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Pandas as Strategic Narratives of Friendship: Relational Public Diplomacy in China-Japan Relations (1972-2023)

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Research Article

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Abstract

When China's giant pandas returned home from Japan in 2023, millions mourned their departure. This study examines panda diplomacy as a strategic narrative of friendship in China-Japan public diplomacy. How does this visual, symbolic practice structure public sense-making of bilateral relations? Using qualitative process tracing, the study explores how panda exchanges generate relational ganqing (collective emotion) and influence diplomatic space across four junctures (1972-2023). The analysis draws on Chinese relational theory, examining concepts of guanxi (relationships) and ganqing (collective emotion) that inform China's diplomatic approach. The study contributes to scholarship on strategic narrative and emotions by examining how animal diplomacy creates affective connections between populations and the way relational grammars operate in a contested environment. The study then identifies four distinct modalities of relational power: acceleration of ties (1972), buffering against security ruptures (2011), lubrication of diplomatic thaws (2017), and relational preservation (2023-2025). Hence, findings show how relational grammars enable emotional narratives to buffer crises and preserve ties in contested environments, with implications for symbolic public diplomacy practice.

1. Introduction

When China’s giant pandas, including the beloved Xiang Xiang, returned home from Japan in 2023, their departure was met with an intense emotional outpouring. Thousands of Japanese citizens queued for hours to offer farewells, a scene described by observers as “funeral-like” despite the escalating geopolitical tensions between Tokyo and Beijing. This phenomenon poses a compelling puzzle for public diplomacy: how can a narrative of “friendship” and “gratitude” persist, and even be leveraged, during periods of acute strategic competition? Although traditional analyses might dismiss such events as sentimentality, this study examines panda diplomacy as a strategic narrative designed to structure how publics make sense of bilateral relationships.

Strategic narratives are communicative tools used by state actors to construct a shared meaning of international relations and to influence the behavior of both domestic and foreign audiences. In the context of China-Japan relations, panda diplomacy is a visual, symbolic, and narrative device that has consistently told a story of “everlasting friendship” across five decades. To decode this practice, this article utilizes a relational lens, specifically the concepts of *guanxi* (relationship/network) and *ganqing* (collective emotion or affect). Instead of viewing these terms as a total replacement for mainstream International Relations (IR) theories, this study treats them as a culturally specific framework through which China constructs its public diplomacy narratives. Besides inter-state relationality, these concepts also explain how “friendship” is not just a status, but an ongoing process of co-constitution and reciprocal obligation. Henceforth, the panda is a node of relational entanglement, and the generation of public *ganqing* makes the social cost of severing ties or exiting the relationship particularly high for the recipient state.

This article addresses the following research question: How has panda diplomacy functioned as a strategic narrative of friendship in China-Japan relations from 1972 to 2023, and with what emotional and diplomatic effects? To answer this, the study employs qualitative process tracing to examine the link between symbolic panda events (loans, births, and returns) and observable diplomatic shifts. By focusing on the Japan case, which is a paradigmatic example of high public engagement and long-term hosting, the analysis traces how panda-related narratives link official gestures to public responses across four critical junctures: the 1972 normalization, the 2011 *Senkaku* crisis, the 2017 “panda boom”, and the 2023-2025 returns.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This article builds on four bodies of scholarship, which are strategic narrative, animal diplomacy and soft power, conceptions of international friendship, and the role of emotions in international relations. While existing studies have shown panda diplomacy as a tool of Chinese public diplomacy and soft power, they have somewhat overlooked its emotional and relational dimensions, particularly in the culturally specific context of China-Japan relations. This article synthesizes insights from the “emotional turn” in IR with Chinese relational theory, then advances a framework that treats panda diplomacy as a deliberate mechanism for generating collective affect (*ganqing*) to cultivate and sustain bilateral *guanxi*.

2.1. Strategic Narratives and Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is increasingly viewed through the lens of strategic narrative analysis, which are purposeful stories told by state and non-state actors to impose order and meaning on complex international crises and relationships. These narratives are means for creating a “compelling storyline” that gives a credible explanation of what happened and allows conclusions to be made (Arceneaux 2024). At the same time, strategic narratives constitute meaningful activities that reproduce or reshape international politics by internalizing shared knowledge. Within this framework, scholarship typically identifies three primary levels: system narratives describing the world's structure, identity narratives defining actors’ values, and issue narratives explaining the desirability of specific policies. Panda diplomacy is a sophisticated identity and issue narrative, as it provides a “shared meaning of the past, present, and future” (Miskimmon et al. 2017) to simplify complex behaviors and advocate for national interests. By communicating themes of everlasting friendship and mutual recovery, China uses the panda as a symbolic device to build consensus around a shared understanding of the bilateral relationship.

An important aspect of these narratives is sense-making during crises, which gives organizations the opportunity to rationalize collective action and decision-making within a community of actors when relationships face security ruptures. In the China-Japan context, the panda narrative often competes with or softens “hard” security narratives involving military buildups or trade restrictions. Although security narratives stress threats and rivalry, the panda-related narrative offers a counter-narrative of special ties and gratitude. This narrative mode of persuasion is particularly effective because it targets

public memory and presents a plotline for a sense of causation and purpose. For example, during the 2011 *Senkaku* crisis, the arrival of pandas was narratively framed as a gesture of solidarity following the Great East Japan Earthquake, changing the discourse from maritime collision to collective recovery.

Thus far, the panda is somewhat a narrative anchor that ascribes character to the state and transforms its image from a strategic challenger into a cultural friend. This narrative establishes continuity by framing five decades of exchanges as a resilient bridge that has not yet hit rock bottom, even when official ties are frozen. Furthermore, it manages the relational obligation cost of exiting the relationship, represented by the return of a national treasure, which is painfully visible to the public. Strategic narrative analysis thus allows for the "interpretation of a reality in a message." (Bier, Park, and Palenchar 2017), ensuring that even in periods of intense tension, a residual narrative of friendship remains available for future diplomatic mobilization.

2.2. Animal Diplomacy and Soft Power

Animal diplomacy has emerged as a distinct subfield that recognizes non-human actors as bearers of symbolic power in IR (Fougner, 2023; Hartig, 2013; Leira & Neumann, 2017). Animals are diplomatic subjects whose visual appeal and perceived innocence help them to bypass rational defenses and elicit emotional responses that human diplomats cannot(Cushing & Markwell, 2009; Fougner, 2023). Hartig (2013) identifies three conditions for successful animal diplomacy, which are (1) a species' restricted natural habitat, (2) high aesthetic appeal, and (3) active state promotion. The giant panda satisfies all three to an extraordinary degree as it is visually iconic, endemic only to China, and aggressively marketed by Beijing. Within this literature, panda diplomacy occupies a prominent place as the most enduring example (Buckingham et al., 2013; Hartig, 2013; Songster, 2018). From the Tang dynasty gifts of panda pelts to the modern era that began with the 1972 presentation of Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing in the United States, pandas have been a "seal" of favored bilateral status(Songster, 2018). Then contemporary scholarship frames panda loans as a calibrated instrument of soft power, with timing often aligned to geopolitical signals like accelerated for friends (South Korea 2016), delayed or cancelled for adversaries (United States 2023-2024), or used to repair ties (Germany after investment disputes) (Wan, 2023).

Nonetheless, the dominant approach remains instrumental and state-centric. Scholars measure success in tourism revenue, media exposure, or policy concessions(Liu et al., 2024), while existing studies note emotional appeal as part of panda diplomacy's success, there has been limited process-tracing of how panda-related narratives interact with specific crises in the Japan case over five decades, particularly through a relational lens of *guanxi* and *ganqing*. Even Hartig's (2013) study treats emotional appeal as a fixed attribute, rather than a process that constitutes the relationship itself. This gap is particularly glaring in the China-Japan case, where pandas have resided in Japan continuously since 1972 and generated extraordinary public attachment.

2.3. Conceptions of International Friendship

The concept of international friendship has been debated along a spectrum from cynical realism to normative idealism. Western scholarship largely follows Aristotle's typology in the Nicomachean Ethics, which is that most interstate friendships are of utility (alliances) or pleasure (cultural affinity), with perfect friendship (based on mutual virtue) deemed impossible between states (Digeser, 2009; Smith, 2011). Realist thinkers, from Machiavelli to Mearsheimer, view friendship as a means of camouflage for power balancing, while Schmitt (2008) regards it as a temporary suspension of enmity. Even constructivists who take friendship seriously (Berenskoetter, 2007; Koschut & Oelsner, 2014) tend to anchor it in shared identity or ontological security needs that are often rooted in individualistic ontologies.

Chinese conceptions, particularly as applied in the East Asian cultural sphere, are notably relational in nature. To be sure, not all of Beijing's foreign policy is dictated by *guanxi,* but this framework is a unique leverage in the Japan case, where shared cultural (Confucian) understandings of reciprocity and hierarchy show the symbolism of the exchange. To be specific, based on Confucianism's hierarchical yet reciprocal *wulun* (the five relationships of ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and friend-friend) and Daoist yin-yang complementarity, friendship is not a discrete bond between pre-constituted actors but a process of co-constitution (Nordin & Smith, 2018; Qin, 2016, 2018). Qin's relational theory of world politics posits that actors' identities and interests are shaped by networks of relations rather than preexisting essences. Within such networks, *guanxi* (□□), which is the web of relationships, is sustained by *ganqing* (□□), the affective warmth or collective emotion that makes reciprocity possible and trustworthy (Hou & Zhu, 2020; Qin, 2018). As Qin puts it, " the more friends she has, the more powerful she is; the more intimate friends she has, the more secure she feels" (Qin, 2016). Henceforth, this relational worldview directly informs panda diplomacy. The panda is not just a "cute diplomat", its black and white color visually evokes yin-yang harmony, and its status as a "national treasure" makes the loan an act of generosity that demands reciprocation. However, it is also necessary to recognize that *guanxi* is not as benign as it is governed by the norm of reciprocity *(huibao □□).* In this hierarchical framework, the gift of a "national treasure" incurs a significant reciprocal obligation. As Qin (2018) implies, relational power is not about the warmth of inclusion, but rather the threat of exclusion. When the recipient fails to honor the relationship, such as by violating the giver's core interests, the withdrawal of the symbol serves as a form of relational management, signaling a loss of face and status. When the recipient enjoys the benefits of the national treasure, they become relationally entangled, making it socially costly to violate the spirit of the relationship, regardless of material disagreement. The pandas are thus a material-affective device for cultivating *ganqing*, which in turn stabilizes *guanxi* even when strategic interests diverge.

See Table 1 for a list of key concepts used:

Table 1. Key Concepts

Concepts	*Explanations*
Guanxi (Relationship)	The network of social connections and mutual obligations that constitutes political power
Ganqing (Affect/Emotion)	The collective emotional warmth or “feeling” that validates the *guanxi* and makes reciprocity possible
Relational power	The ability to influence outcomes not by coercion (hard power) or attraction (soft power), but by defining the nature of the relationship itself.

Source: Compiled by the author

2.4. Emotions in IR and Relational Synthesis

The “emotional turn” in IR has challenged the discipline’s traditional aversion to affect, demonstrating that emotions are not irrational disturbances but constitutive forces that make identities, decisions, and relationships (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2008; Crawford, 2014; Hall, 2015; Hutchison, 2016; Mercer, 2014). Friendship, in particular, is increasingly understood as an affective relationship that produces “other-regarding reasons for action” (Digeser, 2009) and sustains cooperation outside calculative interest (Hall, 2015; Koschut & Oelsner, 2014). However, most emotional turn scholarship remains Western-centric, focusing on fear, anxiety, empathy, or anger among leaders or publics in Europe and North America. Applications to Chinese foreign policy are rare (See Chih-yu Shih’s The Spirit of Chinese Foreign Policy: An Psychocultural Analysis (1990) for an exception), and when attempted, they often impose an individualistic framework (e.g., ontological security) that misses the collective, relational character of Chinese emotional diplomacy (see critique in Nordin & Smith, 2018).

This study bridges that gap by synthesizing the emotional turn with Chinese relational theory. This necessitates a fundamental reevaluation of how influence functions are understood. Although conventional narratives characterize panda diplomacy as "soft power," which Nye (2004) defines as the capacity to influence people through attractiveness and persuasion, this framework falls short of explaining the practice's relational entanglement aspects. The panda is a resource owned by China that, according to the concept of soft power, encourages voluntary cooperation through its visual appeal. However, this attribute-based model fails to account for the structural entrapment inherent in the exchange. This study views panda diplomacy as a node of relational entanglement, rather than a magnet of attraction, based on Qin's relational theory. According to the Chinese ontology of *guanxi*, power is an emerging characteristic of the interaction itself rather than a resource possessed or deployed unilaterally by an actor (Qin, 2018). The distinction between these models puts forward different predictions for diplomatic behavior. The soft power model predicts that panda diplomacy should only work if it successfully improves the aggregate image of China (attraction); if public sentiment toward China remains negative, the diplomacy has failed. On the other hand, the relational model predicts that panda diplomacy functions even in a hostile environment. It argues that the panda establishes a specific, localized bond of *ganqing* (affective connection) that forms a barrier to exit. Japan cooperates not

necessarily because it finds China attractive, but because the specific social cost of severing the panda bond and disappointing the domestic public is too high. Thus, the relational model presents an analytical advantage in explaining why panda exchanges continue to facilitate stability even when general favorability polls are at historic low.

This study posits a feedback loop. Elite strategic calculation initiates the panda loan (the symbolic act), but the subsequent generation of public *ganqing* creates an independent social reality. This collective emotion then feeds back into the political sphere, lowering the audience costs for cooperation and serving as a lubricant for diplomatic initiatives that elites might otherwise struggle to justify. The resulting analytical framework treats panda diplomacy as a three-stage process:

1. Symbolic exchange (panda loan or return)
2. Generation of collective affect/*ganqing* (public joy, grief, protectiveness, observable in media framing, visitor numbers, naming ceremonies, opinion polls)
3. Translation into diplomatic outcomes (easier cooperation, emotional buffer during crises, or public constraint when relations sour).

The mechanism functions through specific transmission channels. Public *ganqing* acts upon elites through (1) Media amplification, which reframes the “other” from a security threat to a cultural friend, (2) Polling signals to indicate to politicians the safe boundaries for rapprochement, and (3) Direct mobilization, where events like naming ceremonies create a constituent pressure that leaders explicitly acknowledge. Relational power is thus reconceptualized not as a resource possessed by a pre-existing state but as an emergent of the relationship itself, co-constituted through affective practices (Figure 1)

Existing scholarship has extensively documented panda diplomacy as an instrument of Chinese soft power and public diplomacy. Scholars have identified the conditions for its success, such as the species’ aesthetic appeal and biological scarcity,

3. Methodology

This study employs qualitative process tracing to examine how panda diplomacy functions as a strategic narrative and relational mechanism in China-Japan relations from 1972-2023. Instead of testing a general theory across multiple cases, the study follows the “explaining-outcome” variant of process tracing, which aims to construct a detailed, historically grounded explanation of a single significant case. Japan is selected as a paradigmatic case, which is a carefully selected, exemplary occurrence to be a model or prototype for comprehending a larger phenomenon by showing its essential characteristics (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of China’s panda diplomacy. Since the arrival of Kang Kang and Lan Lan in 1972 coincided with diplomatic normalization, Japan has hosted pandas continuously for over five decades, longer than any other country. This longevity provides rich temporal variation, which includes periods of warming (1972, 2017), crisis management (2011), and recent cooling (2023). The case also shows the full evolution of panda diplomacy from outright gifts to long-term loans and, most recently, returns.

Japan's high public engagement, evidenced by millions of zoo visitors, national naming ceremonies, and widespread mourning upon departures, makes emotional responses particularly observable. Therefore, the article is able to trace how panda-induced affect interact with shifting bilateral relations.

The data are drawn from three types of primary sources (Table 2)

Table 2. Sources

Types of sources	***Sources***
Archival and official documents	The 1972 Joint Communique, 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, joint statements, and official speeches by Chinese and Japanese leaders (e.g., Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives, Xinhua, and Japanese Cabinet Public Relations Office).
Media content	● 1972 arrival of Kang Kang and Lan Lan ● 2011 arrival of Ri Ri and Shin Shin amid *Senkaku* tensions ● 2017 birth and naming of Xiang Xiang ● 2023 return of Xiang Xiang and other pandas Sources include Japanese newspapers (*Asahi Shimbun, The Japan Times, Yomiuri Shimbun, Kyodo News*), Chinese state media (*People's Daily, Xinhua*), and regional English-language outlets (*South China Morning Post, The Diplomat*). Approximately 70 articles were examined, selected via keyword searches ("panda," "Xiang Xiang," "Ueno Zoo," "Sino-Japanese friendship") in Factiva and newspaper archives.
Public sentiment indicators	Opinion polls (e.g., Genron NPO Japan-China Joint Opinion Survey, 2005–2023), zoo visitor numbers, naming ceremony participation (e.g., 320,000 public suggestions for Xiang Xiang), and media reports of public grief (letters, flowers, memorials).

The analysis then proceeds in two steps. First, it maps the sequence of events in a timeline (Table 2) to establish temporal precedence. Second, it employs qualitative process tracing to examine the link between panda exchanges and diplomatic outcomes. This approach focuses on identifying two specific types of evidence. Firstly, the media coverage is analyzed as sites of narrative framing and circulation (e.g., "symbol of friendship"), which represent public emotion instead of directly measuring it. Genron NPO surveys capture the overall attitude toward China, contrasted with localized panda affection to show narrative divergence. Zoo data and campaigns also show indirect indicators of engagement. These support the plausibility of the narrative pathway but do not enable definitive causal claims. The second is evidence of political crises and whether elites reference this sentiment as a factor in facilitating cooperation. Henceforth, the mechanism is analyzed as a three-part sequence: (1) the symbolic panda event (loan, birth, or return); (2) the generation of collective *ganqing;* and (3) the diplomatic outcome, such as easier cooperation, an emotional buffer during crises, or public constraint when loans end. It is important to note that official documents rarely attribute policy shifts directly to public emotion; therefore, the analysis focuses on observable patterns rather than explicit admissions. To ensure the validity of these findings, the study considers alternative explanations, such as economic

interdependence, to isolate the specific, necessary role that the affective track played in making diplomatic results.

4. Empirical Analysis

Table 3. Variation in the operation of the relational-affective mechanism across four critical junctures.

Period	*Panda Event*	*Official Track (state-level)*	*Public Ganqing*	*Diplomatic outcome/function*
1972	Kang Kang & Lan Lan arrive	Normalization (Joint Communiqué)	50 k visitors Day 1; 32 million lifetime; front-page joy	Acceleration of reconciliation
2011	Ri Ri & Shin Shin arrive	Post-Senkaku crisis + 3.11 disaster	Surge in visitors; framed as "friendship & recovery"	Emotional buffer; prevents total rupture
2017	Xiang Xiang born & named	45th anniversary thaw	320 k naming suggestions; 300:1 lottery; national media boom	Lubricant for diplomatic warming
2023-2025	Xiang Xiang + others returned; no new loans	Semiconductor curbs, new security strategy, Taiwan tensions	Tearful farewells; petitions; "funeral-like" scenes; residual love	Preservation bridge + strategic signalling (withholding)

The analysis examines the operation of the relational-affective mechanism across four critical junctures in China-Japan panda diplomacy over the past half-century. Each episode is assessed against proposed sequence and hypothesized narrative pathway, which is a symbolically loaded panda event that generates observable *ganqing* in Japanese society, which elites then recognize and instrumentalize (or, in periods of deliberate withdrawal, withhold) to shape the possibilities of bilateral *guanxi*. The cases reveal not only remarkable consistency in the mechanism's core logic but also important variation in its diplomatic effects, ranging from the acceleration of warmth to crisis buffering and, concurrently with official rapprochement, to preservation amid a strategic freeze.

4.1. The Narrative of Reconciliation (1972 – Normalization)

In October 1972, the arrival of Kang Kang and Lan Lan in Tokyo took place just four weeks after the signing the Joint Communiqué that normalized relations between China and Japan. The official document addressed historical responsibilities and the termination of the state of war; however, these high-level treaties could not instantly dissolve decades of public enmity. The pandas were deployed as a symbolic narrative device to achieve what legal text alone could not, which is the creation of an immediate, tactile, and joyful sense-making story for the Japanese public. By presenting a national treasure, the Chinese state signaled a narrative of generosity and initiated a new, reciprocal relationship (*guanxi)* following thirty years of hostility. The narrative resonance of this exchange is evident in the

massive scale of public engagement, which the media used to frame China as a cultural ally rather than a revolutionary threat. Fifty thousand people queued to see the pair on their first day at Ueno Zoo, and over their lifetimes, they drew approximately thirty-two million visitors. This overwhelming response is evidence of the strategic narrative of friendship's success taking root in public memory. The pandas then became an emotional proxy for the bilateral relationship and a foundation of public goodwill, or *ganqing,* that provided the political cover elites needed to pursue rapid reconciliation. Ultimately, this juncture illustrates the accelerationary modality of relational power, in which symbolic exchange creates a supportive affective atmosphere that validates official diplomatic moves. By reframing China's image through a persistent narrative of friendship, the exchange lowered the domestic audience costs for the Japanese government to pursue diplomatic and economic integration. While the pandas were not the sole cause of normalization, they are a narrative anchor that humanized the official track and made the transition to peace socially and emotionally accessible to the broader population.

4.2. The Buffering Narrative (2011 – Crisis and Recovery)

Almost forty years later, Beijing reached for the same instrument under far less favorable circumstances. The 2011 episode constitutes an important test case for the theory. If pandas were merely rewards for perceived good political behavior, Beijing would have withheld them following the September 2010 *Senkaku* collision, which had plunged relations to a historic nadir. The September 2010 *Senkaku* collision had greatly disturbed the relations (McCurry 2010). By early 2011, only 20.8 % of Japanese held a favorable view of China, the lowest figure since polling began (The Genron NPO, 2011). Nonetheless, in February 2011, Ri Ri and Shin Shin arrived at Ueno, a few weeks before the Great East Japan Earthquake struck. The timing allowed the loan to be framed as a gesture of solidarity in the face of catastrophe.

The statistical decline continued; however, the qualitative nature of the discourse changed. Without the pandas, the 2011 discourse would have been dominated exclusively by "collision" and "incursion." The pandas forced Japanese media to simultaneously print headlines about "friendship" and "recovery" (Masuda, 2022), thereby preventing the total securitization of the relationship. Foreign Minister Maehara Seiji did not rely on subtle symbolism; he explicitly stated the narrative logic of the loan: "I hope the pandas become popular... so that Japanese people's impression of China would improve further"(WWF, 2011). This confirms that the affective buffer was a calculated diplomatic objective designed to mitigate the fallout of the Senkaku collision. Crucially, this media framing established a discursive counter-narrative that complemented the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government's urgent need to defuse the situation. The collision and subsequent rare-earth embargo (Bradsher 2010) disabled the official track, while the affective track at Ueno Zoo maintained contact. The administration was able to rationalize maintaining low-level diplomatic interaction despite the security breach by using the pandas to gauge public sentiment for "friendship," thereby buying time until the immediate crisis subsided.

It is also important to note that economic interdependence alone failed to buffer this crisis. In fact, China's weaponization of rare earth exports during this period increased tensions. The panda loan's affective provided a key counter-narrative amid economic conflict. The pandas did not reverse the

broader downward plunge in bilateral trust; favorability continued to slide through 2012-2014, but they still managed to secure a positive effect during periods of hostility. In process-tracing terms, they passed the critical test case, in which the observable *ganqing* was produced in abundance, and elites on both sides openly referenced it as a mitigating factor. The affective track, in short, became an emotional buffer to prevent a complete rupture of people-to-people ties at a moment when the official track was going down.

4.3. The Narrative of Lubrication (2017 – Xiang Xiang Boom)

The mechanism reached another milestone in 2017 with the birth of Xiang Xiang, the first panda cub born at Ueno Zoo in twenty-nine years. The explosion of public adoration was immediate and overwhelming. More than 320,000 naming suggestions flooded in from every corner of the country, with viewing-lottery tickets oversubscribed at ratios exceeding 300:1 (Jiang, 2024). Television networks broadcast her every sneeze and stumble to describe the national obsession. Concurrently, 2017 marked the forty-fifth anniversary of normalization, and both governments were actively seeking a path out of the post-2012 deep freeze. Foreign Minister Kono Taro seized the moment with unusual directness: “I hope Xiang Xiang will grow up healthily,” he declared, “along with the development of friendship and cooperation between Japan and China.” (Sano, 2024). This statement is key evidence because it is a discursive act that turns the panda into a condition and a stand-in for the bilateral connection rather than just a yearning for an animal. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo expressed his desire to build a stable friendship in his September anniversary message to Li Keqiang (Straw-in-the-wind), promoting cooperation and interaction across various fields (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2018). The link here is explicit; the “panda boom” lowered the audience costs for the Abe administration’s pivot. While Abe’s shift was strategically motivated by uncertainty over the US alliance, the sheer volume of public joy surrounding Xiang Xiang, as evidenced by 320,000 naming suggestions, signaled to the Prime Minister’s Office that a rapprochement would be politically popular. The panda boom essentially de-risked the diplomatic thaw for domestic consumption.

It is necessary to consider alternative explanations for this diplomatic thaw, particularly those grounded in economic liberalism or realism. Skeptics might argue that the 2017 rapprochement was driven solely by the structural imperatives of economic interdependence, as Japan needed Chinese markets and Beijing needed to stabilize its periphery during trade tensions with the United States. These material factors undoubtedly set the strategic stage; however, they are insufficient to explain the timing and mechanism of the reconciliation. If economic interdependence were the primary driver of diplomatic warmth, the 2012-2016 period of cold relations should not have occurred, as bilateral trade volumes remained robust throughout that time. Despite high economic integration, the lack of a positive affective narrative left political relations frozen. As noted in the 2011 crisis, even deep economic ties could not shield the relationship from security shocks; in fact, China’s weaponization of rare earth exports during that period exacerbated tensions rather than alleviating them. This suggests that material interests are the incentive for the cooperation, but do not automatically generate the public consent required to

pursue it, especially in a democracy where 80-90% of the population holds unfavorable views of the partner nation.

According to the Genron NPO polls, after six consecutive years of decline, Japanese favorable impressions of China rose from 11.3% in 2016 to 13.0% in 2017 and 18.6% in 2018, marking the first sustained improvement since the Senkaku crisis (The Genron NPO, 2017). Admittedly, Xiang Xiang did not single-handedly engineer the thaw, but her presence did provide the emotional assistance without which high-level agreements would have lacked public favor. Alternative explanations might point to the 45th anniversary of normalization or the need to hedge against the Trump administration as the primary drivers of this thaw. However, while these strategic factors set the stage, they lack the capacity to explain the sudden shift in public sentiment (from 11.3% to 18.6% favorability). Strategic dialogues do not generate public enthusiasm, and the panda boom partly provided the necessary affective energy to turn a dry diplomatic anniversary into a genuine societal celebration. Henceforth, the key evidence implies that the elites recognized and leveraged it.

4.4. Departure and Geopolitical Chills (2023-2025)

The most revealing test, however, has come in the past three years, as China systematically recalled its pandas from Japan without offering a replacement. Xiang Xiang returned in February 2023; the four pandas at Adventure World in Wakayama followed in June 2025. As of November 2025, only the Ueno twins, Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei, remain (Kazuo, 2025). With their lease expiring in February 2026, Japan stands on the verge of becoming a panda-less nation for the first time since 1972. Furthermore, Japan aligned with U.S. semiconductor controls, released Fukushima-treated water, and revised its national security strategy, naming China as the “greatest strategic challenge ever faced.” (Johnson, 2025) Genron NPO polling recorded the consequences as Japanese favorable impressions of China collapsed to an all-time low of 12.7% in 2023 and remained abysmally low through 2024(The Genron NPO, 2023, 2024). Nevertheless, the farewells themselves were undeniably tender. Thousands queued for hours to see Xiang Xiang off. The media also showed grief, with phrases like, “I got teary,” “I can’t bear it”, “I hope Japan and China can deepen friendship through pandas like Xiang Xiang,” and “I became emotional when I saw many people shedding tears saying goodbye to her” (Takeshi, 2023). Even in November 2025, with no pandas left in Wakayama and Ueno’s twins counting down their final months, campaigns to bring the pandas back continued unabated (Kuroda 2025).

Chinese diplomats have been quick to capitalize on this residual affection. Consular officials in Osaka publicly urged Japanese citizens to “turn panda love into love for the Chinese people.” (Tamura and Yoshida, 2023). Ambassador Wu Jianghao has repeatedly invoked the pandas as proof of an underlying “gentle and friendly culture” shared by both nations (Xinhua, 2024). Japanese observers, meanwhile, have described the remaining emotional bond as evidence that “relations have not yet hit rock bottom” (Xinhua, 2024) and “Even when everything else is frozen, if we can still talk about pandas, it means there still exists a bridge.” (Tamura and Yoshida, 2023). Nevertheless, the bridge is unmistakably narrowing. Loan negotiations have been transferred from the zoos to the Foreign Ministries. LDP Secretary-General

Moriyama Hiroshi raised the issue repeatedly in 2025 bilateral meetings, only to receive polite deflections. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson now routinely suggests that Japanese citizens “come to China to see the pandas” rather than promising new loans (Masaki, 2025). The lack of *ganqing* had become a domestic political liability. Hard-nosed politicians were compelled to use their diplomatic capital on zoo animals as a result of the "constituent pressure" created by the gap. The message is clear that when Beijing judges the overall *guanxi* to be insufficiently healthy, it withholds the very symbol that once sustained it.

The 2023-2025 period illuminates the hard boundary conditions of the relational-affective mechanism. Although *ganqing* proved resilient among the Japanese public, it is ultimately a soft constraint. *Guanxi* relies on controlling access, whereas Soft Power relies on appeal. Beijing operationalized a type of affective sanctioning by removing the pandas. It essentially penalized the Japanese people for their government's geopolitical alliance with the US by depriving Japan of the "special status" that the loan was intended to confer. This demonstrates that panda diplomacy is a technique of relationship entrapment rather than just a gesture of goodwill. It can buffer against tensions and accelerate thawing, but it lacks the structural weight to override core disagreements (such as the semiconductor export controls and disputes over the Taiwan Strait issue). When the strategic gap becomes too wide, *ganqing* is preserved in stasis but cannot force a policy reversal.

Across these five decades, a pattern of consistency emerges. In every case, a symbolic panda event produced abundant, observable *ganqing* in Japanese society. In every case, elites, Chinese deployers, and Japanese recipients alike recognized that *ganqing* was politically salient and sought to harness it. The diplomatic payoff varied with context: acceleration in 1972 and 2017, buffering in 2011, and stubborn preservation in 2023-2025. Panda diplomacy, in short, is neither sentimental decoration nor crude transactional leverage.

Table 4. Summary of narrative functions across junctures

Period	*Hypothesized Function*	*Observable Evidence*
1972	Acceleration	50000 visitors on Day 1, immediate shift in media framing to “friendship”
2011	Buffering	Pandas deployed despite historic low in relations (Senkaku crisis) validating the “repair” function over the “reward” function
2017	Lubrication	Elite statements (Abe, Kono) explicitly linking panda welfare to diplomatic “warming”
2023-2025	Strategic calibration	The “panda void” generated independent domestic pressure on Japanese MPs to lobby Beijing, implying the political weight of *ganqing*

5. Conclusion

The analysis of China-Japan panda diplomacy over the past five decades suggests that these exchanges are a consistent mechanism of how strategic narratives function under varying geopolitical pressures. A distinct pattern in the effectiveness and limitations of relational-affective mechanisms in public diplomacy emerges from examining the four pivotal moments between 1972 and 2025. According to the analysis, the influence of friendship narratives centered on pandas is strongly shaped by the broader political context. The events of 1972, 2011, and 2017 show that these narratives can effectively hasten reconciliation, avert severe crises, and facilitate diplomatic thaws when there is a reasonable political space for cooperation, even if it is small. In these cases, the production of ganqing (collective emotion) effectively reduced the costs of domestic audiences and created a positive emotional environment for formal rapprochement.

These results have three more significant ramifications for the study of public diplomacy. First, this study provides empirical evidence that emotions are a distinct political resource and strategic narrative pathway rather than a byproduct of policy. Furthermore, this case identifies an insight in which a symbolic act generates collective *ganqing*, which creates a supportive domestic atmosphere that policymakers leverage to stabilize or adjust the broader *guanxi* (relationship). This suggests that managing public sentiment is a deliberate component of statecraft.

Second, the paper demonstrates how non-Western relational theory, particularly Chinese relational theory, can be applied analytically to comprehend modern diplomacy. The process, co-constitutive logic at play here, is difficult for Western conceptions of friendship to convey, whether they involve constructivist identity-based bonding, Schmittian enmity by another name, or Aristotelian utility. According to the Chinese relational worldview, actors are not pre-constituted atoms who subsequently decide to form friendships or alliances; rather, the nature of their relationships physically shapes who they are. Pandas are the ideal tool for this ontology because, as living, breathing gifts that the recipient cannot fully possess, they simultaneously enact interdependence, hierarchy, and generosity. The pandas are recalled when closeness is no longer seen as politically advantageous, not out of animosity, but rather because the nature of the relationship has evolved.

Nevertheless, this does not imply that panda diplomacy is all-powerful. Despite 50 years of panda loans, favorable Japanese perceptions of China have collapsed to historic lows, demonstrating that *Ganqing* cannot sustain the strain of intense geopolitical rivalry in the long term. Beijing itself gives strategic calculus precedence over the emotive stream when necessary. When structural competition and security dilemmas dominate the bilateral relationship, the role of the panda narrative shifts toward preservation and signaling. The more general takeaway is that friendship in international politics is a created atmosphere rather than a binary condition, one that can be intentionally warmed or chilled, thickened or thinned, by symbolic practice. The tenacious endurance of panda love presents a more complex picture in a time when many observers worry that China-Japan relations will irreversibly deteriorate into a Cold War. Even though relations are at their worst since 1972, Beijing has decided to maintain a thin emotional bridge for the time being, while prohibiting the building of new bridges. By testing these limits,

the study moves beyond a simple soft-power success story to offer a realistic assessment of how emotional narratives function in contested environments.

Lastly, the study offers three main contributions to the field of place branding and public diplomacy. Conceptually, this study redefines panda diplomacy as a strategic narrative that utilizes a specific relational vocabulary, including *guanxi, ganqing,* and reciprocity, to structure shared meanings of friendship and obligation. Empirically, through a five-decade, four-episode process tracing of the China-Japan case, the research provides a historical account of how emotional narratives perform different diplomatic functions across a shifting geopolitical context. In practice, for practitioners of cultural and animal diplomacy, this study suggests that emotional narratives are powerful buffers and branding tools in low-trust environments, helping maintain social contact when official channels are disabled. However, expectations must remain modest, although such narratives influence the affective atmosphere of a relationship, they lack the structural weight to override geopolitical conflicts. Future studies should investigate the limitations of this model in various contexts and the necessary conditions for such animal diplomacy to succeed.

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Figures

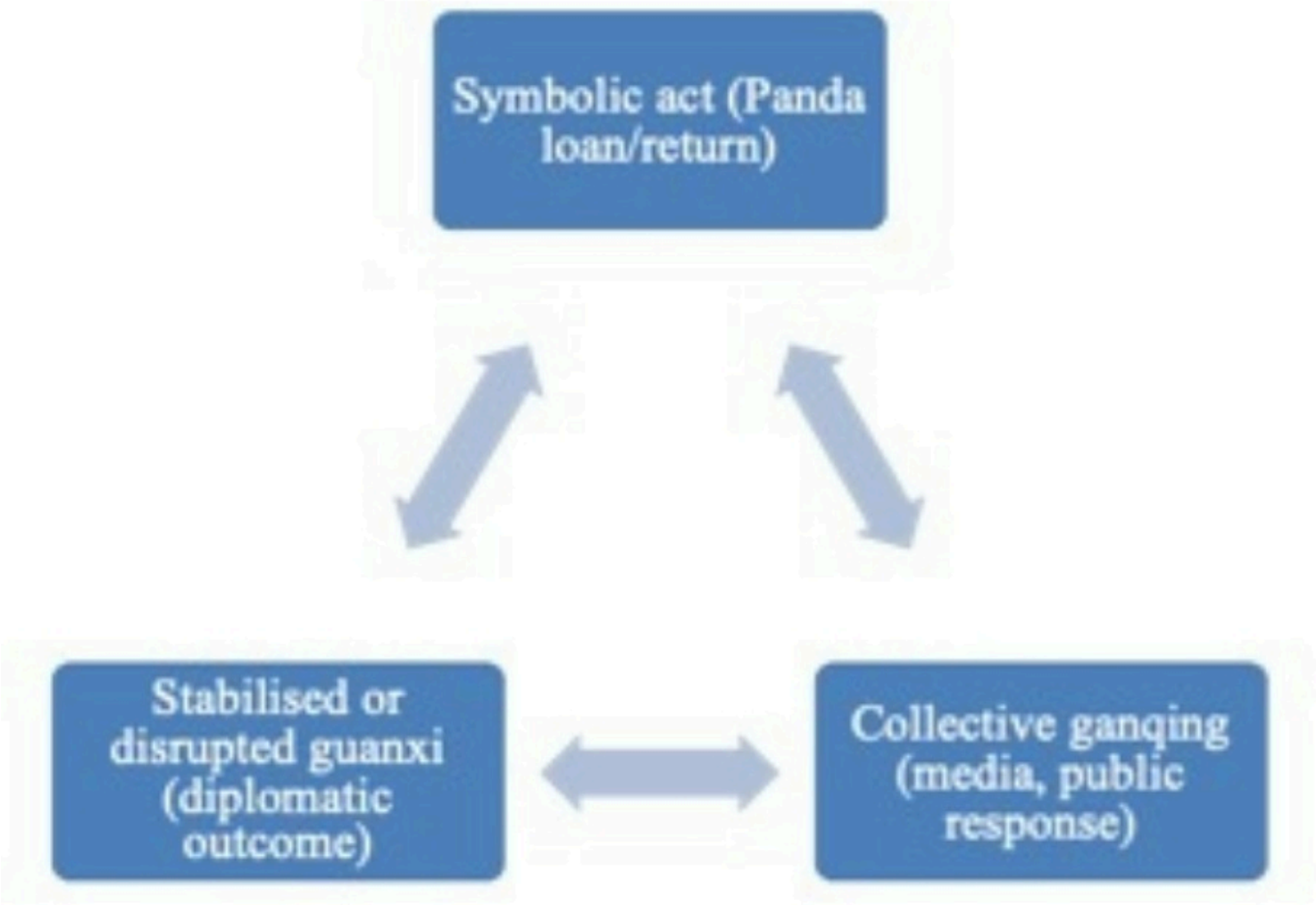


Figure 1

Analytical Framework: Panda diplomacy as relational-affective mechanism