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Pathways of Influence: A Comparative Study of PRC and U.S. Public Diplomacy in France and Italy during the 1980s

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Introduction

The European public sphere of the 1980s was shaped by a tense but ultimately thawing Cold War and the accelerating project of European integration. The "Euromissiles" crisis dominated the early decade and then gave way to détente and new arms-control bargains, creating an atmosphere in which strategic communication, international broadcasting, and overseas public engagement again became central to international politics.[1] In parallel, the Single European Act's internal-market ambition promised denser cross-border circulations of goods, services, and people – conditions that widened the channels through which states projected narratives and cultural products to European audiences.[2]

Media and technology magnified these openings. The spread of satellite distribution and the liberalisation of broadcasting across Western Europe transformed how culture, information, and images travelled. Instead of relying solely on official cultural institutes and elite salons, foreign messages increasingly flowed through hybrid ecosystems of public broadcasters, commercial networks, print outlets, festivals, and universities. These shifts reduced the cost of mass outreach and redefined public diplomacy as a more interactive process, with foreign publics becoming active participants rather than passive targets of state messaging.[3]

Within this environment, the United States and the People's Republic of China mobilised distinct yet partially overlapping instruments. American public diplomacy in the 1980s combined long-standing exchanges and cultural centres with an assertive turn to electronic communication under the United States Information Agency (USIA), which invested in live, media-facing formats designed to engage interlocutors across Europe in real time.[4] China, amid "reform and opening," cautiously expanded external cultural contacts and educational mobility while refitting its communication apparatus for a more outward-looking role; the circulation of students, scholars, and cultural intermediaries became a key conveyor of China's presence in European arenas.[5]

France and Italy, while both central to Western Europe's cultural life, offered different receiving environments. France's strong tradition and assertive state role in cultural affairs framed how external influences were filtered and debated, whereas Italy's rapidly changing media market and plural civic venues created multiple points of entry for foreign messages and cultural forms. Across both settings, however, state initiatives intersected with the everyday work of institutions and people – universities,

[1] Desmond Dinan, *Ever Closer Union: An Introduction to European Integration* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994), 97.
[2] Ibid., 3-4.
[3] Brian Hocking, "Rethinking the 'New' Public Diplomacy," in *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, ed. Jan Melissen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 30.
[4] Nicholas John Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 434.
[5] David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy," *The China Journal*, no. 57 (January 2007): 31.

broadcasters, festivals, diasporic associations – so that public and cultural diplomacy were never only what ministries planned but also what societies received, adapted, and sometimes redirected.

This thesis aims to investigate how the People's Republic of China and the United States articulated and enacted public and cultural diplomacy in Italy and France during the 1980s. It asks a double question: through which instruments and narratives did Beijing and Washington attempt to shape European perceptions in these two countries, and how did formal state strategies interact with societal conduits of influence such as academic exchanges, cultural programming, and migration-driven cultural contact? By placing two global powers and two European cases in comparison, this study aims to reconstruct how distinct political systems operationalised "soft power" before it was canonised as a policy concept, how their instruments overlapped and diverged, and how local contexts in Italy and France conditioned reception and impact.

This thesis engages both public diplomacy and the new public diplomacy as complementary lenses. Public diplomacy is understood as state-originated communication and engagement with foreign governments through instruments such as advocacy, exchanges, international broadcasting and cultural programmes. The new public diplomacy is treated as an analytical evolution that emphasises dialogic, networked and multi-actor practice – foregrounding partnership with non-state and private actors, co-creation, and relationship-building rather than one-way messaging.[6] Within this framework, cultural diplomacy is treated as a constituent part of public diplomacy and refers to the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding. [7] Conceptually, the thesis recognises that these domains overlap: in the 1980s cases examined here, public, new public and cultural diplomacy operated in hybrid settings where state initiatives intersected with societal intermediaries.

Across chapters, sources are consulted in the original languages where applicable (English, Italian, French) and evaluated through standard source criticism (origin, purpose, audience, and contemporaneity). Citations follow Chicago Notes & Bibliography and employ a mosaic approach: Chapters I–II are anchored in secondary literature supplemented by selective official texts, whereas Chapter III is documented exclusively with primary materials from the period under study. This layered strategy permits consistent cross-checking of institutional narratives against contemporaneous evidence and sustains a comparison of practices and reception in France and Italy.

For the U.S. side, the 1980s under President Reagan marked a major shift in which the United States Information Agency recalibrated its apparatus for a more media-centred repertoire, including satellite-enabled formats, and repositioned public diplomacy at the core of America's European

[6] USC Center on Public Diplomacy, "What Is PD?", https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/page/what-is-pd.
[7] Milton C. Cummings, Jr., *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey* (Washington, DC: Center for Arts and Culture, 2003), 1, https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/MCCpaper.pdf.

engagement. Beyond official channels, flagship academic exchange programmes, the everyday corporate presence of brands such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola, and the transatlantic rise of U.S. basketball operated as complementary conveyors of American popular culture.

On the Chinese side, the 1980s were a hinge decade of "reform and opening" under Deng Xiaoping, during which external cultural exchange was cautiously expanded and bureaucratic frameworks for international outreach and information work were recalibrated. Beyond official channels, China's late-1970s policy pivot to overseas study and easing of migration restrictions promoted a surge in mobility, helping to establish academic circuits and Chinese communities that intersected with, and sometimes substituted for, formal cultural diplomacy.[8]

Italy and France constitute analytically fertile and contrasting cases. Both hosted dense ecosystems of cultural institutions, universities, and media environments receptive to transatlantic and trans-Eurasian influences, yet they differed in political traditions, party systems, and elite discourses about Americanisation and Asia. In Italy, a rapidly changing broadcasting landscape and a fabric of industrial districts and urban cultural venues created multiple entry points for external actors – from U.S. public-diplomacy programming and corporate cultural presence to Asian cultural intermediaries – shaping everyday reception beyond formal ministerial channels. In France, a more state-steered cultural sector and Paris's role as a continental hub made the country both a stage for U.S. initiatives and a magnet for diverse diasporic and institutional networks, embedding cultural presence in neighbourhoods, associations and universities. Attending to these country-specific "from below" dynamics, alongside official initiatives, suggests that both states acted within a system of relations no longer state-centric but constituted by various actors and networks operating in a fluid international environment of evolving issues and contexts.[9]

The thesis proceeds in three chapters. Chapter I aims to examine China's transformation under Deng Xiaoping and reconstructs the 1980s architecture of Chinese public and cultural diplomacy by tracing opening-up and diplomatic realignment, detailing the instruments deployed under Deng – such as educational and scientific exchange, artistic exhibition, film and migration-driven outreach – and assessing his longer-term legacy for global diplomacy and soft power.

The purpose of Chapter II is to analyse the Reagan-era revival of U.S. public and cultural diplomacy, situating strategy and rhetoric, the institutional role of USIA/VOA and campaign tools, and the use of exchanges and market actors such as corporate symbols and sport within the wider Cold War communication contest, and then evaluates the long-term impact.

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[8] Wenqin Shen, Han Zhang, and Chao Liu, "Toward a Chinese Model: De-Sovietization Reforms of China's Higher Education in the 1980s and 1990s", *International Journal of Chinese Education* 11, no. 3 (September 2022), 2 https://doi.org/10.1177/2212585X221124936.

[9] USC Center on Public Diplomacy, "What Is PD?".

Chapter III is intended to offer a comparative assessment of Chinese and American public and cultural diplomacy with a focus on France and Italy. It aims to do so by examining the effectiveness of instruments; identifying differences in messaging and outreach; analysing the responses of local elites and publics; and evaluating the extent to which bottom-up cultural exchange amplified, refracted, or blunted state-led efforts. In bringing these strands together, the chapter underscores how official initiatives interacted with locally rooted channels in the two national cases.

Methodologically, this thesis adopts an historical design and aligns its evidentiary base with the distinct purposes of each chapter. For Chapter I, the analysis proceeds primarily from secondary scholarship on political change and external communication under Deng Xiaoping. Authoritative works by David Shambaugh, Ezra Vogel, and Chinese authors provide the institutional and ideological setting of the reform era – particularly the organisation of opening up and its implications for outward-facing cultural activity. The chapter is historiographical and synthetic: it reconstructs context and trajectories from contemporary monographs and articles rather than archival discovery.

Chapter II combines secondary literature with selected official texts. Ronald Reagan's public speeches furnish the administration's declared objectives and narratives for European audiences; the history of the United States Information Agency is taken from the specialist monographic literature; and the Fulbright Program's annual reports supply longitudinal evidence on exchange flows, funding patterns, and programmatic rationales. Interpretation is analytical and literature-driven; primary documents are used to fix timelines, institutional intent, and the turn to new media formats.

Chapter III relies exclusively on contemporaneous primary sources. The corpus comprises presidential and ministerial speeches, exhibition and festival catalogues, newspaper and magazine coverage, and audio-visual materials (television items, photographs, and related documentation) from the 1980s. These sources are subjected to close reading and contextualisation to identify instruments, messages, venues, and modes of reception in each national setting, with particular attention to the interaction between state initiatives and "from-below" circuits.

In sum, this thesis contends that in 1980s Western Europe the effectiveness of U.S. and PRC public and cultural diplomacy turned less on scale than on fit with French and Italian receiving environments. It identifies two pathways – U.S. breadth and media intensity versus Chinese gradual institutional embedding through education, science, language – and argues that durable effects travelled through routinised venues such as universities, festivals, and neighbourhood spaces, where state initiatives met local agency. The analysis further shows that similar instruments were refracted differently, so that outcomes hinged on alignment with existing intermediaries rather than on budgets or spectacle. Conceptually, the study recasts public diplomacy as a multi-actor, relational field and advances reception as a central explanatory variable.

Chapter I: China's Transformation Under Deng Xiaoping: Economic, Diplomatic, and Cultural Reforms

1.1 China's Opening Up Under Deng: Economic Reforms and Diplomatic Realignment

This chapter aims to explore the key reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping that transformed China's economic, diplomatic, and cultural landscape. It focuses on his strategies for economic modernisation, such as the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and the opening of China to foreign investment, which were pivotal in shaping the country's development. The chapter also examines Deng's diplomatic initiatives to strengthen China's relations with Western nations, considering the role of cultural and public diplomacy in enhancing China's international influence. Through the analysis of these reforms, the goal is to highlight how Deng's leadership set the foundation for China's integration into the global system and its emergence as a major power.

A significant shift in China's foreign policy began in the early 1970s, as Mao Zedong opened China's doors to the West after decades of isolation. A pivotal moment in this transformation occurred in 1971, when Beijing was admitted into the UN General Assembly with 76 votes in favour, 35 opposed, and 17 abstentions, of which 23 votes in favour came from European countries, including France and the United Kingdom.[10] This improvement in relations with the West culminated in 1972 with the historic visit of U.S. President Richard Nixon, the first sitting American president to visit China.[11] This rapprochement was not merely a diplomatic breakthrough but also part of a broader effort by China to integrate into the international system and diversify its international relations.

Another relevant event in China's political trajectory came in July 1977, when, following the death of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping emerged from political delegitimisation for the second time[12] at the *Third Plenum of the Tenth Party Central Committee* and began to reassert his leadership.[13] With his return, China entered a new era – one defined by economic pragmatism, diplomatic realignment, and an unprecedented opening to the world.[14]

Even though the last years of Mao's rule showed an opening to the West, this openness remained influenced by ideological considerations and the broader socialist framework he adhered to, with foreign technologies and methods being introduced only through the lens of Maoist thought, which

[10] Suisheng Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023), 49.
[11] Kissinger Henry, *On China* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), 228.
[12] David Shambaugh, "Deng Xiaoping: The Politician", *The China Quarterly*, no. Deng Xiaoping: An Assessment (September 1993): 466–68.
[13] Michael Ying-Mao Kau and Susan Marsh, *China in The Era of Deng Xiaoping*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 19.
[14] Ibid.

prioritised political conformity and ideological purity. In contrast, Deng Xiaoping's approach moved beyond the constraints of the *ti-yong strategy* of selective borrowing (*yong*) as he was more willing than previous reformers to import anything that would enrich China's productive base, without much concern for its potential corrosive effects on Chinese cultural essence (*ti*).[15] This pragmatism enabled Deng to drive China's economic modernisation and industrial development in ways that his predecessors had not been willing to pursue.

This shift, therefore, was not merely a response to economic necessity but rather a calculated effort to enhance China's political legitimacy, both domestically and on the world stage, demonstrating its capacity to engage with the evolving geopolitical landscape while maintaining state control.[16] Chinese leaders referred to this process as *jiegui* ("linking tracks"), a term once linked to railway integration but redefined by the 1980s to signify China's alignment with global frameworks, a transformation – driven by engagement with Western governments and multinational corporations – that reshaped its international role from an isolated revolutionary state to an active participant in global governance.[17]

Building on this momentum, Deng Xiaoping introduced the *Reform and Opening Up policy* (改革开放, *Gǎigé kāifàng*), which reoriented China's economy toward market-driven mechanisms and foreign engagement.[18] However, rather than a single directive, this process unfolded as a series of gradual steps designed to modernise China's economy while preserving political stability. Unlike top-down economic plans implemented by his predecessors, Deng's approach favoured incremental experimentation that enabled the Chinese government to test policies in selected regions prior to their nationwide implementation.[19]

One of the major initiatives was the establishment of China's first Special Economic Zones (SEZs) along the Southeastern coast, in the cities of Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen.[20] These zones – acting as controlled environments where foreign investment was encouraged and private enterprise was tested – laid the foundation for the broader economic liberalisation of the 1980s.[21] Beyond their economic function, SEZs represented a strategic tool aimed at reshaping China's international image, strengthening diplomatic relations, and facilitating integration into global governance structures.[22] By

[15] Shambaugh, *Deng Xiaoping: The Politician*, 458.
[16] Vivian Le, "Development and Authoritarianism: China's Political Culture and Economic Reforms", 20 November 2023, 9, https://www.e-ir.info/2023/11/20/development-and-authoritarianism-chinas-political-culture-and-economic-reforms/.
[17] Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 2011), 697.
[18] Jacques Delisle and Avery Goldstein, "China's Economic Reform and Opening at Forty Past: Accomplishments and Emerging Challenges", in *China's Economic Reform and Opening at Forty: Past Accomplishments and Emerging Challenges* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 3.
[19] Priscilla Roberts, *Chinese Economic Statecraft from 1978 to 1989: The First Decade of Deng Xiaoping's Reforms* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022), 5.
[20] Ibid.
[21] World Bank, "China's Special Economic Zones" (Washington, DC, 2015).
[22] Vogel Ezra, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 398–403.

opening specific regions to foreign investment, China signalled a departure from Maoist relative isolationism and embraced pragmatic engagement with the Western world.[23] The success of SEZs was intended not only to affirm China's commitment to economic cooperation but also to strengthen its political legitimacy on the global stage and encourage deeper engagement with other nations.[24]

As China sought to reorient its economy and integrate into world markets, Europe emerged as a crucial partner in Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up strategy, recognised for its potential in investment, technological expertise, and trade expansion.[25] While China's relations with the United States remained shaped by strategic considerations, its engagement with Europe was primarily economic in nature – focusing on modernisation and economic diplomacy rather than military or ideological confrontation – as Deng employed triangular diplomacy for purposes radically different from those of Mao and his other predecessors.[26]

A key aspect of this engagement was technology transfer, since Deng sought to renovate China's outdated industrial base by acquiring advanced machinery, manufacturing expertise, and infrastructural know-how from Western European countries, particularly West Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, which emerged as key suppliers in this process.[27] In the early 1980s, China secured technological partnerships with German firms, importing advanced machine tools, automobile production equipment, and chemical processing technologies, which were vital to the country's industrial upgrade.[28] France's role was particularly significant as it was the first, even before Washington, to establish formal diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC), a move that set the foundation for deeper economic and technological cooperation between the two countries.[29] This cooperation also extended to China's nuclear energy sector, with the French state-owned company Framatome supplying nuclear reactors to China in the mid-1980s, an agreement that not only strengthened economic ties but also reflected the growing trust between Beijing and European capitals.[30] Meanwhile, British and Italian institutions assisted in upgrading China's banking and financial sectors, offering expertise in financial regulation and risk management as Beijing gradually liberalised aspects of its economy.[31]

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[23] Douglas Zhihua Zeng, *China's Special Economic Zones and Industrial Clusters: Success and Challenges* (Cambridge, 2012), 7.
[24] World Bank, "China's Special Economic Zones".
[25] David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 60.
[26] John W. Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China*, *China's Quest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 403, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190261054.001.0001.
[27] U.S. Congress Office of Technology Assessment, *Technology Transfer to China* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1987), 41.
[28] Ibid., 125-127.
[29] Garret Martin, "Playing the China Card?", *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10, no. 1 (2008): 77.
[30] Ibid., 75.
[31] David Scott, "China and the EU: A Strategic Axis for the Twenty-First Century?", *International Relations* 21, no. 1 (2007): 23–45, https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117807073766.

These economic collaborations were reinforced by the establishment of SEZs in 1980, which created designated areas where foreign companies, including European firms, could invest under preferential tax policies and reduced regulatory barriers.[32] As a result, Western companies were among the first to set up joint ventures in Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Xiamen, contributing to China's rapid industrial expansion.[33] By 1985, European investment had become a major component of China's industrial development, particularly in manufacturing, consumer goods, and infrastructure projects, demonstrating how economic diplomacy had become an integral element of the broader Sino-European relationship.[34] Although Japan and the United States remained China's dominant trade and investment partners during this period, European countries played a unique role in supporting China's transition to a more market-oriented system.[35] The gradual influx of European capital and technology helped Beijing accelerate reforms, creating a foundation for its continued economic rise in the following decades. Moreover, these partnerships helped normalise China's relations with the West and signalled that economic engagement could serve as a pathway for deeper diplomatic cooperation – a theme that would become central in China-Europe relations throughout the 1980s.[36]

Beyond economic imperatives, partnerships between China and European countries in the 1970s and 1980s carried significant political weight, as they served as a strategic instrument for China to reposition itself on the global stage, diversify its diplomatic ties, and reduce reliance on both the Soviet Union and the United States.[37] A pivotal moment in this engagement occurred in 1975, when Deng Xiaoping undertook an official visit to France, an event that expressed Beijing's intent to re-establish economic and diplomatic relations with the major European powers.[38]

A further demonstration of China's diplomatic adaptability was the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong, a landmark agreement that secured Britain's commitment to return Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework.[39] This agreement exemplified China's capacity to engage in high-stakes diplomatic negotiations with

[32] Zeng, *China's Special Economic Zones and Industrial Clusters: Success and Challenges*, 13,14.
[33] U.S. Congress Office of Technology Assessment, *Technology Transfer to China*, 126.
[34] Roberts, *Chinese Economic Statecraft from 1978 to 1989: The First Decade of Deng Xiaoping's Reforms*,8.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ni Yanshuo, 'EU Visit Sets Tone', *Beijing Review*, 28 July 2005.
[37] Sheng Peng, "A 'Gentleman's Understanding': British, French, and German Dual-Use Technology Transfer to China and America's Dilemma during the Carter Administration, 1977-1981", *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 32, no. 1 (2 April 2021): 168–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2021.1883865.
[38] Wilson Center Digital Archive, ed., "Itinerary of Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping's Visit to France from 12 to 17 May 1975," in *Ministère Des Affaires Etrangères, La Courneuve (MAE), Série Asie-Océanie, Sous-Série Chine 1973-1980* (AO), 2174, trans. Martin Albers, 1975, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118645.
[39] "Official Publication: Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong", *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 1984), https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ilr/vol7/iss1/6.

Western powers, effectively balancing national sovereignty with international legal commitments.[40] The successful negotiation of the Hong Kong issue not only strengthened China's credibility in international diplomacy but also signalled its ability to operate within established frameworks of international law and negotiation.[41] These developments culminated in the 1985 EEC-China Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which laid the foundation for sustained political dialogue, scientific exchanges and technological cooperation.[42] This agreement reflected China's increasing political credibility in Europe, marking a transition from ideological suspicion to structured and institutionalised cooperation, but also highlighted European recognition of China as a global actor, laying the groundwork for future diplomatic ties.[43]

Although China's engagement with Europe under Deng Xiaoping has often been interpreted primarily through an economic lens, these partnerships had far-reaching political and diplomatic consequences. By fostering ties with European states, China secured a geopolitical counterweight to both the United States and the Soviet Union and reinforced its strategic autonomy in global affairs.[44] Likewise, European governments viewed engagement with China as an opportunity to expand their global influence, while also encouraging China's gradual integration into the international system.[45]

Deng's approach allowed China to engage with the West not as a passive player, but as a strategic partner redefining the terms of its participation in global governance. This shift wasn't just about economic cooperation; it was a subtle assertion of China's agency, demonstrating that engagement with the West could be a means of economic advancement and a tool for reshaping global power dynamics. For Deng, diplomacy was about positioning China as an indispensable, pragmatic force in the evolving international order. His legacy is visible today in the Sino-European relationship, where economic ties, technological exchange, and political cooperation have influenced the contours of global governance in the 21st century, with China playing a central role in setting the agenda.

1.2 Instruments of Public and Cultural Diplomacy Introduced Under Deng

Deng Xiaoping's *Gaige Kaifang* not only transformed China's economic course but also had a significant influence on its strategy of cultural and public diplomacy. Recognising that economic

[40] Thomas S Macintyre, "Impact of the Sino-British Agreement on Hong Kong's Economic Future", *Journal of Comparative Business and Capital Market Law* 7 (1985): 197–216, https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/jil/vol7/iss2/3.
[41] Ibid.,200.
[42] United Kingdom and People's Republic of China, "Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation between the European Economic Community and the People's Republic of China", *Official Journal of the European Communities*, no. L 250 (19 December 1984).
[43] Ibid.
[44] Young-Chan Kim, *China and the Belt and Road Initiative Trade Relationships, Business Opportunities and Political Impacts* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2022), 170.
[45] Shaun Breslin, *Handbook of China's International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2010), 157.

liberalisation alone was insufficient to redefine China's global image, Deng's administration integrated cultural and public diplomacy into its broader foreign policy agenda as essential components of its normalisation strategy.[46] In contrast to the Maoist era, which had prioritised ideological solidarity with socialist states and maintained an adversarial stance toward the West, Deng adopted a more engagement-driven approach, particularly in Europe and the United States, fostering constructive international exchanges beyond economic cooperation.[47]

A crucial aspect of this shift was the deliberative use of soft power instruments – including academic and scientific exchanges, cultural exports, and informal diplomacy facilitated by migration – to shape international perceptions of China. Through investments in education, cultural heritage, and community-based engagement, China gradually established itself as an active cultural player on the global stage, laying the foundation for long-term public diplomacy efforts.[48] These initiatives played a pivotal role in China's engagement with both the United States and Europe, where academic collaborations, trade exhibitions, and the expansion of Chinese communities played a significant role in fostering mutual understanding and strengthening diplomatic ties.[49]

Among the most prominent instruments of Deng Xiaoping's public diplomacy were scientific and academic exchanges, which became fundamental to China's long-term efforts to expand its global involvement. A key aspect of this strategy was the promotion of scientific cooperation, particularly with the United States, where Chinese scholars and researchers were sent to study advanced technologies and bring knowledge back to China to support its technological progress.[50] A pivotal moment in this shift occurred during the National Science Conference in March 1978, when Deng Xiaoping formally announced a new direction in China's scientific policy.[51] For the first time since the early 1950s, Chinese scientists were actively encouraged by Beijing to establish connections with their Western counterparts.[52] This marked a departure from China's previous stance, reflecting its broader commitment to scientific innovation and global integration, as Deng stated in his speech:

> Backwardness must be recognised before it can be changed. One must learn from those who are more advanced before he can catch up with and surpass them. Of course, in order to raise China's scientific and technological level we must rely on our own efforts, develop our own creativity and persist in the policy of independence and self-reliance. But independence does not mean shutting the door on the world, nor does self-reliance mean blind opposition to everything foreign. Science and technology are part of the wealth created in common by all mankind.

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[46] Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy*, 50,51.
[47] Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 696,697.
[48] Shao-Cheng Sun, "Confucius Institutes: China's Cultural Soft Power Strategy", *Journal of Culture and Values in Education* 6, no. 1 (February 27, 2023): 52–68, https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2023.4.
[49] Ramesh Chandra and Manasi Sinha, "China's Soft Power Diplomacy in International Politics: Strategies, Means and Implications", *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts* 5, no. 1 (30 June 2024): 2, https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.2045.
[50] Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 322,323.
[51] Deng Xiaoping, "Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the National Science Conference", *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* 2 (March 18, 1978), https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/deng-xiaoping/1978/30.htm.
[52] Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 321.

> Every people or country should learn from the advanced science and technology of others. It is not just today, when we are scientifically and technologically backward, that we need to learn from others. Even after we catch up with the most advanced countries, we shall still have to learn from them in areas where they are particularly strong. [53]

Beyond their economic and technological significance, these scientific collaborations also played a diplomatic role. By sending Chinese scholars abroad, China sought to cultivate long-term professional networks and enhance its global image as a knowledge-seeking nation, a strategy aligned with Deng's broader efforts to integrate China into the international community through cultural and intellectual engagement.[54]

China's efforts to advance its education system extended beyond scientific exchanges with the United States to include a significant expansion of academic cooperation with European universities. Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, the Chinese government initiated scholarship programmes and established academic partnerships – particularly with institutions in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom – not only to facilitate student exchanges and strengthen bilateral relations, but also to enhance Western exposure to the Chinese language and culture, reinforcing Beijing's long-term strategy of educational diplomacy.[55]

A key development in Sino-French educational cooperation during the 1980s was the expansion of student and academic exchanges between the two countries. Between 1978 and 1984, France hosted 1,299 Chinese students and scholars, marking a significant increase from previous years, a development facilitated by a bilateral cultural agreement signed in 1965 and subsequently renewed every two years starting from 1978.[56] At an institutional level, there were around 50 university agreements between Chinese and French higher education institutions, although the development of large-scale academic cooperation projects was hindered by the lack of dedicated funding from the French government.[57] Despite these financial constraints, some Chinese universities played a leading role in academic exchanges with France. For instance, Wuhan University became a hub for Sino-French intellectual cooperation, developing programmes in political science, history, language, literature, and economics.[58]

Similarly, during the 1980s, Sino-German academic collaboration expanded, particularly after the 1978 Scientific and Technological Cooperation Agreement, which led China and West Germany to

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[53] Deng Xiaoping, "Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the National Science Conference".
[54] Chenxi Xiong, "Deng Xiaoping's Views on Science and Technology", *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 28, no. 2 (2021): 159–85.
[55] Woyu Liu, "150 Years of Studying Abroad in China: Three Cases of Study-Abroad Fever", *Echo Wall*, December 3, 2021, https://www.echo-wall.eu/china-and-world/off/150-years-studying-abroad-china-three-cases-study-abroad-fever.
[56] Ruth Hayhoe and Marianne Bastid, *China's Education and the Industrialized World: Studies in Cultural Transfer* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1987), 286.
[57] Ibid., 287.
[58] Ibid.

initiate research collaborations across 19 fields, including renewable energy, environmental technology, agriculture, and historic preservation.[59] Over 40 scientific and research institutes from both countries participated in these projects, coordinated by the China State Science and Technology Commission and the German Federal Research and Technology Department.[60]

West Germany also played a crucial role in supporting Chinese scholars and researchers through funding programmes. The Volkswagen Foundation, which had begun sponsoring Sino-German scientific projects in 1979, expanded its focus in 1984 to include humanities research, particularly in economics, society, culture, and politics.[61] Additionally, the Hanns Seidel Foundation supported vocational education and teacher training initiatives, including the establishment of a model *Fachhochschule* (university of applied sciences) in Hangzhou.[62]

Likewise, the United Kingdom became a critical partner in China's educational outreach. By the mid-1980s, an increasing number of Chinese students pursued studies in the UK under the Sino-British Friendship Scholarship Scheme, a memorandum of understanding according to which Britain would finance the study in the UK of 100 to 150 Chinese students each year for ten years.[63]

In addition to government-sponsored exchanges, the Chinese government also implemented policies to facilitate self-funded study-abroad opportunities. Recognising the need to expand access to international education beyond state-sponsored scholarships, the State Council issued the "Temporary Regulations on Self-funded Study-Abroad" in 1981, allowing a broader segment of Chinese students to pursue education overseas at their own expense.[64] This policy diversified the fields of study beyond government-prioritised disciplines and increased the number of students exposed to Western education systems, further deepening academic integration with Europe.

China's approach to these exchanges was strategically aligned with Deng Xiaoping's modernisation policies, which emphasised the importance of learning from the West while maintaining political and ideological control.[65] These exchanges not only helped train a new generation of Chinese experts in key disciplines but also fostered long-term cultural ties that would later support China's efforts to expand its soft power influence through educational diplomacy.[66]

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[59] Mechthild Leutner and Tim Trampedach, *Bundesrepublik Deutschland Und China 1949 Bis 1995: Politik-Wirtschaft-Wissenschaft-Kultur: Eine Quellensammlung* [The German Federal Republic and China from 1949 to 1995: Politics-Economics-Science-Culture: A Collection of Sources] (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), 212.
[60] Su Huimin et al., "China's Relations With West European Countries", in *New China in the New International Setting*, vol. 49, 1996, 149–93.
[61] Ibid., 157.
[62] Hayhoe and Bastid, *China's Education and the Industrialized World: Studies in Cultural Transfer*, 284.
[63] Huimin et al., *China's Relations With West European Countries*, 180.
[64] Liu, "150 Years of Studying Abroad in China: Three Cases of Study-Abroad Fever".
[65] Xiong, *Deng Xiaoping's Views on Science and Technology*, 162.
[66] Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China*, 355,356.

Furthermore, the de-Sovietisation of Chinese higher education, which began in the late 1970s, played a crucial role in shaping these partnerships, as the Chinese government gradually shifted from the Soviet model of education – characterised by centralised control and ideological conformity – to a more flexible system inspired by Western academic traditions.[67] By engaging with European academic institutions, China updated its own higher education system and also enhanced its global standing as a serious scientific partner. These exchanges laid the foundation for initiatives such as the Confucius Institutes, which formally embedded Chinese language and cultural promotion abroad.[68]

While academic and scientific exchanges played a pivotal role in advancing China's innovation and fostering intellectual engagement with the West, they represented only one dimension of Deng Xiaoping's broader public and cultural diplomacy strategy. Alongside these academic initiatives, the reform era initiated under Deng led to a transformation of China's museum sector – marked by a substantial increase in the number of institutions – which became an integral component of China's heritage-related economy, contributing to the nation's international cultural positioning, facilitating its rapid urban transformation, and supporting the growth of its leisure and tourism industries.[69]

As China expanded its domestic museum sector, it simultaneously leveraged its growing cultural economy to enhance its international image.[70] In this context, China employed a two-pronged approach: domestically, museums supported China's urban transformation and tourism; internationally, cultural exports – ranging from iconic symbols like silk and ceramics to theatre and traditional films – became tools to enhance diplomatic visibility and cross-cultural recognition.[71]

One of the most notable examples of this strategy was China's renewed participation in international exhibitions, particularly in Europe and the United States. The 1983 exhibition *The Silk Road: Treasures of Tang China*, hosted at the British Museum, was a major cultural event that displayed artifacts – including silk textiles and porcelain – that underscored China's historical role in global trade and cultural exchange.[72]

This diplomatic use of traditional art signalled a profound shift in the relationship between the Communist establishment and China's imperial past. During the Cultural Revolution, the destruction

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[67] Wenqin Shen, Han Zhang, and Chao Liu, "Toward a Chinese Model: De-Sovietization Reforms of China's Higher Education in the 1980s and 1990s", 5.
[68] Xin Liu, "China's Cultural Diplomacy: A Great Leap Outward with Chinese Characteristics? Multiple Comparative Case Studies of the Confucius Institutes", *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 118 (4 July 2019): 646–61, https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1557951.
[69] Carol Chung et al., "Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Cultural Production within China's Public Museums: Examining the Challenges and Practices Guiding Administration", *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 29, no. 3 (22 February 2022): 331, https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2022.2045978.
[70] Chandra and Sinha, *China's Soft Power Diplomacy in International Politics: Strategies, Means and Implications*, 2.
[71] Da Kong, "Museums, International Exhibitions, and Cultural Diplomacy," in *Museums, International Exhibitions and China's Cultural Diplomacy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 5–8.
[72] Rui Ji, "Cultural Reconstruction Beyond Borders: An Analysis of the Evolution of Chinese Art Exhibitions Abroad in the 20th Century", *La Rivista Di Engramma*, no. 218 (November 2024).

of cultural relics and the rejection of traditional symbols were emblematic of the Maoist effort to break from the past and create a new socialist identity.[73] In this context, the display of ancient artifacts – such as silk textiles, porcelain, and other symbols of China's imperial heritage – represented not just a reclaiming of history but also a strategic repositioning. By showcasing these cultural treasures in international exhibitions, China was able to project a national identity that balanced its revolutionary achievements with a redefined connection to its imperial legacy.[74]

However, it is crucial to question the authenticity of this new identity, as much of it was shaped by pragmatic considerations. The use of cultural heritage in diplomacy was instrumental in enhancing China's visibility and soft power but also reflects a complex reality where the Chinese government, while maintaining strict control, crafted a more palatable narrative for the world stage.[75] This duality between the Communist Party's ideological legacy and the instrumental use of imperial culture underscores the relationship between China's domestic policies and its global ambitions, with strategic goals driving the creation of a new national identity aimed at reasserting China's role in global governance.[76]

Building on the success of this event, China continued to expand its participation in international exhibitions throughout the 1980s, leveraging these events as platforms to promote its artistic and historical tradition while strengthening diplomatic and economic ties with the West.[77] In 1985, the *Chinese Visions* exhibition, held at the Art Department Gallery of the University of Florida, helped foster Sino-international cultural ties.[78] Unlike previous exhibitions that focused solely on China's imperial past, this event showcased contemporary art that blended traditional Chinese elements with influences from Western countries, reflecting the country's rapid transformation under Deng Xiaoping's reforms.[79] By presenting both traditional arts and modern innovations, the exhibition aligned with China's strategy of demonstrating that economic liberalisation and cultural continuity could coexist, fostering a more nuanced perception of China among Western audiences.

The 1980s also witnessed an increasing number of foreign exhibitions in China, providing Western artists with opportunities to present their works to a Chinese audience. A notable example was the

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[73] Frank Dikötter, *The Cultural Revolution: A People's History 1962-1976*, vol. 3 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 50.
[74] Denise Y. Ho, "Museums and Exhibitionary Culture in Twentieth-Century China", in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (Oxford University Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.455.
[75] Ryoko Nakano and Yujie Zhu, "Heritage as Soft Power: Japan and China in International Politics", *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 26, no. 7 (2020): 871, https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2020.1845322.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Kong, 'Museums, International Exhibitions, and Cultural Diplomacy', 8.
[78] Asia Art Archive, "Chinese Visions" leaflet, 1985, Mao Xuhui Archive, https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/mao-xuhui-archive--1985-chinese-vision-florida/object/chinese-visions-leaflet.
[79] Asia Art Archive, "Chinese Visions" press release, 1985, Mao Xuhui Archive https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/mao-xuhui-archive--1985-chinese-vision-florida/object/chinese-vision-press-release.

Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI), an exhibition by American artist Robert Rauschenberg held at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing in 1985, as part of a global project in which Rauschenberg aimed to foster cross-cultural dialogue through contemporary art.[80] While ROCI reflected Rauschenberg's personal commitment to artistic freedom and international exchange, its presence in China also signified the country's gradual openness to foreign cultural influences.[81]

Through these exhibitions, China effectively positioned itself as both a guardian of an ancient civilisation and a dynamic modern state. The deliberate selection of artifacts, the expansion of exhibition themes to include both tradition and modernity, and the increasing use of art as a diplomatic tool played a crucial role in advancing cultural diplomacy, signalling a departure from the previous rejection of China's pre-communist cultural heritage, while simultaneously aiming to strike a balance between acknowledging historical realities and constructing a revitalised national identity on the global stage, drawing strength from its ancient roots.[82]

During the 1980s, China also leveraged its long-standing tradition in ceramics as a strategic instrument of cultural diplomacy. While porcelain exports had historically been a vital component of China's global trade, the renewed emphasis under Deng Xiaoping was not solely driven by economic incentives but also by the overarching objective of offering a curated narrative that reflects the values, ideologies, and aspirations of China.[83] Jingdezhen, historically celebrated as China's porcelain capital, remained a focal point for the production of high-quality ceramics, which were increasingly promoted as emblematic of China's artistic heritage.[84]

European and American collectors and museums continued to exhibit a strong interest in Chinese ceramics during this period, prompting exhibitions that showcased both antique and contemporary works, reinforcing the perception of China as a historical and modern leader in ceramic artistry. A noteworthy case is the exhibition *Chinese Porcelains in European Mounts* held at the China House Gallery in New York from October 1980 to January 1981, which highlighted the enduring appeal and influence of Chinese porcelain in Western art and reinforced the perception of China as a historical and modern leader in ceramic artistry.[85]

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[80] Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, "Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI)", https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/art-context/roci.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Shing Kwan Chan, "Relics and Rapprochement: The Intricacies of Cultural Diplomacy in China's First Archaeological Exhibition in the U.S. during the Cold War Era", *Museum History Journal* 17, no. 1 (2024): 83, https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2023.2283630.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Stacey Pierson, "The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History", *Source: Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (March 2012): 10.
[85] Getty Exhibitions, "Chinese Porcelains in European Mounts", Getty-Conservation Research Foundation Museum, 22 October 1980, https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/exhibition/103MKJ.

The prominence of Chinese porcelain in international exhibitions was not merely a matter of cultural prestige but a key component of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, which promoted the export of traditional goods like ceramics and textiles to strengthen China's global economic integration. A key measure to support exports was the introduction of policies that allowed companies exceeding their export targets to retain a larger share of their foreign earnings.[86] At the same time, exporters were granted access to Foreign Exchange Adjustment Centres (FEACs), where they could convert foreign earnings at more favourable exchange rates than the official rate.[87]

While China's material exports solidified its reputation as a global manufacturing leader, the nation also recognised that cultural influence extended beyond tangible goods. As such, theatre and cinema emerged as parallel instruments of cultural and public diplomacy, allowing China to shape international perceptions through narratives that intertwined its historical legacy with contemporary social themes. The rapid advancement of state-led economic reforms during this period lifted millions of people out of poverty but also concurrently exacerbated income inequality, leading to a heightened social consciousness, which in turn led theatrical artists attuned to these transformations to explore history and examine the roots of contemporary social, political, and economic challenges.[88] Amidst a nationwide resurgence of interest in traditional culture, this period saw the emergence of plays such as *A Wedding and a Funeral* (红白喜事), written by Wei Min et al. and directed by Lin Zhaohua and *The Old Town of Romance* (老风流镇), written by Ma Zhongjun and directed by Chen Yong.[89] These productions not only reflected the evolving socio-political landscape but also served as a medium through which China projected its cultural identity on the international stage.

Traditional films, such as historical dramas and operatic adaptations, were screened at major international film festivals, introducing global audiences to Chinese aesthetics and storytelling traditions; for example, in 1981, Chinese films were exhibited 682 times in 34 nations and regions.[90] This was particularly evident in co-productions and film distribution agreements with European nations, which sought to present China as both an ancient civilisation and a modernising state embracing cultural exchange. A prime example is Bernardo Bertolucci's 1987 film *The Last Emperor* – a collaboration involving China, Italy, and the United Kingdom – based on the book *From Emperor to Citizen: The Autobiography of Aisin-Gioro Pu Yi*.[91] This film not only showcased China's rich

[86] Adi Brender, "China's Foreign Trade Behaviour in the 1980s: An Empirical Analysis", January 1992, 6.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Lin Kehuan, "Critical Stages/Scènes Critiques Chinese Theatre since 1980", *The IATC Journal/Revue de l'AICT*, no. 18 (December 2018).
[89] Ibid.
[90] Yanling Yang, "Film Policy, the Chinese Government and Soft Power", New Cinemas 14, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 81, https://doi.org/10.1386/ncin.14.1.71_1
[91] Puyi, *From Emperor to Citizen: The Autobiography of Aisin-Gioro Pu Yi,* translated by William John Francis (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1964).

history but also underscored its openness to international artistic collaboration, as it was the first Western feature film authorised by the People's Republic of China to be shot in the Forbidden City in Beijing, a demonstration of China's goodwill and commitment to pursuing cultural collaboration with European countries.[92]

By the late 1980s, China's approach to cultural export had established the country as both a steward of its rich heritage and a dynamic player in global affairs. Through exhibitions, art, and films, China enhanced its diplomatic visibility while expanded its economic and cultural reach.[93]

Yet, beyond state-led initiatives, another form of public diplomacy emerged: migration. As economic reforms reshaped Chinese society, an increasing number of Chinese moved to Europe, particularly to Italy[94], the United Kingdom[95] and France[96]. These communities, through businesses, food culture, and daily interactions, became informal agents of China's soft power, able to foster long-term cultural engagement outside official diplomatic channels. Although largely facilitated by shifts in China's migration policies, this migration-driven cultural exchange evolved as an organic process shaped by individual agency and socio-economic structures – deeply rooted in lived experiences and embedded in local economies – with effects that extended beyond state control, ultimately reinforcing China's global influence and facilitating the dissemination of its cultural heritage.[97]

Before Deng Xiaoping's leadership, Chinese migration was largely shaped by state policies that restricted mobility both internally and internationally. Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sought to maintain strict control over population movement to ensure centralised economic planning, implementing the *hukou* (household registration) system in the 1950s, which effectively tied individuals to their place of birth, limiting rural-to-urban migration and access to state services in cities.[98] Internationally, migration was largely prohibited, with the government viewing emigration as a potential ideological threat, as many overseas Chinese communities had ties to anti-communist movements in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia.[99]

However, by the late 1970s, as China emerged from the Maoist regime, Deng Xiaoping recognised the potential benefits of greater mobility, both domestically and internationally, as a means of integrating China into the global economy while alleviating rural poverty.[100]

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[92] Istituto Italiano di Cultura, "The Last Emperor ", September 2019.
[93] Yao Yao Mize, "Rise of Cultural Diplomacy in East Asia", *The Pardee Atlas Journal of Global Affairs*, 2024.
[94] Kevin Latham and Bin Wu, *Chinese Immigration Into the EU: New Trends, Dynamics and Implications* (London: Europe China Research and Advice Network), 34.
[95] Ibid., 38.
[96] Ibid., 32.
[97] Frank N. Pieke, "Recent Trends in Chinese Migration to Europe: Fujianese Migration in Perspective", *Migration Research Series,* no. 6 (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2002), 10–15.
[98] Kam Wing Chan, " The Household Registration System and Migrant Labor in China: Notes on a Debate", *Population and Development Review* 36, no. 2 (2010): 358.
[99] Biao Xiang, "Emigration from China: A Sending Country Perspective", *International Migration* 41, no. 3 (2003): 23.
[100] Ibid., 24.

One of the earliest and most significant economic reforms under Deng was the Household Responsibility System (HRS), introduced in the late 1970s, that dismantled collectivised farming by allowing rural households to lease land from the state and keep surplus production for personal profit.[101] As a result, agricultural productivity surged, but at the same time, rural areas experienced a growing workforce. Millions of farmers, no longer tied to collectivised work units, sought opportunities beyond their home villages.[102]

To accommodate this shift, the Chinese government started to loosen *hukou* restrictions, particularly for temporary rural-to-urban migration. By the mid-1980s, policies allowed rural workers to seek employment in urban areas under the condition that they did not demand urban welfare benefits.[103] This shift led to one of the largest internal migrations in China's history, with millions of *mingong* (migrant workers) moving to urban centres and SEZs in search of employment.[104] These policies, while initially aimed at internal migration, also had indirect effects on international migration, as the normalisation of mobility and the widening of economic disparities between rural and urban areas led an increasing number of Chinese citizens to consider opportunities abroad.[105]

A fundamental shift in China's international migration policy occurred in the early 1980s when the government of Deng Xiaoping legalised and actively encouraged emigration under the banner of economic reform. Whereas Mao-era policies had strictly controlled cross-border movement, Deng's government began to view transnational migration as a way to access foreign capital, enhance China's global presence, and strengthen ties with overseas Chinese communities.[106]

One of the first major legal changes was the 1985 Passport Law, which simplified the process for obtaining travel documents, enabling a significant increase in both labour and student migration.[107] Additionally, China's integration into global trade networks facilitated labor export agreements with countries in Asia and Europe, leading to the first large-scale movements of Chinese workers abroad.[108] By 1985, it was estimated that around 250,000 Chinese workers were employed abroad under state-sponsored labour contracts, particularly in construction projects across the Middle East and Africa.[109]

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[101] Gaofeng Meng, "The Household Responsibility System, Karl Marx's Theory of Property and Antony M. Honoré's Concept of Ownership", *Science and Society* 83, no. 3 (2019): 305,306, https://doi.org/10.1521/siso.2019.83.3.300.
[102] Tiejun Cheng and Mark Selden, "The Origins and Social Consequences of China's Hukou System", *The China Quarterly*, no. 139 (September 1994): 644.
[103] Chan, "The Household Registration System and Migrant Labor in China: Notes on a Debate", 362.
[104] Barry Naughton, *The Chinese Economy : Transitions and Growth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 217.
[105] Pieke, "Recent Trends in Chinese Migration to Europe: Fujianese Migration in Perspective", 12.
[106] Xiang, "Emigration from China: A Sending Country Perspective", 28.
[107] Pál Nyíri, "Expatriating Is Patriotic? The Discourse on 'new Migrants' in the Peoples' Republic of China and Identity Construction among Recent Migrants from the PRC", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27, no. 4 (2001): 640, https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830120090421.
[108] Pieke, "Recent Trends in Chinese Migration to Europe: Fujianese Migration in Perspective", 15.
[109] Xiang, "Emigration from China: A Sending Country Perspective", 28.

During the 1980s, China also pursued state-sponsored labour export programmes, particularly targeting construction and manufacturing jobs in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.[110] Agreements with foreign governments and companies allowed Chinese workers to take on temporary labour contracts, often in large infrastructure projects funded by Chinese investment. This strategy served the purposes of generating foreign exchange earnings through remittances and established Chinese diaspora communities, which later facilitated trade and cultural exchange.[111]

While migration played a key role in industrial growth, the increasing number of Chinese citizens moving abroad became an unexpected but crucial asset in China's global integration. One of the most significant effects of migration was the transfer of skills and knowledge. As China embraced Deng Xiaoping's policy, many Chinese students and professionals sought education and employment abroad, particularly in North America, Japan, and Europe.[112] The government actively encouraged this outflow, viewing it as an opportunity to cultivate a more skilled workforce for China's future. From 1979 onward, approximately 3,000 Chinese students were sent abroad annually to pursue their studies and acquire expertise in business, industrial production, and modern technology.[113]

While concerns over a potential "brain drain" were raised, the Chinese government implemented initiatives to attract these skilled individuals back. An example was the establishment in 1987 of the Financial Support for Outstanding Young Professors Programme by the former Education Commission, which had awarded 2,218 returning professors a total of 144 million yuan by the end of 2003.[114] To further support the reintegration of returnees, the government introduced policies aimed at easing their transition back into the country. In 1989, the Education Commission established 33 Overseas Study Service Centres across 27 provinces and cities to assist returning individuals in securing employment.[115] These centres also included Investment Affairs Departments, providing guidance for expatriates looking to invest in China or transfer technological expertise.[116]

Much of this migration was not part of a meticulously crafted state strategy but rather an organic response to economic opportunities and policy shifts with a long-term impact that proved highly beneficial to China's modernisation and international influence.[117] While the Chinese government actively facilitated migration through education policies and labour export programmes, a portion of

[110] Nyíri, "Expatriating Is Patriotic? The Discourse on 'new Migrants' in the Peoples' Republic of China and Identity Construction among Recent Migrants from the PRC", 645.
[111] Pieke, "Recent Trends in Chinese Migration to Europe: Fujianese Migration in Perspective2, 18.
[112] Ezra, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 321.
[113] Xiang, "Emigration from China: A Sending Country Perspective", 29,30.
[114] David Zweig, "Competing for Talent: China's Strategies to Reverse the Brain Drain", *International Labour Review* 145, no. 1–2 (2006): 72.
[115] Ibid., 73.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Valentina Pedone, "Chuguo, Leaving the Country: A Brief Overview of Migration Flows from China Abroad" (Firenze, 2013): 59-84, 67.

overseas migration developed independently through pre-existing Chinese networks and diaspora connections. In Southeast Asia, North America, and Europe, Chinese business owners acted as intermediaries between Chinese manufacturers and global markets, facilitating trade and investment flows, a dynamic that was particularly evident in Hong Kong, which emerged as a hub for foreign investment and technology transfer, accelerating China's economic integration into global system.[118]

Beyond its economic impact, migration contributed significantly to expanding China's cultural and diplomatic influence on the world stage, as overseas Chinese communities simultaneously preserved their distinct cultural identity and fostered engagement with local populations. Chinese restaurants, cultural associations, and language schools contributed to a gradual but sustained diffusion of Chinese culture, shaping international perceptions of China.[119] This process, often referred to as "diaspora diplomacy," complemented official state efforts by projecting an approachable and relatable image of the country through everyday cultural interactions, as diaspora, rather than being viewed with suspicion, came to be recognised by the Chinese government as a network of individuals capable of contributing to national development through skills and capital.[120]

The impact of migration on China's global standing in the 1980s was profound as it enhanced technological advancement, strengthened business and trade relationships, and subtly expanded China's soft power. Although initially a consequence of economic and migratory liberalisation rather than a state-controlled initiative, migration ultimately became one of China's most effective tools for global influence.[121] By deepening economic ties, encouraging knowledge exchange, and reinforcing China's cultural visibility, overseas Chinese communities played a crucial role in areas that even formal diplomatic efforts struggled to match, aligning with China's approach to influence operations as one of the first nations to leverage society as a foundation for exerting influence in modern times.[122]

Rather than relying solely on traditional state diplomacy, China's approach to influence involved a more coordinated use of various national capabilities, where the presence of overseas Chinese acted as an informal yet effective means of shaping foreign perceptions and fostering attitudes that aligned with China's strategic objectives.[123] The presence of overseas Chinese communities worldwide thus functioned as a non-traditional yet effective means of influence, subtly advancing China's strategic interests in ways that extended beyond conventional diplomatic channels.

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[118] Nyíri, "Expatriating Is Patriotic? The Discourse on "new Migrants" in the Peoples' Republic of China and Identity Construction among Recent Migrants from the PRC", 641.
[119] Ibid., 641-645.
[120] Mayal Dinesh, "Chinese Global Exchange Diplomacy and Influence Operations: An Overview", *Observer Research Foundation*, no. 691 (February 2024): 7.
[121] Zweig, "Competing for Talent: China's Strategies to Reverse the Brain Drain", 66.
[122] Dinesh, "Chinese Global Exchange Diplomacy and Influence Operations: An Overview", 3.
[123] Eric V Larson et al., *Foundations of Effective Influence Operations: A Framework for Enhancing Army Capabilities* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2004), 2.

1.3 Deng Xiaoping's Long-Term Legacy in Global Diplomacy and Soft Power

Deng Xiaoping's redefined form of paramount leadership[124] changed the country's global positioning, transforming its diplomatic approach and soft power strategy. He continued Mao's policy of opening China to the world, but with a more pragmatic approach that was less constrained by ideological limits, leading to what Ezra Vogel described in his biography as a "fundamental transformation of China itself – the nature of its relations with the outside world, its governance system, and its society".[125] A defining feature of Deng's foreign policy was his "*taoguang yanghui* (韬光养晦)" philosophy – "hide your strength and bide your time" – which emphasised economic development as the foundation of China's international standing while avoiding direct geopolitical confrontations.[126] For Deng, modernisation could not be sustained without diplomatic and political engagement, which went beyond merely normalising relations with major powers to securing China's integration into economic and political institutions while preserving sovereignty and autonomy.[127]

One of the first major diplomatic successes of Deng's leadership was the normalisation of relations with the United States in 1979.[128] His visit to Washington that year solidified trade agreements and paved the way for technological, cultural and scientific exchanges, which became key pillars of China's public diplomacy strategy, fostering long-term cooperation and knowledge transfer.[129] By prioritising these exchanges, Deng Xiaoping effectively rebranded China as a nation committed to modernisation and global engagement, demonstrating the soft power potential of academic and technological collaboration. In 1979, following the normalisation of relations with the United States, Deng Xiaoping made a historic visit to the U.S., which included a tour of Texas, a visit that was notable for its emphasis on technological exchanges, as Deng visited several major American companies such as NASA and Ford Motor Company.[130] By engaging directly with cutting-edge American businesses, Deng sought to acquire technological expertise while also demonstrating China's openness to international cooperation, underscoring the importance of business and technological exchanges as key elements of China's public diplomacy strategy.

Beyond the United States, Deng also pursued stronger economic and diplomatic ties with Europe, recognising its importance as a source of investment, technology, and economic cooperation. The 1985 EEC-China Trade and Cooperation Agreement institutionalised economic relations between

[124] Shambaugh, "Deng Xiaoping: The Politician", 479–82.
[125] Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 693.
[126] Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy*, 62.
[127] Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 476.
[128] Ibid., 337.
[129] Ibid., 340.
[130] Ibid., 336.

China and European nations, reinforcing China's position as a rising industrial power.[131] European firms – particularly in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom – played a crucial role in China's development, facilitating technology transfer in sectors such as nuclear energy, automobile manufacturing, and financial services.[132] These economic partnerships accelerated China's industrial development and contributed to a shift in global perceptions, as European governments increasingly viewed China as a key economic player rather than an ideological adversary.

Deng also recognised the significance of multilateral diplomacy, as his leadership oversaw China's entry into the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in 1980 – moves that were essential in attracting foreign investment and loans, which facilitated the country's early industrial reforms.[133] Additionally, he expanded diplomatic and trade relations with Japan and Southeast Asia, securing economic agreements that accelerated China's modernisation.[134]

However, Deng's diplomatic pragmatism extended beyond economic and political agreements, shaping China's cultural and public diplomacy in ways that strengthened its global presence and influence. As previously discussed, this influence materialised through key initiatives that showcased China's rich heritage and deepened its international engagement. Starting from 1979, nearly 3,000 Chinese students were sent abroad to study each year, particularly in Europe and the United States, returning with expertise that contributed to China's technological advancement and economic reform.[135] Meanwhile, China actively promoted its cultural heritage through exhibitions such as *The Silk Road: Treasures of Tang China* at the British Museum in 1983, which reinforced China's historical identity while fostering diplomatic goodwill.[136]

Migration also emerged as a key instrument of China's global engagement during Deng's era. The relaxation of mobility restrictions and the 1985 Passport Law led to an increase in Chinese migration to Europe, particularly to Italy, France, and the United Kingdom, where overseas Chinese communities played a pivotal role in economic and cultural integration, becoming informal agents of China's soft power.[137] Unlike state-led diplomacy, this migration-driven public diplomacy operated at the grassroots level, enhancing China's influence beyond official narratives.[138] This combination

[131] United Kingdom and People's Republic of China, "Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation between the European Economic Community and the People's Republic of China".
[132] Ibid.
[133] Kau and Marsh, *China in The Era of Deng Xiaoping*, 25.
[134] Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy*, 48.
[135] Xiang, "Emigration from China: A Sending Country Perspective", 30.
[136] Ji, "Cultural Reconstruction Beyond Borders: An Analysis of the Evolution of Chinese Art Exhibitions Abroad in the 20th Century".
[137] Nyíri, "Expatriating Is Patriotic? The Discourse on 'new Migrants' in the Peoples' Republic of China and Identity Construction among Recent Migrants from the PRC", 640.
[138] Dinesh, "Chinese Global Exchange Diplomacy and Influence Operations: An Overview", 3.

of economic diplomacy, academic exchanges, and cultural promotion helped solidify China's status as an emerging power, no longer isolated but actively shaping economic and cultural networks.

Despite the success of Deng's diplomatic and economic strategies, his tenure was marked by profound contradictions that revealed the limits of China's transformation under his leadership. While he embraced global economic integration and public diplomacy to reposition China on the world stage, political liberalisation remained strictly controlled, demonstrating the extent to which Deng prioritised economic reform over political openness.[139] His governance combined pragmatism and repression and fostered unprecedented growth while simultaneously reinforcing government's authority, ensuring that modernisation did not translate into democratisation, because as Shambaugh stated, "he sought to make China strong, not democratic".[140]

The 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown starkly illustrated the limits of China's openness, as Deng's administration responded with military force against pro-democracy demonstrators, signalling that while economic reform was encouraged, political dissent would not be tolerated.[141] The protest movement, which initially emerged from dissatisfaction with corruption and growing social inequalities, soon expanded into a broader call for political reform, greater transparency, and democratic participation.[142] However, rather than engaging in dialogue, Deng's government framed the protests as a threat to stability, justifying their suppression in Beijing under the rationale of maintaining order in China and preserving Party control.[143]

The Tiananmen crackdown placed Chinese leaders in a precarious position, triggering Western sanctions and diplomatic repercussions. As the Chinese American political scientist Zhao details:

> France froze relations and became a haven for Chinese dissidents from Tiananmen. Australia cut back on aid and loans. Sweden put aid on hold and banned military shipments. Switzerland likewise banned military sales. Norway froze credits and new exports. West Germany delayed the signing of the already completed financial assistance agreement. In the United States, while the George H. W. Bush administration tried to save the relationship, it had to suspend all exports of weapons and high-level changes. Promising not to coddle tyrants to Beijing and chastising his predecessor for conducting business as usual with those who murdered freedom in Tiananmen Square, President Bill Clinton issued an executive order in 1993 to link human rights conditions for the extension of China's MFN status beyond July 1994.[144]

Following the violent crackdown, the Party found itself in a precarious position, facing widespread criticism from Western nations and a growing alienation from the Chinese public. The events of June 4th left the CCP more isolated than ever, particularly within China's urban centres and among its youth, as the suppression of the protests further strained the relationship between the Party and the

[139] Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 638.
[140] Shambaugh, "Deng Xiaoping: The Politician", 482.
[141] Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 617.
[142] Andrew J Nathan, "The Tiananmen Papers: An Editor's Reflections", *The China Quarterly*, June 2001, 724.
[143] Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 617.
[144] Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy*, 62.

people, with soldiers, who had once been seen as protectors of the state, finding themselves increasingly disillusioned with their role in the massacre.[145]

The incident also exposed deep contradictions within the Party's governance, because while economic reforms had created significant growth, political control remained rigid, and the government's failure to address growing demands for political reform left many dissatisfied. This event thus highlighted the inherent contradiction in Deng's legacy – on the one hand, he advocated for China's integration into the global economy, welcoming foreign investment, technological exchanges, and cultural diplomacy while on the other, he upheld an authoritarian political structure, ensuring that economic transformation did not undermine the stability of China.[146]

Beyond Tiananmen, Deng's tenure also saw increasing economic inequality and social stratification, unintended consequences of his market-oriented policies. The rapid growth fuelled by the Reform and Opening Up policy disproportionately benefited coastal cities and industrial centres, leaving rural areas economically disadvantaged.[147] As China shifted from a centrally planned economy to a hybrid system incorporating market principles, state-owned enterprises faced restructuring, and many workers experienced job insecurity, widening the gap between different segments of society.[148] Corruption within the Party and government bureaucracy flourished, as officials exploited economic liberalisation for personal gain, leading to growing public resentment.[149] Although Deng initiated anti-corruption campaigns, they were largely selective, targeting individuals rather than addressing systemic flaws within the Party apparatus, which allowed misconduct and economic disparities to persist, ultimately eroding public trust in the CCP and generating internal challenges that continued beyond his rule.[150]

Moreover, while Deng's foreign policy fostered global engagement, his cautious nationalism and emphasis on sovereignty often led to territorial disputes and diplomatic tensions. He strongly opposed the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which committed the United States to continuing arms sales to Taiwan and providing for its defence, and in response, he pursued a dual-track strategy by offering Taiwan a high degree of autonomy under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework while simultaneously threatening military action should it formally declare independence.[151] Simultaneously, China's territorial claims in the South China Sea became a source of friction with neighbouring countries,

[145] Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 640.
[146] Ibid., 617.
[147] Naughton, *The Chinese Economy : Transitions and Growth*, 217,218.
[148] Kau and Marsh, *China in The Era of Deng Xiaoping*, 260.
[149] Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 413.
[150] Andrew Wedeman, "Corruption by Design: Building Clean Government in Mainland China and Hong Kong, by Melanie Manion [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004]," *The China Quarterly*, no. 183 (2005): 728–31, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741005310435.
[151] Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 479–81.

demonstrating that despite its economic partnerships, China under Deng remained assertive in protecting its regional interests.[152]

Deng Xiaoping's leadership carefully balanced modernisation with strict political control, shaping China's long-term trajectory. His economic and diplomatic pragmatism laid the foundation for China's global ascent, yet his strong opposition to political reform entrenched an authoritarian governance model that remains intact today, reinforcing the belief that democracy was not a prerequisite for economic development.[153] Under his leadership, the CCP strengthened its grip on society, ensuring that economic liberalisation did not lead to political pluralism, as the Chinese leader viewed centralised authority as essential for preserving social cohesion and sustaining economic growth.[154] However, as Shambaugh noted "Deng failed to grasp the most fundamental of all Marxist precepts – the influence of the economic base on the political superstructure – and his successors may have to pay dearly for this obstinacy".[155] While his reforms propelled China's economic rise, his rigid political stance created long-term tensions between economic development and political stagnation, a contradiction that continues to shape China's governance today.

Despite his authoritarian grip on political life, Deng's diplomatic and soft power initiatives reshaped China's global role, fostering strong and harmonious international relations while securing the country's long-term integration into the global system.[156] By embedding economic strength, strategic diplomacy, and cultural influence into China's foreign policy, he laid the foundation for its sustained global engagement, demonstrating a strategic vision that would shape China's transformation in the decades to come. As Ezra Vogel noted:

> It is difficult for those in China and abroad who became adults after Deng stepped down to realize the enormity of the problems Deng faced as he began this journey: a country closed to fundamentally new ways of thinking; deep rifts between those who had been attacked during the Cultural Revolution and their attackers; proud military leaders who were resistant to downsizing and budget reductions; public animosity toward imperialists and foreign capitalists; an entrenched, conservative socialist structure in both the countryside and the cities; a reluctance by urban residents to accept over 200 million migrants from the countryside; and dissension as some people continued to live in poverty while others became rich. […] It is doubtful that anyone else then had the combination of authority, depth and breadth of experience, strategic sense, assurance, personal relationships, and political judgment needed to manage China's transformation with comparable success.[157]

Deng Xiaoping's leadership, though transformative, reveals a balance between the drive for modernisation and the need for political control. His pragmatic reforms and global outreach reshaped China's trajectory, yet they were tempered by an underlying tension: the push for economic openness clashed with the Party's determination to maintain political rigidity. This duality raises considerations

[152] Ibid., 662.
[153] Le, "Development and Authoritarianism: China's Political Culture and Economic Reforms", 5.
[154] Kau and Marsh, *China in The Era of Deng Xiaoping*, 543.
[155] Shambaugh, "Deng Xiaoping: The Politician", 490.
[156] Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, 714.
[157] Ibid., 694,695.

about whether China's international involvement was primarily driven by a desire to engage with the world or by a strategy to preserve the Party's authority while projecting a globally favourable image.

Cultural and public diplomacy emerged as vital instruments in this strategy, helping to bridge China's revolutionary past with its aspirations for the future. While the Party's authoritarian nature remained intact, Deng understood that soft power was key to strengthening Beijing's global partnerships. Yet, this approach was not without contradictions, as revealed by the Tiananmen incident in 1989, that exposed the limits of China's narrative of peaceful engagement. Despite this setback, China's public diplomacy grew increasingly intertwined with its foreign policy, helping to shape its image as a responsible and influential global power. Still, the tension between China's political control and its diplomatic openness remained a defining feature of its international identity.

In the end, Deng's legacy was defined by strategic compromise: embracing the forces of economic globalisation while maintaining an iron grip on political power. His approach to public and cultural diplomacy, alongside his economic reforms, laid the foundation for China's rise as a global force, with the delicate balance between political control and economic engagement continuing to shape its diplomatic strategies today.

Chapter II: Revival of U.S. Public and Cultural Diplomacy Under Ronald Reagan

2.1 Public Diplomacy in the Reagan Era: Restoring America's Global Image

The aim of this chapter is to analyse how the Reagan administration in the 1980s revitalised U.S. public and cultural diplomacy, examining the strategies, instruments, and narratives employed to restore American prestige, counter Soviet influence, and project U.S. values globally in the aftermath of the crises of the 1970s. The decade of the 1970s had a profound impact on the global image of the United States. A series of domestic crises – including the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the oil shocks, and the ensuing economic downturn – contributed to a shift in the international perception of U.S. international credibility, raising doubts among allies and adversaries about its leadership and legitimacy.[158] This uncertainty at home created fertile ground for external pressures to weigh more heavily on Washington's global position, as developments in the international arena, such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the rise of leftist movements in Latin America and Africa, intensified Cold War tensions and reinforced the perception of a declining U.S. global standing.[159]

Under the presidency of Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) many of these challenges came to the forefront. Carter sought to redefine U.S. foreign policy by emphasising human rights, diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation, departing from the interventionist approach of previous administrations and adopting a more idealistic – if not moralistic – vision of America's role in the world.[160] As noted by American professor Gary W. Reichard, "initially, of course, Carter had consciously cultivated his 'outsider' image, in order to attract the support of millions of Americans disenchanted with the political pros who had produced the Vietnam War and Watergate. And it had worked. […] The result was a widespread sense that Carter represented the promise of national redemption".[161] Once elected, his administration employed human rights discourse as a consistent communicative framework in foreign policy, integrating it into presidential speeches, diplomatic messaging, and public statements by State Department officials. This rhetorical emphasis was further institutionalised through the annual public reporting on human rights conditions in countries receiving U.S. aid, transforming moral evaluation into a visible component of diplomatic engagement.[162]

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[158] Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "Ending the Vietnam War, 1969–1973", *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, Foreign Service Institute, 2016, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/ending-vietnam.

[159] Odd, Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 340–49.

[160] David F. Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 145, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819971.

[161] Gary W. Reichard, "Early Returns: Assessing Jimmy Carter," Presidential Studies Quarterly, vol. 20, no. 3, *The Constitution, Progressivism and Reform* (Summer 1990): 608.

[162] Office of the Historian U.S. Department of State, "Carter and Human Rights, 1977–1981", *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, Foreign Service Institute, 2016, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/human-rights.

However, his tenure was marked by significant crises that further weakened American credibility abroad. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 led to the overthrow of the U.S.-backed Shah[163], culminating in the Iran hostage crisis, which severely damaged American prestige and exposed the limits of U.S. influence in the Middle East.[164] At the same time, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 underscored the resurgence of Cold War tensions, prompting Carter to respond with economic sanctions, the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, and an escalation in military aid to anti-Soviet forces, all measures that eroded domestic confidence in Carter's leadership and consequently his chances of re-election.[165]

Amid this climate of uncertainty, the 1980 presidential election resulted in Ronald Reagan's victory, ushering in his presidency (1981-1989) with a pledge to restore American strength and global leadership. Reagan's Inaugural Address emphasised the projection of U.S. values and culture as a fundamental pillar of his foreign policy, highlighting the importance of freedom, individualism, and economic prosperity as defining elements of American leadership on the global stage.[166] His administration would soon embark on a comprehensive strategy to rebuild U.S. public and cultural diplomacy, leveraging ideological messaging, economic influence, and cultural exports to counter Soviet narratives and strengthen transatlantic relations.

One of Reagan's early priorities was to distance his administration from the perceived decline in American credibility that had followed the Vietnam War and shaped the Nixon and Ford years. While the fall of Saigon had already undermined the United States' image as a global guarantor of democracy and stability, Reagan aimed to reverse this narrative by projecting a renewed sense of national confidence and purpose.[167] The fall of Saigon in 1975, broadcast worldwide, reinforced the perception of U.S. weakness, leading many allies to question the reliability of American commitments.[168] The Soviet Union took advantage of this moment, expanding its influence in Africa, Latin America, and Asia by positioning itself as a champion of anti-imperialist struggles and an alternative to Western liberal democracy.[169]

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[163] David F. Schmitz describes how American support for the Shah of Iran dates back to 1953, when the CIA orchestrated a coup that helped install him in power. The Shah was perceived as having protected Iran from communism, brought stability to a strategically important but volatile region, and fostered economic growth and modernization, all while remaining a loyal ally of the United States. See Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships*, 80–81

[164] David Farber, "Crisis, Chaos, and Jimmy Carter," in *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 9–34, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7sts9.5.

[165] Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, 328.

[166] Ronald Reagan, "President Reagan Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981", YouTube Video, 21:33 (C-SPAN, 12 March 2009), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpPt7xGx4Xo.

[167] Westad Odd Arne, *The Cold War* (New York: Basic Book, 2017), 312.

[168] Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 112.

[169] Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, 299.

Within the context of this growing ideological struggle, the Reagan administration sought to reverse the decline in U.S. prestige by making public diplomacy a central pillar of its foreign policy. Unlike previous administrations that had prioritised détente and strategic arms negotiations, Reagan framed the Cold War as an existential struggle between freedom and democracy on one side, and authoritarian control on the other, asserting at the start of his presidency that Americans should "begin planning for a world where our adversaries are remembered only for their role in a sad and rather bizarre chapter in human history".[170] His administration crafted a comprehensive public diplomacy strategy aimed at reasserting American leadership by projecting a renewed sense of confidence in U.S. values and institutions.[171]

A key element of this strategy was the use of rhetoric grounded in the concept of "American exceptionalism", which presumes that "America's values, political system, and history are unique and worthy of universal admiration", while also implying that "the United States is both destined and entitled to play a distinct and positive role on the world stage". [172] Reagan's discourse emphasised the United States' unparalleled role as the defender of freedom and democracy, portraying its ideological and political system as inherently superior to authoritarian alternatives.[173] This narrative not only reinforced domestic support for his foreign policy but also sought to inspire confidence among allies by dismantling the psychology of détente and delegitimising the USSR as an equal interlocutor.[174]

By invoking American exceptionalism, the Reagan administration sought to reaffirm the U.S. as the moral and ideological leader of the free world, as this vision was grounded in an unshakeable faith in America's historical uniqueness and moral superiority, that himself described as an "island of freedom", a "refuge for all the peoples of the world who yearn to live freely". [175]

This commitment shaped Reagan's broader approach to the Cold War, which rejected the notion of détente in favour of a more confrontational strategy based on realism, strength and negotiation.[176] As Federico Romero argues, Reagan overturned the perception that Soviet communism was an enduring and powerful force, instead attributing to it "an aura of vulnerability and historical obsolescence that many had previously attributed to the West, and in particular to the United

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[170] Ronald Reagan, "Toasts of the President and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom at the Dinner Honouring the Prime Minister", February 26, 1981, *The American Presidency Project*. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/toasts-the-president-and-prime-minister-margaret-thatcher-the-united-kingdom-the-dinner.

[171] Jack F. Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004), 54,55.

[172] Stephen M. Walt, "The Myth of American Exceptionalism," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/the-myth-of-american-exceptionalism/.

[173] Reagan, "Toasts of the President and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom at the Dinner Honouring the Prime Minister".

[174] Federico Romero, *History of the Cold War. The last conflict for Europe* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009), 253.

[175] Reagan, "President Reagan Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981".

[176] Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended*, 57,58.

States".[177] Reagan sought not only to challenge the geopolitical balance of the Cold War but also to reshape its public narrative, replacing the policy of détente with what he envisioned as an all-out political and ideological struggle in which the strength of the West would ultimately prevail.[178]

While Reagan's assertive rhetoric and emphasis on American exceptionalism reinforced domestic support and signalled a shift in U.S. foreign policy, its reception among European allies was varied. In West Germany, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt initially expressed concerns over Reagan's rejection of détente, fearing that heightened U.S.-Soviet tensions could undermine European balance; however, as Reagan's policies unfolded, his administration found a strong partner in Schmidt's successor, Helmut Kohl, who aligned closely with Washington in advocating a firm stance against the Soviet Union and supporting the deployment of Pershing II missiles as part of NATO's strategy.[179]

Still, Reagan's foreign policy did not receive the same support across Europe. From the early 1980s, Swedish-U.S. diplomatic relations were strained due to Prime Minister Olof Palme's criticism of America's military buildup and the Swedish government's consistent cooperation with regimes that were in conflict with the United States.[180] With certain European leaders voicing opposition to Reagan's hardline stance on the Soviet Union and his military interventions – reflecting scepticism toward American foreign policy – the U.S. administration intensified its public diplomacy efforts to counter these concerns, leveraging the United States Information Agency (USIA) and Voice of America (VOA) to shape perceptions of America across the continent.

Established in August 1953 under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the United States Information Agency (USIA) became the principal institution for U.S. federal public diplomacy, tasked with promoting U.S. interests abroad by disseminating information about American policies, culture, and values, particularly in the context of the Cold War.[181] The agency utilised a variety of media, including films, radio broadcasts and publications to counter Soviet propaganda and present the United States as a beacon of democracy and freedom.

The Voice of America (VOA), founded in 1942, served as the official international broadcasting service of the U.S. government, that was operated by the State Department until 1953, when was placed under the control of the newly created USIA.[182] Transmitting multiple times daily in various languages, it relied on a vast network of relay transmitters worldwide to disseminate news,

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[177] Romero, *History of the Cold War. The last conflict for Europe*, 253.
[178] Ibid., 254.
[179] Charles William Carter, "The Evolution of U.S. Policy toward West German–Soviet Trade Relations 1969-89", *International History Review* 34, no. 2 (2012): 235,236, https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2012.626574.
[180] Ola Tunander, "The Uneasy Imbrication of Nation-State and NATO: The Case of Sweden", *Cooperation and Conflict* 34, no. 2 (June 1999): 194.
[181] Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989*, 82.
[182] Ralph A. Uttaro, "The Voices of America in International Radio Propaganda", *Law and Contemporary Problems* 45, no. 1 (1982): 104.

commentary, and educational programmes, with the goal of promoting American democratic values and economic prosperity while shaping international perceptions of the U.S. during the Cold War.[183]

During the Reagan administration, the USIA and VOA played a central role in shaping public opinion across Europe, working to counter Soviet propaganda and strengthen transatlantic support for U.S. policies through strategic communication, cultural diplomacy, and media outreach. A key precursor to this expanded public diplomacy apparatus was Project Truth, created to address mounting concerns over Soviet disinformation and backed by the Policy Group, an intergovernmental think tank dedicated to formulating long-term strategies to counter Soviet narratives.[184]

In the summer of 1981, Charles Z. Wick, the then-director of the United States International Communication Agency (ICA)[185], became increasingly alarmed by the impact of Soviet propaganda on Western Europe. Convinced of the need for a coordinated response, he formally proposed an interagency initiative, and on September 1981, President Reagan approved Project Truth, tasking the State Department, the Pentagon, and the CIA with supporting the ICA in gathering intelligence and delivering rapid responses to Soviet propaganda.[186]

As part of its efforts to reshape European public opinion, the USIA launched extensive media campaigns to support NATO's missile deployment in Western Europe. In response to the growing anti-nuclear movements of the early 1980s, the agency produced films, pamphlets, and opinion pieces, exemplified by its collaboration with the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) to facilitate the screening of *The Day After* in November 1983, a television film depicting the catastrophic consequences of a Soviet nuclear attack on the United States.[187] These materials were distributed through European media outlets to strengthen public understanding of U.S. security commitments.

Meanwhile, VOA increased its broadcasting efforts into Eastern Europe – particularly in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary – in what can be characterised as a bold offensive campaign aimed at culturally challenging communist regimes within their own territories. According to the "Cold War Broadcasting Impact" conference report, in 1984 VOA reached an audience of approximately 130 million worldwide, with a substantial proportion – nearly half – tuned in from the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries.[188] This strategic move sought to open informational

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[183] Ibid., 103.
[184] Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy*, 409.
[185] Ibid., 361: "In April 1978, a new agency arose from the merger of USIA and the State Department's Bureau of Cultural and Educational Affairs (CU): the United States International Communication Agency, abbreviated as ICA or sometimes as USICA".
[186] Ibid., 408.
[187] Adrian Hänni, "A Chance for a Propaganda Coup? The Reagan Administration and The Day After (1983)", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 36, no. 3 (7 November 2015): 415, https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2015.1105514.
[188] Gregory Mitrovich, summary of proceedings in *Cold War Broadcasting Impact: Report on a Conference Organized by the Hoover Institution and the Cold War International History Project of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars at Stanford University*, October 13–16, 2004 (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2005), 12.

spaces within closed societies, using broadcasting as a means to foster critical engagement with regime narratives and promote exposure to pluralistic viewpoints.

While VOA served as the official broadcasting arm of U.S. public diplomacy, Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Radio Liberty (RL) functioned as complementary channels that, despite being privately operated, were part of the broader U.S. strategy to counter Soviet influence.[189] Their private status allowed them to engage more openly in direct criticism of communist regimes while VOA maintained a more formal, journalistic approach.[190] Together, these organisations provided a coordinated effort to undermine communist regimes by delivering accurate news and offering alternative narratives to state-controlled media across Eastern Europe.

Reagan's public diplomacy marked a decisive shift in Cold War strategy, moving beyond détente to actively shape global narratives. Through the USIA and VOA, his administration leveraged media and ideological messaging to counter Soviet influence. While these efforts successfully undermined Soviet credibility, they also intensified debates among U.S. allies, exposing fault lines between supporters and sceptics of Reagan's hardline approach. By broadening U.S. influence beyond military and economic power, his administration helped frame the ideological contest of the 1980s, challenging the narrative control of the Soviet bloc and intensifying pressures on its internal cohesion.

2.2 Key Instruments of U.S. Cultural Influence During the 1980s

The Reagan administration's public diplomacy strategy extended far beyond traditional governmental messaging and broadcasting. Recognising the importance of cultural engagement in shaping perceptions of the United States, greater emphasis was placed on academic exchanges, immersing European students in American institutions to reinforce a narrative of "material wealth, consumer culture, technological know-how, individual freedom, and political democracy".[191]

Simultaneously, the U.S. leveraged corporate diplomacy as a tool to promote its economic influence. Under Reagan's presidency, brands like Ford, Coca-Cola, and McDonald's became symbols of modernity and prosperity, embedding the *American way of life* into European consumer habits while simultaneously serving as vehicles for soft power.[192] Alongside these efforts, the NBA (National Basketball Association) transcended its role as a sporting league to become a medium for transmitting U.S. values. NBA's growing visibility, driven by its most iconic players and extensive media coverage, contributed to the broader cultural appeal of the United States, positioning basketball

[189] Uttaro, "The Voices of America in International Radio Propaganda", 105.
[190] Ibid., 106.
[191] Liping Bu, "Educational Exchange and Cultural Diplomacy in the Cold War", *Journal of American Studies* 33, no. 3 (December 1999): 394.
[192] Burton Yale Pines, "The Ten Legacies of Ronald Reagan", *Hoover Institution* , 1 April 1989, https://www.hoover.org/research/ten-legacies-ronald-reagan.

as both a sport and an expression of American excellence.[193] This section examines the role of academic exchanges, corporate diplomacy, and the cultural penetration of the NBA, illustrating how these factors strengthened U.S. soft power and ideological influence in Cold War Europe.

These initiatives illustrate a broader structural feature of U.S. foreign policy under Reagan: the integration of public diplomacy into a neoliberal model of governance, characterised by the strategic collaboration between state institutions and private actors. Rather than functioning as a purely state-led initiative, American cultural influence during the 1980s increasingly relied on networks involving multinational corporations, media organisations, and cultural industries.[194] This decentralised configuration aligned with the logic of soft power, which, as Joseph Nye later conceptualised, operates through the appeal of a nation's culture and values rather than through coercive means.[195]

The Reagan administration institutionalised this dynamic by encouraging private sector participation in the dissemination of American values, embedding diplomacy within a market-oriented logic of influence. This approach aligns with theories of neoliberal governance, in which state power is exercised through formal diplomacy or military means, but also through decentralised networks of influence operating across borders.[196] U.S. public diplomacy became a transnational project, sustained by non-state actors capable of penetrating foreign societies with widely recognised emblems, exemplifying a "privatisation of diplomacy" in which soft power was increasingly mediated by commercial and cultural vehicles.[197]

As part of its broader public diplomacy strategy, the Reagan administration expanded academic and cultural exchanges to strengthen ideological and political relations between the United States and Europe, with the Fulbright Program – initiated in 1946 with the Fulbright Act – playing a significant role in this effort.[198] The Fulbright-Hays Act of 1961 (Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act) formally articulated the overarching objectives of the programme, establishing its role in fostering international academic and cultural exchanges, as its primary purpose was to:

> Enable the Government of the United States to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange; to strengthen the ties which unite us with other nations by demonstrating the educational and cultural interests, developments, and achievements of the people of the United States and other nations, and the contributions being made toward a peaceful and more fruitful life for people throughout the world; to promote international cooperation for

[193] Charlie Donald, "Basketball Diplomacy: The International Impact of the NBA", *The Generation*, 28 October 2024, https://www.the-generation.net/basketball-diplomacy-the-international-impact-of-the-nba/
[194] Bill Ivey, ed., *Cultural Diplomacy and the National Interest: In Search of a 21st-Century Perspective* (Nashville: The Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy at Vanderbilt University, 2005), 30.
[195] Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power : The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006), 5.
[196] Simon Lee and Stephen McBride, *Neo-Liberalism, State Power and Global Governance* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 43.
[197] Crocker Snow, "The Privatization of U.S. Public Diplomacy", *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 32, no.1 (2008): 191.
[198] Bu, "Educational Exchange and Cultural Diplomacy in the Cold War", 395.

> educational and cultural advancement; and thus to assist in the development of friendly, sympathetic, and peaceful relations between the United States and the other countries of the world.[199]

At the beginning of Reagan's first presidency, during the 1981-1982 academic year, the Fulbright Program played a key role in fostering transatlantic academic exchanges, reinforcing U.S.-European ties during the Cold War. Western Europe was a primary beneficiary, with 681 U.S. scholars and students awarded grants for university studies, research, and teaching in European institutions.[200] These exchanges provided American participants with an opportunity to immerse themselves in European academic environments, promoting mutual understanding and ideological alignment. At the same time, Western Europe also sent a significant number of scholars and students to the United States under the Fulbright and related programmes. According to programme data, 1,919 foreign grantees from Western Europe received academic scholarships to study, conduct research, or teach in U.S. universities.[201] This reciprocal exchange allowed European students and intellectuals to engage directly with American institutions, fostering long-term networks of cooperation and strengthening the transatlantic partnership. Beyond Western Europe, Eastern European scholars and students also participated in these exchanges, albeit in significantly lower numbers, with 72 Americans travelling to Eastern Europe and 205 foreign grantees from Eastern European countries hosted in the United States during the same academic year.[202] These exchanges, though more limited due to Cold War tensions and restrictions imposed by the Soviet Union, provided a rare channel for academic dialogue and cultural diplomacy between the United States and the Eastern Bloc.

After a peak in funding of $38.8 million in 1966, the programme experienced a decline before recovering during the Reagan presidency, fuelled by the administration's public diplomacy ambitions and its confrontational stance toward the communist world.[203] Unlike the previous administration, Reagan's presidency (1981-1989) consistently increased Fulbright Program funding, strengthening its role in public diplomacy. After falling to $15.1 million in 1976, funding rebounded throughout the 1980s, increasing from $20.4 million in 1980 to $36.3 million by 1986.[204] This growth reflected the administration's broader public diplomacy goals and its assertive approach to the communist bloc, positioning educational exchanges as instruments of ideological competition during the Cold War.

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[199] U.S. Congress. *Public Law 87-256, 87 Congress, Session 1, An Act: To provide for the improvement and strengthening of the international relations of the United States by promoting better mutual understanding among the peoples of the world through educational and cultural exchanges*, U.S. Statutes at Large 75, no. Main Section (1961).
[200] Board of Foreign Scholarships, *Twentieth Annual Report: Fulbright Program Exchanges*, 1981–1982' (Washington, D.C., December 1982), 2.
[201] Ibid., 3.
[202] Ibid., 2,3.
[203] Lonnie R. Johnson, "The Fulbright Program and the Philosophy and Geography of U.S. Exchange Programs since World War II", University of Geneva (Geneva: 11 December 2014), 6-8.
[204] Board of Foreign Scholarships, *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report: Fulbright Program Exchanges* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Information Agency, December 1988), 3.

With Europe at the heart of this geopolitical struggle, the Reagan administration strategically expanded Fulbright funding to foster transatlantic cohesion, implementing country-specific initiatives adapted to local political contexts. In West Germany, Fulbright exchanges expanded significantly, deepening ties between German and American institutions since the programme played a crucial role in providing scholarships yearly for study, research, teaching, and continuing education in the U.S. and Germany, thus actively promoting international dialogue.[205] By fostering academic collaboration and cultural exchange, the programme not only helped improve perceptions of the United States in West Germany, but also contributed to restoring West Germany's international image and to reinforcing the connection between its scientific elites and the broader Western world, amid public debates over NATO's nuclear policies and Reagan's foreign strategy.

In Spain, which had recently transitioned to democracy after Franco's dictatorship, the Fulbright Program played a key role in integrating the country into Western Community framework. With the Socialists' rise to power in 1981 and growing anti-NATO sentiment among some party leaders, the Reagan administration intensified its efforts to strengthen ties through academic exchanges.[206] These tensions were partly eased after Spanish President Felipe González's visit to the U.S. in June 1983, when his support for deploying American missiles in Western Europe reassured U.S. officials.[207] Through university partnerships and research collaborations, the Fulbright Program contributed to strengthening Spain's integration into the transatlantic community.

In the Netherlands, the programme facilitated high-level research collaborations in economics and international relations, while institutions such as the Dutch Foundation for Fundamental Research of Matter (FOM) leveraged the Fulbright Program's benefits to promote scientific research in the Netherlands, further demonstrating its role as a mechanism for making ideas travel across disciplines and borders.[208] Fulbright exchanges strengthened academic and diplomatic cooperation, acting as a flexible instrument that adapted to the priorities of both the American and Dutch governments while reinforcing their collaboration in trade, security, and governance, further embedding the Netherlands within the Western alliance.

In Scandinavia the Fulbright Program served as a key cultural diplomacy tool, countering negative perceptions of Reagan's military buildup while showcasing American strengths in education and innovation. This effort was reflected in the evaluations of Scandinavian journalists sponsored by the

[205] Fulbright Germany, "About Fulbright Germany," https://fulbright.de/en/about-us/about-fulbright-germany.
[206] Lorenzo Delgado Gómez-Escalonilla, *Westerly Wind: The Fulbright Program in Spain* (Madrid: LID Editorial Empresarial, S.L., 2009), 98.
[207] Ibid.,99.
[208] Giles Scott-Smith, "The Fulbright Program in the Netherlands: An Example of Science Diplomacy", in *Cold War Science and the Transatlantic Circulation of Knowledge*, ed. Jeroen Van Dongen, Friso Hoeneveld, and Abel Streefland (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 181.

Denmark-America Foundation and the Fulbright Program, which highlighted the uniqueness of their experience and a broader understanding of American society, with longer stays in the U.S. encouraging a less critical attitude toward the U.S. as a NATO ally after the Vietnam War.[209]

Through academic and cultural exchanges, the Fulbright Program became a central pillar of U.S. soft power in Cold War Europe, fostering mutual understanding and strengthening cooperation by providing scholars and policymakers with direct exposure to American institutions and ideas, encouraging dialogue, intellectual collaboration, and deeper diplomatic relations.[210]

While academic exchanges were a key diplomatic tool in strengthening transatlantic ties, the expansion of U.S. consumerism played an equally significant role in shaping European perceptions of the United States. The Reagan administration leveraged corporate diplomacy beyond traditional political messaging to promote modernity, prosperity, and the *American way of life*, reinforcing the ideological battle against the Soviet Union, where consumer culture served as a tangible demonstration of the perceived superiority of the capitalist system.[211] McDonald's, along with other iconic American brands such as Coca-Cola, Ford, Levi's and Marlboro, became a representation of economic prosperity and individual choice, central values of the Reagan administration's narrative.

To contextualise the role of corporate diplomacy during the Reagan era, it is worth noting that, although the term had not yet entered common usage, the strategies and practices it encapsulates were already underway.[212] The expansion of American Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) in Europe during the 1980s went beyond economic growth, actively reinforcing U.S. cultural influence and ideological alignment with Western allies. According to Ordeix-Rigo and Duarte, corporations and MNEs that engage in corporate diplomacy aim "to become global interlocutors; to achieve a true, lasting 'support of the publics' and not a mere and occasional 'public support'".[213] While this definition was formulated later, it aptly describes how American MNEs under Reagan's presidency functioned as extensions of soft power, fostering public trust, legitimacy, and cultural penetration in Europe as part of the broader Cold War ideological conflict.

During the 1980s, McDonald's became one of the most visible symbols of U.S. consumer culture in Europe, representing the spread of American values into everyday life, an expansion aligned with

[209] Anders Bo Rasmussen, "Educational Exchange as a Cold Weapon: American Influence on Danish Journalists after World II", *American Studies in Scandinavia* 44, no. 2 (30 November 2015): 22.
[210] Bu, "Educational Exchange and Cultural Diplomacy in the Cold War", 414.
[211] Alan P. Dobson, "The Reagan Administration, Economic Warfare, and Starting to Close Down the Cold War", *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 3 (2005): 532.
[212] Michelle K. Westermann-Behaylo, Kathleen Rehbein, and Timothy Fort, "Enhancing the Concept of Corporate Diplomacy: Encompassing Political Corporate Social Responsibility, International Relations, and Peace through Commerce", *Academy of Management Perspectives* 29, no. 4 (November 2015): 389, https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2013.0133.
[213] E. Ordeix-Rigo and J. Duarte, "From Public Diplomacy to Corporate Diplomacy: Increasing Corporation's Legitimacy and Influence", *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 4 (2009): 559.

what the sociologist George Ritzer defines as "*McDonaldization*" – the process by which the principles of fast-food restaurants, such as efficiency, predictability, and standardisation, increasingly shape not only American society but also the rest of the world.[214]

With its expansion, the brand faced both acceptance and resistance, as its fast and affordable dining model contrasted with traditional European food cultures, and the global exportation of its fast-food system turned the Big Mac into a symbol of the homogenising threat posed by the spread of the American way of life, reinforcing anxieties about cultural uniformity and the erosion of local traditions.[215] In response, McDonald's adjusted its approach, incorporating localised adaptations to navigate cultural sensitivities while reinforcing its global influence.

In West Germany, where the first McDonald's had opened in Munich in December 1971, the brand saw rapid growth in the 1980s, capitalising on an increasingly mobile and urban workforce that embraced fast food as a symbol of modernisation.[216] However, concerns over *Americanisation* persisted, particularly among critics who viewed McDonald's as a threat to local culinary traditions. Furthermore, in 1985, German journalist Günter Wallraff published the book *Ganz unten*, highlighting poor working and hygiene conditions in McDonald's restaurants, which intensified public scrutiny of the company's practices.[217] To mitigate resistance and align with local preferences, McDonald's not only added beer to its menu to accommodate Germany's strong beer culture but also introduced regionally inspired items, such as the Big Rösti, featuring potato pancakes, and the Nürnburger, a sandwich with Nuernberger sausages.[218] Additionally, McDonald's sourced local ingredients, such as organic beef from German and Austrian farms, to enhance freshness and support the local economy.[219]

In Spain, McDonald's entered the market in 1981, a time when the country was undergoing significant political and economic transformations following dictatorship and positioned itself as a symbol of internationalisation, appealing to younger consumers eager to embrace global brands. However, like in Germany, adaptation was key to McDonald's success – the company introduced items tailored to Spanish tastes, such as gazpacho, a traditional cold soup, and the McIberica burger, featuring Spanish ham and Manchego cheese, reinforcing corporate diplomacy strategies that balanced global branding with local sensibilities.[220] Such strategies illustrate how American

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[214] George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1993), 1. See also: George Ritzer, "Globalization and McDonaldization. Does It Al Amount to ... Nothing?" in *McDonaldization: The Reader* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2006), 335-350.
[215] Giulia Crisanti, *Europeans Are Lovin' It? Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Responses to American Global Businesses in Italy and France*, 1886–2015 (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 150.
[216] McDonald's Germany, " Unsere Geschichte," https://www.mcdonalds.com/de/de-de/ueber-uns/geschichte.html.
[217] Günter Wallraff, Ganz Unten (Colonia: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1985), 315-319.
[218] "The Truth About McDonald's in Germany: Singular Menu and Cultural Background," ABITA LLC & Marketing, October 28, 2024, https://1xmarketing.com/news/en/world-marketing-diary-241028083235/.
[219] Ibid.
[220] "McDonald's in Spain: Success Stories and Secrets from Different Industries," ABITA LLC & Marketing Japan, September 4, 2024, https://1xmarketing.com/news/en/world-marketing-diary-240904120719/.

companies embedded themselves within European societies, using locally attuned practices to legitimise their presence and indirectly advance U.S. public diplomacy objectives.

The expansion of McDonald's in Europe during the 1980s took place within a broader economic and ideological framework shaped by the Reagan administration's policies, aligning with the priorities of American economic and soft power strategies, despite a lack of evidence indicating formal collaboration between the two. Reagan's economic policies – commonly referred to as Reaganomics – were characterised by supply-side economics, deregulation, and a strong emphasis on free-market capitalism.[221] These policies favoured MNEs by reducing trade barriers and encouraging investment, thus facilitating the expansion of American businesses abroad.[222]

The deregulation of financial markets and the promotion of foreign direct investment (FDI) further enabled U.S. multinationals to establish a stronger presence in Europe. Reagan's administration worked with European allies to reinforce economic interdependence between the United States and Western Europe, presenting American brands as symbols of modernity and economic success.[223] This economic strategy had a broader geopolitical function, reinforcing the appeal of Western capitalism in contrast to the centrally planned economies of the Eastern Bloc.

Beyond ideological and diplomatic considerations, the structural economic conditions of the 1980s also played a crucial role in McDonald's European success. The European Communities' own movement toward economic integration – culminating in the Single European Act of 1986 – contributed to an increasingly open market for foreign enterprises.[224] By aiming to eliminate the remaining barriers to the single market, the reform redefined the European Communities as a more innovative and attractive economic space, thereby creating favourable conditions for the transnational diffusion of public diplomacy messages across its member states. In this context, McDonald's benefitted not only from U.S. economic policies but also from the internal dynamics of European integration, which favoured the establishment of multinational brands within the common market.[225]

This trend was not limited to McDonald's; Coca-Cola also played a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of American consumerism. Like McDonald's, its global spread and attractiveness stemmed from its ability to associate itself with a modern lifestyle and leveraging cultural connections with core values of the *American Dream* – such as democracy, efficiency, modernity, and self-entrepreneurship – serving as an ideological marker in Western Europe during the Cold War, where

[221] Eric Helleiner, *States and the Reemergence of Global Finance: From Bretton Woods to the 1990s* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), 147.
[222] Ibid., 148.
[223] Jeffry A. Frieden, *Global Capitalism Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 419.
[224] Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose & State Power from Messina TO Maastricht* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), 314.
[225] Ibid.

it was often positioned in direct contrast to the state-controlled economies of the Eastern Bloc. [226] Coca-Cola's global expansion was deeply intertwined with U.S. foreign policy, particularly as American officials recognised its potential as a symbol of Western.

The company had operated in Europe since the late 1940s, and although communist critics portrayed it as part of an American imperialist agenda, its post-war marketing efforts successfully positioned it as a universal symbol of modernity and consumer choice.[227] By the 1980s, Coca-Cola had become deeply embedded in West German society, functioning not as an imported novelty but as an everyday commodity, further reinforcing the association between American consumerism and economic prosperity.[228] Coca-Cola's expansion in West Germany during the 1980s was also driven by aggressive marketing, notably the global "Coke is It!" campaign. Launched in 1982 and introduced to German consumers by 1985, it strengthened Coca-Cola's image as not just a beverage, but a symbol of lifestyle and Western consumer culture.[229]

As Spain liberalised its economy and opened its markets to greater foreign investment, Coca-Cola positioned itself as a product of economic progress, benefiting from a new wave of consumerism among Spaniards eager to embrace global trends. Spain's accession to the European Economic Community in 1986 and its subsequent integration into the European market created a favourable environment for the expansion of multinational corporations.[230] By the mid-1980s, Coca-Cola became one of the most recognised brands in Spain, leveraging its image of youth and optimism, themes that resonated with Spain's emerging middle class. Additionally, Coca-Cola's sponsorships of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics reinforced its presence as part of the nation's economic and social modernisation, a connection further highlighted by its association with Cobi, the stylised dog mascot designed by Spanish artist Javier Mariscal, whose widespread presence in Olympic branding and Coca-Cola's promotional materials visually linked the brand to the spirit of the Games and their festive, modern image. [231]

Unlike McDonald's and Coca-Cola, which primarily shaped consumer habits, Ford's impact in Western Europe during the 1980s was largely industrial and economic. As one of the largest U.S.

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[226] Crisanti, *Europeans Are Lovin' It? Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Responses to American Global Businesses in Italy and France, 1886–2015*, 149.
[227] Nils Arne Sorensen and Klaus Petersen, "Corporate Capitalism or Coca-Colonisation? Economic Interests, Cultural Concerns, Tax Policies and Coca-Cola in Denmark from 1945 to the Early 1960s", *Contemporary European History* 21, no. 4 (November 2012): 598, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777312000392.
[228] Jeff R. Schutts, "COCA-COLA History: A 'Refreshing' Look at German-American Relations" (Douglas College, 2006), 132.
[229] Ibid., 127
[230] Nuria Puig and Adoración Álvaro-Moya, "The Long-Term Impact of Foreign Multinational Enterprises in Spain: New Insights into an Old Topic", *Journal of Evolutionary Studies in Business-JESB* 2, no. 1 (2016): 17, https://doi.org/10.1344/jesb2016.2.j011.
[231] The Olympic Museum, *La naissance de Cobi - Interview avec Javier Mariscal*, YouTube video, 2:47, published June 7, 2018. https://youtu.be/-qgJmBApe4o.

automotive manufacturers, Ford had long-established production facilities in West Germany, where its presence in Cologne since 1925, made it a major employer and contributor to the country's post-war economic recovery.[232] During the 1980s, Ford's operations in Germany expanded significantly, driven by technological advancements, increased demand for private vehicles, and deeper transatlantic economic cooperation.[233] The company played a major role in automotive innovation and workforce training, fostering technological exchanges between the U.S. and European markets.

In Spain, Ford's investment was particularly significant. The company established a major manufacturing plant in Valencia in 1976, but it was during the 1980s that production accelerated, making Spain a key hub for automobile exports across Europe.[234] Throughout the 1980s, the plant grew steadily, driven by Ford Fiesta production and Spain's industrial policies, becoming a key vehicle export hub and, by the end of the decade, output exceeded 310,000 vehicles, supporting thousands of jobs and boosting secondary industries like auto parts and logistics.[235]

Other American brands such as Levi's and Marlboro also served as conduits of U.S. cultural influence in Europe. Levi's jeans became a symbol of Western freedom and individuality in Eastern Europe, where they were highly sought-after, smuggled behind the Iron Curtain, or sold at high prices on the black market. Although Soviet-made jeans became widely available in the late 1970s, they never matched the status and desirability of authentic American denim, which remained a prized commodity until Eastern Europe opened to Western imports in the 1990s.[236]

Marlboro, a flagship brand of Philip Morris International (PMI) – one of the world's largest tobacco companies – strategically utilised its rugged American imagery in Europe to reinforce themes of masculinity, independence, and adventure, aligning with its broader global identity. As regulatory restrictions on traditional tobacco advertising tightened across European markets, in the early 1970s PMI redirected Marlboro's marketing strategy toward sports sponsorships, notably its partnership with Scuderia Ferrari.[237] By associating itself with Formula 1, a sport linked to speed, technology, and prestige, Marlboro maintained its aspirational appeal among European consumers, positioning itself as a lifestyle brand rather than merely a tobacco product. [238]

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[232] Yuji Nishimuta, "Nazi Economy and U.S. Big Businesses – The Case of Ford Motor Co.", *Kyoto University Economic Review* 65, no. 2 (October 1995): 14.
[233] Enzo Pontarollo, "The Automotive Industry: Structural Aspects and Cyclical Dynamics", *International Journal of Social Sciences*, no. 4 (1989): 560.
[234] A. J. Jacobs, "Ford Motor in Spain", *The Automotive Industry and European Integration* (Greenville, NC, USA: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 198, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-17431-6_11.
[235] Ibid., 200.
[236] Jukka Gronow and Sergey Zhuravlev, "Economic Development and Standard of Living in the USSR after the Second World War: A Consumer's Perspective", in *Fashion Meets Socialism: Fashion Industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War* (Finnish Literature Society, 2015), 75.
[237] Timothy Dewhirst, Wonkyong Beth Lee, and Lauren Czaplicki, "Philip Morris International's Formula 1 Sponsorship-Linked Marketing: Transformation From Marlboro to Mission Winnow", Nicotine and Tobacco Research 25, no. 12 (2023): 1839, https://doi.org/10.1093/ntr/ntad177.
[238] Ibid., 1842.

The expansion of American multinational corporations in Western Europe during the 1980s illustrates how corporate diplomacy functioned as a strategic extension of U.S. soft power, embedding American cultural and economic values within allied nations, while also reinforcing Montville's argument that the private sector is often better suited than government to foster the psychological connections and trust necessary for effective diplomacy.[239] While economic liberalisation and market integration facilitated their growth, brands such as McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Ford, Levi's, and Marlboro did more than merely seek profit – they actively shaped consumer behaviour, influenced cultural perceptions, and reinforced ideological alignment with the West. Through localised adaptations, strategic sponsorships, and engagement with European markets, these corporations cultivated an enduring presence that extended beyond commerce, subtly reinforcing the appeal of the American way of life amid Cold War tensions.[240]

Yet, American diplomacy was not confined to the realm of consumer goods and industrial investment, but it extended into sports and entertainment, where organisations such as the National Basketball Association (NBA) played a pivotal role in exporting American popular culture, fostering cross-border engagement, and reinforcing U.S. influence. The 1980s proved to be a transformative decade for the NBA, marked by a sharp increase in television audiences, a strengthened financial outlook, and league expansion rather than contraction. With the rise of home video technology and VCRs (Video Cassette Recorders), the league launched *NBA Entertainment*, a division dedicated to producing and distributing basketball content beyond traditional broadcasts, further embedding the sport into American and international popular culture.[241] During this period of growth, the rivalry between NBA players Magic Johnson and Larry Bird captivated American audiences in the early part of the decade, while Michael Jordan in 1984 propelled basketball's popularity to unprecedented heights.[242] The NBA strategically positioned Jordan as the face of the league, capitalising not only on his extraordinary athleticism and competitiveness but also on his off-court charisma, media outreach and high marketability. Through this multifaceted persona, Jordan came to embody a renewed and highly attractive vision of America for the global village – an image rooted in dynamism, individuality, and aspirational success.

The league's commercial partnerships with global brands such as Nike, McDonald's, and Coca-Cola further reinforced its cultural impact, positioning basketball not only as a sport but as an emblem

[239] Joseph V. Montville, ed., *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, D.C. Heath and Company, 1989), 481.
[240] Westermann-Behaylo, Rehbein, and Fort, "Enhancing the Concept of Corporate Diplomacy: Encompassing Political Corporate Social Responsibility, International Relations, and Peace through Commerce", 390.
[241] Tim Reynolds, "Stern, Talent Influx Led to NBA Transformation During 1980s," *Fox Business*, January 17, 2022, https://www.foxbusiness.com/sports/stern-talent-influx-led-to-nba-transformation-during-1980s.
[242] Ibid.

of American modernity, consumerism, and lifestyle. An example is Michael Jordan's partnership with Nike for the creation of the Air Jordan line in 1984, which became a global cultural phenomenon as Nike's marketing – including Spike Lee's commercials with the hip-hop character Mars Blackmon – depicted Jordan as both a mainstream icon and a symbol of hip-hop's countercultural appeal.[243] The Air Jordans, priced as a premium product, became a status symbol, particularly among Black youth, and were widely referenced in music and street culture.[244] Beyond Nike, Jordan also appeared in numerous commercials for Coca-Cola, further embedding basketball within global consumer culture, notably as the face of Coca-Cola's "Can't Beat the Real Thing" campaign, which reinforced his authenticity and marketability as a global icon.[245] In 1987, McDonald's launched the "Large Fries for 'Small Fries'" campaign in collaboration with the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) to raise funds and awareness for muscular dystrophy research. Featuring Michael Jordan alongside Mikey Neufeldt, the MDA's national poster child for that year, this advertisement exemplifies how Jordan's growing global influence was leveraged by corporate brands to enhance their market appeal and social credibility.[246] This campaign was part of Jordan's broader engagement in McDonald's advertising, which would reach its peak in the 1990s with the TV spot "Nothing But Net" featuring Larry Bird.[247] By placing Jordan at the centre of major global advertising campaigns, American consumer culture was not only promoted but actively embedded into global popular imagination through sports diplomacy. Through this process, the NBA did not simply export a sport – it exported a lifestyle, a set of values, and an aspirational identity tied to the American dream.

In the 1980s, NBA began to exert a significant influence on European basketball, notably in countries like Germany, Spain, and Yugoslavia, marking a transformative era in which the exchange of playing styles, coaching techniques, and player movements between the U.S. and Europe reshaped the basketball landscape in these nations. Yugoslavia's basketball scene in the 1980s was characterised by remarkable talent and success on the international stage. The nation's investment in sports infrastructure and youth development programmes, exemplified by hosting the 1984 Winter Olympic Games in Sarajevo – the first Olympics in Yugoslav history and only the second hosted beyond the Iron Curtain – led to the emergence of exceptional players who would later impact both

[243] Joshua Wright, "Be Like Mike?: The Black Athlete's Dilemma", *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 4, no. 2 (2016): 10, https://doi.org/10.2979/spectrum.4.2.01.
[244] Ibid.
[245] Internet Archive, "Michael Jordan Bulls Nike 1990 Coke Poster Ad Basketball Card Program VTG". https://archive.org/details/Michael-Jordan-BULLS-NIKE-1990-COKE-POSTER-AD-BASKETBALL-Card-Program-VTG-Rare84-mjuncfan.
[246] McDonald's. "Large Fries for 'Small Fries' – McDonald's 1987 Muscular Dystrophy Program". Advertisement featuring Michael Jordan and Mikey Neufeldt. June 1, 1987.
[247] VCRchivist, "'The Showdown' - Bird vs. Jordan McDonald's ad – 1993", YouTube video, 1:39. Published August 3, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1shK-j_u6LI.

European and NBA basketball.[248] One of the most iconic figures was Dražen Petrović, whose career began in Europe, where he showcased his scoring ability and competitive spirit, before moving to the NBA in 1989 to join the Portland Trail Blazers, which marked a significant moment as one of the pioneering European players in the league.[249] The Yugoslav national team's success during this period was also noteworthy. They won the gold medal at the 1990 FIBA World Championship, showcasing their dominance and the effectiveness of their basketball system.[250]

In Germany, basketball's growing popularity in the 1980s laid the foundation for future developments, and although the NBA's immediate influence was limited, this period set the stage for the emergence of future German NBA stars. German-born Detlef Schrempf initially moved to the United States for his studies but soon transitioned to basketball, joining the NBA in the mid-1980s. His success, marked by two NBA Sixth Man of the Year awards and appearances in two Olympic Games, played a pivotal role in inspiring a new generation of German players and boosting the sport's popularity in his country.[251] The German national team's participation in international competitions contributed to the sport's growth. Their performances helped raise the profile of basketball in Germany and set the stage for future successes, including their EuroBasket victory in 1993.[252]

Spain's basketball evolution in the 1980s was marked by significant strides in both domestic and international arenas. The establishment of a competitive national league, the Liga ACB, in 1983, provided a platform for local talent to develop and compete at high levels, and the influence of American basketball was evident in the adoption of more dynamic playing styles and the integration of advanced coaching techniques.[253] Spanish clubs began to attract foreign talent, including American players, which elevated the competition and provided local athletes with exposure to diverse playing styles. The Spanish national team's performances improved during this decade, highlighted by a silver medal at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, an achievement that underscored Spain's growing prominence in international basketball and reflected the positive impact of integrating aspects of American brand of basketball into their national system.[254]

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[248] Tobias Colangelo, "'250 steps': the history of the world champion Jugo-basketball", *East Journal*, April 21, 2020, https://www.eastjournal.net/archives/110266.

[249] "Dražen Petrović – NBA Career", *Dražen Petrović Memorial Center*, https://www.mmcdrazenpetrovic.hr/en/karijera/nba/.

[250] FIBA. "The Best of 1990 World Cup: Kukoc, Petrovic, Divac lead Yugoslavia to third title, Oscar Schmidt puts on show.", May 25, 2023, https://www.fiba.basketball/en/news/basketballworldcup-2023-classic-games-yugoslavia-crowned-world-champions-in-1990.

[251] Olympics.com."Detlef Schrempf." *Olympics results*, https://www.olympics.com/it/atleti/detlef-schrempf.

[252] FIBA. "History of FIBA EuroBasket." *FIBA Basketball*, https://www.fiba.basketball/en/history/208-fiba-eurobasket/1864.

[253] David J. Berri, Christian Deutscher, and Arturo Galletti, "Born in the USA: National Origin Effects on Time Allocation in U.S. and Spanish Professional Basketball", *Review*, May 2015, 41.

[254] Olympedia. "Basketball at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics." *Olympedia*, https://www.olympedia.org/editions/21/sports/BKB.

During the 1980s, basketball's growing allure in Europe did not advance only through private, commercial channels; it was also amplified by U.S. public diplomacy. After President Reagan's centralisation of the management of public diplomacy, the United States Information Agency (USIA) aligned cultural outreach with strategic objectives and equipped posts to reach youth audiences in Western Europe. Concretely, USIA's WORLDNET satellite TV service and the Voice of America supplied interviews, features, and broadcast-ready material that placed basketball in foreign media schedules, helping frame international competitions as ideological arenas where the United States and the Soviet Union vied for cultural supremacy through athletic achievement.[255] Within this publicly backed framework, basketball's rapid growth in Europe became a deliberate extension of U.S. influence beyond traditional diplomacy. The NBA's expansion – including preseason tours and transatlantic showcase games in the late 1980s – exemplified a form of sports diplomacy: it embedded American values into everyday life and, in the Cold War's ideological arena, subtly reinforced U.S. influence with a "virtuous form of soft power," which U.S. public diplomacy sought to leverage by packaging on-court excellence as cultural narrative. [256]

The 1980s marked a pivotal era in the evolution of U.S. public and cultural diplomacy, with the Reagan administration leveraging multiple channels to reinforce American ideological and economic influence in Europe. Academic exchanges played a crucial role in fostering transatlantic intellectual ties, shaping a generation of European scholars who engaged directly with U.S. institutions, values, and ideals. These encounters not only facilitated mutual understanding but also served to cultivate long-term political and academic networks aligned with American strategic interests. [257] At the same time, corporate diplomacy embedded U.S. consumer culture across the continent through MNEs like McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and Ford, which reshaped consumption habits and reinforced the appeal of market capitalism. The NBA's expansion into Europe further amplified this cultural influence.

These public and cultural diplomacy strategies were integral components of Reagan's confrontation with the Soviet Union. The administration's emphasis on private-sector engagement and cultural dissemination reinforced the notion that soft power could be as consequential as military and economic might in shaping global alliances.[258] Ultimately, the convergence of academic, corporate, and sports diplomacy during this decade highlights how the United States strategically deployed cultural influence to strengthen transatlantic unity, promote ideological alignment, and project an image of capitalist modernity that endured long after the Cold War ended.

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[255] Nicola Sbetti, "International Sport During the Cold War," *Novecento.org*, June 30, 2021, https://www.novecento.org/la-storia-dello-sport/lo-sport-internazionale-al-tempo-della-guerra-fredda-7122/.
[256] Derek Shearer, "To Play Ball, Not Make War: Sports, Diplomacy and Soft Power", *Harvard International Review* 36, no. 1 (2014): 57.
[257] Bu, "Educational Exchange and Cultural Diplomacy in the Cold War", 398.
[258] Nye, *Soft Power : The Means to Success in World Politics*, 12.

2.3 The Long-Term Impact of Reagan's Public and Cultural Diplomacy

Ronald Reagan's presidency marked a significant turning point in U.S. foreign policy, characterised by the strategic deployment of cultural and public diplomacy to counter Soviet influence during the Cold War through an assertive ideological campaign against communism. Central to this approach was Reagan's rhetoric, particularly his depiction of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," which framed the Cold War as a moral struggle between Western democracies and authoritarian regimes, "a conflict between good and evil, in which the United States was on the side of the angels".[259] This discourse was not merely symbolic, but was intended to undermine the legitimacy of Soviet ideology and leadership, as Reagan believed that exposing the moral and systemic failures of the Soviet Union would affirm the superiority of democratic governance, a conviction reflected in his assertion that "the ultimate determinant in the struggle that's now going on in the world will not be bombs and rockets, but a test of wills and ideas".[260]

Recognising the influence of public diplomacy in shaping global perceptions, the Reagan administration actively promoted American values as instruments of soft power, portraying the United States as a model of freedom, prosperity, and individual liberty. In this context, the *Strategic Defence Initiative* (SDI), announced by President Ronald Reagan in 1983, served not only as a military programme but also as a powerful tool of public diplomacy, reinforcing the image of American technological supremacy and ideological leadership on the world stage.[261] Conceived to be a defence against nuclear threats rather than an offensive strategy, SDI was framed as a moral and scientific endeavour to protect humanity from the devastation of nuclear war, reinforcing Reagan's broader Cold War rhetoric that cast the United States as the guardian of freedom and innovation.[262]

However, SDI also exacerbated tensions within NATO, as European allies, particularly Britain, were initially sceptical about its potential consequences, since British policymakers worried that the initiative could undermine existing arms control agreements and provoke further Soviet hostility, leading to a cautious and strategically limited participation in SDI research. [263] These concerns were further amplified by the manner in which the Reagan administration introduced the initiative, with European leaders feeling sidelined in the decision-making process and left to grapple with its

[259] Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, 348.
[260] Ronald Reagan, "President Reagan's Address to British Parliament, Palace of Westminster, London, United Kingdom, June 8, 1982," YouTube video, 34:01, uploaded by Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, May 16, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gm35tFTtsuc.
[261] Arnold Kanter, "Thinking about the Strategic Defence Initiative: An Alliance Perspective", *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)* 61, no. 3 (1985): 449.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Trevor Taylor, "Britain's Response to the Strategic Defence Initiative", *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs)* 62, no. 2 (1944): 217.

implications only after its public unveiling. As noted by Arnold Kanter, an American expert in U.S. foreign policy:

> Part of this reaction stems from the failure of the Reagan administration to broach the issue with its allies prior to the public announcement of SDI: most, if not all, European leaders first learned of the strategic defence initiative when they read the text of the 23 March speech. The reaction is not simply a matter of pride and pique. Always inclined to be a little suspicious of U.S. readiness to take its allies' concerns sufficiently into account, many Europeans see in the American failure to consult them in advance a clear indication that SDI is intended, primarily if not exclusively, to defend the United States. As such, the programme feeds European concern about American tendencies toward unilateralism, if not isolationism. [264]

Reagan's administration managed to navigate European scepticism and reinvigorate support for SDI through strategic public diplomacy, emphasising allied cooperation and shared security objectives, particularly by engaging Britain, a crucial European ally. The success of this approach was evident in the "Four Points" agreement with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, which helped to assuage European concerns and reinforce transatlantic unity on SDI.[265] Reagan and Thatcher framed SDI not as a pursuit for military superiority but as a means to maintain strategic balance in response to Soviet advancements, emphasising that any related developments would comply with treaty obligations and remain subject to negotiation to preserve arms control commitments. Highlighting deterrence, they strengthened the credibility of the Western alliance's defence posture while advocating for East-West negotiations to reduce offensive nuclear arsenals, promoting security through technological innovation and diplomacy rather than an arms race.[266]

Despite its contested legacy, SDI played a crucial role in shaping the perception of U.S. soft power during the final years of the Cold War. It underscored the Reagan administration's ability to use military initiatives as instruments of public diplomacy, demonstrating how technological advancements could constitute both a deterrent and a persuasive tool in the ideological battle against the Soviet Union.[267] While the full implementation of SDI was never realised, its strategic and symbolic impact endured, influencing both U.S. defence policy and global narratives about the role of technology in securing international peace.

As part of this broader strategy to position the United States at the forefront of technological progress, the Reagan administration also expanded its public diplomacy efforts into space exploration, a shift from military-focused deterrence to scientific cooperation that allowed the U.S. to engage its allies in a less contentious but equally strategic endeavour. This initiative was framed

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[264] Kanter, "Thinking about the Strategic Defence Initiative: An Alliance Perspective", 451.
[265] Taylor, "Britain's Response to the Strategic Defence Initiative", 220.
[266] UK House of Commons, *House of Commons Debates* (Hansard), Issue 1331, January 9, 1985, Written Answers, col. 441.
[267] Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, "Reagan's Strategy for the Cold War and the Evil Empire Address", *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 19, no. 3 (2016): 427–63, https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.19.3.0427.

as “the next logical step” in human progress, underscoring the United States’ commitment to scientific innovation and international collaboration, with Reagan tasking the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) with developing a permanently manned space station, allocating nearly $8 billion to the project.[268] This initiative became a tool of public diplomacy, as the U.S. actively sought European participation in the project. In his State of the Union address Reagan stated that: “a Space Station will permit quantum leaps in our research in science, communications and in metals and lifesaving medicines which can be manufactured only in space. We want our friends to help us meet these challenges and share in the benefits. NASA will invite other countries to participate so we can strengthen peace, build prosperity and expand freedom for all who share our goals”.[269]

Following Reagan’s public call for international participation in the Space Station programme, his administration actively pursued diplomatic efforts to engage key allies in the initiative. At the President’s request, NASA Administrator James M. Beggs embarked on a diplomatic mission to Europe, Canada, and Japan to present the details of Reagan’s proposal and assess potential foreign contributions.[270] These visits, along with the discussions held at the London Economic Summit, reinforced the administration’s commitment to international collaboration and highlighted the attention the project received from government representatives and scientific institutions, which led to the European Space Agency’s (ESA) decision to formally engage in the programme.[271]

Unlike the initial European scepticism toward SDI, the Space Station programme was met with greater enthusiasm, as it aligned with Europe’s interest in advancing independent space capabilities while benefiting from U.S. technological leadership. On June 3, 1985, ESA Director General Reimar Lüst and NASA Administrator James Beggs formalised European participation in the Space Station programme by signing a Memorandum of Understanding.[272] This agreement established a collaborative framework for conducting detailed-definition and preliminary design studies over the next two years, focusing on various potential components of the Space Station and representing a milestone in transatlantic space cooperation. [273]

By incorporating space diplomacy into his broader Cold War strategy, Reagan aimed to highlight the superiority of free-market innovation over the Soviet model of state-controlled research, thereby reinforcing the ideological divide between the two superpowers. The United States positioned space

[268] Finn Terence and Hodge John, “Space Station: The next Logical Step” in *The Conference on Space: the commercial opportunities*, London and Washington D.C.: NASA, 1 November 1984), 4.
[269] Ronald, Reagan, “President Reagan's State of the Union Address to Congress from the U. S. Capitol, January 25, 1984”, YouTube video, 48:17, uploaded by Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, May 9, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkCW04_aZ4Q.
[270] Finn Terence and Hodge John, “Space Station: The next Logical Step”, 7.
[271] Ibid., 8.
[272] ESA Bulletin, “ESA and NASA Sign Space Station Agreement at Le Bourget”, *European Space Agency* (Paris, August 1985), 84.
[273] Ibid.

technology not only as a means of national defence but also as a symbol of scientific progress and international cooperation, strengthening international relations by actively involving European nations in collaborative research initiatives. [274] This strategy was closely aligned with Reagan's public diplomacy efforts, which sought to challenge Soviet narratives not solely through military strength but by affirming America's leadership in technological advancement. This diplomatic approach underscored the role of scientific partnerships in fostering Western unity, demonstrating that high-tech progress could serve as a competitive advantage but also as a mechanism for reinforcing ideological and strategic cohesion within the Western bloc.[275]

This emphasis on space diplomacy reflected Reagan's broader strategy of revitalising U.S. public diplomacy, not only to restore American credibility after the setbacks of the 1970s but also to integrate technological leadership into a more assertive ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union. Unlike previous administrations, which had often relied on traditional diplomacy and military alliances, Reagan placed greater emphasis on ideological confrontation, making public and cultural diplomacy integral components of his foreign policy.[276] One of the most significant parts of this strategy was the revitalisation of the USIA. During Reagan's tenure, the USIA was expanded and modernised to carry out a more aggressive counter-narrative to Soviet propaganda, using media campaigns, films, and cultural diplomacy to shape European public opinion. Under Charles Z. Wick, its director, the USIA increased its budget and operational reach, launching programmes such as Project Truth, an inter-agency effort aimed at countering Soviet disinformation in Western Europe. [277]

The administration also intensified its use of international broadcasting as a strategic tool. Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe (RFE), and Radio Liberty (RL) all expanded their reach, particularly targeting Eastern Europe, where audiences had limited access to independent news sources. These efforts proved highly effective in Poland, where VOA and RFE played a critical role in amplifying the messages of the Solidarity movement, which opposed the Soviet-backed regime.[278]

However, Washington's soft power initiatives in the 1980s were not uniformly successful. In Scandinavia, for instance, segments of the public and political elites remained deeply sceptical of Reagan's ideological rhetoric and military policies, which they viewed as escalatory rather than

[274] Roger D. Launius, "United States Space Cooperation and Competition: Historical Reflections", *Astropolitics* 7, no. 2 (2009): 93, https://doi.org/10.1080/14777620903073853.
[275] Ibid., 94.
[276] Lou Cannon, "Ronald Reagan – Foreign Affairs", *Miller Center, University of Virginia*, https://millercenter.org/president/reagan/foreign-affairs.
[277] Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989*, 408.
[278] Uttaro, "The Voices of America in International Radio Propaganda", 105.

stabilising. Sweden's Prime Minister Olof Palme openly criticised U.S. military buildup, illustrating the limitations of American soft power in nations that prioritised neutrality. [279]

While Reagan found allies in Britain under Margaret Thatcher and West Germany under Helmut Kohl, public opinion in these countries was often less enthusiastic. In West Germany, anti-nuclear protests and peace movements gained momentum in response to NATO's Pershing II missile deployments, which many saw as increasing the risk of nuclear war.[280] To counteract public opposition, the USIA launched extensive media campaigns in Germany aimed at justifying the need for deterrence, emphasising the threat posed by Soviet SS-20 missiles. Similarly, in Britain, while Thatcher and Reagan maintained a close diplomatic relationship, opposition parties – particularly Labour and liberal factions – expressed concerns about Reagan's foreign policy, including his Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI).[281] The British government ultimately agreed to cooperate on SDI, but only after reassurances that it would not undermine arms control efforts.

In Spain, Reagan's public diplomacy played a critical role in reinforcing transatlantic integration during a period of political transition. Spain, which had only recently emerged from Franco's dictatorship, was deeply divided over NATO membership, with left-wing factions opposing U.S. military presence. Reagan's administration used academic exchanges, diplomatic visits, and media engagement to strengthen pro-NATO sentiment, particularly after Spanish Prime Minister Felipe González's 1983 visit to Washington, which helped mitigate Spanish concerns.[282]

One of the most successful aspects of Reagan's public diplomacy was its impact on Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland, where U.S. broadcasting and cultural exchange initiatives helped erode Soviet ideological control. In Poland, VOA and Radio Free Europe (RFE) played a crucial role in supporting the Solidarity (*Solidarność*) movement by broadcasting uncensored news and offering alternative narratives that resonated with the Polish population.[283] Western engagement, including U.S. broadcasting and advocacy for human rights, played an important role in amplifying Solidarność's message and pressuring the Polish communist regime during the 1980s. These efforts are believed to have contributed to growing dissent, potentially playing a role in the political changes that unfolded in the late 1980s. [284]

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[279] Tunander, "The Uneasy Imbrication of Nation-State and NATO: The Case of Sweden", 194.
[280] Steve Breyman, "Europeans Demonstrate Against Nuclear Weapons," *EBSCO Research*, 2023, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/europeans-demonstrate-against-nuclear-weapons.
[281] Taylor, "Britain's Response to the Strategic Defence Initiative", 217.
[282] Delgado Gómez-Escalonilla, *Westerly Wind: The Fulbright Program in Spain*, 99.
[283] Robert Brier, *Poland's Solidarity Movement and the Global Politics of Human Rights*, *Poland's Solidarity Movement and the Global Politics of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 213, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108565233.
[284] Uttaro, "The Voices of America in International Radio Propaganda", 105.

In Czechoslovakia and Hungary, U.S. public diplomacy also gained traction, particularly among younger generations, who were increasingly exposed to Western pop culture and consumer brands, reinforcing the attractiveness of the capitalist model. However, despite these successes, the Soviet Union actively attempted to counter U.S. influence by jamming broadcasts, restricting academic exchanges, and portraying American cultural exports as tools of imperialism.[285]

Despite these challenges, Reagan's cultural and public diplomacy efforts helped lay the groundwork for the expansion of American soft power after the Cold War. Under his presidency, public diplomacy was elevated to a core component of national security strategy, an integration that was formalised through directives such as National Security Decision Directive 77 (NSDD-77), which established a Special Planning Group within the National Security Council to coordinate public diplomacy efforts related to national security. NSDD-77 underscored the administration's commitment to organising and strengthening public diplomacy to effectively counter Soviet influence during the Cold War. [286] The institutionalisation of public diplomacy under the Reagan administration has had a lasting impact on U.S. foreign policy, making soft power a central element of national security strategy. The emphasis on attraction and persuasion over coercion, became a guiding principle for subsequent administrations, shaping their engagement in international relations.[287]

His approach extended beyond traditional diplomacy, incorporating the promotion of American values and ideals that reinforced U.S. influence while advancing economic and strategic interests. Central to this vision was Reagan's belief in the power of the free market and entrepreneurship as drivers of global economic growth, recognising that while government should not excessively intervene in economic affairs, it could create an environment conducive to innovation and risk-taking.[288] This philosophy shaped both domestic policy and U.S. engagement abroad, strengthening diplomatic ties while fostering the globalisation of American cultural and corporate influence, as free-market capitalism became an aspirational model for transitioning economies and the proliferation of American consumer brands, such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola, along with the global dominance of the NBA, extended U.S. soft power well beyond governmental efforts.

Reagan's approach was deeply rooted in the power of narrative, embedding public diplomacy within long-term strategic planning, shaping how the United States framed its role in global affairs.

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[285] James Critchlow, "Public Diplomacy during the Cold War : The Record and Its Implications", Journal of Cold War Studies 6, no. 1 (2004): 79.
[286] Ronald Reagan, "National Security Decision Directive n.77: Management of Public Diplomacy Relative to National Security" (Washington, 14 January 1983), https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd77.pdf.
[287] Gail Yoshitani, "Principled Realism in the Reagan Administration", in *Policy Roundtable: Does Reagan's Foreign Policy Legacy Live On?* (Austin, 2018), https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-does-reagans-foreign-policy-legacy-live-on/#essay3.
[288] Yale Pines, "The Ten Legacies of Ronald Reagan".

His ability to blend ideological conviction with compelling storytelling and effective communication reinforced the influence of soft power in advancing American interests. As Joseph Nye argued:

> Humans are storytellers, and the narratives that presidents use to explain their foreign policies define national identity at home, and can expand the domestic political space for a more enlightened definition of the national interest. Such narratives can also generate the soft power of attraction abroad that creates an enabling environment for the United States. But presidential narratives that show lack of respect for other cultures and religions not only narrow moral discourse at home, but they also weaken American soft power abroad and thus undercut our national interest. That is why the broadening of moral discourse is an important aspect in the assessment of presidents' foreign policies. Reagan had a natural talent for such stories.[289]

However, Reagan's cultural and public diplomacy was not without limitations. While it played a crucial role in challenging Soviet ideological control, its effectiveness was not uniform across different political and social landscapes. As Nye highlights, soft power is most effective when a nation's cultural and political values align with the credibility of its actions.[290] When rhetoric and reality diverge, soft power can be undermined rather than reinforced. For instance, while the administration framed the SDI as a defensive measure aimed at securing global stability, many European leaders – and significant portions of their publics – viewed it as a provocative move that risked escalating nuclear tensions rather than reinforcing collective security.[291]

Similarly, while Reagan championed freedom and self-determination in his presidential rhetoric, U.S. support for authoritarian anti-communist regimes in Nicaragua weakened the credibility of American moral leadership, as his administration framed foreign "devils and ideologies" as the root cause of instability in Nicaragua, overlooking the complex domestic realities of the region and reinforcing European scepticism toward Washington's interventions.[292] These inconsistencies revealed the limits of soft power when ideological messaging is not backed by policies that align with the values being promoted, demonstrating that attraction is insufficient without strategic coherence.

Despite these challenges, Reagan's approach reshaped the role of public diplomacy in U.S. foreign policy. His administration laid the foundation for the post-Cold War expansion of American influence, as the internationalisation of U.S. cultural and economic power accelerated throughout the 1990s and beyond. His ability to integrate cultural and public diplomacy into a cohesive soft power framework became a defining characteristic of U.S. engagement with the world. Future administrations, from Bill Clinton's globalisation policies to George W. Bush's post-9/11 strategic communications, would build upon the model that Reagan pioneered.

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[289] Joseph S Nye, "Soft Power and Morals in U.S. Foreign Policy" (Washington, DC, 2021), 3, https://spfusa.org/publications/soft-power-and-morals-in-u-s-foreign-policy/.
[290] Ibid.,1.
[291] Kanter, "Thinking about the Strategic Defence Initiative: An Alliance Perspective", 451.
[292] Walter Lafeber, "The Reagan Administration and Revolutions in Central America", *Political Science Quarterly* 99, no. 1 (1984): 1.

Chapter III: Public and Cultural Diplomacy of China and the United States in Europe: a Focus on France and Italy

In the 1980s, France emerged as a key site for both Chinese and American cultural and public diplomacy, reflecting broader global trends of ideological competition and soft power expansion. For the People's Republic of China, the decade marked a critical phase of modernisation and openness under Deng Xiaoping, which was mirrored in its outreach to Europe. France, with its historical ties to China and its active intellectual and cultural life, became a strategic target for both state-sponsored and grassroots Chinese engagement. Meanwhile, the United States intensified its presence in France by leveraging commercial symbols, academic exchanges, and the global appeal of American popular culture and sports. In these years, the French context offered a unique stage for the convergence, competition, and reception of these two soft power strategies. France's legacy as a former global empire, its central position in Europe, and its enduring cultural prestige made it a significant arena for public diplomacy, where foreign influence had to contend with strong national identity.

During the same decade, Italy represented a distinct cultural and political landscape in Southern Europe, offering both opportunities and challenges for the projection of Chinese and American soft power. While not as historically entangled with China as France, Italy experienced a growing Chinese presence through migration and trade, contributing to a form of grassroots public diplomacy that complemented Beijing's broader modernisation efforts. At the same time, the United States capitalised on Italy's consumer market and increasing openness to international flows, promoting American lifestyles and values through corporate symbols, media, and sports.

This chapter aims to offer an analysis of Chinese and American public and cultural diplomacy in France and Italy during the 1980s, highlighting how each power pursued distinct strategies within a shared context. By examining both state-led initiatives and grassroots dynamics, the chapter intends to underscore the differentiated modalities and receptions of soft power projection across two culturally and politically distinct environments. The chapter will conclude with a comparative section, drawing together the French and Italian cases to identify broader patterns and divergences in the two powers' diplomatic approaches.

3.1 France: Chinese Modernisation Efforts and U.S. Symbolic Presence in the 1980s

3.1.1 Building Bridges from the East: Chinese Migration, Culture, and Academic Initiatives in France

The 1980s marked a decisive moment in Sino-French relations, as the People's Republic of China intensified its public diplomacy efforts in Western Europe, seeking to reshape its international image and cultivate a network of cultural and political allies. France, with its tradition of intellectual

openness and independent foreign policy, offered an ideal partner for this new phase of Chinese outreach. The diplomatic relationship between the two countries, formally established in 1964 under Charles de Gaulle – making France the first major Western power to recognise the PRC – laid the groundwork for renewed political and cultural engagement in the post-Mao era. [293]

A central component of China's public diplomacy strategy in the 1980s was the orchestration of high-level diplomatic exchanges with key Western partners, including France. In April 1983, President François Mitterrand undertook an official visit to the People's Republic of China, demonstrating Paris's openness to engaging with a reform-oriented China outside the rigid binaries of the Cold War.[294] This gesture was reciprocated the following year when Premier Zhao Ziyang travelled to France in June 1984, marking a symbolic milestone in the consolidation of Sino-French relations. Zhao's visit underscored the importance of technological cooperation, trade expansion, and cultural exchange as foundational elements of a modern and mutually beneficial partnership.[295]

Beyond Zhao Ziyang's high-profile visit in 1984, Sino-French public diplomacy during the 1980s was also shaped by the earlier engagement of Deng Xiaoping, who maintained close diplomatic ties with French leadership. Although Deng did not undertake an official state visit to France during the 1980s, his 1975 visit to Paris – conducted in his capacity as First Vice Premier – proved to be a foundational moment in the evolution of bilateral relations. Received by President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Deng's presence signalled China's intention to normalise and deepen its ties with Western Europe during a period of transition.[296] This early visit laid the groundwork for later agreements in the cultural and technological domains and anticipated the reform-oriented diplomacy that came to define China's international posture throughout the 1980s.

Under President François Mitterrand, China-France relations evolved in a direction increasingly aligned with China's reformist ambitions, as the French president adopted an approach that blended commercial priorities with cultural and diplomatic engagement. Among the outcomes of this cooperation was the signing of the 1984 Agreement for the Avoidance of Double Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion with Respect to Taxes on Income, which aimed to facilitate bilateral trade and investment by removing fiscal barriers and creating a predictable legal framework for

[293] Martin, "Playing the China Card?", 77.
[294] Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA), "Arrival of François Mitterrand in China", INA MediaClip, April 1983, https://mediaclip.ina.fr/en/cab8300670601-arrival-of-francois-mitterrand-in-china.html.
[295] Bridgeman Images, "Zhao Ziyang, Chinese Prime Minister, and French President François Mitterrand at Élysée" photograph, Paris, May 30, 1984, https://www.bridgemanimages.com/it/noartistknown/zhao-ziyang-chinese-prime-minister-and-french-president-francois-mitterrand-at-elysee-paris-may-30/black-and-white-photograph/asset/1666920.
[296] Daniel Simon and Gilbert Uzan, "Valéry Giscard d'Estaing at a Dinner at the Chinese Embassy in Paris with Deng Xiaoping during the Chinese Premier's Visit" photograph, Getty Images, May 14, 1975, https://www.gettyimages.it/search/2/image?phrase=val%C3%A9ry+giscard+destaing%3B+deng+xiaoping.

economic actors operating in both countries.[297] Beyond its strictly economic function, the agreement played a role in China's public diplomacy strategy by signalling to Western European partners that the PRC was committed to governance, international legal norms, and long-term engagement.

In addition to fiscal and economic agreements, Sino-French cooperation in the 1980s expanded into technical and infrastructural domains. A notable example is the Agreement on Co-operation in the Domain of Roads, signed in Beijing on 4 May 1985 between the French Ministry of Urban Development, Housing and Transport and the Chinese Ministry of Communications.[298] The accord reflected both countries' interest in fostering industrial and scientific collaboration, particularly in the areas of road construction, traffic safety, and infrastructure management. As part of China's broader public diplomacy strategy, the agreement projected an image of modernisation and openness while reinforcing long-term cooperation through joint research, technical exchanges, and institutional dialogue.[299] More broadly, these official initiatives suggest that China's public diplomacy in France was not improvised, but followed a deliberate strategy that combined political visibility, cultural credibility, and long-term economic partnership.

Yet beyond high-level visits and formal agreements, a more diffuse and enduring form of public diplomacy emerged from below, driven by patterns of migration and local integration. The migration of Chinese nationals to France – particularly to urban centres such as Paris – represented not only a socio-economic transformation but also a key channel through which Chinese culture became increasingly visible, embodied, and woven into everyday French life.[300] During the 1980s, these flows intensified, especially from the southeastern coastal province of Zhejiang and, more specifically, the city of Wenzhou. This renewed mobility was enabled by the loosening of emigration restrictions under Deng Xiaoping's reformist leadership and supported by existing family and commercial networks that facilitated chain migration.[301]

France has long been home to one of the oldest Chinese communities in Europe, with its origins tracing back to the First World War, when around 140,000 Chinese labourers were brought to Europe to support the war effort. After the conflict, approximately 3,000 remained in France, establishing the country's first Chinese quarter in Paris's 13th arrondissement. While earlier Chinese communities in France were largely composed of migrants from Indochina or Zhejiang province, the 1980s marked

[297] Government of the People Republic of China and the Government of the French Republic. "Agreement for the Avoidance of Double Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion with Respect to the Taxes on Income", May, 30 1984, http://treaty.mfa.gov.cn/tykfiles/20180718/1531876965720.pdf.
[298] Ministry of Urban Development, Housing and Transport of the French Republic and Ministry of Communications of the People's Republic of China, "Agreement on Co-Operation in the Domain of Roads," *United Nations Treaty Series* 1458, no. 24661 (May 4, 1985).
[299] Ibid.
[300] Pieke, "Recent Trends in Chinese Migration to Europe: Fujianese Migration in Perspective", 88.
[301] Chan, "The Household Registration System and Migrant Labor in China: Notes on a Debate", 362.

a new phase, characterised by the arrival of migrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan, contributing to the diversification of the Chinese presence in France.[302] This shift was reflected in demographic trends: in 1975, the Chinese population in France numbered approximately 3,000, rising to 5,000 by 1982 and reaching over 14,000 by 1990, as migration fluxes intensified.[303] Unlike earlier politically driven flows, this wave was largely economically motivated and characterised by chain migration patterns, with transnational family networks playing a central role – a transformation that reflected a broader shift in Chinese migration trends toward globalisation and diversification in both origin and occupation, with Europe increasingly integrated into new migratory circuits.[304] Over time, around half of the Chinese population in France came to be concentrated in the capital, which developed three main Chinatown districts: the 13th arrondissement, Belleville, and the area surrounding Temple and Arts-et-Métiers.[305]

The 1985 television report "Paris: Chinese District", broadcast by TV3 Catalan Television, offered a rare glimpse into the evolving Chinese presence in the 13th arrondissement. The programme captures how this urban space had, by the mid-1980s, become a centre of Chinese communal life – its streets lined with restaurants, grocery stores, textile shops, and bilingual signage, all of which contributed to a distinctly transnational atmosphere. [306] The aesthetic, linguistic, and sensory features of these businesses – ranging from the visual language of Chinese signage, to the aromas of regional cuisines – functioned as subtle yet persistent forms of grassroots diplomacy, transmitting an image of Chinese life that was tangible and emotionally resonant. The news report focused also on the visibility of public celebrations such as the Lunar New Year, where colourful parades animated the streets and drew in French spectators. These events, though organised at the local level, had significant symbolic value: they not only reinforced community cohesion among Chinese migrants, but also made their cultural practices accessible and visible to the broader French public.[307] Through these daily encounters – in markets, shops, and street festivals – Chinese culture became a tangible, lived presence in the urban landscape, contributing to what can be seen as a form of informal, community-driven public diplomacy.

By the end of the decade, this presence had further consolidated. The 1989 news report "Chinois de Paris", broadcast on the French television channel Antenne 2, provides a compelling visual and

[302] Carine Guerassimoff, "The New Chinese Migrants in France", *International Migration* 41, no. 3 (2003): 136.
[303] Ibid. 137
[304] Thierry Mariani, *Chinese Migration to Europe: Challenges and Opportunities*, report no. 13843, Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, July 2, 2015), 13, https://pace.coe.int/en/files/19716.
[305] Latham and Wu, *Chinese Immigration Into the EU: New Trends, Dynamics and Implications*, 32.
[306] *Paris: Chinese District*. 30 Minutes, Directed by Joan Salvat. Aired March 1, 1985, on TV3 Catalan Television, https://www.europeana.eu/it/item/2051937/data_euscreenXL_EUS_35B59B69CCD1F81AD977185EEEFE9E6C.
[307] Ibid.

narrative record of this transformation. It highlights the growing influence of large-scale Chinese-owned businesses, including restaurants, bakeries, and food wholesalers like *Tang Frères*, which served not only commercial functions but also acted as important nodes of social interaction and cultural transmission.[308] The report illustrates how many of these establishments adapted to the host society by hiring French staff and offering "europeanised" menus, fostering spaces of hybrid cultural negotiation. At the same time, traditional practices – such as festive banquets, community weddings, and kin-based financial networks – demonstrated the durability of transnational ties sustaining the community.[309] In this context, Chinese commercial spaces emerged not only as instruments of economic resilience but also as effective agents of soft power, strengthening both the visibility and legitimacy of the Chinese community within the broader fabric of French urban society.

In addition, the practice of sharing a state's cultural heritage through cuisine and national food has increasingly been employed as an informal yet strategic instrument of cultural diplomacy – a practice commonly known as gastrodiplomacy.[310] In the case of China, this dimension of soft power became particularly evident in the 1980s, when Chinese cuisine began to play a quietly effective role in shaping cultural perceptions abroad. In France, the emergence of Chinese-owned restaurants reflected not only a response to market demand, but also a deliberate strategy of cultural positioning and economic integration. Some restaurateurs cultivated a refined atmosphere tailored to a French clientele, drawing inspiration from imagined versions of early 20th-century Shanghai to craft an environment that combined exoticism with elegance.[311] Attention to presentation, interior design, and service was central to this effort, as was the adaptation of menus to local tastes. At the same time, the increasing visibility of Asian communities in Paris – particularly in the 13th arrondissement – encouraged the multiplication of small, independently run restaurants, that were often family-operated and relied on informal networks for labour and financing, contributing to the development of a distinct urban micro-economy.[312] Culinary entrepreneurship thus served a dual function: it provided economic stability for migrant families while simultaneously offering the broader public a structured and stylised introduction to Chinese culture. In this way, the restaurant sector became a soft in form but strong in effect medium of gastrodiplomacy, through which Chinese migrants negotiated both their social integration and cultural expression within the French urban context.

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[308] *Chinois de Paris, Antenne 2, Le Journal de 20h*, directed by Jean-Marc Illouz, aired May 12, 1989, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/cab89018839/chinois-de-paris.
[309] Ibid.
[310] Fatin Mahirah Solleh, "Gastrodiplomacy as a Soft Power Tool to Enhance Nation Brand", *Journal of Media and Information Warfare* 7 (June 2015): 163.
[311] *Restaurateur chinois*, directed by Safi Faye, *Regard sur la France*, aired October 14, 1984, on France Régions 3, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/i04126269/restaurateur-chinois.
[312] Ibid.

In parallel with the growing network of restaurants and small businesses that anchored Chinese life in the urban fabric, public celebrations and festivals provided a complementary channel through which migrants asserted their cultural identity and engaged visibly with the broader French society. In mid-February 1985, the celebration of the Chinese New Year – marking the beginning of the Year of the Ox – offered a striking display of cultural expression in the heart of Paris. A large public parade animated the streets of the 13th arrondissement, where lion dances, martial arts demonstrations, and firecrackers created a vibrant atmosphere that attracted hundreds of onlookers.[313] Many French spectators – young and old – lined the sidewalks, some visibly amused, others clearly intrigued, as traditional Chinese performers advanced through the neighbourhood. The parade showcased dragons and symbolic costumes imported directly from China, revealing the community's effort to preserve and display cultural authenticity. The visual spectacle was accompanied by music, rhythmic drumming, and coordinated choreography, offering a striking contrast to the surrounding urban setting. A French commentator noted the increasing scale of the event compared to previous years, suggesting a growing confidence within the Chinese community and a rising public curiosity.[314]

These events placed strong emphasis on community cohesion and visibility. Chinese shopkeepers and restaurateurs temporarily closed their businesses to participate in the collective celebrations, while children in traditional dress paraded through the streets carrying symbolic items such as oranges and red banners. As these rituals unfolded, the growing presence of photographers and television crews signalled a rising media interest in what was increasingly perceived as a public performance of identity. Through these gestures and symbols, the Chinese District was momentarily transformed into a space of cultural affirmation – where tradition, visibility, and urban interaction converged to engage the broader Parisian public.[315]

While these developments unfolded largely through commercial practices and migrant networks, they must also be understood within the broader framework of China's public diplomacy strategy. In the 1980s, the Chinese government increasingly recognised the value of diasporic presence and cultural familiarity as instruments for fostering a more favourable international image.[316] Though not always state-directed in a top-down manner, many of these initiatives – including culinary visibility, festival organisation, and artistic displays – were facilitated or encouraged by Chinese diplomatic missions, cultural bureaus, or bilateral cooperation agreements. Their cumulative effect contributed

[313] *Chine : L'année du buffle*, written by Jean-Pierre Gratien, directed by Philippe Radault, report by Martine Laroche-Joubert, *Le Journal de 20h*, aired February 19, 1985, on *Antenne 2*, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA), https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/cpb85050555/chine-l-annee-du-buffle.
[314] Ibid.
[315] Ibid.
[316] Xiang, "Emigration from China: A Sending Country Perspective", 28.

to shaping a climate of receptivity and normalisation, making everyday forms of cultural engagement a subtle yet effective extension of state-sponsored soft power.

Alongside migration and commercial presence, the 1980s also saw the strategic circulation of Chinese visual and performing arts in France as instruments of cultural diplomacy. Exhibitions of ceramics and painting, as well as television and theatrical performances, served to project an image of China rooted in aesthetic refinement and civilisational continuity. These initiatives, often supported by official cultural institutions or carried out through bilateral cooperation, aimed to cultivate cultural familiarity and soften political perceptions through artistic engagement.

In January 1984, the Centre Pompidou hosted a public event organised by the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA) dedicated to Chinese television, offering French audiences the rare opportunity to view excerpts from a variety of televised content produced in the People's Republic of China. The selection included animated programmes, Peking opera, news segments, advertisements, and fashion shows.[317] Beyond the diversity of formats, the screening revealed the social and ideological functions of television within Chinese society at the time. Interviews with French viewers and experts – such as CNRS researcher Claire Quiquemelle – highlighted the degree to which Chinese audiences approached television with seriousness and attentiveness, often watching in near silence, with a discipline that reflected broader cultural norms.[318]

Particularly striking to the French public was the presence of advertising on Chinese television. While surprising for viewers accustomed to associating socialism with anti-commercialism, the advertisements shown promoted not private brands but generic product types, such as cameras or beer, reflecting a non-competitive and state-controlled approach to consumption. Quiquemelle emphasised that Chinese advertising at the time did not aim to foster consumer competition but rather served a symbolic and educational function, signalling modern lifestyles and technological aspirations.[319] The decision to host this initiative within the Pompidou Centre – a space associated with artistic and cultural dialogue – reflected an effort to present Chinese television as a cultural object worthy of critical attention; while not overtly diplomatic, the event nonetheless contributed to the informal circulation of Chinese imagery abroad, broadening French perceptions through curated exposure to China's ordinary programming.

Another notable case was the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, simultaneously held at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette in Paris, which brought together 100 contemporary artists – 50 from Western countries and 50 from non-Western contexts – in an ambitious

[317] Centre George Pompidou. "Télévision chinoise (18–22 janvier 1984)". https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/program/calendar/event/cEbMLjX.
[318] "TV chinoise à Paris", *Antenne 2, Le Journal de 20h*, aired January 19, 1984, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA), https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/cab8400313301/tv-chinoise-a-paris.
[319] Ibid.

international exhibition. Its primary aim was to create a genuine opening for contemporary artistic practices from outside the Western canon by challenging prevailing hierarchies in the global art world and selecting all artworks according to the same criteria, with attention to their rootedness in space and time, regardless of geographic origin.[320]

Unlike the 1984 exhibition "Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern", which juxtaposed Western modernism with so-called "tribal" art to draw parallels or contrasts, *Magiciens de la Terre* rejected this oppositional framing.[321] Instead, it sought to present all participating artists within a unified curatorial vision, as part of a shared field of contemporary creation. This inclusive approach marked a significant shift in the historiography of art, offering Western audiences the awareness that contemporary art not only exists beyond the West, but also thrives through diverse and complex aesthetic languages.[322] The exhibition thus played a crucial role in enhancing the international visibility of Chinese contemporary artists, positioning them as cultural interlocutors and contributing to China's strategy of cultural diplomacy through artistic engagement.

Three of the 100 artists invited came from China: Huang Yong Ping, Gu Dexing and Yang Jie Chang. These three artists, all of whom had only recently left China, were engaging with themes of memory, ritual, fragmentation, and political ambiguity, often through materials such as ashes, animal bones, raw clay, or calligraphic abstraction. Gu Dexing, for instance, exhibited plastic masses in an artistic practice aimed at releasing sensuality and instinct, as well as approaching intellectual truth.[323] What made their participation particularly striking was the absence of folkloric or stereotypically "oriental" references, in contrast with the dominant French expectations of Chinese cultural production at the time, as their work challenged the binary opposition between "modern" and "traditional" and contributed to undermining the exoticist gaze often applied to non-European artists in major Western institutions.[324] Their presence in *Magiciens de la Terre* thus served not only as a moment of artistic exposure but also as a subtle intervention in the field of cultural diplomacy, offering an alternative image of China – one marked by experimentation, rupture, and intellectual complexity.

Among the various expressions of Chinese cultural diplomacy in France during the 1980s, traditional theatre also played a meaningful role in fostering cross-cultural dialogue. A particularly illustrative example is the performance of Chinese shadow puppetry held in 1985 in Gilly-lès-Cîteaux, a small town in the Côte-d'Or region, as captured by the regional broadcaster FR3

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[320] Centre George Pompidou. *Magiciens de la Terre (18 mai – 14 août 1989)*. https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/programme/agenda/evenement/cTEXnL.
[321] William Rubin, ed., *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984).
[322] Centre George Pompidou. *Magiciens de la Terre.*
[323] Centre Georges Pompidou, *Magiciens de la Terre 1989,* exhibition catalogue (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1989).
[324] Ibid.

Bourgogne. Executed with remarkable precision by a troupe of Chinese performers, the show brought to life an age-old artistic tradition that blends handcrafted puppets, storytelling, and live music. This event, set in a rural and intimate setting, offered French audiences a rare opportunity to engage directly with a form of cultural expression deeply rooted in Chinese history.[325] Beyond its entertainment value, the performance functioned as a powerful tool of cultural outreach, introducing local spectators to aesthetic codes, moral narratives, and artistic practices unfamiliar to them. In this sense, shadow theatre served as a conduit for mutual understanding and intercultural resonance, reflecting how cultural diplomacy could unfold not only through grand exhibitions but also through smaller, emotionally resonant encounters.

While performances, exhibitions, and traditional arts introduced French audiences to the expressive and symbolic dimensions of Chinese culture, cultural diplomacy during the 1980s was not limited to aesthetic encounters. Parallel to these initiatives, academic exchange became a strategic and enduring tool through which China deepened its engagement with France, fostering intellectual cooperation and mutual understanding on a more institutionalised level. France was the first major Western country to establish a long-term scientific and technological (S&T) agreement with the People's Republic of China, signing in January 1978 both a five-year intergovernmental S&T accord and a two-year cultural exchange protocol. These agreements covered thirteen priority areas and included specific cooperation projects such as genetic studies, medicinal plant research, the creation of an S&T database, and a geological study. [326]

By 1980, roughly 200 Chinese students were officially studying in France under the auspices of these frameworks. In October of the same year, the Chinese Academy of Sciences signed an additional agreement with the French State Center of Science and Research, enabling reciprocal exchanges of scientific personnel and joint research activities.[327] These initiatives contributed to the rapid expansion of bilateral scientific ties, with further agreements in fields such as geology, metrology, agriculture, and nuclear energy. Despite some delays in implementation and concerns on the French side about relations with the Soviet Union, cooperation deepened, including academic and technical collaboration in space sciences, telecommunications, and nuclear reactor technology.[328] The scale and scope of these exchanges reflected both nations' mutual interest in reinforcing scientific diplomacy as a cornerstone of their evolving partnership. These exchanges served not only to train a new

[325] FR3 Bourgogne, "Représentation de théâtre d'ombres chinoises à Gilly," April 1985, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/dxc9801093436/representation-de-theatre-d-ombres-chinoises-a-gilly.
[326] Hayhoe and Bastid, *China's Education and the Industrialized World: Studies in Cultural Transfer*, 286.
[327] Ibid.
[328] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. *China's Science and Technology Relations with Western Europe and Japan*. CIA Report No. CIA-RDP83B00551R000200150004-8, declassified. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1980.

generation of Chinese scholars in French universities and grandes écoles, but also to foster mutual recognition of intellectual traditions and academic excellence.

While the 1980s saw a steady institutionalisation of Sino-French academic and scientific cooperation, the political events of 1989 introduced a new layer of complexity to this framework. In particular, the Tiananmen Square repression reshaped the context in which Chinese students and scholars engaged with their French counterparts, raising questions about the intersection of academic exchange and political dissent. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square repression, many Chinese students living abroad publicly voiced their opposition to the violent crackdown. In Paris, protests and demonstrations expressed solidarity with the democratic aspirations of those who had mobilised in Beijing. Despite these tensions, French authorities did not suspend the students' residence permits, allowing them to continue their academic activities and maintaining the regular functioning of cultural and educational exchanges. [329] This attitude reflected France's broader commitment to preserving the structures of intellectual and cultural cooperation even in times of political crisis. While the Chinese government did not curtail its international academic programmes in response to these events, the protests highlighted the complex and sometimes unpredictable implications of cultural diplomacy. [330]

In the following years, Chinese authorities became increasingly attentive to the political contexts in which international exchanges unfolded. While they did not abandon the strategy of promoting national image and influence through educational cooperation, the events of 1989 left a lasting imprint on the way such exchanges were conceived and managed. The experience of student mobilisation abroad underscored that academic diplomacy, though resilient, could not entirely shield itself from political tensions. In this sense, the legacy of 1989 – which manifested in "the continuing struggle between liberalism and authoritarianism that will inevitably shape China's future" – revealed both the possibilities and the inherent limitations of cultural and educational exchanges as stable instruments of global engagement. [331]

Taken together, these multiple forms of engagement – from elite diplomatic encounters and artistic exhibitions to grassroots migration and community festivals – reveal the multifaceted nature of China's cultural diplomacy in France during the 1980s. Far from relying solely on formal state-led initiatives, China's presence unfolded through an intricate interplay of state strategies and diasporic practices, fostering a gradual and tangible integration of Chinese cultural expressions into French urban life. While the Tiananmen crisis momentarily exposed the political sensitivities underlying educational exchanges, it did not fundamentally disrupt the broader dynamics of cultural interaction.

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[329] Institut national de l'audiovisuel, "Chine: étudiants Paris" (Paris: INA, 1989), https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/cac90004678/chine-etudiants-paris.
[330] Ibid.
[331] Jean-Philippe Béja, "The Impact of China's 1989 Tiananmen Massacre on China's Foreign Policy," *China Perspectives*, no. 3 (2009): 4–15, https://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5753.

Rather, it underscored the inherent tensions that accompany the projection of national image abroad, where state intentions intersect with the autonomy of individual actors. In this sense, China's cultural diplomacy in France throughout the 1980s emerged not only as an instrument of soft power, but also as a complex process shaped by negotiation, adaptation, and mutual perception.

3.1.2 Soft Power à l'Américaine: Branding, Education, and the Rise of U.S. Popular Culture in France

The 1980s were a delicate decade for U.S.–French relations. In the French setting, Washington's public diplomacy formed an integral part of a broader strategy to manage policy frictions while sustaining alliance cohesion. It worked alongside traditional diplomacy to reassure partners, explain American positions to French audiences, and keep channels open with key intermediaries in politics, media, universities, and cultural institutions. Calibrated to French political sensibilities during the Mitterrand years – when the government maintained an independent and at times critical foreign-policy posture – American public policy prioritised credibility, responsiveness, and engagement.

State visits and bilateral summits were central to the U.S. public diplomacy agenda. The official visit of François Mitterrand to Washington on March 12, 1982, unfolded as a carefully staged diplomatic exercise in which the French President, only recently elected and perceived in the United States with a degree of ideological suspicion given his socialist credentials, arrived at the White House determined to reaffirm France's role as a steadfast and rational ally within the Western bloc.[332] The encounter between Mitterrand and Reagan combined substantive dialogue with highly symbolic public rituals. After a private meeting in the Oval Office, both leaders presented themselves to the press in a calculated display of unity. Reagan praised Mitterrand's "wisdom and statesmanship," underscoring the productive nature of their discussions, while Mitterrand, speaking in French and choosing words imbued with historical resonance, invoked the deep ties of friendship and alliance linking the two nations since the American War of Independence.[333] By exchanging formal courtesies and projecting mutual respect, Reagan and Mitterrand engaged in a form of public diplomacy aimed at dispelling doubts about the solidity of NATO and Western cohesion at a time of renewed Cold War confrontation. Mitterrand's 1982 visit to Washington demonstrated how public diplomacy operated

[332] Getty Images, "President Ronald Reagan Talking to French President Francois Mitterrand during Meeting in Oval Office," March 12, 1982, photograph by Diana Walker, https://www.gettyimages.it/detail/fotografie-di-cronaca/president-ronald-reagan-talking-to-french-fotografie-di-cronaca/530242471.
[333] National Archives and Records Administration, "President Ronald Reagan's Meeting in the Oval Office and Lunch in the Blue Room and Departure Remarks at the Diplomatic Entrance with President Francois Mitterrand of France during his Working Visit," March 12, 1982, video recording, *National Archives Catalog,* https://catalog.archives.gov/id/66383780.

on multiple levels: as a reaffirmation of bilateral ties, as an expression of common strategic purpose, and as a performance of solidarity designed to resonate far beyond the walls of the White House.

Reagan's official visit to France in June 1982 – which took place only a few months after François Mitterrand's own journey to Washington and coincided with the Versailles G7 Summit – represented a significant case of public diplomacy in action. [334] It reflected a carefully choreographed diplomatic exchange intended to consolidate the Franco-American partnership at a delicate moment in transatlantic relations. The summit unfolded amid one of the most severe economic downturns since the postwar era, with global recession, high unemployment, and persistent inflation posing serious challenges to Western economies. Discussions among the leaders, though described as "candid and tough", ultimately reaffirmed cooperation as the guiding principle for addressing the crisis, with Reagan underscoring the primacy of anti-inflationary policy as a means to restore growth and employment, while concrete commitments were made to foster market openness, particularly towards developing countries, and to tackle emerging global trade issues.[335]

Beyond economic matters, East-West relations figured prominently on the agenda. The summit yielded a firm declaration that engagement with the Soviet bloc should proceed with caution and in accordance with Western security imperatives. Particularly sensitive was the issue of export credits to the USSR. Reagan obtained a broad consensus on the need to avoid excessive and self-defeating credit extensions to Moscow, underscoring a shared desire to tighten the Western economic front in response to the broader geopolitical context.[336]

While Versailles offered Reagan a platform to assert U.S. leadership and reinforce the unity of the Western bloc, the visit also became a stage for an important exercise in public diplomacy. Through crafted public addresses, Reagan invoked the historical ties binding France and the United States. In his radio address from the Palace of Versailles on 5 June 1982, he emphasised the site's significance in American history, recalling that "within these walls Louis XVI and Benjamin Franklin concluded an alliance without which our Revolution's outcome might have been very different," and that in 1783 the Treaty of Versailles, signed in the palace, had formally recognised American independence.[337]

This narrative continued later that day during Reagan's remarks at the commemoration of the 38th anniversary of the Normandy Invasion. Speaking at a site symbolically linked to Franco-American wartime cooperation, he paid tribute to the joint sacrifices of the Second World War, noting that "the

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[334] White House Historical Association, *Henry Haller Collection*, photograph by Karl Schumacher, "President Reagan Joins G7 Leaders in Versailles," June 4, 1982, https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Henry%20Haller%20Collection/1128231.tif.info.

[335] Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, *Public Papers of Ronald Reagan*, June 1982, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/2022-03/40-025-R09-024-2022.pdf.

[336] Ibid.

[337] Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on the Trip to Europe", June 5, 1982, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/radio-address-nation-trip-europe.

French, British, Canadians, and Americans fought shoulder to shoulder for democracy and freedom – and won".[338] By foregrounding themes of liberty, democracy, and mutual sacrifice, Reagan's public diplomacy during his visit to France aimed to transcend ideological divides and reassure the French government and public of America's commitment. Far from incidental, these gestures were designed to project an image of an alliance grounded in shared historical experience and collective values.

In parallel with high-level diplomatic engagements, the 1980s witnessed a strategic deepening of U.S.-France cooperation in the cultural and academic fields, which served as essential instruments of American soft power. These initiatives complemented official diplomacy by promoting shared values, facilitating dialogue among intellectual elites, and reinforcing the long-standing transatlantic partnership at the societal level. Central to this effort was the enduring role of the Fulbright Program, which, since the signing of the bilateral educational exchange agreement between the United States and France on 22 October 1948, has stood at the core of academic mobility – one of the most structured and lasting dimensions of their bilateral relationship.[339] From the signing of the bilateral agreement through the 1982–1983 academic year, the Fulbright Program alone had facilitated exchanges for 14,338 U.S. citizens to France and 8,081 French citizens to the United States, a testament to the institutional depth and symbolic weight of this initiative. [340] By sponsoring French scholars in American institutions and supporting U.S. lecturers in French universities, the programme contributed to the formation of a bilingual and bicultural intellectual elite committed to the continuity of Franco-American dialogue. More broadly, French academic mobility toward the United States reflected this same dynamic: in the 1983–1984 academic year alone, 3,180 French students were enrolled in American higher education institutions, a figure that underscored the sustained attractiveness of U.S. academic and cultural models during the decade.[341]

Institutionally, the American Center for Students and Artists in Paris played a prominent role throughout the 1980s. Established in Paris in 1931, the institution initially functioned as a modest educational facility offering English-language courses and library services, but in the aftermath of World War II, it underwent a significant transformation into a fully-fledged cultural centre. The Center hosted exhibitions, performances, film screenings, and debates that showcased American culture

[338] Ronald Reagan, "Remarks Commemorating the 38th Anniversary of the Normandy Invasion, D-Day", June 5, 1982, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-commemorating-38th-anniversary-normandy-invasion-d-day.
[339] Board of Foreign Scholarships, *Nineteenth Annual Report: Fulbright Program Exchanges, 1980–1981* (Washington, DC, 1981), 23.
[340] Board of Foreign Scholarships, *Twenty-First Annual Report: Fulbright Program Exchanges, 1982–1983* (Washington, DC, 1981), 34-35.
[341] Ibid., 12.

beyond the dominant narratives of consumerism and militarism, engaging with French artists and intellectuals in ways that fostered critical but constructive exchange.[342]

In 1980, the Center established a dedicated Photography Department under the leadership of Scott MacLeay. This initiative not only expanded the Center's artistic repertoire but also positioned it at the forefront of contemporary photographic discourse. MacLeay's involvement in the inaugural Paris Biennial Month of Photography that same year underscored the Center's commitment to integrating American photographic innovation into the European art scene. His 1982 exhibition, *Fragments, Cycles, Sons,* exemplified this ethos by blending visual and auditory elements to create an immersive experience, reflecting the Center's embrace of interdisciplinary approaches. The Center's role as a nexus for experimental art extended beyond photography. It facilitated pioneering endeavours in media arts, such as the 1981 slow-scan video transmission between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the American Center, orchestrated by the theoretician in art Don Foresta. This event highlighted the Center's engagement with emerging technologies and its dedication to fostering international artistic collaborations between France and the United States.[343]

In contrast to the formal channels of academic and artistic cooperation, brands like McDonald's and Coca-Cola exercised a form of informal soft power, embedding American aesthetics, habits, and ideals into ordinary consumer experiences. Both forms – structured institutional engagement and commercial presence – should be understood as complementary dimensions of the broader U.S. strategy to promote cultural affinity and ideological alignment during the 1980s. McDonald's opened its first French location on June 30, 1972, in the suburb of Créteil, southeast of Paris.[344] Nonetheless, a legal dispute limited the chain's expansion, and by the mid-1980s, McDonald's operated only about 20 outlets in France – far fewer than the 150 in the UK and over 200 in West Germany at the time.[345] When McDonald's re-entered Paris in 1984, the market had already been exposed to other fast food brands, which helped make the concept more familiar to French consumers. Still, like Coca-Cola, fast food chains occupied an ambivalent position: they were embraced as symbols of modern American culture while also provoking concerns about their impact on French traditions and identity.[346]

Perceiving a strategic opportunity during a period of evolving cultural and commercial dynamics, McDonald's France launched a rapid expansion campaign, underpinned by substantial investments in real estate and advertising aimed at consolidating and extending its market presence. The opening

[342] Foundation for Arts Initiatives, "History," https://ffaiarts.net/history/.
[343] "Scott MacLeay: The American Center Years and the Paris Biennial Month of Photography," *Scott MacLeay*, https://www.scottmacleay.com/american-center.
[344] Laurent Telo, "La petite histoire du fast food en France." *Le Monde,* September 30, 2015.
[345] Nicole Lefevre, "McDonald's a trente ans," *Le Monde*, May 1, 1985.
[346] Crisanti, *Europeans Are Lovin' It? Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Responses to American Global Businesses in Italy and France, 1886–2015*, 162.

of a flagship restaurant in a belle époque-era Parisian building served as a symbolic marker of this new beginning. As Robbin Hedges, president of McDonald's France, explained: "the biggest thing we have had to overcome was getting consumers to accept us again. We have had to show we're not the McDonald's of the past," and added, "we're trying to use the McDonald's system of doing things, and we've tried to add a French flavour to it".[347]

This renewed strategy involved assertive property acquisitions – reportedly exceeding $6 million for the Champs-Élysées lease – and a deliberate localisation of the dining experience, including adjustments to salad dressings and the introduction of beer and Evian water to accommodate French preferences. Thomas Allin, a senior executive for McDonald's Europe, emphasised the brand's new positioning as a "multi-domestic company," stating that "McDonald's doesn't want to be seen as a world brand, it wants to be seen as part of a local market." A renewed focus on family dining, especially through Sunday child-oriented promotions, further distinguished the chain from its competitors in the French food service sector.[348]

Photographic evidence from this decade offered a powerful lens through which to observe the cultural dimensions of American corporate diplomacy. In one image, a young man sits outside the Ambassade cinema in Paris, drinking from a McDonald's cup while French film posters – such as for Le Grand Frère starring Gérard Depardieu – frame the scene behind. The juxtaposition of U.S. consumer products with French cultural symbols underscored the impact of American presence in everyday urban life.[349] In another photograph, Coca-Cola signage is prominently displayed in a Parisian café, visible as a measured but strategic branding element in a traditionally French social space. These visual cues – seemingly ordinary – reveal the extent to which American multinational corporations had embedded themselves within the fabric of French commonplace experience. More than commercial success, they represent a form of informal public diplomacy, wherein logos and packaging conveyed a lifestyle associated with modernity, efficiency, and global connectivity.[350]

This strategy of embedding American values into the quotidian life extended beyond food and drink into the domain of personal computing and technological aspiration. The 1985 Apple Expo in Paris offered a compelling window into Apple's early efforts to consolidate its presence in the French and European markets. Held at the Paris Expo Porte de Versailles, the event featured a stylish and

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[347] Steven Greenhouse, "McDonald's Tries Paris Again," *New York Times*, June 12, 1988, https://www.nytimes.com/1988/06/12/business/mcdonald-s-tries-paris-again.html.
[348] Ibid.
[349] Sari Gustafsson, *A Young Man Drinking McDonald's Lemonade in Front of Gaumont Ambassade, Paris, September 1982,* photograph, September 14–20, 1982, JOKA Journalistic Picture Archive, Sari Gustafsson Collection, Finnish Heritage Agency (Museovirasto), identifier JOKASAG4A:54, https://museovirasto.finna.fi/Record/museovirasto.7d98746a-9031-44a4-b359-b9705439dfa3/UserComments?imgid=1.
[350] Sari Gustafsson, *People in a Café in Paris, France, Autumn 1982*, photograph, September 14–20, 1982, JOKA Journalistic Picture Archive, Sari Gustafsson Collection, Finnish Heritage Agency (Museovirasto), identifier JOKASAG4A:17, https://museovirasto.finna.fi/Record/museovirasto.6ECD50E17C56109DAC469AD0AC7FAB61.

forward-looking exhibition design that foregrounded the Macintosh and Apple II series, inviting visitors to experience American innovation in a curated, hands-on environment.[351] During the event there was a bustling, youthful crowd interacting with Apple computers, demonstrating the brand's appeal beyond the niche of technical specialists. The strong emphasis on graphic design, desktop publishing, and educational software highlighted Apple's strategic positioning as not just a computer manufacturer, but a cultural intermediary for a new digital lifestyle. Notably, the presence of French-language interfaces and localised educational content indicated Apple's commitment to adapting its image to French sensibilities – an approach consistent with broader American corporate efforts in the country during the decade.[352] The Expo functioned not only as a commercial platform, but also as a symbolic event: a site where American technological aesthetics and values were made accessible, tangible, and desirable within a European cultural framework.

In parallel to the commercial and consumer-driven channels of cultural influence, American soft power also manifested itself through the realm of basketball. While fast-food chains and technology brands contributed to the normalisation of American aesthetics within urban French life, the increasing visibility of U.S.-style basketball offered a more dynamic, performative, and participatory vector for the transmission of American cultural values. A pivotal step in the institutionalisation of high-performance sport in France was the enactment of Law no. 75-988, 29 October 1975, which established the Institut national du sport et de l'éducation physique.[353] Located in Paris, the institute was created to train elite athletes across various disciplines, including basketball, and by the early 1980s had become a cornerstone of French sporting excellence. The basketball programme, initiated under the direction of Yvan Mainini, became a key incubator for national talent and "has trained some of the biggest names in French basketball," serving as "the main selection pool for the men's, women's, and junior French national teams." The programme involved approximately 50 full-time athletes each year, equally divided between girls and boys aged 15 to 18, who underwent rigorous daily training and took part in national championships as a single team.[354]

The decisive turning point in popularising American basketball in France came in January 1985, when the French television channel Canal+ acquired the rights to broadcast NBA games. These broadcasts featured the commentary of George Eddy, a Franco-American former professional player known for his energetic style and hybrid vocabulary. Eddy's enthusiastic delivery and use of English

[351] L'Aventure Apple, "Apple Expo," https://www.aventure-apple.com/apple-expo/.
[352] Amazing Tech History, *Rare Footage of Apple Expo Paris in 1985*, YouTube video, 3:46, May 14, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVMdtZ8YGDc.
[353] Franch Republic, Loi n° 75-988 du 29 octobre 1975 relative au développement de l'éducation physique et du sport, *Journal officiel de la République française,* no. 253, 30 octobre 1975, 11180–11183, https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000000311084.
[354] Institut National du Sport, de l'Expertise et de la Performance (INSEP), "Basketball," https://www.insep.fr/en/training-and-sport/basket-ball.

basketball jargon made NBA games more accessible and appealing to French audiences. Reflecting on his commentary style, Eddy noted that "my American accent apparently marked a generation of basketball fans in our country." [355] Another prominent figure in French basketball during the 1980s was the player Hervé Dubuisson. His athleticism, airborne play, and charisma on the court captivated French audiences unaccustomed to such displays, making him not only a domestic icon but a cultural bridge to the NBA ethos. In 1984, he became the first French player to be invited to train with an NBA franchise, the New Jersey Nets, during their Summer League. Although he did not sign a contract, this exposure symbolically marked a turning point: for the first time, a French player was seen as compatible with the physicality and tempo of American professional basketball. Dubuisson's performances, both in France and internationally, helped reframe basketball in the public imagination contributing decisively to the Americanisation and popularisation of the sport in France.[356]

This cultural momentum culminated institutionally with the creation of the Ligue Nationale de Basket-ball (LNB) in 1987. Established by a committee of high-level professional clubs, the LNB was designed to restructure and professionalise the sport in France, in part responding to the rising appeal of the American basketball model and its media-driven visibility. The LNB took over the organisation of the top-tier men's professional basketball leagues in France, further aligning the French basketball system with international standards.[357]

In sum, the 1980s marked a decisive decade in which the United States deployed an increasingly multifaceted strategy to consolidate its cultural presence in France. Through a careful orchestration of public diplomacy – from presidential visits to economic summits framed as moments of shared democratic purpose – the U.S. government worked to reaffirm alliance ties at the highest level. Yet beyond the diplomatic stage, public diplomacy operated intensively in less formal, but no less influential, arenas: academic exchange, experimental art, commercial branding, and even sport.

What emerges from this composite picture is not merely the diffusion of American culture, but its strategic adaptation – both by its promoters and its recipients. French society did not passively absorb these influences; it negotiated, localised, and reinterpreted them, producing a hybrid cultural space where American and French values coexisted, competed, and often converged. In this light, American soft power in 1980s France appears not as a one-directional export, but as a dynamic process of cultural negotiation that reveals the complexity of transatlantic relations.

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[355] Nikestadiums, *Paris Bball Stories: George Eddy*, YouTube video, 2:38, posted December 1, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rme_8ymEioc.

[356] Radio France, "Hervé Dubuisson, l'incroyable histoire du premier basketteur français en NBA en 1984," *L'Œil du Tigre*, podcast, hosted by Matthieu Thévenon, December 25, 2016, https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/l-oeil-du-tigre/herve-dubuisson-l-incroyable-histoire-du-premier-basketteur-francais-en-nba-en-1984-1650669.

[357] Ligue Nationale de Basket-ball, *Règlement LNB 2022–2023* (Paris: Ligue Nationale de Basket-ball, 2022), 2, https://www.lnb.fr/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Reglement-LNB-22-23.pdf.

3.2 Italy: Diverging Approaches of Chinese Outreach and U.S. Influence in the 1980s

3.2.1 Threads of Influence: Migration, Material Culture, and Educational Outreach from China to Italy

During the 1980s, the People's Republic of China gradually established a multifaceted diplomatic presence in Italy. This effort aligned with Deng Xiaoping's broader strategy of reform and international opening and combined formal diplomatic gestures with more diffuse channels of societal, commercial, and educational influence. This strategy was part of a broader redefinition of China's global identity, as Beijing sought to strengthen bilateral ties and reshape its international image through engagement with key European countries. Italy emerged as a particularly receptive partner in China's European engagement strategy. This section examines the development of Chinese public and cultural diplomacy towards Italy throughout the decade. It begins with formal engagements – such as high-level visits and bilateral agreements – before addressing more decentralised channels, including migration, material culture, and academic cooperation. Together, these dimensions illustrate how China's soft power in Italy was constructed through a dual strategy of institutional diplomacy and community-level involvement.

A pivotal moment in the early phase of China's diplomatic opening to the West was the official visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua to Rome, where he was received by President of the Italian Republic Sandro Pertini at the Quirinal Palace on 5 September 1978. This encounter, held just months before Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening strategy was formally adopted, marked one of the earliest direct high-level exchanges between the two republics and signalled Beijing's intention to recalibrate its foreign relations through political dialogue and symbolic diplomacy.[358] The meeting embodied China's emerging strategy of engaging trusted Western partners as gateways to broader European recognition. Italy's willingness to receive such a senior Chinese official at the presidential level underscored its responsiveness to the PRC's overtures and laid the institutional and diplomatic foundations for the intensification of bilateral ties that would follow in the next decade.

Building on this high-level meeting, the official visit of the President of the Italian Republic, Sandro Pertini, to the People's Republic of China from 17 to 26 September 1980 marked a significant moment in the evolving trajectory of Sino-Italian relations. Beyond its political dimension, the visit was a carefully curated exercise in public diplomacy, in which both governments engaged in symbolic gestures, speeches, and staged interactions designed to project mutual respect, historical continuity,

[358] Presidency of the Italian Republic, *Meeting between the President of the Italian Republic, Sandro Pertini, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Mr. Huang Hua,* 5 September 1978, Historical Photograph Archive of the Quirinal Palace, https://archivio.quirinale.it/aspr/fotografico/PHOTO-002-005918/presidente/alessandro-pertini/incontro-del-presidente-della-repubblica-sandro-pertini-ministro-degli-affari-esteri-della-repubblica-popolare-cina-sig-huang-hua.

and shared values of peace, development, and cultural openness. Pertini's arrival in China as the first Italian head of state to visit the PRC was itself a highly visible diplomatic signal. In his address to Chinese President Ye Jianying in Beijing on 19 September 1980, Pertini evoked shared cultural references as a historical metaphor for dialogue between East and West. "As we flew over your territory," he declared, "I was thinking of the long journey made centuries ago by one of the greatest travellers of all time, the Venetian Marco Polo. In his book Il Milione, he opened up to the Western world the knowledge of China's glorious and ancient civilisation" (author's translation).[359] This rhetorical gesture not only linked the visit to a deeper cultural-historical narrative but also served to underline a respectful recognition of Chinese antiquity and dignity – an important aspect of China's image construction in the reform era.

Throughout the visit, Chinese authorities reciprocated with a protocol that foregrounded hospitality, unity, and shared aspirations. The structured itinerary – covering Beijing, Xi'an, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Canton – allowed Pertini to meet a broad spectrum of Chinese officials and engage with symbolic places of national memory and technological progress. The public nature of these encounters was visually captured in a series of official photographs from the Historical Archive of the Quirinal Palace, showing Pertini alongside Chinese leaders, visiting historical monuments, and addressing youth and students.[360] These images conveyed a narrative of mutual openness and peaceful coexistence, core themes in China's early 1980s diplomatic messaging.

A particularly emblematic moment was Pertini's visit to Beijing University, where he engaged with students and spoke of the power of education and science to build intercultural bridges. During his address Pertini declared that "only meetings in the fields of culture and science can establish fruitful relations between our two countries and between all peoples […]. It is on the ground of culture and science that men, all men on Earth, regardless of the nations to which they belong or their race, will understand and meet each other always, and therefore be able to establish relations of peace in the world" (author's translation).[361] This emphasis on education and progress aligned with China's

[359] "Mentre sorvolavamo il vostro territorio ripensavo al lungo viaggio che secoli fa compì uno dei più grandi viaggiatori di tutti i tempi, il veneziano Marco Polo. Egli dischiuse al mondo occidentale nel suo libro 'Il Milione' la conoscenza della gloriosa ed antichissima civiltà della Cina." In Presidency of the Italian Republic, *Speech by President Sandro Pertini to President Ye Jianying, Beijing, 19 September 1980,* in Discorsi del Presidente Sandro Pertini (1978–1985) (Rome: Historical Archive of the Quirinal Palace), 411, speech in Italian,https://archivio.quirinale.it/discorsi-bookreader//discorsi/Pertini.html#page/404/mode/2up.

[360] Presidency of the Italian Republic, *State Visit of the President of the Italian Republic Sandro Pertini to the People's Republic of China (17–26 September 1980),* Historical Photograph Archive of the Quirinal Palace, https://archivio.quirinale.it/aspr/fotografico/PHOTO-002-007323/presidente/alessandro-pertini/visita-stato-del-presidente-della-repubblica-sandro-pertini-nella-repubblica-popolare-cinese-17-26-settembre-1980#n.

[361] "Questi incontri soltanto, fra cultura e scienza, possono stabilire rapporti fecondi fra i nostri due Paesi e fra tutti i popoli […]. È sul terreno della cultura e della scienza che gli uomini, tutti gli uomini della terra, non importa a quali nazioni appartengano, a quale razza che si intenderanno e si incontreranno sempre e quindi potranno stabilire rapporti di pace nel mondo." in Presidency of the Italian Republic, *Speech by President Sandro Pertini at Peking University, 20 September 1980, in Discorsi del Presidente Sandro Pertini (1978–1985)* (Rome: Historical Archive of the Quirinal

own strategy of presenting itself as a country undergoing peaceful modernisation through education, technology, and international cooperation.

Alongside high-level political visits, another important expression of China's public diplomacy towards Italy during the 1980s was the conclusion of formal legal instruments that signalled openness and international reliability. One such example was the Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Italian Government concerning the Encouragement and Reciprocal Protection of Investments (Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT)), signed in Rome on 28 January 1985 and entered into force in August 1987. The agreement aimed to encourage and protect investments between the two countries by guaranteeing non-discriminatory treatment, protection against expropriation, free transfer of capital, and access to dispute resolution mechanisms.[362] Beyond its economic content, the BIT functioned as a diplomatic signal, projecting an image of China as a modernising, rules-based actor while also advancing its international recognition during the ongoing normalisation of relations with the capitalist West. For Italy, the treaty confirmed the value of sustained engagement with a reforming China, while for the PRC it reinforced the broader narrative of peaceful development and legal integration into the global order – a key component of its external image-building in the post-Mao era.

While these state-level initiatives constituted the visible and formal dimension of China's public diplomacy towards Italy, they were only one facet of a broader process of engagement. Alongside official visits, treaties, and diplomatic symbolism, more diffuse and informal channels began to shape Italy's perception of the People's Republic of China. In particular, the 1980s saw the emergence of migration as a quiet but powerful vector of cultural presence. Through the establishment of local communities, economic networks, and everyday interactions, Chinese migrants contributed to embedding China's image within the fabric of Italian urban life.

Although small-scale migration from China had already begun in the 1950s – with the formation of early communities in cities such as Rome, and Milan – the Chinese population in Italy remained very limited for decades. As of 1975, official figures counted only 402 adult Chinese residents across the entire country.[363] According to estimates by the Italian National Institute of Statistics, by the end of 1991 there were 15,776 Chinese citizens holding residence permits in Italy, reflecting a substantial increase and the consolidation of China's migratory footprint in the country. This population was

Palace), 416-417, speech in Italian, https://archivio.quirinale.it/discorsi-bookreader/discorsi/Pertini.html#page/410/mode/2up

[362] Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Republic of Italy, *Agreement concerning the Encouragement and Reciprocal Protection of Investments,* signed 28 January 1985, https://edit.wti.org/document/show/6b7a1c2d-1ecc-4e4e-8d88-a338538063dd.

[363] Anna Marsden, "Chinese Descendants in Italy: Emergence, Role and Uncertain Identity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 7 (2014): 1240, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2014.883082.

geographically concentrated in a few key regions, with Lombardy accounting for 3,950 residence permits, Lazio for 3,771, and Tuscany for 3,193 – highlighting the emergence of urban centres such as Milan, Rome, and Prato as the primary nodes of Chinese settlement.[364]

The increase in Chinese migration to Europe was driven by a combination of structural transformations within China and expanding economic ties with European states. While not officially framed as a tool of public diplomacy, these migratory flows effectively contributed to the transnational projection of Chinese culture. Economic liberalisation policies, coupled with a surge in trade and foreign direct investment, restructured China's internal labour market and prompted new forms of international mobility. Migration was further facilitated by the gradual relaxation of China's internal and external mobility restrictions, as local authorities in cities like Beijing and Wenzhou began to actively support international migration as a driver of regional development.[365] Through this dynamic, Chinese migrants – often relying on family or community networks – established new diasporic communities across European cities.[366] While these movements were rooted in economic necessity rather than political strategy, they played an increasingly important role in the informal transmission of Chinese cultural practices, values, and visibility across the continent.

This cultural diffusion became particularly visible in Italy through the emergence of distinctive Chinese neighbourhoods, where migration translated into permanent settlement, entrepreneurship, and community life. A striking example is the case of Prato, in Tuscany, which had grown into one of the most prominent Chinese urban enclaves in Europe by the late 1980s and early 1990s. In this city, the influx of migrants transformed the local landscape both socially and physically. Prato's industrial model, based on subcontracting and flexible production, offered ideal entry points for migrant labour and entrepreneurship, especially from Wenzhou province. Many Italian producers welcomed this new presence: Chinese workers either rented factory spaces or were employed at low cost and high speed, offering local owners a convenient solution that allowed production cycles to continue without interruption.[367] Over time, Chinese-owned workshops and businesses proliferated, reshaping the urban fabric and the economic rhythms of the area. The growth of this enclave also fostered a visible and self-sustaining cultural presence, as street signs, commercial practices, language, and culinary establishments became vehicles for the informal projection of Chinese culture.

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[364] Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), The Foreign Presence in Italy in the 1990s (Rome: ISTAT, 1998), https://ebiblio.istat.it/digibib/Presenza%20straniera%20/PUV0364350_La_presenza_straniera_in_Italia_negli_anni90.pdf.

[365] Biao Xiang, "Emigration from China: A Sending Country Perspective", 24.

[366] Thierry Mariani, *Chinese Migration to Europe: Challenges and Opportunities*, 6-7.

[367] China Daily DOCS. "Made in Italy by the Chinese." YouTube video, 30:19. June 3, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lEIu5A9SBtI.

In Milan, the 1980s marked the beginning of a profound transformation in the Via Paolo Sarpi district, as a growing number of Chinese migrants began to settle and engage in commercial activities. Over the course of the decade, this area developed into a dense network of Chinese-run wholesale and import businesses, particularly focused on low-cost consumer goods and textiles. These enterprises were often structured around extended family networks and relied on autonomous financial practices, such as so-called "walking banks," which circulated capital informally within the community. [368] While this commercial dynamism reshaped the identity of the neighbourhood, it also provoked unease among segments of the Italian population. Local residents and business owners voiced concerns over changes in public space usage, the visibility of unfamiliar economic practices, and the competitive pressure exerted by Chinese enterprises, which they perceived as contributing to the closure or displacement of long-standing Italian shops.[369] The evolving dynamics of Via Paolo Sarpi thus became emblematic of the complex intersections between migration, urban change, and contested perceptions of legitimacy and belonging.

This tension, however, was not the only lens through which the transformation of Via Paolo Sarpi was experienced. An example of emerging cultural visibility was the celebration of Chinese New Year in January 1987, vividly described by Fabrizio Gecchelin at *Corriere della Sera*. On that occasion, the streets of Paolo Sarpi and Canonica were temporarily pedestrianised and filled with dragon dances, traditional music, and food stalls, drawing large crowds of both Chinese residents and Italian locals. The event – sponsored by local associations and supported by the municipal government and the Chinese consulate – transformed the neighbourhood into a "picturesque slice of Chinese metropolis".[370] This moment of celebration, community pride, and enthusiastic participation reflected how the Chinese presence was not only commercial but also increasingly cultural and publicly acknowledged in Milan's urban life.

While Chinese migration laid the demographic foundations for a long-term cultural influence in Italy, one of its most visible and pervasive expressions during the 1980s was the rapid expansion of Chinese cuisine. As noted by food critic Massimo Alberini in a 1988 *Corriere della Sera* article, the first Chinese restaurant in Milan - La Pagoda, on via Fabio Filzi – opened in 1962 and marked the beginning of what would become a widespread gastronomic phenomenon by the late 1980s.[371] An article titled "E per secondo mi porti volpe affumicata alla vietnamita" (And for the second course,

[368] Journeyman Pictures. "Milan's Chinland, Italy". YouTube video, 8:15. February 2008. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=er7ShvBw9TQ.
[369] Ibid.
[370] Fabrizio Gecchelin, "Un drago a Chinatown. I festeggiamenti del capodanno cinese," *Corriere della Sera*, January 26, 1987, 20.
[371] Massimo Alberini, "A cena con i draghi," *Corriere della Sera*, December 30, 1980, 15.

I'll have Vietnamese-style smoked fox) noted that in Rome in 1980 there were already 18 Chinese restaurants, including 8 located in Trastevere "the sancta sanctorum of Roman cuisine".[372]

Throughout the 1980s, cities such as Milan and Rome experienced a marked increase in the number of Chinese restaurants, which began to appear both in working-class districts and in more central urban neighbourhoods. Often family-run and modestly decorated, these establishments introduced Italian customers to unfamiliar culinary practices – such as eating with chopsticks or drinking jasmine tea – and to a repertoire of dishes including spring rolls, sweet-and-sour pork, and Cantonese-style rice. By 1987, Milan alone reportedly hosted at least 90 Chinese restaurants, while Rome followed closely with 77 venues recorded in the same year. [373]

However, reactions from the Italian public ranged from enthusiastic embrace to humorous scepticism. A 1980s article from *Corriere della Sera* described Chinese food as a sentimental as much as economic "threat" to Roman culinary orthodoxy, while also noting how Chinese chefs adapted their dishes to the tastes of the local clientele, creating a hybrid form of culinary diplomacy.[374] The spread of these establishments, indeed, can be interpreted not merely as a gastronomic trend but as a form of cultural soft power – unofficial, decentralised, and closely tied to the rhythms of Italian society. Italian newspapers of the time documented how these restaurants offered an accessible "entry point" into Chinese culture and aesthetics. In Milan, the opening of the restaurant La Pagoda was reported with considerable fanfare; its launch was attended by diplomats and journalists, and its menu drew praise for introducing dishes like swallow's nests and Peking duck to the Italian palate.[375]

Outside the restaurant walls, new initiatives such as home delivery services like "China Cena" in Rome extended the reach of Chinese cuisine into all Italian homes. These services offered personalised menus delivered by scooter, allowing Italians to enjoy exotic dinners in domestic settings – a clear sign of how far Chinese food had moved from the margins to the mainstream.[376] By combining novelty with adaptation, Chinese eateries became informal ambassadors of Chinese culture. They introduced Italians to new ingredients, utensils, and service rituals, while also integrating economic agents – many first-generation migrants – into Italy's service sector. In doing so, these establishments contributed to an evolving process of cultural entrenchment: Chinese food moved from ethnic curiosity to culinary mainstay, embedding itself within the rhythms of Italian urban life by the close of the decade.

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[372] C. De. Si., "E per secondo mi porti volpe affumicata alla vietnamita," *Corriere della Sera*, Corriere Romano, August 30, 1980, 12.
[373] Massimo Alberini, "A tavola con le bacchette," *Corriere della Sera*, March 18, 1988, 37.
[374] De. Si., "E per secondo mi porti volpe affumicata alla vietnamita," 12.
[375] Alberini, "A cena con i draghi," 15.
[376] Monica Paternesi, "E la cena cinese arrivò in tavola," *Corriere della Sera*, July 21, 1986, 18.

Beyond gastronomy, other forms of material culture – particularly decorative arts and traditional crafts – also began to mediate China's cultural presence in Italy during the 1980s. Through fairs, exhibitions, and local markets, Chinese artisanal production entered the Italian public sphere, expanding the informal channels of cultural diplomacy beyond the culinary domain. A seminal example of this trend was the exhibition *I dipinti dell'anno nuovo in Cina* (Chinese New Year's paintings), held in February 1980 at Rome's Palazzo Braschi. Curated by A. Bujatti, G. Mantici, and M. Müller and organised by the Italo-Chinese Association, the event constituted one of the earliest institutional presentations of Chinese visual culture in Italy. [377] It focused in particular on New Year prints and traditional iconography, offering Italian audiences a glimpse into the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of life in China. The exhibition thus marked an important step in introducing Chinese heritage into Italy's museum landscape, positioning folk imagery not merely as decorative art but as a medium of cultural translation and diplomatic soft power.

During the 1980s, the Italian art scene began to host a growing number of exhibitions dedicated to contemporary Chinese artists, reflecting both the diversification of the local cultural offering and the internationalisation of Chinese art. Among the most emblematic figures of this phenomenon was Ho Kan, a Nanjing-born painter who had relocated to Milan in the 1960s and became a key representative of the Chinese diaspora in European artistic circuits. Throughout the 1980s, Ho Kan held multiple solo exhibitions in prominent Italian venues, including Galleria Artecentro in Milan (1982, 1984, 1985, 1988), the Municipality of Tavarnelle Val di Pesa in Florence (1986), and the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna at Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara (1987).[378] His work, deeply influenced by Taoist philosophy and modernist abstraction, was received as a refined synthesis of Eastern and Western aesthetic vocabularies. These exhibitions did not simply showcase Chinese contemporary art but also contributed to repositioning Chinese cultural expression within institutional art circuits in Italy. As the Eli Klein Gallery catalogue notes, Kan's Milanese years marked a turning point in his production, where Taoist-inspired minimalism met the metaphysical legacy of Italian painting traditions, resulting in a form of cultural hybridity that resonated with Italian and international audiences.[379]

While visual and material culture offered intuitive modes of encounter, a more structured form of cultural diplomacy also emerged through educational and academic exchanges, which China promoted increasingly throughout the decade. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the People's Republic of China intensified its scientific and technological diplomacy with several Western European countries, including Italy. A significant turning point came in October 1978, when Italy

[377] Lucia Caterina and Adolfo Tamburello, *L'arte Estremo Orientale in Italia: Mostre e Cataloghi, Il Giappone* 18 (1978): 9.
[378] John Seed, *Ho Kan: Forms of Consciousness* (New York: Eli Klein Gallery, 2021), PDF e-catalogue, https://www.galleryek.com/artists/ho-kan4/cv.
[379] Ibid.

and China signed a five-year bilateral agreement on scientific and technological cooperation, that established a government-to-government framework for collaboration and provided a formal basis for exchanges of scholars, scientists, and experts, particularly in applied scientific fields.[380] By early 1980, the agreement had already led to the placement of ten Chinese students and researchers in Italy, underscoring both countries' willingness to operationalise their shared objectives. This institutional momentum was further reinforced in May 1980, when the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences signed a dedicated exchange and cooperation agreement with the Italian National Research Council. The agreement expanded bilateral engagement beyond applied sciences into the humanities and social sciences, reflecting a mutual interest in promoting comparative academic inquiry and facilitating the exchange of scholars and research materials across disciplinary boundaries.[381]

Throughout the 1980s, the teaching of Chinese language and culture in Italy experienced a steady growth, reflecting both China's increasing international relevance and Italy's broader cultural engagement with Asia. Although the tradition of Italian sinology has deep historical roots, the 1980s marked a phase of renewed institutional consolidation and expansion. Several Italian universities, notably *L'Orientale* in Naples, *La Sapienza* in Rome, and *Ca' Foscari* in Venice, played a leading role in offering courses on Chinese language, literature, and history, while new academic positions and teaching programmes gradually emerged in other universities such as Bologna, Pavia, Milan, and Perugia.[382] By the late 1980s, courses dedicated to Chinese language and culture were established in nearly all major Italian universities, supported by new collaborations and the foundation of scholarly associations such as the *Associazione Italiana Studi Cinesi* (AISC), founded in 1979 in Rome.[383]

In sum, the 1980s marked a crucial phase in the gradual construction of China's cultural and public presence in Italy. Through a combination of formal diplomatic gestures, grassroots migration, commercial and culinary presence, the People's Republic of China succeeded in weaving a complex web of relationships that extended far beyond the political and economic sphere. While these initiatives were often fragmented and lacked the coherence of a centrally orchestrated cultural strategy, their cumulative effect was nonetheless significant. By the end of the decade, China had established a diplomatic and commercial foothold in Italy but also a tangible and recognisable cultural impact embedded in urban spaces, universities, and everyday practices. Rather than remaining confined to abstract geopolitical narratives, China became increasingly familiar through the ordinary rhythms of cultural exchange.

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[380] Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Scientific Diplomacy, Embassy of Italy in Beijing, https://ambpechino.esteri.it/it/italia-e-cina/diplomazia-scientifica/.
[381] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. *China's Science and Technology Relations with Western Europe and Japan,* 16.
[382] Luisa M. Paternicò, "Italian Sinology: Honoring the Tradition, Facing the Present and Securing a Future," *Journal of Chinese History* 7, no.2 (2023): 384, https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2021.41.
[383] Ibid. 392.

3.2.2 Made in the United States: Commercial Icons, Academic Mobility, and Basketball Culture in Italy During the 1980s

The cultural presence of the United States in Italy during the 1980s was articulated through a dual strategy that combined formal diplomatic initiatives with the informal yet pervasive influence of American commercial, academic, and cultural exports. On the governmental level, the United States maintained close ties with Italy through public diplomacy initiatives, official visits, and bilateral agreements that aimed to reinforce shared values and transatlantic cooperation within the broader context of the Cold War. These efforts were designed not only to strengthen Italy's alignment with the Western bloc but also to promote a favourable perception of U.S. cultural and intellectual leadership. Alongside these institutional channels, American influence manifested itself through a wide range of less formal but equally impactful vectors. From the diffusion of corporate cultural icons such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola to the growth of academic collaborations and the popularisation of American sports, the 1980s witnessed a deepening of the United States' cultural footprint in Italy.

American public diplomacy toward Italy in the 1980s was anchored in high-level visits that intertwined political, cultural, and educational narratives. A central moment came during President Ronald Reagan's official visit to Rome on June 7, 1982, hosted by President Sandro Pertini. In the Joint Statement following their meetings, Reagan expressed gratitude for Pertini's recent state visit to the United States and affirmed their intention to reinforce bilateral youth exchanges with the launch of a programme which will begin in 1982, while also committing to regular meetings to discuss cultural and information matters aimed at strengthening ties between their countries.[384]

Five years later, Reagan's participation in the 13th G7 Economic Summit in Venice (June 8-10, 1987) further underscored the enduring significance of U.S.–Italian public diplomacy. In his address to Western Europe from Villa Condulmer on June 5, 1987, broadcast prior to the summit's opening, Reagan blended the economic agenda with historical memory and public diplomacy, reinforcing the narrative of American commitment to European stability. He invoked the legacy of the Marshall Plan – presenting it not as an act of charity but as an initiative to foster European cooperation and resilience – underscoring the point by tying it to the day's symbolism: "As it happens, this day, June 5th, marks the 40th anniversary of the inauguration of the Marshall Plan. Those were days of great generosity and courage, when the countries of Europe rose from the ashes of war, put away their centuries-old

[384] Ronald Reagan, "Joint Statement Following Meetings in Rome with President Sandro Pertini and Prime Minister Giovanni Spadolini of Italy" (speech, Rome, June 7, 1982), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/joint-statement-following-meetings-rome-president-alessandro-pertini-and-prime.

animosities, and together with America built a new age of freedom and prosperity". [385] By evoking this shared historical milestone, Reagan positioned the United States as a longstanding partner in Europe's progress, aligning past initiatives with the objectives of the Venice summit.

Reagan's speech also addressed the importance of people-to-people connections and cultural diplomacy, noting that strong transatlantic ties were reinforced not only through treaties but through exchanges of ideas, educational initiatives, and a shared cultural heritage. This rhetoric echoed the broader strategy of U.S. public diplomacy in Italy and Western Europe during the decade, which sought to consolidate alliances through cultural affinity as much as through military or economic agreements.[386] The Venice Summit thus served as both a diplomatic and symbolic reaffirmation of America's role in Europe. By intertwining economic discourse with references to shared history and democratic values, Reagan's message reinforced the cultural dimensions of U.S.–European relations. This speech, delivered from a Venetian villa steeped in history, resonated with the summit's broader ambition: to maintain Western cohesion not only through policy but through a common cultural and historical narrative.

Alongside diplomatic and cultural initiatives, academic exchanges played a central role in consolidating the United States' cultural weight in Italy during the 1980s. Programmes aimed at fostering student mobility and scholarly collaboration served not only as educational opportunities but also as subtle instruments of public diplomacy, reinforcing cultural ties. A pivotal structure in this dynamic was the Association of American College and University Programs in Italy (AACUPI), established in Rome in 1978. AACUPI emerged as a coordinating body for U.S. university study-abroad programmes across Italy, representing over 150 institutions – including programmes in Rome, Florence, Milan, and Venice – by the decade's later years. This association facilitated smooth operation, legal recognition, and academic cooperation under Italian regulations, solidifying the presence of American higher education throughout the country.[387]

Rome in particular became a hub for American academic activity. Institutions such as The American University of Rome (AUR)[388], founded in 1969, and John Cabot University[389], established in 1972, anchored the presence of U.S. liberal arts education in the Italian capital. Both institutions offered fully accredited degree programmes, with AUR recognised by Italian Ministry of Education and John Cabot University forging partnerships with over 120 American universities. These campuses

[385] Ronald Reagan, *Address to Western Europe from the Venice Economic Summit* (radio broadcast, Villa Condulmer, Mogliano, Italy, June 5, 1987), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-western-europe-venice-economic-summit.
[386] Ibid.
[387] Association of American College and University Programmes in Italy (AACUPI), "About AACUPI," https://aacupi.org.
[388] The American University of Rome (AUR), "The AUR Difference," https://aur.edu/aur-difference.
[389] John Cabot University (JCU), "About JCU," https://www.johncabot.edu/about-jcu/default.aspx.

became essential nodes in the broader network of transatlantic mobility, attracting both American study-abroad students and Italian participants eager to access American-style education.

In addition to these degree-granting institutions, Rome hosted longstanding centres of American scholarship focused on the humanities. The American Academy in Rome – active since 1894 – remained a prestigious institution supporting advanced research in fields ranging from architecture to archaeology. [390] Similarly, the Intercollegiate Center for Classical Studies (ICCS), known simply as "The Centro", continued to provide undergraduates from the United States with immersive programmes in Roman history, Latin, and the arts. These institutions, alongside initiatives like the American Institute for Roman Culture's field schools, contributed to maintaining Rome's reputation as a privileged site for American academic exchange in Italy.[391]

While these institutions anchored a permanent American academic presence within Italy, offering U.S.-style education directly on Italian soil, other initiatives focused on fostering transatlantic academic mobility. Chief among these was the Fulbright Program, established through a bilateral agreement between the United States and Italy on December 18, 1948, which complemented the permanent presence of American universities in the country by fostering a dynamic and reciprocal exchange of students, researchers, and professors between the two nations.[392] Throughout the 1980s, the Fulbright Program continued to play a significant role in fostering academic and cultural exchange between Italy and the United States. Managed through the binational Fulbright Commission in Rome, the programme remained faithful to its mission: promoting mutual understanding through the exchange of students and professionals. In 1980 alone, Italy contributed substantial resources to this endeavour, with financial support of $212,150 matched by the U.S. government's $829,620 underscoring the shared commitment to sustaining these exchanges.[393]

The programme facilitated numerous grants for Italian scholars to pursue research and teaching opportunities in the United States and supported American academics in Italy, spanning fields from the humanities and social sciences to law and economics. By the decade's end, despite broader budgetary concerns impacting U.S. cultural diplomacy, the Fulbright Program in Italy remained resilient. In 1988, Italy reaffirmed its strategic commitment through contributions of $384,615, reflecting a stable and growing partnership. The programme not only fostered bilateral academic collaboration but also strengthened transatlantic ties by enhancing institutional cooperation between universities in both countries.[394]

[390] American Academy in Rome (AAR), "About: History of the Academy," https://aarome.org/about/history/academy.
[391] Intercollegiate Center for Classical Studies in Rome (The Centro), "About," https://thecentrorome.org/about/.
[392] Board of Foreign Scholarships, *Twentieth Annual Report*, December 1982, 23.
[393] Board of Foreign Scholarships, *Nineteenth Annual Report*, December 1981, 6.
[394] Board of Foreign Scholarships, *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report*, December 1988, 6.

Yet, beyond the spheres of diplomacy and education, American influence during the 1980s also manifested itself through more informal but equally pervasive channels. Commercial icons, lifestyle trends, and popular culture played a crucial role in shaping the imaginaries of Italian society, offering new avenues for the projection of American soft power through the mechanisms of corporations, consumerism and mass culture. The arrival of McDonald's in Italy during the mid-1980s represents a paradigmatic case of how American consumer culture permeated Italian society through corporate channels, shaping not only consumption patterns but also sparking cultural and political debates. Italy was the last Western European country to inaugurate a McDonald's, with a first quiet opening in Bolzano in 1985, but the brand's real symbolic impact came with the inauguration of its Rome location in March 1986, in Piazza di Spagna. This site, which at the time was the largest McDonald's in the world, featured 450 seats, a children's play area, a piano, an innovative salad bar, marble decorations, wooden tables, and traditional sanpietrini floor tiles – all elements carefully chosen to appeal to Italian aesthetic and sensibilities.[395] The opening proved a success, with crowds lining up from early morning and more than 20,000 people turning up on the first day to enjoy their "bite of America", a level of enthusiasm that persisted in the following days and exceeded all expectations.[396]

At the same time, the restaurant's inauguration provoked widespread protests, bringing together political factions, cultural figures, and local businesses in defence of Italy's architectural and culinary heritage. These early controversies reflect how McDonald's quickly became emblematic of a broader Americanisation, perceived as a threat to Italy's cultural identity – an anxiety further heightened by the contemporaneous rise of the "Made in Italy" brand as a counterweight to foreign influences. This perception was confirmed by articles in major newspapers of the time, lamenting how the arrival of McDonald's "marked another stage in the city centre's decline," was "upsetting the atmosphere of the most beautiful city in the world," and accused of "disfiguring" Rome.[397]

Opponents of McDonald's organised a large public demonstration in Rome on April 20, 1986, protesting the opening of the fast-food chain in Piazza di Spagna. The protest brought together not only ordinary citizens but also well-known figures from politics, entertainment, and culture, including Claudio Villa, Renzo Arbore, Renato Nicolini, and fashion designer Valentino. For many, McDonald's symbolised a broader threat to Italy's architectural, culinary, and urban traditions. These demonstrations reflected wider tensions in Rome at the time, as local businesses were already protesting against the new *Piano del Commercio*, a municipal plan aimed at reorganising retail regulations through stricter rules on shop sizes and licenses. Merchants feared that such measures, favouring larger and standardised commercial models, would harm their businesses and accelerate

[395] Laura Laurenzi, "E a Piazza di Spagna il tempio fast food più grande del mondo", *La Repubblica*, March 13, 1986.
[396] Rossella Lampugnani, "Il Fast food della Discordia", *L'Unità*, March 21, 1986.
[397] "I politici discutono di vino e fast food", *Corriere della Sera*, april 12, 1986, 34.

the spread of foreign franchises. In this climate, McDonald's became an emblem of broader anxieties over the transformation of Italy's urban and cultural identity.[398]

By the late 1980s, the fast-food model introduced by McDonald's appeared to have firmly established itself in Italy, with the number of American-style fast-food outlets steadily increasing across the country and in 1989, Massimo Alberini described fast food as "the most significant phenomenon in the field of food and nutrition in the twentieth century," highlighting its profound impact on eating habits and consumer culture.[399] This dynamic of both adoption and resistance is well captured by Giulia Crisanti, who notes that:

> The success of fast food in Italy, as well as the resistance to it, are proof of the influence of the American model, but also of the selective appropriation and reinterpretation of this model abroad. Besides the many copycats offering hamburgers and fries at American-like restaurants with American-sounding names, the arrival of fast food led many Italian restaurateurs and food experts to look for a way to combine "the need for a quick meal with that of not losing their taste for quality food".[400]

Far from being a one-directional process of Americanisation, the Italian experience with fast food demonstrates how global trends were filtered through local identities, creating hybrid forms of consumption that reflected both modern demands and enduring attachments to national culinary heritage. In this light, the case of McDonald's served as a revealing example of how corporate culture functioned as an informal yet powerful tool of soft power, influencing daily habits and contributing to the broader tapestry of U.S.–Italy cultural relations during the decade.

Alongside McDonald's, Coca-Cola stood as one of the most recognisable emblems of American consumer culture in Italy, not only as a commercial product but as a symbol embedded in daily life. Although Coca-Cola had been present in Italy for decades, the 1980s marked a turning point in its consolidation, thanks to aggressive strategies of market expansion. At the start of the decade, Coca-Cola controlled over 87% of the Italian cola market and over 35% of the orange soda market through Fanta, consolidating its dominance through acquisitions and restructuring of its bottling operations.[401]

This position of strength, however, had been carefully built over time through strategies of cultural adaptation as well as commercial growth. Already in 1977, the Italian Ministry of Tourism and Entertainment had granted official approval for a Coca-Cola commercial to be screened in Italy. The advertisement's description explicitly linked the brand to notions of vitality and happiness through slogans such as "Coca-Cola dà più vita; Coca-Cola aumenta l'allegria" (Coca-Cola gives more life; Coca-Cola increases cheerfulness), reflecting the company's long-standing strategy of associating its

[398] Anna Forti, "Fast food, la città discute (e si divide)," *Corriere della Sera*, April 15, 1986, 28.
[399] Massimo Alberini, "Uffa l'hamburger e le patatine," *Corriere della Sera*, April 12, 1989, 36.
[400] Crisanti Giulia, *Europeans Are Lovin' It? Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Responses to American Global Businesses in Italy and France, 1886–2015*, 192.
[401] Ferruccio Bortoli, "Due «ricette» diverse per il mondo a forma di lattina Pepsi o Coca Cola: chi vincerà la battaglia della sete?" *Corriere della Sera*, July 4, 1981, 9.

product with positive emotions and conviviality. Although this campaign predates the 1980s, it highlights how Coca-Cola had already embedded itself within Italian advertising channels and adapted its messaging to local cultural and regulatory contexts well before the brand's broader consolidation in the following decade.[402]

However, this commercial success did not prevent significant resistance. Italian beverage companies attempted to leverage growing national pride by launching alternative products marketed as more authentically Italian, such as Misura Cola and various orange sodas, though none managed to seriously challenge Coca-Cola's supremacy. In parallel, accusations of unfair competition led San Pellegrino to file a lawsuit against Coca-Cola in 1987, though the action ultimately failed.[403]

Coca-Cola's growing symbolic status in Italy – as it increasingly appeared not merely as a drink but as a cultural presence – provoked broader concerns about globalisation and national identity. In 1986, scholar Arturo Carlo Quintavalle openly questioned how Coca-Cola, an emblem of American consumerism, could become Italy's "national beverage," highlighting apprehension about cultural homogenisation in a period marked by renewed patriotic sentiment and the consolidation of national culinary traditions.[404] Yet, Coca-Cola itself sought to appropriate and adapt to these cultural dynamics: the slogan "Una bibita 28 volte italiana" (A Drink 28 Times Italian) emphasised local production, while the company's Memorabilia Club capitalised on Italian affection for nostalgia.[405]

Thus, while Coca-Cola's expansion did not provoke street protests like McDonald's, it was not without resistance. The tensions it elicited – between economic globalisation and cultural identity, between American corporate strategies and Italian consumer traditions – demonstrate how even seemingly mundane products could become sites of cultural negotiation. In this light, Coca-Cola's trajectory in 1980s Italy exemplifies how corporate diplomacy operated through adaptation, persistence, and the cultivation of soft power embedded in everyday consumption.

The influence of U.S. corporate culture extended further into the visual and material dimensions of identity through fashion, accessories, and lifestyle products. Clothing and branded goods such as Levi's and Timberland became not only commodities but visible markers of belonging to a globalised, aspirational, and distinctly Americanized way of life. Levi's jeans, in particular the iconic 501 model, became a staple of Italian youth fashion, representing an icon of casual style with roots in American working-class culture. The brand's success in Italy during the decade was reinforced through marketing strategies that emphasised authenticity, rebellion, and freedom – values strongly resonating

[402] Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, *Nulla osta n. 70390 per lo spot pubblicitario Coca-Cola*, June 1, 1977, Italia Taglia – Archivio della censura cinematografica, https://www.italiataglia.it/files/visti21000_wm_pdf/70390.pdf.
[403] Re. Ge. "San Pellegrino- Coca Cola, è guerra delle bollicine," *Corriere della Sera*, September 12, 1987, 13.
[404] A. C. Quintavalle, "Analizziamo una nuova martellante campagna di bibite in lattina," *Corriere della Sera*, August 6, 1986, 14.
[405] C. Lov, "In mostra la mitica storia delle bollicine yankee," *Corriere della Sera*, November 3, 1989, 34.

with Italian consumers exposed to American culture. This imagery was strengthened by international advertising campaigns such as the 1980s television commercial with the actor Julian McMahon featuring the slogan "Do You Fit the Legend?" which framed Levi's not as a product but as a lifestyle choice rooted in individuality and confidence. These campaigns contributed to cementing Levi's cultural status, aligning Italian youth culture with a global narrative of American casual wear.[406]

Similarly, Timberland positioned itself within the Italian market not solely as practical footwear for outdoor activities but as a status symbol linked to the aspirational aesthetics of American leisure culture. Imported initially through specialised retailers, Timberland boots became associated with durability, craftsmanship, and a rugged, understated elegance – a set of qualities that appealed to consumers seeking to align themselves with American models of casual style. In the 1980s, Italy became Timberland's first European export market, marking the brand's initial step into the European continent. The success of Timberland in Italy soon prompted expansion into other countries, and Europe quickly evolved into one of the company's most profitable regions.[407]

The emergence of the *paninari* ("Sandwichees") youth subculture in Italy during the 1980s can be understood as a consequence of the growing visibility and diffusion of American consumer brands such as McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Levi's, and Timberland. Born in Milan, the paninari revolved around an explicit embrace of American-inspired goods and lifestyles, positioning themselves as a visual and behavioural expression of the cultural influence exerted by these corporations on Italian youth. Their preferred gathering places – fast-food chains like Burghy, and later McDonald's in Piazza San Babila – were not chosen for culinary reasons but served as social spaces where young people could perform their allegiance to a consumerist and Americanized lifestyle.[408]

The paninari's distinctive look blended Levi's 501 jeans and Timberland boots, forming a recognisable uniform that signalled alignment with ideals of casual sophistication, affluence, and modernity. These stylistic choices reflected a desire to embody the lifestyle values promoted through American advertising: freedom, optimism, and conspicuous leisure.[409] Coca-Cola's sustained advertising efforts and McDonald's growing network of fast-food outlets offered cultural scripts that the paninari appropriated, turning them into visible markers of social belonging and identity. Through their adoption of these brands, the paninari not only embraced the commodified icons of American modernity but actively contributed to their domestication within Italy, endowing them with new

[406] "Levi's commercial with Julian McMahon (My Girl) (1987)," YouTube video, 0:32, posted September 19, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJMo6Xn8Q_w.
[407] Celia L. Smith, "The Evolution of Timberland: How the Boot Became a Fashion Icon," *Essence*, October 27, 2020, https://www.essence.com/fashion/accessories/evolution-timberland/.
[408] Claudio Bernieri, "Al paninaro non importa se l'olio è megafritto," *Corriere della Sera*, March 9, 1989, 34.
[409] Crisanti Giulia, *Europeans Are Lovin' It? Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Responses to American Global Businesses in Italy and France, 1886–2015*, 182.

meanings tied to local youth culture and urban belonging. In this sense, the paninari phenomenon illustrates how corporate soft power operated through daily commodities, reshaping patterns of consumption and giving rise to new forms of cultural expression in 1980s Italy.[410]

During the 1980s, American basketball culture gained an unprecedented foothold in Italy, complementing the broader diffusion of U.S. consumer brands through sport. This phenomenon, though not orchestrated through official diplomatic channels, functioned as an effective tool of public diplomacy, integrating American sporting values, aesthetics, and stars within the Italian popular imagination. Italy's long-standing tradition of competitive basketball provided fertile ground for this cultural exchange, but it was the arrival of figures like Mike D'Antoni in the Italian leagues that catalysed the sport's transformation into a bridge between Italian and American cultural spheres.

Mike D'Antoni's career with Olimpia Milano (Billy Milano) exemplifies this dynamic. Initially arriving as a player, D'Antoni became a symbol of basketball's growing cross-cultural resonance. His eventual naturalization as an Italian citizen and participation in the Italian national team underscored the permeability between American and Italian sports cultures. As noted in contemporaneous coverage, D'Antoni was celebrated for his decisive role in Milano's success, with headlines emphasising his leadership and technical skill as essential to the team's victories.[411] The Milanese press often underlined that D'Antoni's impact transcended his on-court achievements: the chorus of "Mike, facci sognare" ("Mike, make us dream") from the stands reflected his full assimilation into Italy's sporting culture.[412]

Another early and emblematic figure of the cultural "transfer" between American and Italian basketball was Mike Sylvester, known in Italy as Michele Silvestri. Like D'Antoni, Sylvester fully integrated into Italian basketball culture, becoming a naturalised citizen and representing Italy at the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games.[413] His career with teams such as Virtus Bologna, Napoli, and Olimpia Milano throughout the 1970s and 1980s exemplifies how American basketball not only provided temporary athletic spectacle but became embedded in Italy's sport and national identity.

During the 1980s, Italian basketball experienced a period of success on the European stage, reflecting the sport's growing status not only within Italy but across the continent. As reported in contemporary Italian press, by the mid-1980s teams like Billy Milano (Olimpia Milano) and Banco Roma were consistently reaching the latter stages of major European competitions. Italian teams

[410] Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 469.
[411] "D'Antoni ha già pronti i documenti per giocare fra gli azzurri del basket." *Corriere della Sera*, Corriere Sportivo, January 17, 1980, 30.
[412] Zelio Zucchi, "D'Antoni miracola se stesso e la Tracer," *Corriere della Sera*, October 15, 1987, 30.
[413] Zelio Zucchi, "«Lieto evento» nel basket azzurro: Mike Silvester da ieri è italiano," *Corriere della Sera*, Corriere Sportivo, February 28, 1980, 31.

achieved these results through a distinctive style of play, described by sports journalist Zelio Zucchi as a form of "catenaccio" applied to basketball – a tactical, disciplined, and physically demanding defensive approach. This strategy, evident in the performances of Billy under the guidance of Mike D'Antoni, was credited with dismantling opponents through defensive rigor and strategic precision, a method Zucchi argued was unmatched by any other European basketball school at the time.[414]

The cultural entrenchment of American basketball in 1980s Italy extended far beyond the court. Figures like Mike D'Antoni and Mike Sylvester embodied a deeper process of cultural integration in which American athletic values, playing styles, and public personas were not merely imported but actively embraced and localised. The simultaneous success of Italian teams on the European stage further amplified this process, positioning basketball as another conduit through which American soft power shaped Italian cultural and sporting practices during the decade.

The 1980s represented a pivotal decade in the evolution of U.S.–Italy cultural relations, marked by the convergence of formal diplomatic initiatives and the pervasive influence of American consumer and popular culture. Through food, fashion, education and sport, American brands and institutions penetrated Italian society, offering new models of consumption, identity, and aspiration. From the contested arrival of McDonald's in Rome to the adoption of Levi's jeans and the popularity of NBA stars, American public diplomacy functioned not only through official agreements but through the subtle yet enduring appeal of its lifestyle and symbols. Italy's selective appropriation and reinterpretation of these influences underscore how American soft power operated not as a uniform imposition but as a catalyst for hybrid forms of cultural expression.

3.3 Comparative Analysis of Public and Cultural Diplomacy

Taken together, the case studies presented in this chapter reveal the plural and evolving nature of both Chinese and American public diplomacy in Europe during the 1980s. Both actors sought not only to promote a positive image abroad but to reshape perceptions, build alliances, and project models aligned with their own domestic trajectories. Yet, as the Italian and French cases illustrate, the effectiveness of these efforts was shaped by local conditions – political receptivity, historical memory, cultural affinities, and social structures. What emerges is a complex field of interaction in which soft power strategies had to be continuously negotiated and reinterpreted.

This final section aims to offer a comparative reflection on these dynamics, analysing how China and the United States mobilised public and cultural diplomacy across similar terrains through markedly different methods – and with varying degrees of resonance. By assessing the effectiveness

[414] Zelio Zucchi, "Il basket italiano sta dominando l'Europa grazie a un 'catenaccio' che fa spettacolo," *Corriere della Sera*, January 29, 1983, 23.

of their strategies, the contrasts in messaging and outreach, the responses of local governments and public opinion, and their respective abilities to engage with the specific political contexts of each host country, this section seeks to highlight how public diplomacy functioned not merely as an instrument of foreign policy, but as a projection of broader ideological and cultural aspirations.

A comparative analysis of Chinese and American public diplomacy in 1980s Italy and France allows for a more precise understanding of how distinct political systems articulated their soft power ambitions within pluralistic Western contexts. As Nye conceptualised, soft power derives from a country's ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment, relying on culture, values, and foreign policy credibility.[415] Both China and the United States pursued soft power strategies in Europe during this decade, but from fundamentally different starting points.

The United States operated from a position of global cultural hegemony and ideological self-confidence, embedded in decades of transatlantic institutional cooperation and deeply rooted cultural industries.[416] In contrast, the People's Republic of China was undergoing a radical transformation under Deng Xiaoping, reorienting its foreign policy from ideological confrontation to pragmatic engagement.[417] As such, public diplomacy became a tool for normalisation and image rebranding, particularly in key Western countries such as France and Italy. These two countries provide an analytically valuable comparative framework. Italy's Atlanticist alignment and internal political heterogeneity – especially the presence of the largest Communist party in Western Europe – made it receptive to both Western and non-Western influences.[418] France, meanwhile, occupied a unique position within the Western bloc, asserting cultural and diplomatic independence from the United States while maintaining deep historical and cultural ties with China.[419] The effectiveness of Chinese and American public and cultural diplomacy in 1980s Italy and France reflected two distinct strategic approaches. These divergent models were influenced by national priorities, but also by the varying cultural and political landscapes of the receiving countries. In the immediate postwar years, the United States kept its wartime information machinery inside the State Department and defined its mission as giving foreign publics "a full and fair picture of American life and the aims and policies of the United States government," building the Interim International Information Service and its successors around that principle.[420] This early architecture privileged person-to-person tools: USIS

[415] Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, 5.
[416] Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy*, *1945–1989*, 400.
[417] Douglas Zhihua Zeng, *China's Special Economic Zones and Industrial Clusters: Success and Challenges,* 7.
[418] Antonio Varsori and Benedetto Zaccaria, eds., *Italy in the International System from Détente to the End of the Cold War: The Underrated Ally* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 4.
[419] Martin, "Playing the China Card?", 77.
[420] Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989*, 24

libraries and cultural centres, and the new Fulbright exchanges which seeded long-term academic linkages with American studies. In Italy, these instruments blended with overt messaging during the 1948 electoral showdown: USIS exhibitions showcased working conditions in the United States, the VOA amplified American attention to Italian affairs and Italian-American letter-writing networks mobilised opinion – an ensemble understood to have aided the Christian Democrats' victory.[421]

By the Reagan era, however, these interpersonal instruments had been integrated into a broader, media-driven model. The revitalised United States Information Agency (USIA) played a central role in this transformation, intensifying the connection between strategic objectives and cultural messaging.[422] In Italy, this translated into a systematic use of television via WORLDNET, the revitalisation of Voice of America, and the deployment of mobile exhibitions and press briefings to ensure visibility and message control. These instruments allowed for high visibility and widespread dissemination of American values by enabling foreign audiences to see "American life and technology firsthand in the vast spaces of major exhibitions and experience it in the intimacy of the home, over Voice of America radio".[423]

On the other hand, China's public diplomacy infrastructure in the same period was still in its formative stages. The 1980s marked the country's gradual re-entry into global cultural circuits following the diplomatic rupture of the Cultural Revolution. Cultural diplomacy operated primarily through state-sponsored mechanisms, such as bilateral cultural cooperation agreements, Chinese language programmes, and official exhibitions of traditional arts, silk, and porcelain. Education and scientific exchange played a critical role: the number of Chinese students and academics in Italy increased steadily throughout the decade, often facilitated by scholarships and government-sponsored academic protocols.[424] These exchanges, however, remained quantitatively limited compared to American programmes. In addition, Chinese public diplomacy was often embedded in development-oriented cooperation and long-term economic engagements rather than in mass culture or popular outreach. While not immediately visible or spectacular, this approach allowed for more stable and long-term institutional ties, especially in scientific and linguistic cooperation.[425]

In France, U.S. public diplomacy deployed a broad set of instruments designed to project American cultural, educational, and political values. Key tools included the Fulbright Program, which supported bilateral academic exchanges and a network of American cultural centres offering language courses, libraries, and public events. Beginning in 1985, the launch of Voice of America Europe added a new layer of outreach, broadcasting English-language programming on music, society, and international

[421] Ibid., 43.
[422] Ibid., 82.
[423] Ibid., xiv.
[424] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. *China's Science and Technology Relations with Western Europe and Japan,* 16.
[425] Roberts, *Chinese Economic Statecraft from 1978 to 1989: The First Decade of Deng Xiaoping's Reforms*, 166.

affairs targeted specifically at European youth.[426] These efforts were supported by initiatives such as WORLDNET, which, through its regional subsystem Euronet, allowed American officials to engage with European media and academic audiences via interactive television links.[427]

Beyond institutional programmes, American public diplomacy in France during the 1980s was also reinforced by the international expansion of U.S. consumer brands – such as Coca-Cola and McDonald's – which functioned as corporate instruments of cultural influence. McDonald's, in particular, maintained its core American identity while adapting to the specific characteristics of the French urban environment. Realising that its traditional expansion model would not fit European urban layouts, the company reoriented its strategy towards city centres, prioritising visibility and accessibility within dense metropolitan contexts. Furthermore, it mirrored Coca-Cola's model by presenting itself as a federation of local retailers, emphasising proximity and local embeddedness while preserving a recognisable American brand structure. This dual logic of adaptation reinforced McDonald's role as a culturally flexible yet ideologically coherent actor.[428]

Rather, Chinese public and cultural diplomacy in France in the 1980s unfolded through a selective but multi-dimensional strategy, combining official state instruments with informal channels rooted in local communities. In the absence of a global media infrastructure or mass cultural industries, the PRC relied on bilateral agreements in education, science, and culture, signed with French ministries and academic institutions. These included protocols on language instruction, scientific cooperation, and the mobility of students and researchers, often involving institutions such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Wuhan University, and the French State Center for Scientific Research.[429] The 1978 bilateral agreement on scientific and technological cooperation (S&T), laid the groundwork for joint projects in fields ranging from medicinal plant research to metrology and nuclear energy, while the number of Chinese students in France increased steadily over the course of the decade.[430] These initiatives, though limited in visibility, enabled a consistent form of engagement that framed China as a modernising, credible, and intellectually invested partner in Europe.

Just as U.S. brands expanded their urban visibility in France through commercial presence, Chinese migrant entrepreneurs contributed to a parallel, and increasingly visible, form of public diplomacy that emerged at the grassroots level. The growth of Chinese communities in Paris – especially in the 13th arrondissement – brought with it a network of restaurants, businesses, and

[426] Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989*, 451.
[427] Ibid., 434.
[428] Crisanti, *Europeans Are Lovin' It? Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Responses to American Global Businesses in Italy and France, 1886–2015*, 158.
[429] Hayhoe and Bastid, *China's Education and the Industrialized World: Studies in Cultural Transfer*, 286.
[430] Ibid.

cultural spaces that introduced French society to everyday practices of Chinese life.[431] Culinary entrepreneurship, notably, became a vector of gastrodiplomacy, blending economic integration with stylised representations of Chinese identity.[432] In addition, the inclusion of Chinese artists in the 1989 international exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* offered a striking intervention in contemporary artistic discourse, challenging exoticized visions of Chinese culture and affirming China's place in global conceptual art.[433] Taken together, these official and community-driven channels constituted a hybrid infrastructure of public diplomacy, less centralised than the American model but equally capable of shaping symbolic narratives – through persistence, embeddedness, and cultural specificity.

The United States and the People's Republic of China pursued divergent narrative strategies in their public diplomacy during the 1980s, revealing fundamentally different visions of international order and cultural legitimacy. In the U.S. case, public diplomacy messaging was anchored in the Reagan administration's global ideological offensive, which mobilised the values of freedom, democracy, and free enterprise to reassert American moral leadership in the Cold War. As Schmitz demonstrates, Reagan used these ideals both to justify interventionism and to reframe right-wing authoritarian regimes as acceptable allies in the global struggle against communism – despite their domestic repression.[434] The messaging functioned on two levels: externally, to differentiate American values from those of the Soviet bloc; and internally, to universalise the narrative of the United States as a "force for good," even when supporting illiberal regimes. This dissonance was absorbed by U.S. public diplomacy infrastructure – including the USIA – whose cultural messaging emphasised not only liberal politics, but also the everyday appeal of American consumerism, individualism, and technological innovation.[435]

Different from the United States, China's public diplomacy during the same period articulated a deliberately non-confrontational and non-hegemonic discourse, centred on modernisation, non-interference, and mutual respect, in line with Deng Xiaoping's guiding principle of "peace and development".[436] As noted by Lai and Lu, this approach reflected a broader strategic posture in which China consciously adopted a low-profile foreign policy while gradually expanding its international influence. Embracing the doctrine of *taoguang yanghui* – "hiding its capacities and biding its time" – China integrated itself into the existing international system while simultaneously promoting multilateralism, regional cooperation, and economic diplomacy as the normative pillars of its soft

[431] "Chinois de Paris," *Antenne 2*, directed by Jean-Marc Illouz, May 12, 1989.
[432] "Restaurateur chinois," *Regard sur la France*, directed by Safi Faye, 1984.
[433] Centre George Pompidou, *Magiciens de la Terre*.
[434] Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*, 8.
[435] Inderjeet Parmar, "Challenging Elite Anti-Americanism in the Cold War: American Foundations, Kissinger's Harvard Seminar and the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies," in *Soft Power and U.S. Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Inderjeet Parmar and Michael Cox (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 109.
[436] Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, 32.

power strategy.[437] Whereas the United States promoted a forward-looking and universalist narrative grounded in democracy and capitalism, China articulated a cautious and system-accommodating discourse, emphasising its commitment to stability and integration through multilateralism and non-interference. Rather than offering a competing ideological model, Chinese public diplomacy in this period aimed to enhance legitimacy and reduce international apprehension by aligning cultural messaging with broader foreign policy principles.

Reactions to Chinese and American public and cultural diplomacy in 1980s France and Italy unfolded across multiple levels of society, from governmental institutions and political elites to intellectual circles and segments of the public. These responses were shaped not only by strategic interests, but also by ideological orientations and perceptions of cultural autonomy or affinity. While governments and party leaderships assessed foreign initiatives through the lens of international positioning, academics, journalists, and public opinion engaged with them more discursively – interpreting, endorsing, or contesting their symbolic content. The reception of public diplomacy was therefore not monolithic, but stratified, reflecting the political diversity of each national context.

In France, a country historically sensitive to narratives of cultural domination, China's civilisational discourse found more sympathetic terrain than America's assertive universalism. Chinese public diplomacy in France benefited from a historical undercurrent of support, fostered by a similar view of international order and a shared desire to pursue an independent foreign policy outside the constraints of bipolar politics.[438] Meanwhile, television programming – such as the INA-curated screening of Chinese state television at the Centre Pompidou – allowed French audiences to engage directly with Chinese representations of everyday life, often sparking curiosity rather than resistance.[439] Though lacking the media infrastructure of its American counterpart, China's efforts were often welcomed within Francophone academic and artistic institutions, where they were perceived as non-intrusive and culturally valuable rather than hegemonic. Still, these exchanges remained relatively circumscribed, limited in scope by institutional constraints and China's own cautious foreign policy posture during the early years of Deng Xiaoping's reforms.[440]

The United States, despite its longstanding alliance with France, encountered recurring resistance at the discursive level. Many French intellectuals and cultural policymakers viewed American cultural exports – particularly mass consumer products like McDonald's and Coca-Cola – not only as symbols

[437] Yongnian Zheng and Chi Zhang, "Soft Power and Chinese Soft Power," in *China's Soft Power and International Relations*, ed. Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu (London: Routledge, 2012), 31.
[438] French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directory of Asia and Oceania, *Note sur les relations franco-chinoises*, 29 December 1988, no. 1788, CADN (Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes), 513PO/2004/038, box 20, FR II.6.
[439] Centre George Pompidou. "Télévision chinoise (18–22 janvier 1984)".
[440] France, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Chronologie des relations franco-chinoises*, undated document, CADN (Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes), 513PO/2004/038, box 13, FR II.1.

of capitalist modernity, but as vectors of homogenisation and Americanisation. The journalist Pierre Drouin cautioned against what he described as the deceptive allure of American consumer culture. "Les mirages de la consummation" promoted by U.S. cultural products, he argued, diverted attention from deeper existential and social questions, fostering the illusion that everything meaningful could be bought: *liberté* through automobiles, *égalité* through holiday clubs, and *fraternité* through drinking Coca-Cola.[441] This critique resonated with the broader defence of what became known as *l'exception culturelle* – the notion that culture should not be reduced to a market commodity, but actively protected as an expression of national identity and intellectual autonomy.[442]

At the governmental level, however, cooperation with the United States remained strong throughout the 1980s, particularly within the frameworks of NATO and bilateral educational programmes such as the Fulbright exchange. Despite moments of cultural tension and public critique, French executive authorities continued to prioritise transatlantic stability and strategic alignment. Elite networks of academic and diplomatic exchange such as the Fulbright Program – supported by foundations and state institutions – played a central role in sustaining pro-American links even in countries where cultural resistance was strong.[443] These contradictions reveal a layered reception that reflected the dual structure of French foreign policy, where political pragmatism and strategic cooperation coexisted with cultural defensiveness rooted in Gaullist tradition of resistance to external influence, particularly among intellectuals and media elites wary of American cultural expansion.

Italian reactions to American and Chinese public diplomacy in the 1980s reflected a complex interplay of political alliances, ideological divisions, and cultural sensitivities. At the governmental level, Italy remained anchored to the Atlantic alliance, supporting U.S. diplomatic and cultural initiatives through programmes such as Fulbright and bilateral cooperation agreements. Yet this institutional Atlanticism coexisted with a widespread cultural ambivalence, especially within left-wing and intellectual circles, where American soft power was often associated with commodification, homogenisation, and ideological intrusion.[444]

Public reactions to McDonald's provide a clear example: when the company attempted to open its first restaurant in Rome in 1986, the project was met with strong opposition from local politicians, residents, and intellectuals, who denounced it as an attack on Italian culinary traditions and a symbol of American cultural imperialism. Italian newspapers gave space to editorials warning against the spread of fast foods and voiced broader concerns about the cultural and aesthetic impact of

[441] Pierre Drouin, "Sous le charme américain", *Le Monde*, March 27, 1974.
[442] Senate of the French Republic, *L'Europe et la culture*, Rapport d'information n. 213 (2000–2001), presented by Maurice Blin, Délégation pour l'Union européenne, February 1, 2001, https://www.senat.fr/rap/r00-213/r00-2137.html.
[443] Board of Foreign Scholarships, *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report: Fulbright Program Exchanges*, 6.
[444] Varsori and Zaccaria, eds., *Italy in the International System from Détente to the End of the Cold War: The Underrated Ally* , 195.

McDonald's, describing its arrival as a sign of urban decline and a threat to the city's atmosphere. This reaction was not marginal: it exposed a deep tension between Italy's geopolitical alignment and its cultural reflexes, particularly within a society where the Italian Communist Party (PCI) remained one of the largest in Western Europe.[445]

By contrast, the reception of Chinese public diplomacy followed a different path. While less visible and assertive, China's presence in Italy – through academic exchanges, exhibitions, and especially migration – was often perceived with curiosity rather than alarm. In cities like Milan, Prato, and Florence, the growing number of Chinese businesses and restaurants introduced elements of daily cultural contact that operated beneath the radar of geopolitical suspicion.[446] Intellectuals and journalists occasionally engaged with China in terms of modernisation and international balance, but far less as a civilisational threat. As noted by Roberto della Rovere in a 1985 article published in *Corriere della Sera*, American fast food culture, represented most symbolically by McDonald's, was often perceived as alienating and dissonant with Italian traditions of sociality and gastronomy. Della Rovere contrasted the rise of McDonald's with the growing popularity of Chinese restaurants, arguing that while the former provoked unease and cultural dislocation, the latter offered "a different evening" that felt more compatible with urban Italian lifestyles.[447] This distinction reflects a nuanced form of cultural preference: while American public diplomacy succeeded in terms of exposure and scale, Chinese cultural offerings – though modest – resonated more organically with certain segments of the Italian public and national habits.

The ability to adapt public and cultural diplomacy strategies to specific national contexts represented a crucial factor in determining their long-term resonance. In this regard, the United States and the People's Republic of China displayed markedly different approaches, shaped not only by their respective foreign policy priorities but also by their structural position in the international system and their level of prior embeddedness in European cultural and political landscapes.

The United States, operating from a position of global cultural hegemony, benefited from pre-existing institutional networks and long-standing transatlantic partnerships. In both France and Italy, U.S. diplomatic and cultural initiatives were often inserted into already established frameworks, such as NATO cooperation, Fulbright exchanges, and bilateral agreements.[448] This allowed for a relatively seamless continuation of engagement. However, this embeddedness sometimes translated into a certain rigidity, with American strategies relying on standardised instruments of projection that did not always account for local cultural sensitivities or political ambivalences. In France, the assertive

[445] "I politici discutono di vino e fast food," *Corriere della Sera*.
[446] China Daily DOCS. "Made in Italy by the Chinese.".
[447] Roberto della Rovere, "Una serata diversa? Provare con l'Asia", Corriere della Sera, July 19, 1985, 22.
[448] Board of Foreign Scholarships, *Nineteenth Annual Report: Fulbright Program Exchanges, 1980–1981*, 23.

promotion of American consumer culture frequently collided with entrenched traditions of cultural protectionism and intellectual autonomy. These concerns were compounded by growing U.S. economic investment in the country, prompting voices across the political spectrum to denounce President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's perceived subservience to American multinational corporations and to warn against the risk of economic and symbolic subordination to American hegemony.[449] In Italy, although Atlanticist governments such as those led by Spadolini and Craxi remained closely aligned with U.S. strategic priorities, including the deployment of Euromissiles, important sectors of the political and civil landscape – particularly the Communist Party and the pacifist movement – expressed strong opposition to the Reagan administration's foreign policy. As Varsori noted, U.S. actions such as the intervention at Sigonella were perceived as unilateral and disrespectful of Italian sovereignty, fuelling widespread concern about the asymmetry of the transatlantic relationship.[450]

By contrast, China's lower visibility and more cautious diplomatic posture paradoxically enabled greater adaptability to local contexts. Lacking a global media infrastructure and facing limited cultural familiarity in Europe, Chinese authorities adopted a strategy of gradual engagement, centred on education, scientific cooperation, and grassroots cultural presence. This low-profile approach aligned well with domestic political dynamics in both France and Italy, where a full embrace of foreign influence was politically sensitive. In France, China's discourse of non-interference and modernisation found resonance with Gaullist principles of diplomatic autonomy and resistance to hegemonic structures. By the mid-1980s, bilateral relations had evolved into a framework of increasing political convergence, with both states displaying a shared interpretive approach to key international issues, grounded in commitments to multipolarity and sovereign independence. Although economic exchanges remained modest and failed to meet French expectations, the depth of political alignment continued to strengthen.[451]

In Italy, Chinese public diplomacy benefitted from the country's active diplomatic engagement and long-standing interest in fostering relations with non-Western powers. Throughout the second half of the 1980s, Italy strengthened its bilateral ties with the PRC – signing defence and consular agreements and becoming China's second-largest European trading partner after West Germany. Rome's proactive role in the EEC, including its push for renewed political dialogue with Beijing during its 1990 Council Presidency, further reinforced a favourable environment for Chinese

[449] Crisanti, *Europeans Are Lovin' It? Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Responses to American Global Businesses in Italy and France, 1886–2015*, 159.
[450] Varsori and Zaccaria, eds., *Italy in the International System from Détente to the End of the Cold War: The Underrated Ally* , 111,112.
[451] Roberts, *Chinese Economic Statecraft from 1978 to 1989: The First Decade of Deng Xiaoping's Reforms*, 275.

engagement. This diplomatic posture, offered China opportunities for high-level, depoliticised cultural cooperation, bypassing more ideologically constrained frameworks.[452]

The comparative analysis of Chinese and American public and cultural diplomacy in 1980s France and Italy reveals not only the diversity of instruments and narratives employed by each actor, but also two fundamentally distinct models of soft power projection. The United States operated from a position of cultural dominance, mobilising a vast and well-established diplomatic infrastructure to assert democratic values, capitalist modernity, and individualism. Its approach was highly visible, multi-layered, and ideologically assertive – integrating institutional tools, corporate diplomacy, and mass media into a coherent vision of global leadership. Yet while structurally robust and far-reaching, this model occasionally encountered resistance, particularly where national identities or traditions of cultural autonomy conflicted with the universalist tone of American messaging.[453]

China, by contrast, pursued a more cautious and adaptive form of soft power, shaped by its transitional position in the global order and by a strategic emphasis on modernisation without confrontation. Crucially, Beijing did not seek to dominate the discursive space, but rather to insert itself carefully into existing institutional and cultural networks. This allowed it to avoid direct ideological friction and to cultivate legitimacy through long-term partnerships, scientific exchange, and diaspora engagement. While its approach lacked the global immediacy of the American model, it proved more attuned to local contexts – especially in societies marked by ideological pluralism or scepticism toward hegemonic narratives.[454]

These divergent strategies reflect not only different levels of global reach but also contrasting visions of international legitimacy. American public diplomacy aimed to reaffirm a normative order rooted in Western liberalism and consumer modernity, often through high-visibility campaigns and symbolic assertion. China, meanwhile, signalled reliability, political maturity, and a willingness to engage on equal terms – favouring incremental influence over immediate impact. Understanding these contrasts is essential to grasp how soft power operated in the specific political and cultural conditions of late Cold War Europe. In France and Italy alike, the effectiveness of public and cultural diplomacy depended less on the magnitude of projection than on the ability to adapt to local contexts, align with national priorities, and negotiate cultural sensibilities – factors that defined the limits and possibilities of both the American and Chinese models in the 1980s.

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[452] Valter Coralluzzo, "Italy's Foreign Policy Toward China: Missed Opportunities and New Chances," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 13, no. 1 (2008): 9–10, https://doi.org/10.1080/13545710701816794.

[453] John Krige, "Technological Leadership and American Soft Power," in *Soft Power and U.S. Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,* ed. Inderjeet Parmar and Michael Cox (London: Routledge, 2010), 133.

[454] Den Qirong, *Gaige kaifang yilai de zhongguo waijiao* (Chinese Diplomacy since the Reform and Opening Up) (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chuban She, 2009), 18.

Conclusion

This thesis has analysed how the United States and the People's Republic of China mobilised public and cultural diplomacy across the two heterogeneous European contexts of Italy and France during the 1980s. Taking the decade's shifting communicative infrastructure and changing European policy environment as backdrop, the chapters traced tools, intermediaries and receptions to show that public diplomacy functioned less as a unidirectional state broadcast than as a negotiated field shaped by media systems, institutional legacies, and everyday social circuits in the host countries.

A first cross-case finding is the persistence of distinct projection repertoires. The United States combined long-standing exchanges and cultural-centre networks with a confident move into high-visibility, media-centred formats under USIA; this sat alongside the everyday presence of commercial symbols and sport as conduits of American popular culture.[455] The result was a multilayered model that leveraged official programmes and market logics to stage a narrative of modernity and leadership. Yet visibility and breadth also encountered sites of resistance – particularly where traditions of cultural autonomy were strong – revealing limits to standardised instruments in settings sensitive to Americanisation. Instead, China advanced a lower-profile, selective repertoire oriented to education, science, language teaching, exhibitions and community-level presence. Rather than contesting the discursive space head-on, Chinese actors sought insertion into existing institutional and cultural networks, building recognition through academic mobility and diasporic circuits.[456] This strategy proved adaptive to environments wary of overt ideological assertion, and it benefited from incremental, everyday contact rather than spectacle.

Second, the comparison foregrounds the determinative role of receiving environments. France's strong, state-steered cultural policy tradition structured how external initiatives were filtered, debated and sometimes resisted; Italy's rapidly changing media market and plural civic venues, by contrast, created multiple points of entry for foreign messages and forms, not without internal opposition.[457] Across both cases, universities, broadcasters, festivals and associations mediated the travel of ideas and images, such that outcomes turned not only on what ministries planned but also on what societies received, adapted and redirected.

Third, effectiveness correlated less with the magnitude of projection than with the fit to local opportunity structures. In Italy, corporate icons, academic mobility and sport – epitomised by the popularisation of U.S. basketball – operated as culturally legible channels that aligned with emerging

[455] Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989*, 82.
[456] Woyu Liu, "150 Years of Studying Abroad in China: Three Cases of Study-Abroad Fever".
[457] Senate of the French Republic, *L'Europe et la culture*.

market media and youth audiences; in parallel, new Chinese networks connected to industrial districts and urban service economies provided niches through which cultural practices circulated from below. In France, U.S. media-facing formats benefited from visibility but also encountered stronger protective reflexes, while Chinese presence embedded through Parisian neighbourhoods, associations and institutional partnerships. In each national setting, instruments and narratives were filtered and sometimes amplified by these locally rooted circuits.[458]

These dynamics map onto two ideal-typical pathways to resonance. The U.S. pathway emphasised breadth, immediacy and mediated spectacle – linking exchanges, centres, corporate culture and sport to a confident, real-time engagement strategy in Western Europe. The Chinese pathway emphasised gradual institutional embedding – scientific and educational cooperation, language and exhibitions, diasporic networks – privileging incremental legitimacy over immediate discursive dominance. Each pathway was simultaneously enabled and constrained by the host environments of Italy and France.

Methodologically and conceptually, the comparative design underscores that public and cultural diplomacy in late-Cold-War Europe unfolded within a relational system no longer strictly state-centric but composed of multiple actors and networks. Instruments travelled through hybrid ecosystems in which publics participated actively rather than passively, and where cultural programming, broadcasting and academic mobility frequently operated in hybrid state–societal settings. The Italian and French cases thus show how "from-below" channels – universities, festivals, civic associations, neighbourhood venues – could refract and sometimes amplify state-led efforts. [459]

For the France–Italy contrast, three axial differences are salient. To begin with, policy mediation diverged: France's dirigiste cultural field supplied veto points and discursive filters that were largely absent in Italy's more plural, commercially liberalising media environment. In addition, the economies of visibility differed: U.S. high-exposure instruments travelled more readily into Italian mass-culture repertoires – commercial television and sport merchandising – while provoking more structured contestation in France; by contrast, Chinese initiatives gained visibility in France chiefly through metropolitan neighbourhoods and institutional partnerships, whereas in Italy they accrued through industrial-district linkages and urban services. Finally, temporalities of effect were distinct: U.S. efforts generated immediate, broad exposure but also episodic pushback in Italy and France, whereas Chinese efforts produced slower recognition yet more durable footholds where cooperation infrastructures took root in both countries.[460]

Taken together, the findings reaffirm the value of studying public and cultural diplomacy jointly. Treating cultural diplomacy as a constituent domain within public and new public diplomacy captures

[458] Martin, "Playing the China Card?", 77.
[459] USC Center on Public Diplomacy, "What Is PD?".
[460] Roberto della Rovere, "Una serata diversa? Provare con l'Asia".

how exchanges, exhibitions, education and language programmes interact with broadcasting and advocacy, and how both are conditioned by the social topographies in which they land. The 1980s cases demonstrate that instrument design and messaging mattered, but so did host-country mediation: elite discourses, party systems, policy legacies, media markets, and the density of cultural institutions.

Analytically, the thesis supports a networked view of public/cultural diplomacy: outcomes in Italy and France emerge from iterative interactions among officials, mediating institutions and mobile communities rather than from unilateral projection. Empirically, it shows that seemingly prosaic channels – language courses, academic labs, restaurants, film clubs, neighbourhood associations – carried some of the decade's most durable imprints. These are not peripheral to public diplomacy; they are integral to how it works in practice.

The analysis is bounded to two countries and a single decade. Extending the comparison to additional European cases (e.g., the Iberian peninsula or the Nordic states) and to the 1990s would test the portability of the two pathways identified here, particularly as satellite distribution deepened, commercial broadcasting matured, and Chinese educational mobility accelerated. Within Italy and France, deeper micro-studies – city-level archival and audio-visual reconstructions – could further specify how local actors translated state initiatives into recognisable cultural forms. These extensions would refine the general point established here: in late-Cold-War Europe, fit to receiving environment and density of intermediaries were decisive for the traction of public and cultural diplomacy.

In sum, the thesis places two global powers alongside two European receiving environments to show how soft power was operationalised in overlapping yet distinct ways. In France and Italy, instruments moved through country-specific circuits, so outcomes turned on local mediation rather than sheer volume. From this vantage, public and cultural diplomacy appear not as monopolised state practices but as multi-actor, interactive fields. Effects followed fit: where instruments met institutions and messages met publics, traction proved most durable.

Executive Summary

This thesis investigates how the United States and the People's Republic of China mobilised public and cultural diplomacy in Western Europe during the 1980s, focusing comparatively on Italy and France. Cultural diplomacy is treated as a constituent part of public diplomacy, so the analysis follows both state-led initiatives and the ways in which they interacted with local institutions and everyday venues. The aim of this thesis is to reconstruct instruments, messages, and reception within two heterogeneous European settings and to account for why similar tools travelled differently across national contexts.

Building on this framing, Chapter I examines China under Deng Xiaoping through secondary scholarship on political reform, the spread of Chinese communities, and the internationalisation of education and science. It reconstructs the institutional landscape of the 1980s and the repertoire of outward-facing cultural activities – language and cultural programmes, exhibitions, and academic mobility – through which China engaged European audiences, setting out the constraints and opportunities that shaped practice.

Chapter II turns to the United States in the Reagan years and, likewise, proceeds primarily from secondary literature anchored by selected official texts. Presidential speeches are used to recover stated aims and narratives for European publics; specialist histories of the United States Information Agency trace the shift toward media-centred practices (including satellite-enabled formats); and annual documentation on academic exchanges records the scale, rationale, and continuities of people-to-people programmes. Read together, these materials outline a multilayered American repertoire that combined institutional strategy with the everyday diffusion of cultural forms.

The comparative analysis in Chapter III then relies exclusively on primary sources – presidential and ministerial speeches, exhibition and festival catalogues, contemporaneous press, and audio-visual materials – to map how initiatives were presented, mediated, and received in France and Italy. By following instruments across venues such as universities, cultural centres, festivals, broadcasters, and neighbourhood spaces, the chapter traces how national policy traditions, media ecologies, and civic infrastructures filtered and sometimes redirected state efforts.

The conclusion argues that the two powers deployed partially overlapping yet distinct repertoires and that outcomes depended less on volume than on "fit" with the Italian and French receiving environments. Durable effects often moved through ordinary channels – language courses, academic exchanges, restaurants, film clubs, and neighbourhood associations – where state objectives met local agency. Public and cultural diplomacy thus appears not as a top-down broadcast but as an interactive field shaped jointly by officials, mediating institutions, and the social textures of the host societies.

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