

# The Negotiation of Cultural Identity

## An Analysis of Public Diplomacy Strategies in A Cross-situational Context\*

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**Abstract**—It is widely acknowledged that cultural diversity is a critical aspect of public diplomacy seeking to communicate with international publics. However, little research-based evidence exists about what cultural diversity means to practitioners. This study examines how the attributions of cultural identity are negotiated in the direct and dialogical (online) conversations among the U.S. Embassy and Chinese netizens. It captured and analyzed 1,239 tweets and all the comments that appeared under the Weibo (Chinese version of Twitter) handle of the U.S. Embassy during the observation period. Within the framework of constructionism theory and intercultural public relations, this article asserts that, in a cross-situations where the external publics whose cultural identifications differ from those of the organization, issues representing cultural conflicts may arouse more negative responses. Findings indicate that compared to neutral topics, conflict-related information correlates with a higher proportion of negative comments. Therefore, this study shed light on the understanding of the power of the situational theory in predicting which issues are likely to create active publics.

**Keywords**—*cultural identity; public diplomacy; microblogging; situational theory*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Once former American President Obama officially nominated Gary Locke, former Minister of Commerce, to be the next ambassador to China on September 3, 2011, Chinese microblog users started hot debates on social networking sites. In recent years, the adoption and function of internet gradually draw more and more attention from researchers in public diplomacy. New words “public diplomacy 2.0” and “microblog diplomacy” have been generated to highlight the important roles played by social medias like Blog, Microblog and Facebook and so forth. The value of social media is also emphasized by practitioners. Many countries and governments have already adopted social media in public diplomacy. For instance, America initiated “Public Diplomacy 2.0” and made it one of the most important strategies in public diplomacy (Glassman, 2008). Social networking sites and blogs become important media to influence global publics. For instance, prime minister of Britain, president of Russia and president of America etc. all opened personal accounts on Twitter. Many British ambassadors start using blogs in recent years

(Andersson, Gillespie and Mackay, 2010).

Besides individuals, governments and other organizations also begin their move in social media. For example, the White House has opened an account on both Twitter and Facebook. The White House now has a stronger presence on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and Vimeo. It even boasts its own iPhone application (Ng Tze Yong, 2010).

In China, embassies of many countries have adopted microblogs to directly speak with Chinese netizens. Countries including United States, Britain, France, Japan, Denmark, Italy, Australia, Egypt etc. opened their microblog accounts at sina.com, the most popular microblog website that attracts the largest number of microblog users in China.

On microblog platforms, users can create news feed, make comments, and forward messages. In contrast to television and radio audiences, Internet users leave traces that can be retrieved and then be analyzed (Andersson, Gillespie and Mackay, 2010). Although public diplomacy performers in social media context has been well documented (e.g. Armstrong & Gao, 2010; Muralidharan et al., 2011; Earlier, Rybalko, & Seltzer, 2010), little is known about how the audience interpret the messages that the organizations delivered. Also little literature adopt audience-centered approach to study the “real effect” of public diplomacy strategies (Gilroy, 1997). By far now, an ignorance of cultural perspectives in the literature make us reflect key issues as following:

- RQ1: What are the main themes delivered by the US Embassy in China?
- RQ2: How the Chinese microblog users interpret the messages?
- RQ3: Are the US Embassy and Chinese netizens fulfill a real dialogue on the microblog platform?

Therefore, this study make contributions by connecting cultural identity, public diplomacy and situational theories.

### II. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### A. *New Approaches of U.S. Public Diplomacy*

The target audience of public diplomacy is foreign public (Andersson, Gillespie and Mackay, 2010). Cull (2009) defines public diplomacy as process by which an international actor conducts foreign policy by engaging a foreign public.

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Henderson (1973) defines public diplomacy as a type of soft power. Cull (2009) listed five strategies of public diplomacy including listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting.

After 9/11 terrorist attack, the United States stated to change their tune of public diplomacy and has begun to “win back their hearts and minds” in the Middle East and other places in the world (Babst, 2008). Regardless of tactics, the overall strategy of American public diplomacy can be summarized as to promote freedom and democracy through accurate and objective news and information (Iskandar, 2005).

With the increasing popularity of social networking sites, microblogging public diplomacy has been adopted and is taking place of some traditional ways. Voice of America, a radio service used to influence Chinese public ceased to broadcast in 2011. By now, the White House has opened eight different social networks, including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, iTunes, Myspace and LinkedIn. White House has huge group of fans on those websites: more than a million on Facebook, 2.2 million on Twitter, and 70 thousand entrepreneurs and businessmen on LinkedIn (Jianan, 2011). During the presidential election of Obama, the power of YouTube, Facebook and Twitter played a vital role in winning donation, motivating voters and expanding information (Yong, 2010). The public diplomacy was since then identified by the U.S Government Accountability Office as one of the 13 priorities of the President (Snow, 2009).

According to Fischer & Reuber (2011), compared with Facebook and other social networking services, Twitter makes social interaction more dynamic and more convenient. Although Facebook has more individual participation versus Twitter, it lacks wide-scale public exposure. Twitter affords free, highly mobile, very personal and very quick interactions, and thus can be used to send and receive and read almost any messages by just a screen and the internet.

Microblogging platform such as Twitter and Weibo also provides an opportunity to measure the effect of public diplomacy from the audience side. Debates over how to best reinvigorate US public diplomacy among the Pentagon State Department officials, information agencies and communication experts are to a large extent, resulted from the absence of an effective way to measure the effect of public diplomacy investment (Babst, 2008; Dale, 2009).

### *B. America's "Weibo Diplomacy" in China*

In China, microblog (“weibo”) users saw a big increase in 2010. According to statistics, by December 2010, there are 63.11 million microblog users in China, taking up 13.8% of all netizens (CNNIC, 2011). The web-based diplomacy of the American Embassy in China started in November 2009. The American Embassy opened its Chinese blog and account in Kaixin.com, the largest SNS website in Chinese mainland at that time. A Chinese media made a report titled “American Embassy Opened Chinese Blog Before Obama Visits China: showing ‘Humanity’”.

In 2010, the American government initiated Weibo Diplomacy in China. Up to now, the American government agencies including “American Embassy in China”, “U.S.

Consulate General in Chengdu”, “China Office of New York Travel Bureau” and “Education USA China” have official weibo accounts certified by sina.com. Among these accounts, “American Embassy” has the largest amount of the Chinese fans, totaling 160,798 in 2011.

### *C. Theoretical Frameworks*

The theoretic framework of this thesis draws from the combination of constructionism in international relations studies (Debris, 2003) and the Circuit of Culture Model (Curtin & Gaither, 2005).

*1) Discourse and identity construction:* Constructionism emphasizes discourse and its role in constructing identities among international subjects (Debris, 2003). The core assumption of this theory regard discourse as a vehicle of human’s knowledge, value, ideology and even the basic question on self-identity such as “who I am”. Constructionism theory holds that the reason of conflicts arises from identity conflicts resulted from discourse construction (Choi, 2006). Pitts (2009) pointed out that many of our daily interactions involve cultural identity negotiations. And the increasing intergroup encounters and technological advancement because of globalization has increased the occasions for managing multiple group identities in any given encounter.

According to constructionism theory, subjects in relations will dynamically construct “Self” and “Other” through discourses, a process that affected by complicated factors, including representations of mass media, formal and informal communication activities of government, active explanation of the public and so forth. Fierke (1998) stated that negotiation is different from dialogue. The two belong to different language games and are constructed based on different rules. Negotiation strengthens more differences between “Self” and “Other”. In contrast to negotiation, dialogue stresses more on the similarity of identities between “Self” and “Other” to remove obstacles and alleviate contrariety. Duncombe (2011) found that Hollywood filmmaking is stressing more on the difference between the West and non-west, and such schemas are impacting the direction of diplomacy strategies. Therefore, Deos (2008) thought that the reason that public diplomacy gets increasingly welcomed by governments is the important role in mutual identity construction rather than differentiation strategies.

*2) The circuit of culture model:* Like the attention to discourse and identity considered by constructionism in international relations studies, the Circuit of Culture Model in public relations studies also emphasizes “identity, differences and power” in discourse practices (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). Curtin and Gaither (2005) introduced the circuit of culture model (see “Fig. 1”) brought up by du Gay, Hall and their colleagues (1997) into public relations studies, and further explained it in combination with the practice of public relations.

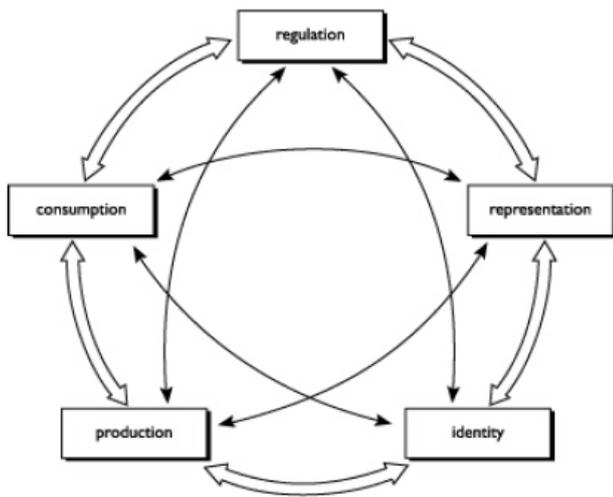


Fig. 1. *The circuit of culture* (adapted from Curtin & Gaither, 2005 ).

The Circuit of Culture Model is in contrast with the linear communication model which is based on functionalism paradigm. The difference is the former theory emphasizes more on the synergistic, nonlinear and dynamic features of public relations. The core of the model is the construction of meaning. The Circuit of Culture Model interprets communication behaviors as five cultural moments: representation, production, consumption, identity and regulation, among which meaning-construction is the core process (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). Circuit of Culture Model describes public relations as a dynamic social production practice of meaning, and thus identity gets constructed in the process of production and consumption of meaning (Woodward, 1997).

### III. METHOD

We adopted thematic analysis that takes text as research subject (Joffe & Yardley, 2004) to investigate how the American Embassy dynamically produce and consume meanings.

#### A. Thematic Analysis

Different from content analysis, thematic analysis pays greater attention to the qualitative aspects of the material analyzed (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Thematic analysis is basic and useful and should become a qualitative research method necessary for researchers (Aronson, 1994; Boyatzis, 1998; Roulston, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Boyatzis, 1998). And the advantages of thematic analysis lie in the following: emphasizing the richness of detailed statistics (Boyatzis, 1998); deeply digging the deep meaning instead of superficial meaning of the texts which obviously is closer to framework study while different from content analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006); paying attention to the broader sociocultural contexts in which the discourses exist. Braun & Clarke (2006) stated thematic analysis should consider questions as followed:

What does this theme mean? What are the assumptions underpinning it? What are the implications of this theme? What

conditions are likely to have given rise to it? Why do people talk about this thing in this particular way (as opposed to other ways)? and What is the overall story the different themes reveal about the topic? (p83)

Braun and Clarke (2006) also pointed out that thematic analysis was particularly appropriate for the study of an under-researched area. As the research on discourse of public diplomacy is still at a primary phase, thematic analysis is appropriate to fulfill the research goal.

#### B. Data Collection and Analysis

According to Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis includes three dimensions: overall or detailed analysis, latent or semantic themes, and data or theoretically driven analysis. In this study, we use the second methodology. Because we care more about how meaning is produced and consumed in the process of interactive communication rather than macro-statistical and semantic description. Therefore, we focus on the “themes” rather than the data.

Therefore, this research follows the main steps of a standard thematic analysis procedure (Taylor & Bogdan, 1989; Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006):

- Establishing data corpus through data collection. As for thematic analysis, data corpus refers to all the data collected for a particular research project. Also, because the data under the official account registered by the American Embassy at sina.com can be only retrieved since May 21, 2010, the data corpus contains all microblogs from May 21, 2010 to May 21, 2011, totaling 1,239 microblogs (tweets) written by the American Embassy. We also analyzed the comments and replied tweets under each original tweet, totaling 38,219 tweets from Chinese followers.
- Data analysis and coding. Coding and analysis are combined; the process of coding is the process of analysis, which is different from content analysis. Thematic analysis allows researchers’ subjective involvement and depends on researchers’ interpretation and judgments (Boyatzis, 1998: 63). Therefore, when thematic analysis begins the finding of themes starts.
- Abstracting the themes and sub-themes. The aim of thematic analysis is to find relevant meaningful groups of discourses. Themes represent as units or levels derived from patterns including “conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1989:131). Sub-themes are described as relations among themes. A theme may contain many supporting sub-themes.
- Describing the thematic map of the production and consumption of meaning. A thematic analysis is expected to be able to provide the audience a map of the relationship between theme and sub-themes. Before you begin to format your paper, first write and save the content as a separate text file. Keep your text and graphic files separate until after the text has been formatted and styled. Do not use hard tabs, and limit

use of hard returns to only one return at the end of a paragraph. Do not add any kind of pagination anywhere in the paper. Do not number text heads-the template will do that for you.

#### IV. RESULTS

##### A. Meaning Production

The process of meaning production happens in a multi-level context including social culture, organizational culture and personal factors (Curtin & Gaither, 2005) which affect the final information product in various aspects. As the gatekeepers of information outputs, the American Embassy constructs identities of America and China via its official microblog on sina.com.

1) *Meaning production process*: The American Embassy's microblog selects some sensitive topics about the Chinese society which are most concerned by the Chinese public to get psychologically closer to the Chinese netizen and adopts the following process of meaning production: "Sensitive Issues Selecting → Knowledge and Information Providing → Stimulus Repeating and Reinforcing" to construct difference under the relevant and sensitive themes and knowledge. Take the following microblog text for an example:

"How much money needed to buy a house in America? <http://t.cn/hb0EJG> the house shown in the picture: three living rooms, 2.5 bathrooms, 250 m2 construction square, occupying two Mus, 30-minute driving distance from Washington. Its current price is USD 400,000."

"在美国买房要花哪些钱 <http://t.cn/hb0EJG> 如图这样的前二后三层, 3 卧 2.5 卫浴, 居住面积 250 平米, 占地大约两市亩, 距离华盛顿市区车程 30 分钟左右的独栋屋, 目前市价 40 万美元"。

Seeing just from the superficial information conveyed by this microblog, we may simply consider it as an introduction of the cost on housing in America. However, this tweet was forwarded 6,891 times and gained 2,275 comments, making this tweet one of the most hot tweet for the observation year.

Let's move on to the next microblog:

"Bill for a regular American family: this is a common middle class family with monthly income of 3000-6000 dollars after taxes and insurance. The bill for this family totals 117.04 dollars, which covers three-in-one service including telephone, internet and cabal television. The telephone does not limit local or long-distance call, including America and Canada. The internet speed is 25M, with free wireless and cable double use modem. <http://t.cn/h5Bfc1>"

"一个美国家庭的电话/有线电视/宽带费账单: 这是一个普通中产家庭, 缴完税险后月入 3 千到 6 千美元。这个家庭的账单总计 117.04 美元, 享受三合一服务, 包括座机, 上网和有线电视。电话是无限制的本地和长途通话, 包含美国和加拿大。宽带速率 25M, 免费提供无线和有线两用路由器。 <http://t.cn/h5Bfc1>"

From the information on surface, this is also a microblog introducing income and expense of an American family. But what worth attention is this microblog got forwarded 1,758 times, ranking the second hottest tweet. It also got 633 comments, ranking the third.

The American Embassy chooses topics that subtly reflect the good aspects of America but the bad aspects of China. Conflicts thus are produced. Owing to the selection of sensitive topics, those discourses, without any conflict on face meaning, become vehicles to impart American value into China. The top ten microblogs, defined by the amount of forwarding and commenting, covered topics including living, income, consumption ability, food safety, journalism freedom, officials' income and taxes and so forth. Obviously, those topics all are sensitive topics in current China.

2) *Thematic map of meaning production*: Thematic analysis further explains how the American Embassy selects themes and how the relations between those themes get constructed. We think there are three sub-themes in the American Embassy's microblog data corpus: (1) latent conflict; (2) direct advocacy; (3) neutral information. These sub-themes all support a higher level of theme, i.e. the difference between U.S. and China as shown in "Fig. 2":

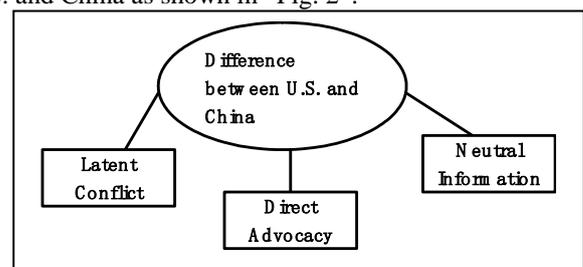


Fig. 2. Thematic map of meaning production.

"Latent Conflict" refers to the difference and conflict between the American and Chinese identities covered by the knowledge and information mentioned above. Take the following microblog as an example:

"The working rights of American seniors: in America, the recruitment advertisements often do not set forth requirements like gender, height, weight, appearance etc., and seldom have limit of age, because those are illegal. There are often people over age of 70 working in check-out stand in supermarket. When taking plane in America, you are very likely to meet women air hostess or aged men."

"美国老人的工作权利: 在美国, 招聘广告不但不大会性别、身高、体重、相貌等要求, 而且极不可能看到年龄限制, 因为这基本都违法。超市收银台常常有年纪绝对超过 70 岁老人在为你服务。乘坐美国飞机, 常常是 '空嫂'、'空大妈' 端茶送水, 当然也有年龄不小的男士当服务生的。 <http://t.cn/h1jekw>"

"Direct Advocacy" refers to tactics of expressing values to be advocated with discourse, these microblogs include selective quoting President Obama or other American important statesmen, as one of the microblogs reads:

"Have opportunity of receiving education and be able to work with dignity; have freedom of choosing religion, not needing to be worried or scared or limited. Those are universal value supposed to get acknowledged throughout the world."

"有机会接受教育并能有尊严地工作; 有信奉宗教的自由, 不必担惊受怕也不会受到限制。这些都是必须在世界各地得到遵守的普世价值观。"

This microblog was forwarded for 838 times, ranking ninth, and was commented for 274 times, ranking tenth. Another example:

“President Obama: opened market provides prerequisite for individual’s development. Free media and independent judiciary system can erudite power abuse and lead to accountability. It is opened society and active participation of citizens that boycott unfairness and injustice.”

“奥巴马总统：有开放的市场才能有个人蓬勃发展。有自由的媒体和独立的司法制度才能根除滥权和专权，才能坚持问责。有开放的社会和公民的积极参与才能抵制不平等和不公正。”

Just the above two pieces of microblogs almost cover all the core values long advocated by America like freedom, fairness for opportunity, open market, freedom of journalism and independent jurisdiction and so on.

“Neutral Information” here refers to the other information, apart from the above two kinds constructing the difference between China and America in an implied or express way, presented through the American Embassy’s microblog like knowledge about English study, American history and literature and so forth.

3) *Identity construction—the self and the other*: Though the American Embassy takes “culture” as the first key word in describing its microblog on sina.com, “culture” is just the surface layer of information conveyed through microblogging. Different from the public diplomacy strategy that focuses on cultural identification to the Arabic World, the American Embassy’s microblog in Chinese does not try to emphasize “cultural relativity and overlap” to gain certain identity recognition from the Arabic Youth Groups as the “Radio Sawa” station did (Iskandar, 2005). In contrast, we find that the discourse conveyed in the American Embassy’s microblog in China is constructing differences of identities between China and America, a deeper layer of meaning representing social-economic and political differences rather than cultural difference. Then, without taking cultural overlap as a bridge connecting China and America, how could the American Embassy’s microblog draw attention of the Chinese microblog users? Obviously, sensitive social topics or issues shoulder the task. As for international relations, the discovery, accumulation, organization and production process of “knowledge” is a process of constructing meaning, identifying “Self” and “Other”. The microblog using by the American Embassy inevitably becomes such process.

### *B. Meaning Consumption*

Public relations theory of “circuit of culture model” believes that the production of meaning must be confirmed in the consumption process of meaning (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). In other words, if the information cannot be understood and recognized by the consumers, the production of meaning makes no sense. The circuit of culture model emphasizes the importance of meaning’s explanation and decoding. The production and consumption of meaning in public relations exist in form of competitions and compromises in discourse process. Thus, this thesis focuses on how the Chinese followers

decode, understand and interpret the information delivered by the American Embassy.

1) *Meaning consumption process*: According to the observation of all comments during the observation period, we find “sensitive topics” are also trigger touching off the public response to microblog. From reading “sensitive topics” related microblogs, the Chinese people can feel the deep meaning intended by the information sender, i.e. the difference between America and China. By May 11, 2011, the microblog opened by the American Embassy had fans as many as 160,798. Those microblog users instantly receive information conveyed by microblogs from the American Embassy and then transmit or comment certain microblog, which are very likely stir response from “fans of fans”.

No matter in which case the comments of microblog come, researchers always can recognize how people responding actively consume meaning and reproduce meaning through thematic analysis of those comments. As for this phase, the American Embassy’s microblog seems having accomplished its mission of producing meaning, because the Chinese people decode the connotative meaning like the difference between America and China in matters concerning people’s livelihood and democracy. Followings are three responses to a certain microblog:

“Laoshiheshang: we old men at seventies do not figure out things understood by this seventh grade student.”

“老食和尚：7 年级学生都明白的事，在我们这 70 岁的大爷都没整明白。(2011-05-03 02:47)”

“Wuti 0071: how many Chinese adults can understand this kid’s words?”

“无题 0071：中国成人有几个能懂这孩子说的(2011-05-03 13:10)”

“Fenglinxian: a few Chinese doctors understand this basic truth.”

“枫林仙：中国的博士生也没有几个理解这个基本的道理。(2011-05-03 13:03)”

The above three comments are about the following microblog:

American middle school students talk about the First Amendment, “In fact, the First Amendment is to guarantee your voice can be heard by others,” said Ninth grade student Ellis. “Without freedom of expression, government can do whatever it wants to do,” said a seventh grade student, “it is up to government’s decision, and the result can be awful.” <http://t.cn/hgtZRN>

美国中学生谈第一修正案：“说实在的，第一修正案就是保证你的声音能够让人听到。”威廉王子县森林公园高中九年级（初三）学生爱丽丝说。“如果没有表达自由，政府可能做它想做的任何事情”，赫伯特·J·桑德斯初中一位七年级学生说，“取决于它所作的决定，其结果可能会很糟糕。” <http://t.cn/hgtZRN> (2011-05-03 12:49)

However, information receivers’ confirmation of difference is not equal to consensus about “who is better and who is worse.” It will be cursory if we think the production of meaning has been finished and then move on to construct task

when the Chinese microblog users can distinguish the “different theme” in the American Embassy’s microblog.

2) *Thematic map of meaning consumption*: Yardi and Boyd (2010) found, through the observation of discussion on Twitter, social media strengthens people’s in-group and out-group identity awareness. This discovery gets confirmed in this thesis to some extent. We find there are three sub-themes in the response of the Chinese microblog users to the American Embassy’s microblog: “in-group vs. out-group”, “good vs. bad”, and “unacquainted vs. acquainted”, and they all support a core theme established by the microblog sender—“Difference between U.S. and China.” “Fig. 3”

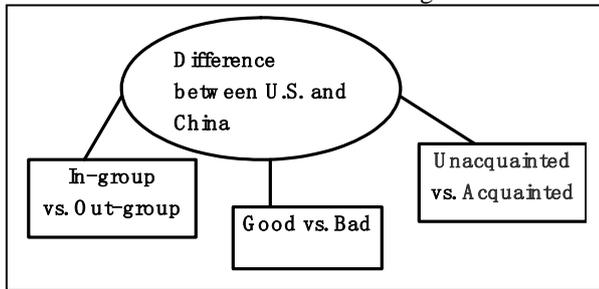


Fig. 3. Thematic map of meaning consumption.

Theme of “in-group vs. out-group” refers to clear distinguish between “Self” and “Other” expressed by commentary discourse. In this research, this kind of theme means the comments contains words of collective identity like “we and you”, “we and they”, “us and them” etc. or words or rhetoric which can draw clear identity boundaries. For instance, the American Embassy once wrote a microblog concerning Chinese population increase:

Richard Groves announced that the total number of the American people was 308,745,538, ranking the third in the world. In the last ten years, American population increased 273 million, taking up to 9.7%. While the Chinese population once saw an explosive growth, and now facing problems such as aging and gender imbalance etc., what does this mean for China?

美国人口普查局局长罗伯特·格罗夫斯宣布，截至今年4月1日，美国居住人口总数为308,745,538。列世界第三。10年来，美国人口增长2,730万，幅度为9.7%。中国人口曾经经历爆炸性的增长，现在却面临老龄化和男女性别比例失调等问题，这对中国意味着什么？  
<http://t.cn/hbJWYC> (2010-12-29 11:42)

There are two comments following this microblog:

*Aijiang*: *it's none of your business.*

哎酱：“跟你有啥关系” (2010-12-29 12:19)

Hutudepandeng: what if China only has 300 million people?

糊涂的攀登：“如果我们现在才3亿人口会怎么样？” (2010-12-29 11:53)

“Who I am” is defined by “who I am not.” Hans Mol (1976) pointed out the meaning of identity on both personal and social levels: On personal level, people need to have a steady position to protect them from the outer environment; on social level, groups also need to create common-shared idea, regulation and value system to fight against the threat from outer environment.

One of the direct results caused by the construction of group difference is the boundary between different groups become clearer and clearer, thus stimulating confirmation of “in-group vs. out-group” and “self vs. other.” But as Taylor (2003) pointed out the difference construction of in-group may cause hostility even repelling. We can further divide the Chinese citizen’s comments into three tier-themes: (1) vigilant--be suspicious about the information or opinions output by the American Embassy; (2) repellent--disagree with the information or opinion in the microblog; (3) hostile--strongly disagree with the information or opinion in the microblog, and may further cause hostility for America, the American people or American value. The emotion contained in three themes become stronger and stronger which can appear in different comments and also can overlapped in a same comment. Among the following three comments, the first one focuses on “vigilant”, the second one focuses on “repellent” and the third one combines “vigilant” and “hostility”:

Aiyueye-53MTB: does America started to use microblog for propaganda after it shutting down VOA...

爱越野-53MTB：“难道美国关了VOA中文频道改来新浪微博继续宣传……” (2011-03-08 09:06)

Jiangnananliu: can America be considered as a powerful country! You are in Beijing! Have a look at the parking ground! Have a look at the prosperous ambience! Have a look at the stream of cars! Can you count yourself as a country famous for cars! I did not see such situation in America. Of course, I am riding bicycle to work, I do not have as much money as the American people do.

江南岸柳：“你们美国算什么汽车大国哟！你们不在北京吗？看看高架变身停车场的壮观！那家伙，锣鼓喧天红旗招展！那看不到边的尾灯！你们美国还什么汽车大国哟！我在美国就没见这阵势。当然啦！我现在也只能自行车上班。咱没美国人有钱。” (2010-11-17 13:25)

Laona: you keep talking about problem of peddlers today, what plot are you thinking? The peddlers are not your focus. America never stops trying to subvert us!!!...

老纳：“今天反覆谈论小摊贩问题 你们又在搞什么阴谋!?!? 是醉翁之意不在酒吧?!?!? 美帝国主义 亡我之心不死啊!!!” (2011-04-04 12:03)

Theme of “good vs. bad” refers to comments making judgment on the value level. Different from theme of “In-group vs. out-group” which distinguishes the boundary between different identities, theme of “Good vs. bad” presents clear value of commentators and mainly explains the information and opinion using framework that America is better than China. We can contain three tier-themes driven from coding into this sub-theme: (1) self-deprecating--express an attitude of “China is worse than America” using a way of self-denying or self-mocking; (2) introspective--think China should learn from America; (3) self-defendant--provide evidence to “why China is worse than America”. The following three comments each represents one of the above themes:

Feidada: too sad! A lot of the Chinese people do not know May 3 is International Journalism Day, even some journalists do not know, is it funny? Alas...

费大大：“太悲哀了，我们很多中国人根本不知道有5月3日世界新闻日这个节日，甚至很多记者本人，是不是很有趣，哎~~~~” (2011-05-05 11:21)

Langlvshi: management of food safety in America worth our learning...

郎律师：“美国的食品安全管理值得我们学习……” (2011-05-15 22:13)

Haoxiaohuiblog: environmental protection is responsibility for everyone. If those developed countries had not damaged the environment of the world with the first and second industrial revolutions, the Chinese people would be the most environment-friendly today.

郝晓辉 blog：“环保是大家的，如果不是这些发达国家，利用第一次工业革命和第二次工业革命，将世界环境破坏掉的话，到今天，中国人也是最环保的。” (2011-05-11 11:07)

The theme of “unacquainted vs. acquainted” refers to microblog users’ comments focusing on only one knowledge or phenomenon, which is different from the comments judging on ideology like the above two kinds. Comments under such theme always follow some microblogs containing neutral information, like a series of microblogs sent by the American Embassy to correct the Chinese people in understanding scholarship awarded by Howard University:

Howard Scholarship’s connotation and others: every time when Howard University publish the enrollment list, the Chinese Media often report the enrollment information of Chinese high school students, and title the report like “\*\*is enrolled by Howard with Full Scholarship”. It seems Howard is not attractive enough, and it is adding “Full Scholarship” that can make it peculiar. Then what is the real Howard Scholarship? This is related to Scholarship and Subsidy system in American universities.

哈佛奖学金的内里乾坤及其他：每到哈佛放榜日，中国传媒常常报道中国高中生被哈佛录取的消息，报道大多冠以“某某以优异成绩考取哈佛并获全额奖学金”的标题，似乎哈佛还不够吸引人，一定要加上“全额奖学金”才更显特别。那么，哈佛全额奖学金的真实情况究竟如何呢？这牵涉到美国大学奖助学金制度。(2011-04-21 10:31)

Following it are comments like:

Yinxuyong: I have been lay so many years. Now I finally know!

印修勇：“被骗了多少年啊，现在才知道！” (2011-04-22 01:22)

Daocaorende2011: very useful information.

稻草人的2011：“非常有用的信息，学习了” (2011-04-21 12:19)

3) *Identity reproduction*: Organization and the public are not two camps in opposition to each other, but dynamic identity groups constructed together with negotiation of meaning and mutually being producer and consumer of information for each other. Public relations cannot only dynamically construct producer of information but the consumer of information (Woodward, 1997). From this point, the response of the Chinese microblog users to the American Embassy’s microblog is, at the same time, constructing and reproducing a meaning concerned with identity. From the above, we may describe such reproduction process using the

following theme map, See “Fig. 4”. At the same time, staff in the American Embassy will reply or explain users’ comments after observation, during which process it realizes the second production of meaning. On surface, microblog may be a channel of information communication. But from the perspective of public diplomacy, it works as a platform for symbolic interaction between a country’s government and the foreign mass.

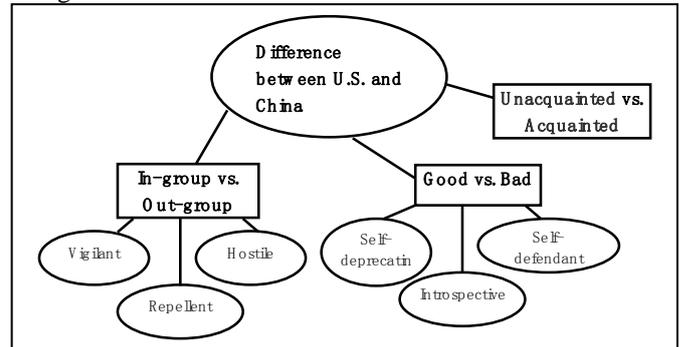


Fig. 4. Thematic map of identity reproduction.

## V. CONCLUSION

This qualitative research explores the way of construction of identities of “America” and “China” in the conversations between the American Embassy and Chinese people. The research connects constructionism theory in international relations studies and circuit of culture model in PR theories to interpret the process of identity construction and the production vs. consumption of meanings. In the meantime, we apply thematic analysis methodology, which emphasizes deep discourse analysis yet rarely adopted in communication studies, especially in studies of public diplomacy.

The result shows that difference rather than similarity between America and China was constructed as a common theme. Touching “sensitive” topics is a major strategy adopted by the American Embassy to induce hot debate. However, around sensitive issues, the Chinese followers used an unexpected approach to interpret the meaning. They see more different and out-group feelings from the message, and will use a resistant way to handle the conflicts.

On the other side, the American Embassy takes selected “sensitive topics” as trigger to provide information and knowledge to strengthen the difference between the two nations. The message conveyed an American-style superiority. However, when the Chinese microblog users receive meaning of “difference”, three different explanation themes are generated: “in-group vs. out-group”, “good vs. bad” and “unacquainted vs. acquainted.” The Chinese microblog users may not retrospect “problems” of themselves according to the “good-bad” framework as expected. Instead, the message may strengthen a recognition of self-identity and induce vigilance, repellent and even hostility against America’s “infiltration of ideology.”

As an explorative research, limited by time and budget, we did not interview staff who takes in charge of the weibo account and the Chinese netizens who follow the account.

Second, we did not sample the data, instead, we read and analyzed all the tweets under the account during the observing period. Further study could consider sampling and thus expand the observing timeline.

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