



And What About the Animals? A Case Study Comparison Between China's Panda Diplomacy and Australia's Koala Diplomacy



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Abstract

In a global scale of public diplomacy strategies that use nonhuman animals, two of the main representative species are the panda (China) and the koala (Australia). Both species embody several symbolic meanings and are mostly known as cuddly and cute, and their actual lives as diplomatic objects are not usually considered. That is, their perspectives, needs and individuality as subjects outside of their potential benefits for these countries are not commonly addressed when analysing public diplomacy that uses nonhuman animals — usually known as animal diplomacy —. The comparative literature review conducted in this study identifies similarities and discrepancies in how China and Australia have chosen to use the individuals of these endemic species. While China's use of pandas as soft-power tools is widely documented and seen as a positive strategic tool for the country's reputation, Australia's approaches with having koalas as representatives of their country are various, inconsistent and, at times, contradictory, or even accidental. Pandas and koalas are used as gifts in gift diplomacy, considered objects of diplomacy, holders of symbolic power and conveniently for the image of the zoos, seen as refugees of their home countries when in zoos abroad — given their status as threatened species. Even if many of the individual pandas and koalas are named when used for diplomatic purposes, none of them are deemed as moral subjects. Scholars, researchers and journalists promote the ongoing invisibility of the needs and interests of these nonhuman animals even in animal-based diplomacy contexts.



Keywords:

Animal diplomacy, public diplomacy, soft power, animal ethics, interspecies ethics, critical animal studies.

1. Introduction

The status, role and perception of nonhuman animals in society are determined by human's cultural construction. Their use as soft power tools in public diplomacy offers an illuminating and powerful opportunity to include interspecies ethics from a critical animal studies perspective. This project aims to draw parallels and differences between two of the currently better-known representatives of animal-based diplomacy: China's panda diplomacy and Australia's koala diplomacy. Some diplomacy scholars have started recognising animals as diplomatic subjects, not just as objects of diplomacy, because of their representative power (Hartig 2012; Leira & Neumann 2017; Simons 2020).

This article offers a comparative literature review on Australia and China's public diplomacy and their use of koalas and pandas, respectively. The aim is twofold: First, to identify the main characteristics of their public diplomacy

strategies, which involve a pattern of depicting nonhumans as *cuddly*. Second, the paper aims to address the actual relevance of these individuals in the context of animal-based diplomacy. Most of the discussed literature shows speciesist biases and little to no acknowledgment of nonhumans as moral subjects. As an under-researched topic usually addressed from a human-centred approach, this article by contrast offers a critical analysis by comparing and exploring ways of improving the representation of nonhuman animals in public diplomacy from an anti-speciesist stance.

2. Methodology

Given the comparative nature of this research, the research questions of this paper involve identifying the parallels between the two countries' animal-based diplomacy:

- a) Do pandas and koalas embody similar symbols for their respective countries?
- b) Do China and Australia have different attitudes and strategies towards accepting these two animals as representatives of their cultures?
- c) Are panda and koala diplomacies more culturally complex than the former *gift* dimension of animal-based diplomacy?

The technique employed in the analysis is literature review with a comparative analysis. As such, this paper examines two remarkable examples of animal-based diplomacy — panda diplomacy (China) and koala diplomacy (Australia) — through the existent analysis on their relevance within the field of public diplomacy and the strategies employed by the countries. To this end, a hierarchy of issues has been created to compare and contrast the main traits of both. The research is conducted while recognising that the very use of these species is intrinsic to the diplomacy being analysed. Yet this reality does not prevent the Critical Animal Studies (CAS) perspective or other critical perspectives that can be employed in further research from increasing the awareness and importance of an animal turn within the field of public diplomacy.

The rest of the article is structured in the following way: section three provides the theoretical framework of the paper; section four shares the results of the comparative review by overviewing the four main common traits of panda and koala diplomacy pointed by the literature (symbolic value of the species, touristic and mega-events attraction, methods in which pandas and koalas are allocated as representatives of the countries and their governments, and contrast on trade and cost-efficiency); and finally the last section draws conclusions from the comparative review conducted in the paper and expands the analysis by adding the interspecies ethics dimension, which includes a series of recommendations for professional communicators and for scholars that report and/or analyse animal-based diplomacy.

3. Theoretical framework

Alasdair Cochrane discusses the concept of interspecies justice in the book *Sentientist Politics: A Theory of Global Inter-Species Justice* (2018), which laid the following framework: "If sentient animals also have moral worth and rights ... then it seems as if the worth and rights of all sentient creatures — and not just humans — ought to shape the aims and structure of politics" (Cochrane 2019, 2). In this same volume the author also includes a call "to view them [nonhuman animals] as the subjects of political power that they are" (Cochrane 2019, 7). Considering these points, it could be said that interspecies ethics offers the inclusion of nonhumans based on their intrinsic political and moral worth. This is a crucial concept for understanding what this paper proposes: centring or, at least, recognising nonhuman animals as subjects instead of objects within public diplomacy and what is typically known as *animal* or *bestly diplomacy*. In order to avoid the use of speciesist terminology, in this paper the concepts used are *animal-based diplomacy* and *diplomacy that uses nonhuman animals* to refer to the same matters.

In this section I am offering a short overview of the different levels of consideration for nonhuman animals and approaches to nonhuman animals in diplomatic matters. By following an anti-speciesist stance, this paper has chosen a CAS perspective. As a field, CAS has "a direct focus on the circumstances and treatment of animals" and is concerned "with the nexus of activism, academia and animal suffering and maltreatment", which allows the researcher to take the established "normative stance against animal exploitation and ... denotes a stance against an anthropocentric status quo in human-animal relations" (Taylor & Twine 2014, 1-2).

Within the context of public diplomacy analysis, Simons for instance reminds that both the lives and the bodies of nonhuman animals are "easily appropriated as the bearers of the metaphors of soft power projections" (2020, 183), as it is for instance with the association of national emblems with a particular species or when traded as gifts with more-than-physical or literal dimensions. In this regard, Leira and Neumann state that nonhumans as gifts allow to circumvent "the reciprocity that is commonly associated with gift-giving" (2020, 339). Such consideration renders them as objects that bear meanings that go beyond — and do not acknowledge — their existence as individuals. Connected to this use as gifts, Simons (2020) suggests that "the bodies of animals can form the medium for the projection of national cultures ... by which a diplomatic or politically motivated gift can be used as ... soft power" (179). Furthermore, this author identifies an increase in the focus on animal-related issues within the study of public diplomacy and international relations, recognised as the "animal turn", started by scholars interested in animal advocacy by "addressing the impact of historical forces or cultural representations on the bodies of animals" (Simons 2020, 179). Such animal turn in this field, like the one previously undertaken in political philosophy, is needed to start understanding other than human species not for what humans attach to them, but as who they are, with the significance of their realities being acknowledged.

There are different opinions regarding the roles that nonhumans are placed into within public diplomatic matters. On the one hand, Hartig identifies three different roles that would determine the kind of animal-based diplomacy being employed — to which the author refers as *animal diplomacy* — to increase both repute and standing and that might be applied to the study of public diplomacy: 1) Nonhuman animals as gifts; 2) exchanges as diplomatic gesture, and 3) other animals being loaned (Hartig 2012, 52). Even if specific interpretations consider that the previous three can be reduced to a form of diplomacy of giving, this author defends that “while these animals were meant to please and adulate the receiving ruler in the first place and thus can be understood as a tool of ruler-to-ruler diplomacy, they also made a lasting impression on the public in the receiving countries” (Hartig 2012, 53) and thus have further implications and value in public diplomacy.

On the other hand, and according to Leira and Neumann, other animals can fulfil the following four roles within what they label as *beastly diplomacy*: 1) The roles and existence of nonhuman animals in several situations and cultures; 2) the symbolic and metaphorical aspect, which refers to what they represent; 3) nonhuman animals as diplomatic subjects, whenever they are part of diplomats' families and enjoy the same diplomatic immunity, and 4) nonhuman animals as objects of diplomacy, occurring in the context of species being threatened by extinction, etc. (2017, 339).

It is interesting to mention that amongst the animals partaking in the public diplomacy strategies of the countries, some might belong to the protected sphere as treasured species while others belong to a more ambiguous status, such as the kangaroo in Australia, a species that can be found on display and converted into food (Simons 2020, 183). The consequences for the deploy of a specific species in the projection of a countries' soft power is not always positive for the animals being used. As Simons argues, there are cases where it “seems to be a direct reverse or negative correlation between the propensity of a country to deploy a specific animal in its soft power projection and its desire ... to protect, develop and care for the animals concerned” (2020, 183).

4. A comparative literature review on panda and koala diplomacy

From the literature review conducted on panda and koala diplomacy research, four main features have been deemed useful for the China-Australia comparison carried out here. These are the symbolic value, the tourism and mega-event related usage, the methods of dissemination of the imagery and the trade and cost efficiency of pandas and koalas in the realm of Public Diplomacy.

4.1. Symbolic value

According to Leira and Neumann, the symbolic and cultural value of totemic — “meaning that they have identified themselves with an animal” — social groups can be applied in the context of the metaphorical aspect of animals within public diplomacy, as human groups identify themselves with a nonhuman animal whether these identifications are sought by the states or ascribed by non-state

actors, such as citizens (2017, 344). One of the main traits that koalas and pandas share is their conception as *cute* by the public, as their “human baby-like qualities together with numerous and long-standing representations in popular culture” (Markwell 2020, 1) makes it easier for them to be integrated into the identity of their natural habitat countries. This understanding of the entire species as cute is a result of an anthropomorphising and infantilising process, which might promote empathy towards certain nonhumans (Burton & Collins 2015, Caraway & Caraway 2020) but also misdirect empathy from individuals towards the cute “generic entity” (Vale & McRae 2016, 128) and misrepresent the truth of nonhuman animals (altering their *umwelt* or perspective) (Hight 2017, 31). As a result, the cutified status of both species is a positive tool for their countries but might be considered problematic to nonhuman individuals themselves.

On one side of the influence spectrum, Buckingham et al. address the relevance of the panda as a soft-power resource for China. For these authors, the adoption of a culture by people from another culture is a key aspect of soft power to build both acceptance and omnipresence, and soft power involves “achieving what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Buckingham et al 2013, 266). They highlight that the presence of individuals of this species “in non-Chinese zoos ... offers a softer animal symbol for China ... and an entry point to the documentaries dealing with natural beauty of the country” (Buckingham et al. 2013, 266). Marketing wise, pandas are present on many products, ranging from global conservation campaigns to cars, drinks, radios and more. Furthermore, it is essential to remember that pandas use, being “distinctive and naturally occurring only in China”, is more effective for China's public diplomacy with the help of the merchandising with a global appeal (Hartig 2013, 57).

On the other side of the spectrum, the symbolic value of koalas presents specific problems for Australia's public diplomacy. On the one hand, there is the issue of “the persistence of stereotypical or outdated images about Australia abroad, or what they [Senate Committee enquiry] labelled as the ‘Sunshine, Cuddly Koalas and Abundant Natural Resources’ problem” (Sani & Twombly 2010, 629). As it happens with pandas in China, koalas are endemic to Australia. Their boom in media coverage, especially connected to their transfer to zoos into foreign countries, is not considered by Ian McArthur to “contribute to a multidimensional image of Australia”, as it aids the “view of Australia as a ‘fenceless zoo’” (2006, 580). Being represented via text and images, captive exhibits, museum exhibits and souvenirs, as well as in encounters in nature, the engagement with the species is multi-dimensional within tourism (Markwell 2020, 4). The literature reviewed for this paper addressing the issue of koala diplomacy do not wonder about the consequences of these transfers and commodification of the individuals of this species, but limit themselves to the effect that the koala-Australia association has on Australia's diplomacy.

On the other hand, Sani and Twombly state that the “cuddly koalas” factor might even be considered as one of the elements that have made it possible for Australia to not “worry about its public image, and has successfully and

traditionally been protected” by it when facing politically delicate situations: “[It] works to a certain extent as a buffer against more critical news coming from this country” (2010, 630). It is also incredibly beneficial for the attractiveness factor and economic interests of the country. According to McArthur: “There is evidence that media-conveyed images of koalas ... contributed significantly to increased Japanese tourist traffic to Australia in these years” (2006, 580).

4.2. Touristic attraction and mega-events

Markwell (2020) states that the representations of animals within the tourist industry, regardless of the media outlet or the format, “are always embedded within particular ideologies and discourses” (2). In fact, the framing chosen can objectify the animals and even ignore their own agency as the individual and sentient beings that each of them is (Markwell 2020, 2). As such, it is shocking to see the lack of questioning in the literature on the effects of the use on nonhuman animals when they are traded, gifted, etc., for the sake of improving a country's image, even when both species have recently been labelled as in-risk.

Image 1: President Obama embracing a koala



Source: White House Archived Twitter account, November 16, 2014.

From the symbolic and material point of view, Markwell highlights that koalas play an important role in soft diplomacy as they are “featured in destination marketing campaigns and ... mass-produced on postcards and tea towels and the soft toy version is a ubiquitous Australian souvenir” (2020, 1). In this regard, Simons points out that pandas in long-term hiring plans on foreign zoos contribute at the same time to the projection of soft power and a source “of foreign currency through the tourist dollar” (2020, 180).

These two species also have a presence in their countries' mega-events. Simons reminds us that pandas were used by China “as a logo for other forays into the soft power game such as the Beijing Olympics of 2012 ... Olympic Games are, of course, wonderful vehicles for soft power projections” (2020, 180). Media attention can also backfire: the G20 is a perfect example of other animals stealing the spotlight of an international event. Koala diplomacy was the focus of media reporting, which was criticised as world leaders were shown “hugging away, even those who had threatened each other verbally weeks and days before ... US and Chinese media ignored the policies and loved the wildlife” (Harris Rimmer 2014) as illustrated by Image 1.

4.3. Methods of distribution

The importance of social media and online strategies is fundamental to the allocation of both pandas and koalas as representatives of both the countries themselves and their governments. The findings by Huang and Wang confirm that in the context of the public diplomacy of China, “the practice of panda engagement online is highly politicised”. According to these authors, Chinese media outlets use Twitter: “(a) to spread official discourse and views in the diplomatic area to strengthen the government's impact and (b) to accrue sympathy capital and increase attractiveness through strategic placement of imagery ... and textual narrative” (Huang and Wang 2020, 118).

According to the same authors, the mobilisation of panda imagery within this social media also “enhanced friendly relations with foreign political leaders and people and established a friendly and peaceful image of China on Twitter” (Huang & Wang 2019, 69). Image 2 illustrates the combination between pandas' (symbolic) figures and an unrelated piece of news. In this example, the panda illustrates China by embodying the country as a non-threatening persona within an article that criticises the hostile attitude of “Western countries ... busy depicting China as a ‘threat’ this year” when China is proposing “jointly building a community with shared future” (People's Daily Online 2018).

Image 2: News outlet promoting the identification of China with pandas



Source: China Daily, February 2, 2018.

Against this background, it is interesting to consider the reflection offered by Simons about the dichotomies on the use of animals as soft power projections, as there are differences “between a soft power projection as a classic attempt to deploy the attractiveness of a country or culture and something which looks more like a propagandistic attempt to conceal an unfortunate truth” (2020, 183-184). Whether they are strategically employed as a distraction or embodiments of the country's policies, there is no reflection or questioning of their use or their own living conditions in media coverage or the reviewed literature about animal-based diplomacy.

4.4. Trade and cost-efficiency

As stated before, the importance of gifts as social factors makes the metaphorical aspect of animal-based diplomacy especially critical because of the bonds that gifts help to establish regardless of the links between the different partaking societies (Leira & Neumann 2017, 345-346). However, when nonhumans are involved, this process transcends from the inanimate dimension. As Leira & Neumann stress, in this case the direct reciprocity is more challenging and, as a result, it would be more common “for the reciprocity to come in another form: beast being exchanged for status, political favour, goodwill or suchlike” (2017, 346).

A look at the official Chinese news easily provides an example of a consistent positive interpretation of any panda-related action, whether it is

related to the conservation sphere or the adaptation of the gift-trade into loans that let the public enjoy watching them (People's Daily Online 2018). Panda diplomacy is even shown as an efficient effort that the Chinese government is making in order to protect the species (CGTN 2017). According to Buckingham et al, amongst the trades that China has benefited from, pandas are connected to the following ones: uranium, oil, advanced technology, salmon flesh, petrochemical and renewable energy technology and Land Rover cars (Buckingham et al. 2013, 264-265). As a result, pandas are being used as bodies of exchangeable resources and income, as well as prestige and positive international relations. The extent of such exchanges can be seen in Image 3, a world map where countries that benefit from the loan of pandas are shown.

Image 3: Map with countries that benefit from the panda loan



Source: Vox, 2017.

Koalas, on the other hand, seem to attract more media backlash because of the economic cost that their use entails. For instance, the coverage of koala trades, such as the loan between Australia and Singapore in 2015, highlights the cost on “taxpayers money” while other areas of aid are left without support (Cartell 2015). Even when the form of diplomacy is not targeted, some articles criticise the conservational efforts of Australia as worsening for the reputation of the country while, simultaneously, victimising koalas (for instance Purcell, 2018). Illustrations by political cartoonists such as Martin Rowson on the G20 and Matt Golding on Australian foreign aid echo the protests on either the media attention or economic investment that koala diplomacy carried on the years 2014 and 2015. In the case of Martin Rowson’s carton, he portrays a critique of the focus on koalas by media and politicians in the context of the G20, showing politicians in an airport accessing a VIP lane thanks to holding one koala — by the leg and while in a four-legged position —, and once they are about to access the gate, the politicians dump the individual koala into the trash. In Matt Golding’s cartoon, the

attention is directed towards the funding and support that the Singapore Zoo gets through koalas being dropped by an Australian foreign aid airplane while someone shouts "DROP BEARS" (all words capitalised in the original) pointing at the plane.

5. Conclusions and further thoughts

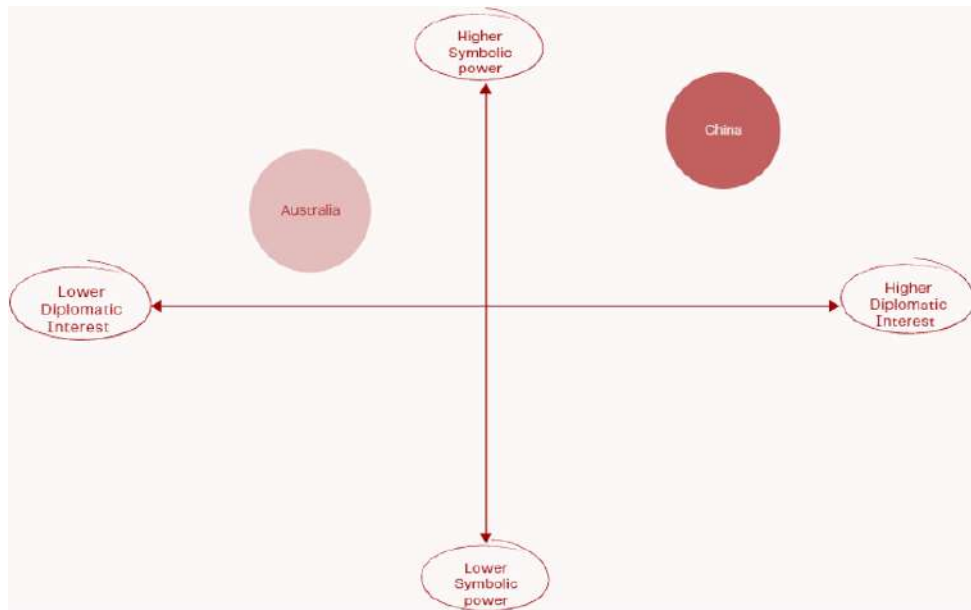
This paper has provided a preliminary examination of the research conducted on two leading representatives of current *cuddly* animal-based diplomacy — Australia's koala and China's panda — and found several similarities and disparities between them. Both koalas and pandas can be considered unique cases within the public diplomacy in their use as symbols to communicate local culture to foreign countries and incentivise bilateral behaviour. As a main conclusion it can be stated that the literature reviewed for this paper fails to address the problematic nature of using nonhuman animals as tools and resources.

China's use of pandas as soft-power tools is intentional and better documented — from the *gift* dimension to the social media strategies — while Australia's positioning on the identification of the country with koalas has been identified as more inconsistent through the review of the literature on the topic. In many instances, this diplomacy is considered either too expensive for the effect it has by the public or even harmful for the laziness and *open zoo* related stereotypes that foreign countries associated with the species and the country simultaneously.

From the literature analysed one can infer that both species are being used as a touristic claim within and outside of their countries, holding meanings and bearing the metaphorical embodiment of their respective countries. The positive associations between pandas and China or koalas and Australia are increasingly accessible to the public; the contexts for these interrelations are not academic or people-exchange related but available through social media and news outlets. Moreover, the symbolic power is relevant and complicated enough for Australian diplomats to have condemned the negative stereotypes promoted by koala-Australian associations and tried to control them by state-funded campaigns. The diplomatic interest and level of symbolic power also vary, as can be seen graphically represented in Figure 1, which positions China with a higher interest in public diplomacy that uses nonhuman animals.

Pandas and koalas are anthropomorphised, cutified and their value is more connected to their human-assigned symbolism than to their individuality as sentient beings: the affected nonhuman animals are not considered diplomatic subjects but as objects of diplomacy, as illustrated in Figure 1. They fulfil several different roles depending on the countries' context and purpose attached to the species as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 1: Symbolic Power and Diplomatic Interest for China (pandas) and Australia (koalas)



Source: Elaboration by the author.

The literature reviewed within the field of public diplomacy also lacks any interspecies ethics approach; the role of all the individual animals being traded, objectified, turned into cultural representatives and used as gifts have been reduced to their imposed symbolic status. The literature on animal-based diplomacy reviewed for this paper also shows an absence of criticism regarding the speciesist appropriation of nonhuman animals by public diplomacy, as well as an absence in general of concern for animal ethics issues. This shows that the topic is still to be explored from a multidisciplinary, critical perspective that includes the moral consideration of nonhuman animals as sentient and individual subjects.

Figure 2: Roles of pandas and koalas within Public Diplomacy

	Gift Diplomacy	Diplomatic Subject	Objects of Diplomacy	Symbolic Power
Panda (China)	✓	X	✓	✓
Koala (Australia)	✓	X	✓	✓*

*Problematic stereotyping

Source: Elaboration by the author.

There are several things that scholars, researchers and communicators can start taking into account when reporting on matters of animal-based diplomacy. Drawing from recommendations produced by critical animal studies scholars for communication practitioners, some shifts that can be applied when reporting on this type of Public Diplomacy are: Selecting appropriate terminology, including the perspective of nonhuman animals and recognising the interests of individuals of other species. These three recommendations will, at least, help recognise nonhuman animals as subjects of diplomacy instead of objects even within a context where they are instrumentalised and used for human profit:

- *Select appropriate terminology:* To start with, researchers and professional communicators should be clear about who is included when using the term *animal*; the use of “more precise terms such as *nonhuman animals, animals excluding humans, or other than human animals*” (Animals and Media 2016) is recommended. In the context of diplomacy that uses nonhuman animals, especially in pandas and koalas, the subjects are usually named, and a certain degree of personhood gets acknowledged with the recognition of individuality (regardless of the marketability purposes behind the naming). The suitable terms for referring to the nonhumans being used would be the ones that do not blur the character of the individual, conscious and sentient animals: like avoiding using terms such as: “it”, “units”, “genetic material”, “specimens” (UPF-CAE 2020, 8). When it comes to pronouns and reporting particular stories, it is recommended to use “he/she/they” and “who/which”, as well as “someone”, instead of “that/which” or “something” (Freeman, Bekoff & Bexell 2011, 601).
- *Include the perspective of nonhumans:* The perspective of nonhuman animals should be included by being conscious of how speaking on behalf of NHA affects them (Syrnyk 2016, 22). This means that whenever they are involved, they must be acknowledged and not only “from the human perspective and one that benefits us” (UPF-CAE 2020, 6).
- *Recognise the interests of individuals of other species:* The interests that other species have should be both identified and acknowledged (UPF-CAE 2020, 7), including “habitat, territory, food, water, safety, companionship and freedoms from pain, injury, distress, and exploitation, as well as needs to freely express normal behaviour and maintain their preferred relationships” (Animals and Media 2016). This could be applied by not idealising captivity and maintaining a critical perspective when reporting on the strategic use as “cuddly” toys for politicians, as it happened at the G20.



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