of any kind is most often intended to signal hierarchical relationships at high levels of leadership. Leira and Neumann differentiate between gifts displaying obeisance as those offered to curry favor and gifts displaying superiority as those bestowed to evoke noblesse oblige. Eline Ceulemans (2021) draws a similar distinction between "Ceremonial or Convivial Gifts," finding the former type in the Chinese diplomacy context to offer "mediation of authority" and the latter to negotiate authority when the participants in the gift exchange view one another as relative equals (p. 141). Ceulemans believes the PRC utilizes the grandeur and high-profile nature of ceremonial gift-giving as a way to fortify a higher position in the international hierarchy (p. 136). Ceulemans was greatly informed by Jorg Kustermans' (2019) work with "Gift-giving as a Source of International Authority," with one key difference being that Kustermans focuses on the experience of authority and refrains from suggesting gifts function to legitimize hierarchy. He argues that the threshold for rendering the reality of authority palatable is higher, and that diplomatic gift-giving contributes to the maintenance of authority but does not necessarily contribute to building authority or establishing hierarchy.

To now review the literature specific to panda diplomacy, there is, as previously mentioned, little to no controversy over the fact that giant pandas are a positively branded symbol of the PRC, consistently serving as ideal ambassadors in both adversarial and amicable contexts. It was as recently as 2013, however, that Falk Hartig helped reorient the scholarly conversation around pandas to focus on the dimension of public diplomacy. His work broke from the convention of prioritizing the significance of leader-to-leader interactions, as was the norm ever since Nixon-Mao normalization efforts put the very term "panda diplomacy" on the map. The now popular lens of public-panda diplomacy can be further divided into two scholarly areas of interests: one of which focuses on the cultural symbolism pandas propagate; the other of which focuses on environmental messaging. These two ways of viewing panda diplomacy draw different conclusions about what makes panda diplomacy so successful at advancing the PRC's foreign agenda.

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Elena Songster's (2018) book on the *Panda Nation* covers both viewpoints comprehensively, though she starts with the argument that the panda made the ideal mascot of a rejuvenated China free from imperial oppression and foreign occupation because pandas are almost completely absent from classical Chinese literature, art, and historical canon. Moreover, the biological quirks that make the giant panda rare and endemic positioned the species as a unique representation of the PRC's ambition to transform and advance China's scientific, social, and cultural prestige. Earlier works such as Yiwei Wang's (2008) depict the decision to elevate the panda to the national emblem as more controversial. Wang describes the tradeoffs associated with pandering to Western audiences as tied with China's need to cast off suspicions as it grew in strength as a nation. Despite the differences in framing the process of the panda's rise to prominence, both Songster and Wang advance the argument that the panda has succeeded in promoting Chinese foreign policy goals because it symbolizes the culture and identity of China in a way that is adequately palatable to internal and external audiences.

On the other hand, the environmentalist lens puts forth the view that the conservation implications of panda participation in public diplomacy efforts are the source of the program's success. There is considerable quantitative evidence that supports this claim. A 2020 study of panda-related engagement in Chinese state media identified China's self-promotion as the protector of cute animals as the main vehicle through which it captures hearts and minds (Huang and Wang, 2020). Likewise, a recent panda video experiment produced results which suggest media content that associates China with nature preservation efforts improves overall attitudes towards Chinese culture (Yang and Lin, 2022). These studies explain the effectiveness of panda diplomacy by claiming that it helps the PRC suggest to international audiences that China is a responsible world leader that cares for the environment and invests in the world's bright future. In a surprising twist, however, Songster (2018) highlights how Taiwanese authorities rejected previous panda offers from the PRC throughout the 1980s and 90s on the basis of "environmental stewardship."

This deflection attempted to deemphasize the political implications of the offer and rejection, which will make more sense in the context of a brief discussion of a few current frameworks used to make sense of Taiwan-Chinese mainland relations. While there are numerous theories about cross-strait relations—including many that explicate the effects of economic leverage, militarism, and international pressures driven by the US—I will focus on those that concern domestic politics and Taiwanese nationalism or national identity because the former is pertinent in establishing how political leaders and diplomats interact with foreign policy and the latter provides the context for how the Taiwanese conceive of their identity, culture, and legal standing in relation to the mainland's public diplomacy efforts at reunification. Numerous scholars have identified the Taiwanese political temperature as an indicator of Cross-Strait relations. While mainland China's one-party system is structurally different from Taiwan's multi-party democracy, evidence suggests that leaders from either side of the strait have a tendency to take a hardline stance against the other side when their domestic political position becomes threatened (Wu and Chen, 2020). On the Taiwanese side of the strait, the rise of a two-party system has seen the two main players, the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), differentiate themselves based on attitudes towards the mainland (G. Lin, 2019). The KMT generally advocates for harmonious relations with the mainland, while the DPP expresses greater distrust. These differences inform and are informed by increasing divergence on matters of national identity (G. Lin, 2019). In turn, debate over national identity arose in part from the effects of institutionalizing democracy.

Economic growth and broader civil and political freedoms contributed to the emergence of Taiwanese nationalism, which clashes with Beijing's preferred narrative of One China under a shared history and culture (Momesso and Lee, 2019). Of course, in addition to the effects of politics, Taiwanese nationalism also varies between age groups and may change based on the mainland's actions. The fluidity of the Taiwanese identity is also debated alongside the possibility of reunification with China, with the implication being that friendlier relations with China will see a suppression of nationalism whereas threatening behavior will stoke it (Feng, 2018 and Wu, 2013). Cross-strait linkages and interactions are another framework commonly invoked to explain and predict Taiwan-mainland relations, which are inherently connected to matters of identity and respective domestic politics (Wu and Chen, 2020).

The separation of the Taiwanese identity from the Chinese identity also contributes to the highly contested legal status of Taiwan. Under the declaratory theory of statehood, which is the dominant perspective in legal and

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diplomatic circles, the ROC can make a case that it qualifies under the four Montevideo Convention conditions of 1) permanent population, 2) defined territory, 3) government, and 4) capacity to enter into interstate relations (Eckert, 2002, p. 21). A more stringent reading of the requirements might rebut that the last two conditions are unsatisfactory due to the absence of declared independence from the PRC and ever-increasing diplomatic isolation (p. 22-23). The Taiwanese claim to sovereignty seems more tenuous when examined under the constitutive theory of statehood, which places greater emphasis on recognition by the international system and the concept of mutual consent to bear the responsibilities of participating as a state (p. 24). Even those that claim Taiwan meets the conditions *for de jure* independence are restrained in their arguments by the fact that the ROC, by not declaring independence, does not consent to be considered a separate, sovereign entity from the mainland (Singh, 2022). In terms of outside acceptance, most members of the international community today either solely recognize the PRC, or, like the US, “acknowledge” the positions on both sides of the strait (Lee, 1996).

While the legal arguments over Taiwanese sovereignty are far from settled, with conclusions often drawn for political expediency, perhaps more relevant to the focus of public diplomacy and authority is the emergence of a popular sovereignty theory. This model, primarily championed by Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), claims that the government has legitimacy by the will of the people, and thus authority is granted by liberal democracy under the principles of self-determination (Ukai, 2018). Taiwan’s transformation from an authoritarian state under martial law into a full-fledged democracy in the 1990s helped to instigate public passion for freedom within a Taiwanese identity. The Taiwanese identity is a democratic one, which contradicts the authoritarianism that characterizes CCP rule. In the context of Taiwan’s controversial standing in the world, my research will proceed from the intersection of the literature on diplomatic gift-giving and its interactions with authority. These theories therefore inform my examination of this particular case of panda diplomacy.

## Research Design and Methodology

### *Methodological and Practical Considerations*

My research will employ a single case study methodology in order to analyze the case of panda diplomacy that took place in the mid-2000s between mainland China and Taiwan. In keeping with Andrew Schrank’s (2006) suggestions on the suitability of a case study, the Taiwan case represents both a “crucial” and “deviant” example of panda diplomacy that can shed light on the “causal mechanisms” proposed by the separate body of diplomatic gift-giving theory (p. 173). In terms of selecting a single case study over a comparative case study, while the comparison of Hong Kong could make for an interesting analysis due to the presence of control variables it shares with Taiwan—such as case timeframe, relationship to the PRC, and socio-cultural identity—ultimately this juxtaposition would not translate well into the study of panda diplomacy, especially taking into account the rituals of diplomatic gift-giving that uniquely enshroud the Taiwan case.

A qualitative case study necessarily privileges depth over breadth, and also requires the sacrifice of statistical models that make predictions possible as in large-N studies. More specifically, the single case study often faces criticism for lacking observable variance, being a singular context (George and Bennet, 2005, p. 31). But this research question aims to explore causal mechanisms of a diplomatic relationship that impacts a particular focus of contemporary geopolitical tensions, not to answer the question of how frequently panda diplomacy falls short of intended outcomes, nor to make predictions about the outcomes of future cases of panda diplomacy. The single case study methodology is more than adequate considering that my research mainly seeks to use the Taiwan panda diplomacy case as a means of approaching the larger puzzle of cross-strait relations. Moreover, George and Bennet additionally point out that the process-tracing steps necessary to link causal mechanisms to outcomes manage to address the problems caused by degrees of freedom and lack of independence present in research designs with a greater number of cases (p. 33).

While I may encounter various discursive elements in the course of data collection due to conflicting mainland and Taiwanese rhetoric and the need to understand the meaning-making caused by gift-giving symbolism, I remain more interested in the broader diplomatic gift-giving rituals surrounding the case of panda diplomacy than the discourse itself which surrounds said rituals. Similar reservations apply to utilizing an ethnographic study, since the relevant

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data to explore these questions is best found from the timeframe in which the case occurred, rather than from immersion as a contemporary participant-observer. An interpretivist approach would also pose undue timeframe, language, and budget burdens for a researcher based in the US. Performing a single case study, in comparison, can rely on readily available archival data and thus conclude in a timely manner given the resources available via the American University Library, related databases, and Baidu. I utilize numerous articles and press releases published by both Taiwanese and Chinese entities and pay close attention to statements made by public officials and statistics purporting to indicate public attitudes. I do not engage with any human participants in the course of conducting this research.

## *Elements of Research Design*

The context of cross-strait relations combined with the lens of diplomatic gift-giving informs the specific elements of this research design in order to answer the following research question: How do sociological mechanisms contribute to the extent that the application of panda diplomacy between China and Taiwan influences their dynamics of authority? My hypothesis is that this case represents a misapplication of diplomatic gift-giving, contributing to the erosion of cross-strait diplomacy, as measured by increased diplomatic tensions, worsening public perceptions, and political pessimism towards the possibility of mutually acceptable solutions. The body of theory on gift-giving and authority suggests two complementary inferences: one which says the agenda to create authority results in failed public diplomacy outcomes from the usage of ceremonial gifts (rather than convivial), and the other which says the agenda to fortify existing authority results in successful public diplomacy outcomes. The absence or presence of the conditions in either antecedent ensures these hypotheses are mutually exclusive in truth value and are therefore falsifiable.

Since the independent variable in these hypotheses is the presence or absence of existing authority prior to the case of panda diplomacy, this can be operationalized by the extent to which Taiwan met conditions for *de facto* considerations of statehood as a measure of the influence the PRC did or did not wield over the island. These measurements would also indicate the extent to which cross-strait relations were hierarchical as a necessary indicator of vertical authority. As for the dependent variable concerning the success of panda diplomacy gift-giving rituals generating favorability, this will be operationalized through the general public's response both during and immediately after the process of bringing the pandas to Taiwan. This will be measured by asking the data questions about how the pandas are perceived by Taiwanese society and what motives are ascribed to the PRC and whether these views become more agreeable over time.

Kustermans' (2019) questions about how gifts contribute to fortifying authority—namely, through the defined positions of participants, the performance of emotion, and the suitability of the gift—will guide my research (p. 404). I take into account each of these aspects, which are in many ways shaped by Taiwanese-Chinese cultural identity, as I process my data. Moreover, I treat previous explanations for panda diplomacy's success as intervening variables that help to filter through the causal mechanisms to reach the end outcome. This will clarify the role of socio-historical and cultural elements as well as account for the undercurrent of environmentalism, with the added benefit of enhancing the validity of my process-tracing methods. While this research may lack cross-case comparisons to provide external validity, it does operate under falsifiable hypotheses that are consistent with diplomatic gift-giving literature and enjoys a high level of transparency with regards to where data sources are accessed and employed.

## **Results**

### *Measures of Existing Authority*

Around the time this case of panda diplomacy took place, the ambiguous experience of Chinese authority was lacking in the Taiwanese consciousness. In fact, Taiwanese sources rather unambiguously assert sovereignty and indignation at attempts by the PRC to infringe on their independence through maneuvers such as import formalities. According to the literature on gift-giving diplomacy, the dynamics of authority between participants is a crucial explanatory variable for the effects that the gift may have on mediating the experience of the relationship. To understand the modern-day dynamics between Taiwan and China, it is first necessary to understand the historical

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context. The narrative promulgated today by the Taiwanese government emphasizes that the island known to Europeans in the Age of Discovery as Formosa became a province of the last Chinese imperial dynasty as late as 1885, and within a decade was conquered by imperial Japan. Taiwan remained under Japanese jurisdiction until after the conclusion of the second World War, in which Japan ceded various territories, including the island, to the Republic of China (henceforth ROC), which was led by the Kuomintang (henceforth KMT) party. The ROC lost the Chinese civil war and with it effective control of the mainland when the KMT's government relocated to Taiwan in 1949 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). The current Chinese telling of events, however, goes into much greater detail on the subject of Taiwan's ancient ties to the mainland (Embassy of the PRC in the Bahamas, 2022). The PRC promotes a "one-China" framework on the basis of culture, ancestry, and economic dependence to suggest that Taiwan is a renegade province which will eventually come back into Beijing's fold. The official stances taken up by the ROC and PRC do not differ greatly in their factual presentations of historical events, but the framing nonetheless reveals their policy objectives toward one another. The PRC characterizes the very phrase "status quo" as an attempt to undermine efforts to achieve reunification under one China (Embassy of the PRC in Grenada, 2023). The ROC rather enjoys the status quo of cross-strait relations, a sentiment broadly shared by the ROC's two rival political parties, despite other manifestations of ideological disagreements over mainland policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

The key to understanding the dynamics of authority across the strait lies in understanding how their unresolved history has transformed into competing perspectives on the status of the island. For the most part, Taiwan has enjoyed *de facto* independence from the PRC since the ROC arrived on the island. The Taiwanese government, democratically elected by the island population, for all intents and purposes has administrative control over civil and military matters within its borders. As previewed in the literature review, the legal question is yet unresolved, which means in a strictly hierarchical sense there are some perceptions that Taiwan is beholden to its parent state and its choices are not its own because of the PRC's outsized influence (Eckert, 2022).

Even so, given the importance of perception in measuring authority, the data suggests that the Taiwanese do not recognize Chinese authority over themselves, and the Chinese are not entirely convinced either on the matter of the reality of authority and not the legal arguments for possession. For example, Zheng Lizhong, a representative of the CCP's Taiwan Affairs Office, said that "Tuan Tuan and Yuan Yuan will sow the seeds of peace, solidarity and friendship" (Lu and Shan, 2008). This statement seems to be an admission that at this point in time, there was no existing reality of Taiwanese subservience to or unity with the mainland, hence the need to "sow the seeds" from scratch. Reports from the Taiwan side, particularly those sensitive to the meaning-making of diplomatic gifts, similarly viewed panda diplomacy as a tactic to *build* authority. The *Taipei Times* wrote, "If Taiwan is to survive as an independent sovereign identity, every effort must be made to ensure that it remains an international problem," (Cole, 2010). The framing of the issue of authority as an internalization vs internationalization problem occurs more than once in the data, and often in conjunction with discussions of the panda issue. For example, then-Taiwan Society secretary general and member of the DPP Lo Chih Cheng characterized the panda saga as another attempt by Beijing to make the Taiwan issue an internal matter, saying that it was a diplomatic effort made in pursuit of "de jure unification" (Staff Reporter, 2008). Implied in his statements is the idea that Taiwan at the time was *de jure* disunified from China. While the legal arguments contain numerous ambiguities and plenty of room for interpretation of legal and historical facts, the key takeaway is that Taiwan was not having the *experience* of authority, which is the main measure my independent variable requires.

Part of the uproar and part of what undercut the internationalization of the panda diplomacy case was the debate over whether the fauna gifts were compliant with Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the prevailing international agreement on wildlife trade (1973). Essentially, the Mainland Affairs Office took offense to the CITES secretary describing the importation of pandas as a domestic matter (Ko, 2008). This decision from CITES was rubbing salt in the wound that Taiwan has no say in UN-directed matters. While on one hand the KMT government did not want CITES to interfere with the panda arrangement, it also did not want to shift the needle too much in the direction of the international community treating cross-strait matters as domestic matters. Taiwan has been consistent in its desire to uphold the status quo, which allowed for China and Taiwan to be functionally equal in terms of ability to negotiate trade and imports. The drama over CITES felt like a calculated move to transform that *de facto* horizontal relationship.

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One potential argument for China already possessing authority via the international community's acquiescence is the fact that CITES held firm in upholding the importation of pandas as an internal issue. Forcing Taiwan to recognize that it was not an equal member—or a member at all—in the *international* hierarchy was one way of showing Taiwan it has to answer to Chinese authority. China attempted to assert ownership of the island by flouting the protocol by which it would abide if Taiwan truly were a sovereign nation. A rebuttal to this argument is that Taiwan's loud rejection of this move is also a loud rejection of Chinese authority. Given that diplomatic gifts are supposed to help mediate authority, a gift that incites a response explicitly denying that authority's existence in the first place supports the inference that China did not meet the required threshold of authority for the process of rendering the experience palatable to take place.

## *Experience Conveyed by Panda Diplomacy*

In the absence of existing authority to mediate, panda diplomacy as a type of diplomatic gift-giving still encodes the attitudes, hopes, and fears symbolized in cross-strait exchanges. Utilizing Kustermans' (2019) three criteria for gift-giving rituals—position of participants, performance of emotion, and suitability of the gift—this section will trace the process of panda diplomacy's effects on mainland-Taiwan dynamics.

The position of participants, when not characterized as a parent-child state relationship, is expressed in the course of this case in more horizontal terms, as indicated by the official position of China's State Forestry Administration, claiming that sending pandas to Taiwan is a special matter "between brothers" ("China halts panda gifts to foreign countries," 2007). The names chosen for the pandas, Tuan Tuan and Yuan Yuan, also evoke familial imagery given that together they mean reunification. Tuan Yuan Fan is the traditional reunion meal served during Lunar New Year festivities. The Lunar New Year or Spring Festival is the most important holiday in Chinese culture and is a special time for families to reunite. It is therefore unsurprising that Tuan Tuan and Yuan Yuan's arrival to Taipei Zoo was scheduled to occur during the Lunar New Year holiday.

Alongside the seeming wholesomeness of the reunification and brotherhood themes, the data also suggests that panda diplomacy with Taiwan represented a union more akin to a wedding ceremony. One humorous take from the Taiwanese side points out the potential innuendo of "Tuan Yuan" meaning an intimate type of union (Staff Reporter, 2009). The Taiwanese public was also highly interested in Yuan Yuan's heat cycle (Mo, 2009a). The zoo's veterinarian also had to field questions from the public about Tuan Tuan's sexual maturity and how soon the couple could produce cubs (Lu and Shan, 2008). This evidence seems to suggest that the Taiwanese public has a light-hearted interest in the future fertility of the bears themselves, with less emphasis overall on the symbolic nature of the reunion. The Chinese side, however, takes the symbolism in the metaphor much more seriously. Discussing the sexual maturity of the bears is called the "consummation of the marriage," (Yao, 2008). This evokes the idea of Taiwan and China becoming one, with the union of the bears being a proxy for the union of the mainland and the island. When discussing opposition to panda diplomacy within Taiwan, the metaphor chosen to represent this resistance is "eating Taiwanese tofu" (Yao, 2008). This is a common tongue-in-cheek idiom for taking advantage of someone, usually in a sexual way ("Chinese Slang," 2015). The Chinese media's use of this saying to describe Taiwanese resistance to panda diplomacy is dismissive and also promotes the normalcy of intimacy between the mainland and the island. Zheng Lizhong's aforementioned comments about the need to "sow the seeds," can be taken as yet another example of the way China attempts to use fertility imagery to suggest reunification will allow both sides of the strait to prosper.

As highlighted in Mauss's (1925/1966) essay, part of what makes gifts work as a way to consolidate relationships—even those without a strong direction of authority—is through the obligations of requital. So, the suggestion that both sides will benefit from closer ties may be a diplomatically appropriate one; however, amidst the discussion of what animals Taiwan would be sending back to China were also complaints and concerns that receiving pandas would detract attention and care away from native Taiwanese fauna (Liu, 2008). These concerns were compounded by the extraordinarily expensive investment it took to build the panda pavilion, that too in the midst of the 2008 financial crisis. The fears about the neglect of native Taiwanese animals are in many ways a proxy for fears of a deepening inequality between Taiwan and China, and fears that the KMT government was selling out to China by accepting the trade.

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These fears, a main feature in the performance of emotion, were agitated by the panda case, not made more palatable. The international media also participated in this environment of fear; a quote by Taiwan Solidarity Union Legislator Huang Shi-Cho calling the pandas a type of “Trojan horse” was widely circulated in American media in particular (Magnier, 2006; McDonald, 2012). Huang claimed that pandas were intended to destroy Taiwan’s “psychological defenses, (AFP, 2005). In terms of understanding how soft power and public diplomacy works, Huang’s description, while intentionally alarming, is not far off from the mechanisms that make panda diplomacy a successful practice as a whole. When taking into account the state of mind the Taiwanese must have been experiencing when this case of panda diplomacy took place, the most important contextualizing factors may be the 2008 financial downturn and domestic politicking around issues related to the economy, corruption, and mainland relations. The Chinese attempted to take advantage of these weaknesses, as evidenced by the media characterizing Taiwan’s refusal of the pandas as signs of paranoia and close-mindedness (Dong, 2007). Domestically, the DPP also attempted to exploit the KMT’s weaknesses to gain a greater political foothold (Lu, 2008 and Mo, 2009). Specifically, political rivals interpreted the KMT’s fight to bring pandas to Taiwan as a public distraction from not having anything else to show for their time in power (Staff Reporter, 2008).

The KMT seemed to have bought into the Chinese presentation of the pandas as symbols of fertility. Pandas, after all, were accepted as a sign of rejuvenation and rebirth by both the KMT and the PRC in the dust of the imperial era (Songster, 2018). This gift would be suitable as a reminder of cultural ties and would also remind the ROC that it originated from the mainland. However, the symbolism of fertility is somewhat inappropriate given that pandas are famously poor at reproducing on their own, which contributed in part to their endangered status at the time. This certainly did not slip the minds of animal rights activists. While the environmental stewardship argument was for the most part viewed as a political deflection, it is also true that Taiwan was not equipped to offer the care and facilities necessary to maintain two pandas, which is why they had to invest around 10 million USD in preparation (Liu, 2008). This put a strain on the economic outlook held by the Taiwanese public and provoked the ire of environmentalists who believed importing pandas was not in the animals’ best interest.

## *Response Variable of Public Response*

Although the Taiwanese government issued a round of rejections during previous offers of pandas from the PRC in the 80s and 90s, polling in 2005 indicates at least half or more of the Taiwanese public was in favor of accepting the pandas (Songster, 2018). This seems to be evidence that while pandas were still out of reach, the Taiwanese were craving what they couldn’t have. The Taiwanese public at this time also were highly in favor of the KMT, whose charter includes a clause for the “goal of national reunification (Kuomintang, 2023). However, there is some data that suggests they were on an election winning streak more so as an indictment of the DPP’s corruption and not as an indication that the Taiwanese populace wanted to reunify with China (The Editors of Taipei Times, 2014). Interest in reunification steadily decreased over time as satisfaction with life on the democratic island grew.

The introduction of the pandas to Taiwanese society was a grand affair, broadcasted on the Spring Festival show to millions and under heavy reporting by both sides. In spite of the pleasant weather, time off for the holidays, and excitement decades in the making, the Taiwanese public did not come out in the numbers projected to greet the pandas. In fact, by some accounts, only about half the number of visitors projected to pay for zoo entry that year did so. By the opening week, Taipei Zoo began fretting about potential financial losses, complaints of overcrowding, and public dissatisfaction of the overpriced pageantry (Chao, 2010; Mo, 2009a; Mo, 2009b) Interviews with zoo-goers that first week showed some enthusiasm, especially in reference to the touching gesture of the president walking with the poor and orphaned children to be the first to greet the pandas. But these statements were also tinged with commentary on tensions with the mainland and economic unrest (Huang, 2009). Members of the DPP were especially critical of the opening ceremonies, which is commentary on the diplomatic rituals themselves and also indicates the domestic divide over how to engage with China. Some also viewed the manner of delivery itself as unceremonious and an offense to the Taiwanese people, which is the exact opposite desired outcome of a well-orchestrated gift exchange. The precision of these rituals is in part what allows them to make the experience of authority palatable.

Both during and throughout this case of panda diplomacy, the Taiwanese public expressed skepticism of pandas as



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a “cultural weapon,” detecting suspect motives such as forcing Taiwan to present itself as an internal entity within China, particularly in reference to the CITES drama (Cole, 2010). There was also an element of presumptiveness characterizing the Chinese side, given that the government hosted the naming contest before Taiwan had even agreed to accept the pandas (Lu and Shan, 2008). That millions of people supposedly voted for a name meaning reunion could be taken as evidence that the Chinese public has a favorable view of Taiwanese reunification but should likely be primarily understood as part of CCP propaganda. There came about an interesting contradiction over the names. When the head Taipei Zoo zookeeper was asked by reporters about changing their names, he responded, “We respect these individuals, who have been called these names for four to five years. They have also learned to respond to these names ... At the moment, there are no plans to change their names” (Lu and Shan 2008). This statement appears to sidestep the political issue by telling a blatant lie, at least according to the narrative that millions on both sides of the strait named the pandas together in a national contest. Also interesting about this comment is the way that the animals’ autonomy is presented as a shield to criticism. Leira and Neumann (2017) briefly discuss that some of the value of beastly diplomacy is that the animals themselves are living, breathing ambassadors, and parties understand and attribute some degree of free will to them as participants in the diplomatic dance.

Signs that this case of panda diplomacy put strain on the already limited trust in cross strait relations is the suspicion that the KMT was joining hands with the PRC to distract from employment issues (Staff Report, 2008). Animal rights activists also accused the KMT of political machinations (Lu, 2008). In this sense, displeasure at China was by proxy directed at the KMT, which is known for its softer stance on the mainland compared to the DPP. Had the DPP still been in power, there is a chance this case of panda diplomacy might not have occurred at all.

There seems to be polling evidence that the Taiwanese public had not mentally linked pandas with improved cross-strait relations, which I might argue stems from the lack of authority causing them to be grateful or consider their relationship hierarchical with the mainland. The winter before the pandas arrived, the National Taipei University forecasted low odds for peace and stability in the region, but also noted hopefulness and excitement about the pandas arriving (Ko, 2008). While there was a perception that the KMT is softer on the mainland, there was also the sense that tensions would ease due to KMT coming back to power and doing more to keep China appeased. However, the public seems very clear on the distinction between wanting to keep China out of Taiwan and wanting reunification. In the years following the pandas’ arrival, polls show steadily increasing favorability of independence, although keeping the status quo of de facto independence remained the most popular option for the populace throughout this case.

In terms of measuring my variable of erosion of diplomacy, it seems to be the case that China interpreted efforts to maintain the status quo as a challenge to its goals, whereas the Taiwanese intended to preserve the stalemate. Thus, while this case did not seem to trigger increased tensions in the timeframe that immediately followed, largely in part due to the KMT actively courting favor with China, there does seem to be worsening perceptions by the public and growing pessimism about the odds of unity, solidarity, and friendship developing. The totality of this evidence indeed points to the failing of the public diplomacy campaign. In addition to rushing into the situation before authority was already established, the suitability of the gift and performance of emotion as well as the performance of ritual was less than satisfactory to many members of the public, meaning there was both a misapplication of diplomatic gift-giving and perhaps not the best selection of gift. Of course, on the other hand, I can think of few other gifts that would drum up as much publicity and stir the pot in terms of domestic Taiwanese politics as much as giant pandas could. But diplomatic gift-giving is not about making a splash or being noticed to be effective, it is about the careful implementation of changing the sociological structures that would make a populace more receptive to the gift-giver. In this, China fell short.

## Conclusion

This single case study on panda diplomacy between China and Taiwan explored the possible intersection of diplomatic gift-giving and dynamics of authority within the scope of public diplomacy. I tested the mechanisms of gift-giving rituals against the reality of how the case unfolded and uncovered interesting interpretations of the symbolism imbued by giant pandas on the political stage. My results did not support the environmentalist rationale for the

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effectiveness of panda diplomacy, which may be due to the unique domestic politics of the island. My data also did not emphasize the importance of economic ties, rather, the context of the 2008 worldwide financial crisis was much more salient in informing both domestic politics and the level of fear the ROC had towards the PRC. Taiwanese defiance of Chinese authority is not unshakeable; indeed, it is the source of much insecurity, but Chinese authority over Taiwan is even more dubious by virtue of the self-ruling island's *de facto* independence, regardless of its legal status.

One possible alternative critique of my research is that the PRC had the intention all along to unilaterally clamp down, and panda diplomacy was not a main feature of their long-term strategy. Under this assumption, the Taiwanese response is not a valid dependent variable because they were not given the chance to respond in good faith. Authority must be something the PRC seeks by forceful means, which is an inference supported by Kustermans' (2019) findings. In this case, there is an argument to be made that China's legitimate claims to authority grew weaker in the wake of this case of panda diplomacy because physical coercion was not a prominent component of their strategy. As making predictions about China's inclination to use military force or intimidation tends to belong to the realm of policy and security analyses, perhaps additional research should examine the overlap between security and diplomacy in this context. Moreover, while the PRC differs from Taiwan as a mono-party dictatorship, the views of the Chinese public may bear further investigation as well. While analyzing the meaning-making taking place within the inherent symbolism of diplomatic gift-giving, I found myself increasingly interested in the possibility of pursuing a discursive analysis on a similar data set.

Given the data presented here, however, I feel confident in concluding that there was very little authority from the PRC to the ROC being experienced by the Taiwanese public at the time, and that the experience of this case of panda diplomacy was troubled by the absence of this sociological relationship foundation, which in turn colored the performance of emotion and suitability of the gift. Altogether, this process led to increased pessimism and an ever-cooling attitude towards the mainland. I do not attempt to attribute direct causality between panda diplomacy shortcomings and worsening cross-strait relations as suggested by the 2014 Sunflower Movement, but there is a case to be made that the sociological state of Taiwanese sentiment was damaged against the capacity for trust and goodwill because of the misapplication of public diplomatic gift-giving.

Looking at present implications, I am curious how these results could be used as a lens to look at how China might change its usage of panda diplomacy. My hypothesis distinguished between convivial and ceremonial gifts according to Ceulemans' (2021) distinction, which allows me to explain the success of panda diplomacy in other cases where China was successful in delighting a foreign populace of a state towards which it was subservient. Now that China is advancing up the global hierarchy, presumably it will increasingly be offering diplomatic gifts of the ceremonial kind more often in order to fortify its authority. While I posit that China had the calculations of authority and the timing wrong in the Taiwan case, it is possible that future attempts will be more accommodating of the Chinese agenda simply because its existing authority is more widespread and would require less precision to act upon.

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