

# *The Role of the First Lady in Public Diplomacy since the Founding of the Republic of China*

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**Abstract:** Governments around the world attach great importance to “first lady diplomacy” since it is a crucial form of public diplomacy. When first ladies are now playing an increasingly prominent role in diplomacy, a relevant study in China is yet to be conducted. Therefore this paper aims to analyze the role of the first lady in China’s public diplomacy based on historical facts.

Politics and gender equality were once the two major factors hindering the development of first lady diplomacy in the early days of the People’s Republic of China until Mrs. Wang Guangmei won a good reputation for China with her demeanor and competence during her debut on the international stage in 1963. Her visit not only contributed to China’s breakthrough in ideology but also brought a wisp of freshness to her compatriots, who were then living a hard life.

First lady diplomacy in China embraced its new era upon Mrs. Peng Liyuan’s first overseas visit in 2013, during which Mrs. Peng gave full play to the great influence of the first lady: not only was she an aspiring promoter of Chinese brands and culture, but also an active participant in public welfare. Her musical background, in the meantime, adds to the shaping of China’s national image in a gentle way.

**Keywords:** First Lady Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy, China

## 1. Introduction

The title “first lady” refers to the wife of the head of state and is usually considered a symbol of national image and etiquette. When it comes to “first lady diplomacy”, the first lady associates and communicates with every sector of society in various forms so as to fulfill the diplomatic mission entrusted by the state leader or advocate non-political issues and is therefore seen as an important part of public diplomacy and national soft power. Due to the constant rise of their societal influence, countries are now attaching more and more significance to the diplomatic role of the first lady. Renowned first ladies include Eleanor Roosevelt, Jacqueline Kennedy and Michelle Obama –former first ladies of the United States; Lyudmila Putin – the former Russian first lady; Queen Yassin Rania of Jordan and the former British first lady Samantha Cameron. All of them represent well for their countries and leave an unforgettable image on the diplomatic stage.

First lady diplomacy, meanwhile, has experienced twists and turns in China. Not only was this convention absent for a long time, but even its validity was also questioned by its people due to gender-discriminating implications. With the development of times, however, this diplomatic practice

has now been recognized by the Chinese people and even gained huge popularity when Peng Liyuan, the incumbent first lady, escorted the chairman of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Xi Jinping, during his foreign visits in April 2013.

The first lady plays an increasingly prominent role in China's public diplomacy when relevant research at home and abroad is yet to be conducted. Therefore this paper aims to sort out historical facts about China's first ladies' participation in foreign affairs so as to analyze their roles in China's public diplomacy and national image based on case studies.

This paper consists of four parts. The first part discusses factors that influence first lady diplomacy in the PRC when the second part studies the contribution of the former first lady Wang Guangmei to improving China's national image in the 1960s; the third part centers on Peng Liyuan, the incumbent first lady of China, about her diplomatic performance and her dedication to national image, and the fourth part analyzes the diplomatic role of China's first ladies and their dedication to China's public diplomacy in different times.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The Role of First Lady Diplomacy**

The first lady plays vital in the diplomatic arena, whose good performance can enhance the effectiveness of public diplomacy and help enhance a country's soft power. According to Professor Zhao Kejin of Tsinghua University, a first lady needs to balance the social roles of women, leaders and the general public on the diplomatic stage [1].

The first lady usually acts as a capable assistant of the state leader in diplomatic activities. As a supporting role, the first lady can soften the image of her husband through her feminine charm. Professor Song Guoyou of Fudan University pointed out that the atmosphere of love and harmony between the state leader and the first lady will undoubtedly add to the image of the leader himself and his country. At the same time, the first lady's participation in diplomacy can narrow down the distance between foreign politicians and their families, especially when disputes occur [2].

The first lady can act as a propagandist of her country and a bridge between the government and the public. From 1789 to 1920, as suggested by American scholar Shawn J. Parry Giles, the first ladies of the United States made outstanding contributions to public and philanthropic affairs. They usually demonstrate the image of a mother and campaign for social issues such as child protection [3]. Meanwhile, the actual impact they impose on diplomacy to some extent depends on the educational and professional experience of the lady herself, concluded by Karina Marczuk, a scholar at the University of Warsaw, after a long-term study of the then polish first lady Agata Kornhauser-Duda (2015-2020). The diplomatic activities first ladies attend are also closely related to her husband's political goals [4].

### **2.2. Limitations of First Lady Diplomacy**

Despite their radiancy on the diplomatic stage, first ladies do not act without restrictions, which, according to scholars, are mainly divided into two categories: institution and social environment.

The first lady's participation in diplomacy stands on a rather vulnerable foundation. Since no clarification of their diplomatic roles has been made in constitutions or laws, whether they can and to what extent they may be involved in diplomatic affairs depend largely on the authorization of the state leader – that is, their husbands, while most of them can only serve as the “assistant” and “supporter” of their spouse. Prior to Rosalyn Carter, indicated by Keith v. Erickson, their public activities were strictly limited to ritual events as a companion of the leader, and they remain basically silent on domestic and international affairs even today, which is ironic considering that they are usually described as “powerful” women. Once they encounter social and political pressure, as

suggested by Prof. Zhao Kejin, they will tend to hide behind the scenes, thus hindering their political influence [5].

What is more, first ladies are often viewed as an appendage of the head of state, and their political agenda, duties and social influence are frequently ignored. American scholar Robert P. Watson believes that this is because the role they play is more or less related to their gender. Most of the diplomatic activities the first lady participated in were non-policy affairs, such as health care, disease control, children's and adolescents' education, women's rights, and more. Instead of being independent, these activities are usually considered supplementary to their husbands' political goals [6].

### 3. Factors Affecting First Lady Diplomacy

The development of first lady diplomacy was not free from difficulties in PRC, and politics was one of the major factors. Upon the eve of founding the PRC, Mao Zedong proposed three basic guidelines that constructed the principle frame of China's foreign policy, namely "making a fresh start", "cleaning the room then treating," and "leaning to one side", when the last one means China should firmly support the socialist camp led by the Soviet Union [7]. First lady diplomacy, which originated from capitalist countries, was therefore naturally ignored. According to Wang Guangmei's reminiscence, there was an unwritten law in the early days of the PRC that a diplomat visiting a socialist country should not bring his wife, while he should follow the opposite rule when visiting a non-socialist country [8]. That explains why only four first ladies have escorted the state leader during foreign visits when the PRC has had seven chairmen since its founding in 1949, and the four ladies are: Wang Guangmei, the wife of Liu Shaoqi; Wang Yeping, the wife of Jiang Zemin; Liu Yongqing, the wife of Hu Jintao; and Peng Liyuan, the wife of Xi Jinping.

Gender equality was also an important factor that influenced first lady diplomacy around the founding of the PRC. When China dispatched ambassadors overseas for the first time in the 1950s, their spouses refused to go together as "ambassador's wife", and some of them even asked for a divorce. This is because women had undergone oppression for centuries before the PRC accomplished women's liberation upon its founding. When liberation truly arrived, it pushed their pursuit for independence and career to an unprecedented height, thus colliding with the status of "ambassador's wife", which means staying in a subordinate position most of the time. Some of the wives found it unbearable being granted "Mrs." plus their husbands' names, let alone first lady diplomacy that goes even further [9]. This problem was not solved until Zhou Enlai, the then-Chinese premier, and his wife Deng Yingchao persuaded them to change their mind through a great deal of effort.

Greater and greater importance was attached to first lady diplomacy in the 1960s. In September 1961, the Central Committee established the Steering Group on Lady's Foreign Affair Activities so as to give full play to the role of wives in diplomacy, with Zhang Qian – the wife of Chen Yi, the then Vice Premier of the State Council and Minister of Foreign Affairs, served as the deputy leader and instructor. First lady diplomacy in the PRC has thus climbed to its first peak.

### 4. Wang Guangmei's Stunning Debut

From April 13 to May 16, 1963, with the company of his wife Wang Guangmei, Chairman Liu Shaoqi went on an international visit to Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam. This is the debut of China's first lady on the international stage since the founding of the PRC.

Great value was placed on this visit for several reasons. Back in the 1960s, when western countries adopted the policy of containment and isolation against China, this was the first time that a Chinese chairman had ever visited non-socialist countries (Indonesia, Myanmar and Cambodia), not to

mention the country had just managed to survive the three-difficult-year of starvation from 1959-1961. Whether the visit was successful, therefore, was particularly important to the Chinese government.

During the visit, Mrs. Wang's demeanor won a good reputation in China, as her elegant rhetoric and decent dress caught the eyes of the world. When welcomed by President Sukarno at the airport, the then Indonesian President had an amusing conversation with Mrs. Wang. Sukarno asked, "It is very hot in our country. Is that all right to you?" Mrs. Wang replied, "It is very hot indeed, but more importantly, our hearts are warmer than the weather." Sukarno then said, "We have not seen each other for a year." (Sukarno visited China in 1962) Mrs. Wang replied, "Yes, but Mr. President still looks very young" [10].

Besides being the first lady, Wang Guangmei was also the chairman's political secretary, which means she could assist Liu Shaoqi in foreign affairs and act as his English interpreter on certain occasions. Guo Jiading, a famous Chinese translator, recalled that Mrs. Wang was a rather fluent English speaker. Not only could she clearly understand what the guests meant and get to know their opinions in advance, but she delivered precise and assessable translations to the chairman as well. "She was a woman with extraordinary knowledge, a good conversationalist in not only everyday business but also international affairs" [11].

Mrs. Wang's debut as China's first lady paid off in diplomatic terms. The success of this visit marked China's breakthrough from ideological barriers and starting point of communication with countries outside the socialist camp, and Mrs. Wang should be given credit for it. She lit up the image of the country when back then, it was branded "ignorant," "belligerent," "cunning," and "dangerous" by its adversaries. At the end of their stay in Indonesia, President Sukarno gave Mrs. Wang a gift – orchids of a new variety that was named after her as a compliment of "flower-like beauty", drawing an excellent end to this historical visit [10].

The success of this visit is also a stimulant for Chinese people at home. With arduous material conditions and international blockades, Chinese people in the 1960s barely had any contact with the outside world. After this visit to the four Southeast Asian countries, news documentaries were shown on silver screens across the country, where her beauty and elegance brought a wisp of freshness to their meager entertainment and a hint of curiosity to westerners who then feared "Red China" in the era of tension and hardship. "As the pioneering first lady on the international stage in the history of the Republic of China, Mrs. Wang possessed an elegant demeanor which fully displayed the charm of oriental women and facilitated Chairman Liu's visits." So said Cheng Ruisheng, the Chinese ambassador to Myanmar and India, who was then an entourage on the 1963 visit [11].

## **5. Peng Liyuan's Contribution to China's Public Diplomacy**

China's First ladies stayed humble in diplomatic activities for decades after Wang Guangmei's last appearance in 1966, and this situation did not change until Chairman Xi Jinping took the oath of office in 2012. In March 2013, accompanied by his wife Peng Liyuan, the Chinese President visited Russia, Tanzania, South Africa and the Republic of Congo and later attended the BRICS Summit, which was also Mrs. Peng's debut on the diplomatic stage. This trip caused a sensation around the globe and triggered "Peng Liyuan fever" in global media. Multiple titles were granted to China's first lady, such as "the embodiment of oriental beauty," "the ambassador of China's image," "dazzled the whole world," "irresistibly charming," "the interpreter of China's soft power," and more. First lady diplomacy in China has henceforth embraced its new era.

Mrs. Peng Liyuan is well aware of the great influence she has as the first lady, of which she has taken full advantage to advocate Chinese culture and brands whenever she can. Her outfits mostly come from local designers, which, with simple and dignified style, convey the idea of Chinese aesthetics and capture the eyes of the world. The gifts she presented during diplomatic activities, in

the meantime, were mostly local products or handicrafts with distinct Chinese features. Such options are undoubtedly a manifestation of cultural confidence and greatly enhance the national pride of the Chinese people. Thanks to the great influence of the first lady, almost all the products Mrs. Peng presented or employed became a real hit – products from brands such as Pechoin (a skincare brand), ZTE and Nubia (both cellphone brands) even once ran out of stock. As a chief ambassador of China, Mrs. Peng's words and deeds not only show China's style and power as a big country but also open a window for Chinese brands to the whole world.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Peng Liyuan demonstrates many personal traits when being on the diplomatic stage. Already a renowned artist in China before becoming the first lady, Mrs. Peng attended quite a number of cultural activities at home and abroad, especially the ones that involved music, which not only adds to China's cultural attractiveness to the whole world but also fills out the country's national image in a subtle way. In March 2013, when Mrs. Peng visited Russia, she performed famous Russian ballads with the Alexandrov Ensemble, which promoted friendship and cultural exchanges between the two countries. Liu Guchang, former Chinese ambassador to Russia, speaks highly of Mrs. Peng, who has been in charge of her reception many times when she performed in the country: "My wife and I have a very good impression of Mrs. Peng Liyuan. She is a rather elegant and friendly lady. I remember once, after performing in the Kremlin Grand Theatre, she directly changed into a casual outfit for a reception party. Every guest at the party congratulated her on her wonderful performance, and she replied quite modestly; you could not tell at all from her appearance that she was a superstar. She is so gentle to everyone she greets" [12].

Mrs. Peng's contribution to public diplomacy is by no means limited to her image and star effect; her passion for public affairs is also a crucial part of it. Besides her role as the first lady, her enthusiasm for public welfare can be seen in many aspects. She has performed hundreds of times for people in disaster-hit areas, which include Xiaotangshan Hospital, the battlefield against SARS in 2003, Wenchuan – an area heavily stricken by an earthquake in 2008, and Jiujiang – the frontline against catastrophic flood in 2009. Mrs. Peng, in the meantime, has long been committed to the cause of AIDS prevention, she was employed by the World Health Organization as a goodwill ambassador to fight against tuberculosis and AIDS on June 3, 2011, and the loving "Mother Peng", as AIDS orphans call her in China. Instead of standing high above the masses, Mrs. Peng remains down-to-earth style and stays within reach of people in need. This is where the real influence of China lies – which is neither advanced military equipment nor economic growth figures, but the power that delivers kindness and reaches the hearts.

A first lady does represent women from her country on the diplomatic stage. Compared with state leaders whose visits put emphasis on national interests, the responsibilities of a first lady lie primarily on demonstrating her country's image and conveying the friendship of her people to all sectors of society in the host country. The first lady, therefore, becomes "the chief ambassador" and a natural advocate of her country. As the first lady with multiple identities (artist, AIDS goodwill ambassador, and more), Mrs. Peng Liyuan not only accompanies Xi Jinping on international visits but also gets down to major issues of human society on her own by independently participating in many activities involving women, children, culture and environment, which vividly reflects independence and rise of the status of Chinese women in the new era, who now have the same right to speak in the international community as men. This is historic progress in China, a country that has experienced centuries of feudal society in which men were superior to women.

With her artistic specialty, in the meantime, Mrs. Peng skillfully applies music to public diplomacy. On September 13, 2014, during her visit to Tajikistan State Institute of Art, Mrs. Peng acclaimed that music is an art of emotion, a language that enables communications among hearts and feelings of different nationalities with no need for translation [13]. Such observation is true in her diplomatic practice, where music serves as an envoy of hospitality and sincerity and a bridge that narrows the



distance between China and the world. Being elegant both inherently and externally, Mrs. Peng not only the world but also makes the image of Chinese women well established in the hearts of public, which accords with the comment of Joseph Nye: “Mrs. Peng Liyuan represents China’s soft power, from whom we can see China’s courtesy and culture. Your country is very lucky to have such a charming first lady” [14].

## 6. Conclusions

As a new name card for China and a new bridge of communication to the outside world, not only can the first lady demonstrate the typical qualities of an excellent individual, but also the overall image of her country. From the above discussion, it is not difficult to find that the first lady is a great donor behind China’s public diplomatic success from its once less-developed age to today’s prosperity, especially Mrs. Wang Guangmei and Mrs. Peng Liyuan. Greater expectations can thus be placed on China’s first ladies for their future contributions to public diplomacy; hence, the Chinese government may increase publicity of the first lady at home and abroad to expand her influence further.

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