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# Science Diplomacy and China's New "Self-Prioritizing" Development Mindset



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By [Joy Y. Zhang](#)

SCIENCE DIPLOMACY - 15 YEARS ON

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The past fifteen years have seen two turning points in China's role in global science and in science diplomacy. The first was in 2009, when China surpassed Japan as the second-largest research power, leading to expectations that the U.S.-China partnership would be pivotal in global science.<sup>1</sup> Fifteen years later, the *Nature Index* signaled another "turning point": China's dominance in high-quality research was poised to shift the center of gravity away from the West, fragmenting international collaboration.<sup>2</sup> Such concerns seemed to be reinforced by President Xi Jinping's championing of "self-prioritization" (*yi-wo-wei-zhu*) as the new development framework in 2020.<sup>3</sup> Initially focused on prioritizing China's domestic market, this new mindset quickly influenced discussions on intellectual property, the governance of innovation, and science diplomacy.<sup>4</sup>

What role does science diplomacy play in the era of China's new self-prioritizing outlook? An informed answer must consider three crucial factors in China's evolving global outreach strategy. First, under Xi, science diplomacy has supplanted Confucian culture as the centerpiece of China's soft power and public diplomacy, with a strategic shift from "reaching out" to "inviting in." Second, China's investment in science diplomacy now prioritizes not just political recognition but also economic benefits. Finally, this transformation is deeply connected to a generational change in Chinese nationalism.

While the Confucius Institute program was the signature public diplomacy initiative of the Hu Jintao administration, since Xi took office in 2013, China has transitioned to a more future-oriented, science-centered global strategy, aligned with his vision of building a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind." The term "science diplomacy" was officially incorporated into China's national policy discourse in 2016, when China's State Council underlined it as a key element in enhancing China's global influence by advocating for the "integration of scientific and technological innovation with

national diplomatic strategy" in one of the six core principles of its Thirteenth Five-Year Plan.<sup>5</sup>

When Xi took office, China recognized that public diplomacy required not only sending its professionals abroad but also attracting foreign students to China. It became Asia's largest destination for international students by 2018—two years before its original aim, driven by the Xi administration's support for "Study in China" programs.<sup>6</sup> The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, became the focus of this outreach. In its first decade, China sponsored 1,900 visiting scholars from BRI countries, and co-authored papers with these countries increased 3.7-fold.<sup>7</sup> This "inviting-in" strategy was further strengthened by the 2018 establishment of the Alliance of National and International Science Organizations for the Belt and Road Regions (ANSO), which expanded academic sponsorships to strengthen ties with former foreign graduates from China.<sup>8</sup>

Prioritizing science and innovation in China's public diplomacy, alongside encouraging BRI students and academics to visit also serves short- and mid-term economic interests. By 2020, China had grown its share of international students from 1% in 2000 to 9%.<sup>9</sup> While government scholarships are often seen as a draw, only 12.8% of international students in China receive them.<sup>10</sup> The focus on training students and academics from BRI countries is aimed at creating a network of individuals who can introduce Chinese science and innovation standards to their home countries, opening doors for Chinese business and industry.

Xi's public diplomacy is arguably more aggressive than Hu's, as it exerts greater control over the terms and conditions of knowledge exchange and production. In a 2021 discussion organized by the Shanghai Technology Administrative Cadres College, officials from China's Ministry of Science and Technology and science policy experts concurred that such "inviting-in" marks a distinct

difference from China's passive adaptation of other countries' innovation culture, and a shift to the 'self-prioritizing' approach in which China "presents the resource, presents the research questions, and let the smartest scientists and the best talents around the world come to us."<sup>11</sup>

This assertive stance resonates with China's Gen Z, the upcoming backbone of the nation's science and society. This alignment is due not only to their upbringing under a more stringent nationalist education but also to the fact that they have known only a strong and rising China. This experience has fostered a significant generational shift in how they perceive China's place in the world.

In 2023, social media accounts sparked widespread criticism of Tsinghua University and other institutions as "unpatriotic" due to the high percentage of graduates applying to study abroad. The backlash was so significant that Tsinghua felt it necessary to respond by releasing data showing that the percentage of graduates studying overseas had actually declined from 16.5% in 2018 to 7.1% in 2022.<sup>12</sup> In fact, many top universities have seen the percentage of their alumni studying abroad almost halve between 2017 and 2021.<sup>13</sup> This stigma surrounding studying abroad has alarmed many and prompted Zhiwen Chen, Chief Editor of China's *Education Online*, to publicly denounce the narrative, emphasizing that studying abroad is a personal choice, not a measure of patriotism.<sup>14</sup>

However, even Chen acknowledges that the generational shift in global engagement goes beyond government propaganda.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Millennials, who see intrinsic value in studying abroad, Gen Z is more skeptical and pragmatic, focusing on economic prospects and the convenience of staying closer to home. This mindset has made "4+0" degree programs increasingly attractive.<sup>16</sup> These programs allow students to earn dual degrees from local and foreign institutions while completing their entire education in China and are promoted

by China's Ministry of Education to retain capital that would otherwise flow abroad.

As China has transitioned from an emerging to an assertive scientific power over the past 15 years, science diplomacy has gained importance both for China and the world. The real challenge, however, may lie not in the official "self-prioritizing" stance, but in how this rhetoric resonates with and reinforces the new generation's nationalistic outlook and increased skepticism toward reaching out to the world. Understanding and being attuned to China's evolving mindset is crucial for any diplomatic dialogue and meaningful scientific collaboration.

## Endnotes

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