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Tweeting for Influence: Analysing France and China's Cultural Diplomacy on Social Media, a Mixed Methods Approach

Rémi Meehan

Sciences Po Paris, Paris, France

remi.meehan@sciencespo.fr

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Abstract

How are states using cultural diplomacy on social media to expand their power? This research analyses over 67,000 tweets from the French and Chinese Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA s) as well as their respective state-sponsored cultural networks including *Institut Français*, *Alliance Française*, and the Confucius Institutes. Stephen Lukes' three-dimensional power framework, where cultural authority legitimizes power over others, provides the study's theoretical basis. In analysing the tweets, I employ a mixed methods approach including VADER sentiment analysis, word frequency analysis, and thematic analysis. While both states aim to present their cultures as high-value cultures, the similarities end there. As a liberal democracy, France encourages open expression through its cultural institutions, including discourse critical of France. In contrast, China's cultural diplomatic messaging is precisely controlled and speaks about China in invariably exalting terms. This study offers evidence that regime type has a powerful effect on cultural diplomatic messaging on social media.

Keywords

cultural diplomacy – social media – public diplomacy – Ministry of Foreign Affairs – sentiment analysis – *Institut Français* – Confucius Institute – strategic communication

Introduction

The rise of social media over the past fifteen years has impacted all avenues of state communication, including diplomacy. As a result, a large academic literature around the concept of digital diplomacy has developed over this period.¹ Many scholars have focused on the digitalisation of public diplomacy, but there has been relatively little attention on the digitalisation of cultural diplomacy specifically.² Considering the extensive state-driven and state-supported cultural diplomatic activity in the digital domain since the early 2010s, more research on cultural diplomacy on social media is needed.³

Today, influential powers such as China, the United States, France, the UK, and Germany all conduct cultural diplomacy on social media, perhaps most prominently on Twitter (now rebranded as X).⁴ As of December 2023, there are over 75 active Twitter accounts affiliated with *Institut Français* and *Alliance Française*, France's two cultural networks uniquely dedicated to disseminating French culture and engaging with the foreign public on cultural issues.⁵ China has also significantly invested in its cultural diplomacy on social media, especially following a sharp increase in US-China trade tensions in 2018, which prompted Beijing to reassess its Twitter activity.⁶ Since its launch in 2019, the Spokesperson of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Twitter account (@MFA_China) has gained over 670,000 followers and tweets over ten times a day on average, often about Chinese culture. @MFA_China has since become the most followed state-run Chinese account on Twitter.⁷ Moreover, China's network of Confucius Institutes (CIs), dubbed by contemporary China scholar Jacques deLisle as "the most visible manifestation of China's cultural soft power agenda," has a Twitter presence that dates as far back as 2011.⁸

This study seeks to contribute to the scholarship in digital diplomacy by exploring how France and China digitalised their cultural diplomacy. Applying

1 Holmes, 'Digital Diplomacy'; Bjola and Manor, *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Diplomacy*, pp.3–6.

2 See Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, 2019.

3 Grincheva, 'Digital Cultural Diplomacy: From Content Providers to Opinion Makers', pp. 207–208.

4 For reasons of stylistic clarity and to avoid any confusion when comparing social media content across time, this paper will refer to X (formerly Twitter) as Twitter. Twitter was rebranded as X in April 2023.

5 *Institut Français* [Twitter].

6 Huang and Wang, 'Exploring China's Digitalization of Public Diplomacy on Weibo and Twitter: A Case Study of the U.S.-China Trade War'.

7 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023.

8 DeLisle, 'Soft Power in a Hard Place: China, Taiwan, Cross-Strait Relations and U.S. Policy', pp. 493–524.

Stephen Lukes' three-dimensional power framework, this study theorises that France and China digitalised their cultural diplomacy to further legitimise their cultural authority on the global stage and enhance their power. In analysing an initial corpus of over 67,000 tweets, this research uncovers empirically how France and China's digital practices of cultural diplomacy differ, even as they share the same goal of expanding their global influence. This study employs a mixed methods approach, using quantitative tools such as word frequency analysis and VADER sentiment analysis to identify broad patterns and themes which are then explored qualitatively.

For China, engaging in cultural diplomacy on social media helps portray Chinese language and culture as a high-value culture with a rich history and heritage. It does this by promoting Chinese language and cultural exchange programs, a key part of Xi Jinping's plan to build China's "cultural self-confidence" and "explain China's story to the world."⁹ China's cultural diplomacy online also links Chinese culture with China's economic strength and overseas development aid, presenting China as a benevolent global actor. Finally, China leverages its cultural diplomacy on social media to criticise US leadership. Coordinated, disciplined messaging from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Confucius Institutes offer evidence that China's authoritarian regime keeps its cultural diplomatic messaging tightly bound to these narratives. Of the over 17,000 Chinese cultural tweets analysed, those mentioning Chinese history or culture did so in invariably exultant terms. Most Chinese tweets mentioning the US, however, did so from a critical lens.

In contrast, France's approach to cultural diplomacy on social media is less centralised and more unscripted. While France seeks to strengthen its cultural leadership by promoting its language and culture, it also promotes culture generally, including non-French cultures and non-French artists. Notably, this diffuse approach sometimes results in the state-sponsored amplification of voices critical of the French government. This diversity of voices allows France to present itself as an international cultural standard-bearer and defender of universal values, indirectly reinforcing its cultural leadership. Occasionally, the French government itself will use cultural diplomacy to acknowledge and atone for historical wrongs. Overall, France and China's sharply contrasting approaches to cultural diplomacy on social media reveal deep differences in how each state believes global influence is cultivated. These differences reflect the fundamentally divergent worldviews of their respective democratic and autocratic regimes.

9 Zhao, 'The China Model of Public Diplomacy and its Future', pp. 175–177.

The study will be structured as follows. The first section will define key terms and theorise how states use cultural diplomacy on social media to enhance their power employing Stephen Lukes' "three dimensions" of power. The second section will provide some historical background to contextualise the case studies. The third section will describe the methodology used to analyse the tweets. The fourth section will describe the main themes and narratives conveyed in the respective datasets of French and Chinese tweets. The final section will summarise the findings and suggest avenues for further research.

Main Research Question

This study addresses the following research question: *how are states using cultural diplomacy on social media to expand their power?*

Concepts and Definitions

Cultural Diplomacy as a Subset of Public Diplomacy

The USC Center for Public Diplomacy defines public diplomacy as "the practice of engaging with foreign audiences to strengthen ties, build trust, and promote cooperation."¹⁰ For diplomacy scholar Nicolas Cull, cultural diplomacy is one of the "core elements" of public diplomacy, which he defines as governments' "attempts to explain [themselves] to the world."¹¹ In *Soft Power*, Joseph Nye describes the "third dimension" of public diplomacy as "developing lasting relationships with key individuals" through "cultural and academic exchanges."¹² For these thinkers, cultural diplomacy is conceived as a bounded subset of public diplomacy. M. C. Cummings takes a broader view, defining cultural diplomacy as "the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding."¹³ In this research, I employ a more limited, state-centric definition of cultural diplomacy as a subset of public diplomacy. Combining Nicholas Cull and Joseph Nye's definitions, I define cultural diplomacy as a core subset of public diplomacy; namely a state-supported effort to explain itself to the world through history, education, and cultural exchange.

¹⁰ USC, 'What is PD?.'

¹¹ Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, pp. 1–3; 487–492.

¹² Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, p. 109.

¹³ Cummings, *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey, Americans for the Arts*.

Digital Diplomacy and the Digitalisation of Public Diplomacy

At the dawn of the internet in the early 2000s, “digital diplomacy” referred to early online government initiatives, such as a Foreign Ministry’s website for public diplomacy.¹⁴ The subsequent explosion of social media a decade later compelled governments to communicate on new digital platforms, greatly expanding the concept of “digital diplomacy” and blurring the line between “digital diplomacy” and public diplomacy on social media.¹⁵ As state actors’ social media use proliferated, so did academic articles on social media and diplomacy.¹⁶ By the mid 2010s, “digital diplomacy” was often defined as the use of social media for diplomatic purposes.¹⁷

More recent scholarship has called into question the usefulness of digital diplomacy as a distinct subset of diplomacy.¹⁸ After all, diplomacy is not neatly separated between the digital and non-digital, and digital tools are used today in every facet of diplomacy from sensitive WhatsApp exchanges between two negotiators to wide-reaching messages of public diplomacy on popular social media platforms. Moreover, the digitalisation of MFAs developed over many years and is still ongoing. Indeed, the digitalisation of MFAs reflects the broader global transition of human communication to digital spaces. For these reasons, Ilan Manor prefers “the digitalization of public diplomacy” over “digital diplomacy” to describe states’ public diplomacy efforts on social media.¹⁹ To avoid the inherent ambiguities of “digital diplomacy,” in this study I will use “the digitalization of cultural diplomacy” to describe the dynamic process of states engaging in cultural diplomacy on social media and “cultural diplomacy on social media” to describe states’ cultural diplomatic content online.

The Digitalisation of Cultural Diplomacy and Cultural Diplomacy on Social Media

If cultural diplomacy is the state-supported effort to explain its culture to the world, then social media provides countless opportunities for doing so. Social media enables MFAs and state-supported cultural networks to directly

14 Dizard, *Digital Diplomacy: U.S. Foreign Policy in the Information Age*; Potter, *Cyber-Diplomacy: Managing Foreign Policy for the Twenty-First Century*.

15 Manor and Crilley, ‘The Mediatisation of Ministries of Foreign Affairs: Diplomacy in the New Media Ecology’, pp. 273–298; Lequesne (ed.), *Ministries of Foreign Affairs in the World: Actors of State Diplomacy*.

16 Cull, ‘The Long Road to Public Diplomacy 2.0: The Internet in US Public Diplomacy’, pp. 123–139; Sandre, *Twitter for Diplomats*.

17 Bjola and Holmes, *Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, pp. 4–9; 71–74.

18 Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, p. 14.

19 Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, pp. 10–21.

communicate with foreign publics to a degree unimaginable in the pre-digital world.²⁰ Before social media, a state-sponsored cultural event could reach thousands and indirectly reach hundreds of thousands with sufficient attention from traditional media. Today, social media enables states to promote cultural events in real-time to a global audience of millions.²¹ States have responded to this enlarged “opportunity set” in two ways. Some insist on stricter message discipline. Others empower more local-level cultural actors who can better connect with specific digital audiences. This research posits that the path a state chooses to digitalise its cultural diplomacy reflects how it views itself and what it believes will enhance its cultural authority. Much academic literature shows that state beliefs about legitimacy are shaped by regime type.²² The case studies in this research offer a contrasting example of how two states with different regime types digitalised their cultural diplomacy and engage in cultural diplomacy on social media today.

Lukes’ Three Dimensions of Power

In his seminal book, *Power: A Radical View*, Steven Lukes describes three dimensions to power. Unlike traditional materialist conceptions of power, Lukes’ framework emphasises the potential of language and culture to shape behaviours and outcomes, and is therefore especially helpful in understanding how states can use cultural diplomacy to expand their power. Lukes’ first dimension, decision-making, is “observable” power.²³ A classic example is a government enacting a new strategy or initiative. In the context of cultural diplomacy, power’s first dimension could be an MFA’s digital strategy. France’s 2021 digital strategy declared “influence” one of its top strategic priorities, and underlined the importance of effective social media communication with “priority publics”.²⁴ In 2018, China’s State Council issued several “opinions” offering “standardized guidance” to government branches and ministries to improve the “clear function and positioning” of their social media messaging.²⁵

20 Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, p. 105.

21 Grincheva, ‘The past and future of cultural diplomacy’, pp. 172–191.

22 Gilley, *The Right to Rule: How States Win and Lose Legitimacy*; Gerschewski, ‘The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes’, pp. 13–38.

23 Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 3rd ed., pp. 20–22.

24 MEAE, ‘Plan de transformation numérique’, 2021, p. 17.

25 Chan, ‘Sweeping Up the Government’s Social Media Mess’; General Office of the State Council, ‘Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Promoting the Healthy and Orderly Development of Government New Media.’

Such observable exercises of power fit neatly into Lukes' first dimension of power.

The second dimension, agenda setting, describes the parameters that surround the process of decision-making. In a legislative body where representatives are directly elected, party leaders and special interest groups can nonetheless exert power by controlling which issues are discussed and which are not.²⁶ Lukes emphasises that these "nondecisions" confine "the scope of decision-making" and perpetuate the status quo. Often, there is no clear means of challenging "nondecisions" and thus no way of broadening the scope of possible choices.²⁷ In cultural diplomacy, power's second dimension is exerted by public diplomats, digital communication officers, and lead organisers of state cultural networks such as the Confucius Institutes or *Institut Français*. These individuals decide which cultural events are promoted and how cultural content is presented on social media. In so doing, they also implicitly decide which cultural content to exclude. This dimension of power is subtle and behind-the-scenes, yet plays a crucial role in shaping states' cultural diplomacy.

Lukes spends most of his book exploring power's third dimension, which he equates with "secur[ing] willing consent by shaping and influencing desire and beliefs."²⁸ This dimension of power is pervasive, far-reaching, and the "least accessible to direct observation."²⁹ In the parliamentary example, the third face of power could be social and cultural norms which strongly discourage a dissatisfied group from raising valid concerns. In such a case, an ostensibly open society would be implicitly dominated by the members of the in-group who defend prevailing norms.³⁰

In his framework, Lukes sees power, authority, and influence as distinct if overlapping concepts (Fig. 1). In Fig 2 I re-created Lukes' conceptual map following the theorized impact of state efforts to digitalize cultural diplomacy. A state that engages in effective cultural diplomacy on social media can expand its cultural authority in the international system. While not all states that engage in cultural diplomacy online do so effectively, those that do can expand their cultural authority, resulting in greater influence and greater power.

In its more extreme forms, the third dimension of power can become "thought control."³¹ Inspired in part by Antonio Gramsci's writings on hegemony, the

26 Lukes, *Power*, 3rd ed., pp. 44–45.

27 Lukes, *Power*, 3rd ed., pp. 27–8.

28 Lukes, *Power*, 3rd ed., p. 3.

29 Lukes, *Power*, 3rd ed., p. 3.

30 Lukes, *Power*, 3rd ed., p. 42–47.

31 Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed., pp. 7–28.

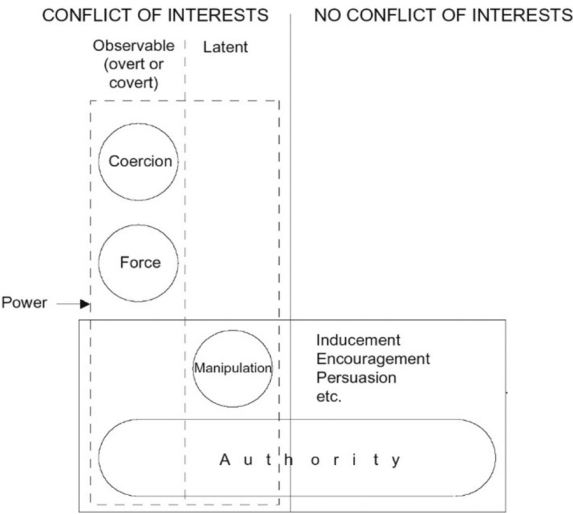


FIGURE 1 (from Stephen Lukes' *Power: A Radical View*)

third face of power describes how groups and individuals can dominate others with their consent. Lukes presents the harrowing example of the 1944 Great Bengal famine where impoverished Indian mothers happily gave up their health and food for the wellbeing of their husbands and male children.³² Lukes suggests the Indian women who acted this way had internalised the belief

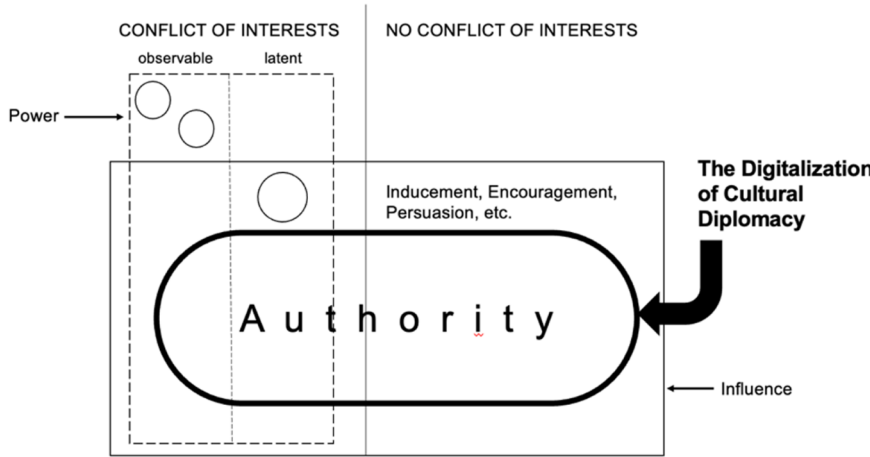


FIGURE 2 How the digitalization of cultural diplomacy can increase state power

32 Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, pp. 1–4; Lukes, *Power*, 2nd ed., pp. 135–8.

that their male relatives' wellbeing superseded theirs and had thus become "a willing part of the fabric of [their] own domination."³³

This subtle yet pervasive dimension of power is what states seek to amplify through the digitalisation of their cultural diplomacy. On social media, states promote their culture via language classes, artistic performances, and other content that highlights their culture as unique, interesting, and worthy of admiration. The ease of producing social media content allows states to sustain a never-ending stream of cultural diplomatic messages that advance favourable narratives. Such repetition can shift perceptions, as demonstrated by the *illusory truth effect*, a well-documented phenomena where subjects accepted falsehoods as true when repeated often enough.³⁴ Twitter, as the preferred social media platform of elites in many countries, has the unique potential to shape decision-makers.³⁵ The more states disseminate convincing messages on Twitter to shapers of public opinion, the more states' cultural leadership is legitimised. In the French case, cultural diplomacy on Twitter showcases non-French artists and promotes "French" universal values, indirectly reinforcing its cultural authority. In the Chinese case, cultural diplomacy on Twitter links China's economic success with its "historic" culture, legitimising its cultural authority. States with legitimized cultural authority can then mould the beliefs and desires of other international actors, a form of "thought control." Over time, these actors' beliefs and desires can converge with the desires of the dominating state.

Historical Background

France and China as Case Studies

I chose France and China as case studies for several reasons. First, both states have fully embraced digital tools including social media to communicate their culture. This is evident from the significant social media presence of French and Chinese state actors on Twitter and other platforms. Second, both China and France have an explicit state policy of using cultural diplomacy in the digital space to enhance their power. Few other states have such clearly

33 Dowding, 'Three-Dimensional Power: A Discussion of Steven Lukes' Power: A Radical View', pp. 136–45.

34 Hasher *et al.*, 'Frequency and the conference of referential validity,' pp. 107–112; Brashier and Marsh, 'Judging Truth,' pp. 499–515.

35 Blank, 'The Digital Divide Among Twitter Users and Its Implications for Social Research,' pp. 679–97; Robertson, 'Here's what our research says about news audiences on Twitter, the platform now known as X'.

articulated strategies. Finally, both states use a network of state-sponsored and state-supported cultural institutions to promote their cultures. The networks of *Institut Français* (IF), *Alliance Française* (AF), and Confucius Institutes (CIs) are among the world's largest cultural diplomatic networks. Other state-sponsored networks, such as the UK's British Council and Germany's Goethe Institute, lack the scale, funding, or deep institutional commitment of the French and Chinese networks.³⁶ While France and China differ greatly in size and political systems, their engagement in cultural diplomacy on social media is similar in scale, and they have state-sponsored networks of comparable size and ambition. This enables a balanced comparative analysis of both states' cultural diplomatic engagement on social media, despite radical differences in regime type. Thus, this research builds on previous comparative studies of regime type in international affairs.³⁷ The following subsections present a brief background on France and China's cultural diplomacy and their digitalization efforts.

Cultural Diplomacy of France

Cultural diplomacy in France has its origins in the late 19th century as advances in mass communication expanded diplomatic messaging beyond elites to broader foreign audiences. *Alliance Française* was founded in 1883 by private donors with government support, and the publicly financed *Institut Français* came to existence several decades later.³⁸ Over the next century, both the state-supported *Alliance Française* and state-funded *Institut Français* would grow substantially into essential nodes of French cultural dissemination.

Today these two cultural networks lie at the heart of French cultural diplomacy. The *Alliance Française* network has 829 chapters in 135 nations. In 2022, *Alliance* chapters hosted 21,000 events attended by 3.2 million people worldwide.³⁹ Globally, *Institut Français* has over 137 chapters.⁴⁰ While the *Alliances Françaises* are funded primarily through grassroots donations, *Institut Français* is supported by a French national cultural budget of over 4

36 Wintour, 'British Council to close 20 offices across globe after cuts and lost income'; Wieder, 'The Goethe-Institut to close two of its five French sites'.

37 Hyde and Saunders, 'Recapturing Regime Type in International Relations: Leaders, Institutions, and Agency Space', pp. 363–95; Rød and Weidmann, 'Empowering activists or autocrats? The Internet in authoritarian regimes', pp. 338–51.

38 Roselli, 'Le projet politique de la langue française. Le rôle de l'Alliance française', pp. 73–94.

39 *Fondation des Alliances Françaises*.

40 Eschapasse, 'Diplomatie culturelle: comment la France consolide ses positions'.

billion euros, equivalent to 1/10th of France's defence budget. By comparison, US federal spending on culture is 1/2000th of US defence spending.⁴¹

Just as the *AF* and *IF* networks have evolved considerably since their founding, so too has the language surrounding their missions and goals. No longer explained in crude colonial terms, today these organisations' *raison d'être* is for France to gain "influence," and even to improve French security.⁴² In his 2017 election campaign, French President Emmanuel Macron promised more funding for *l'Institut Français*, stating that IF must "evolve to become a grand international cultural agency." His campaign literature professed: "The teaching of French and France is not a value of the past. It is an essential tool of our influence, and also in our battle against extremism."⁴³

Institutional discourse from IF and AF further support this influence-growing mission. *l'Institut Français* describes its dual purpose as both promoting French language and culture globally and "striv[ing] for cultural diversity around the world."⁴⁴ This second mission is made possible by partnerships and events hosted with "cultural stakeholders" abroad. These events are widely promoted through IF's many social media channels, raising artists' profiles and showcasing IF's commitment to elevating diverse cultural voices. *Institut Français*' official motto is "liberty, creativity, and diversity"—an echo of the French revolutionary slogan "liberty, equality, and fraternity."⁴⁵ This motto hints towards IF's third purpose, often professed by Macron, to promote "French" universal values.⁴⁶ How values can be simultaneously "French" and "universal" is never fully explained. Nevertheless, the aim of France's foreign cultural policy is clear: to spread French culture and elevate international artists as much as possible, usually with the help of social media.

Cultural Diplomacy of China

While China has been a key player in global trade and cultural exchange for millennia, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) only integrated cultural diplomacy as part of official foreign policy in the early 2000s. As China emerged as a major economic power in the late 1990s, its foreign policy became

41 *Art Review*, "We saved culture": France boosts 2022 culture budget to 4 billion euros'; *Budget Ministère des Armées*; Grantmakers in the Arts, 'Public Funding for Arts and Culture in 2020'; Bloomberg Government, 'FY23 Defense Budget Breakdown'.

42 Macron, 'Le programme, La République En Marche!'; Macron, 'Discours du Président Emmanuel Macron à l'occasion de la conférence des ambassadrices et des ambassadeurs'.

43 Macron, 'Le programme, La République En Marche!'

44 *Institut Français*, 'Our missions', 2024.

45 *Institut Français*, *Accueil*, 2023.

46 Macron, 'Le programme, La République En Marche!'

outward-focused. This national strategy of “Going Global” encouraged Chinese business to invest abroad to sustain the country’s rapid economic growth.⁴⁷ While primarily an economic development initiative, “Going Global” soon impacted other areas of CCP policymaking. In 2002, Chinese Cultural Minister Sun Jiazheng announced a strategy of “establishing a brand-new image of China and building China into an international cultural centre” by “infiltrating into mainstream international community and mainstream media.”⁴⁸

Shortly thereafter, the CCP added culture as the third pillar of Chinese diplomacy and in 2004 launched the Confucius Institutes, which soon became a hallmark of China’s cultural diplomacy. CIs aimed to “develop and facilitate the teaching of the Chinese language overseas and promote educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other international communities.”⁴⁹ China invested heavily in growing its CI network. By late 2018, 500 CIs had been established around the world.⁵⁰ Drawing a direct comparison with *Alliance Française*, the CCP committee in charge of the CIs reportedly set a goal of establishing 1,000 CIs by 2020 in hopes of exceeding the number of global *AF* chapters.⁵¹

After Xi Jinping rose to power in 2013, his focus on building “cultural self-confidence” ensured China’s continued investment in cultural diplomacy.⁵² According to Xi, “Culture is a country and nation’s soul. Our country will thrive only if our culture thrives, and our nation will be strong only if our culture is strong.”⁵³ Without this “soul”, Chinese diplomacy is rudderless.⁵⁴ The centrality of Chinese culture is equally reflected in institutional discourse. Official CCP statements cite China’s “cultural soft power” as a national resource derived from China’s socialist ideals and the “indelible contribution[s]” of its 5,000-year-old civilization to mankind.⁵⁵

47 Wang and Miao, ‘Going Global Strategy’.

48 Liu, ‘China’s Cultural Diplomacy: A Great Leap Outward with Chinese Characteristics? Multiple Comparative Case Studies of the Confucius Institutes’, pp. 646–61.

49 Liu, ‘China’s Cultural Diplomacy’, pp. 646–61.

50 Jakhar, ‘Confucius Institutes: The growth of China’s controversial cultural branch’.

51 Liu, ‘China’s Cultural Diplomacy’, pp. 646–61.

52 Jin, ‘Cultural Self-Confidence and Constellated Community: An Extended Discussion of Some Speeches by Xi Jinping’.

53 Jinping, ‘Full text of Xi Jinping’s report at 19th CPC National Congress’.

54 Zhao, ‘The China Model of Public Diplomacy and its Future’, pp. 169–181.

55 Becard and Menechelli, ‘Chinese Cultural Diplomacy: instruments in China’s strategy for international insertion in the 21st Century’; Jinping, ‘Full text of Xi Jinping’s speech on the CCP’s 100th anniversary’; Kong, ‘Imaging China: China’s cultural diplomacy through loan exhibitions to British museums’.

This marriage of socialist principles with China's cultural heritage is reflected in Xi Jinping's calls for public diplomacy with "Chinese characteristics." According to Chinese scholar Kejin Zhao, this emphasis on ideological conformity in diplomatic messaging signifies "Marxism's key role in guiding [China's] public diplomacy" and is motivated by Xi Jinping's desire to "consolidate" his "political legitimacy" (2019).⁵⁶ In China, culture is so fundamental to public diplomacy that public and cultural diplomacy are nearly synonymous. Seen in this way, Chinese cultural diplomacy plays an indispensable role in promoting state power and helps explain the CCP's deep commitment to engaging in cultural diplomacy.⁵⁷

France's Digitisation of its Cultural Diplomacy

Recognising the power of social media to strengthen its already extensive cultural diplomatic network, France was an early adopter of social media for diplomatic purposes. The French Foreign Ministry (*MEAE*) launched its dedicated English-language Twitter account in 2011. In 2015, France published its official digital strategy, one of the first European countries to do so. Two years later, *MEAE* published a separate international digital strategy with the digitalisation of diplomacy as a key component.⁵⁸ In explaining its rationale for an international digital strategy, *MEAE* directly evoked state power: "Digital technology is now a key issue for France's foreign policy ... be it for the success of France's economy in the global competitive sphere or for conditions of stability, security and power on a global scale."⁵⁹

In addition to the international digital strategy published by *MEAE*, the French Ministry of Culture also publishes a separate digital cultural strategy. Mirroring the *MEAE*'s digital strategy, the Ministry of Culture's digital strategy seeks to "spread French language and culture" in the digital space. The strategy also describes that France's digital culture should be a "vector" for democratisation and free expression.⁶⁰ These strategy documents from two different French ministries (*MEAE* and the Ministry of Culture) showcase how

56 Zhao, 'The China Model of Public Diplomacy and its Future,' pp. 169–181.

57 Becard and Menechelli, 'Chinese Cultural Diplomacy: instruments in China's strategy for international insertion in the 21st Century.'

58 ANSSI, Agence nationale de la sécurité des systèmes d'information, 'The French national digital security strategy: meeting the security challenges of the digital world'; *MEAE*, 'Stratégie internationale de la France pour le numérique.'

59 *MEAE*, 'Stratégie internationale de la France pour le numérique'; *MEAE*, 'Digital and soft diplomacy,' *France Diplomacy—Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs*.

60 Ministère de la Culture, 'Cultural Digital Strategy.'

the French state believes that promoting universal values will build its cultural authority and enhance its power.

This idea that France's diplomacy—cultural, digital, or otherwise—should act as a “vector” for democratisation and free expression appears often in French documents of diplomatic strategy. In portraying itself as this legitimate representative of democratic values, France seeks to further cement its position of cultural leadership in the international system. The more French art, culture, ideas, and democratic values are seen as desirable and exemplary, the more entrenched France's cultural leadership becomes. As more international actors adopt this vision of France as an international cultural standard-bearer and defender of universal values, they will increasingly evaluate themselves and others based on French norms and standards. This is Lukes' “third face” of power—an automatic perpetuation of “prevailing norms,” an internalised desire to act in accordance to an authority's wishes.⁶¹ The more France is seen as a legitimate international arbiter of culture and universal values, the greater its cultural authority and the greater its influence and power (see Fig. 2).

China's Digitisation of its Cultural Diplomacy

The digitalisation of cultural diplomacy presented a significant opportunity for China to grow its cultural authority and showcase its “cultural soft power.” China's cultural diplomacy on social media is characterised by both strict adherence to institutional messaging and informal coordination among state actors including ministries, grassroots organisations, and state media.⁶² The Chinese MFA's earliest social media accounts, dating back to 2011, were almost exclusively on Chinese platforms like Weibo, targeting a domestic audience and subject to government censors.⁶³ Chinese public diplomacy on ‘Western’ social media began taking off around 2015, when more embassies and diplomats started posting on Twitter and official Facebook pages in English.⁶⁴ A 2018 study found that three-quarters of social media messages from Chinese embassies were retweets of official Chinese Foreign Ministry reports and the rest were mostly retweets of state-run media. The study concluded that high-level state actors have limited flexibility in their messaging and noted that government

61 Lukes, *Power*, 3rd ed., p. 119.

62 Zhao, ‘The China Model of Public Diplomacy and its Future’; Huang and Wang, ‘Exploring China's Digitalization of Public Diplomacy on Weibo and Twitter: A Case Study of the U.S.-China Trade War’.

63 Huang and Wang, ‘Exploring China's Digitalization of Public Diplomacy on Weibo and Twitter: A Case Study of the U.S.-China Trade War’, p. 193.

64 Alden and Chan, ‘Twitter and Digital Diplomacy: China and COVID-19’.

mouthpieces closely adhered to CCP rules that public communications be “sleek and harmonious.”⁶⁵

The launch of @MFA_China in 2019 marked the first authoritative Twitter account for the Spokesperson of the Chinese MFA. While @MFA_China launched nearly a decade after many other MFAs had rolled out their primary Twitter accounts, it quickly accumulated a large following. Within a few years, it had over five times more followers than MEAE’s official English language account (@francediplo_EN) despite the latter being seven years older. @MFA_China represented a renewed centralisation of Chinese public and cultural diplomacy on social media. Soon the most-followed Chinese government account on Twitter, @MFA_China frequently posted cultural diplomatic messages and became one of the CCP’s key avenues for building China’s “cultural self-confidence” and growing China’s cultural authority on Twitter. A 2022 study analysing 100,000 tweets and Facebook posts from Chinese diplomatic entities including Confucius Institutes, Chinese embassies, and the Chinese MFA found that 10.6% of the total tweets from these government-sponsored accounts discussed Chinese culture and people.⁶⁶

The Confucius Institutes also played a key role in the digitalisation of China’s cultural diplomacy. With some Confucius Institutes launching Twitter accounts as early as 2011, these accounts were among the first Chinese cultural diplomatic initiatives on an international social media platform. Although the Twitter activity of CIs in the US and UK dropped substantially as many CIs in the West ceased operations in the late 2010s, non-Western CI accounts remain quite active, mostly notably @MakConfucius, the CI account at Makerere University in Uganda. The intrinsic de-localisation of social media, which enables @MakConfucius to communicate with a global English-speaking public despite hundreds of CIs closing in Europe and the US, underscores the disruptive potential of cultural diplomacy’s digitalisation.⁶⁷ In an increasingly digitised world, the digitalisation of cultural diplomacy enables China to “tell its story well” and advance its cultural authority across the globe.⁶⁸

65 Huang and Arifon, ‘Chinese public diplomacy on Twitter: Creating a harmonious polyphony’; Song *et al.*, ‘Twitter Diplomacy and China’s Strategic Narrative during the Early COVID-19 Crisis’.

66 Miller, ‘China’s Digital Diplomacy’.

67 Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, pp. 8; 36–40.

68 Huang and Wang, ‘Exploring China’s Digitalization of Public Diplomacy on Weibo and Twitter: A Case Study of the U.S.-China Trade War’.

Methodology

This research aims to answer the question: *how are states using cultural diplomacy on social media to expand their power?* Adopting a mixed methods approach, I analysed 67,808 tweets using quantitative tools for an initial sentiment analysis and then identified 1,426 “performing” tweets for a qualitative thematic analysis. This approach ensured both rigorous data collection as well as insights from human coding.

I divided this research question into two sub-questions:

Sub-question 1: *what are the main themes and narratives of France and China's cultural diplomacy on social media? Are there measurable differences in sentiment among different themes?*

Sub-question 2: *what can the different themes and their respective sentiments scores tell us about the similarities and differences in France and China's approach to digitalising their cultural diplomacy?*

For the first sub-question, I obtained a comprehensive dataset of French and Chinese cultural diplomatic tweets and conducted VADER sentiment analysis to score each tweet. High performing tweets were then sorted into thematic categories using word frequency analysis and manual coding. The aggregate VADER scores of each category were compared for both countries.

To answer the second sub-question, I analysed the thematic categories and their respective VADER scores, identifying significant differences in how France and China digitalise their cultural diplomacy. These differences present a contrasting case study of how different regime types engage in cultural diplomacy on social media. The “results” section details these findings.

Scope

To develop a comprehensive dataset of French and Chinese cultural diplomatic tweets, I first defined the scope. Given the vast content on social media platforms, defining scope is essential for research using social media data.⁶⁹ This paper limits the analysis to Twitter and only examines content from MFA (@FranceDiplo_EN and @MFA_China), *Institut Français*, *Alliance Française*, and Confucius Institute accounts. Embassy and consular accounts were excluded to manage data volume, though future studies analysing embassy and consular data could provide additional insights.

This research focuses only on Twitter for several reasons. First, despite recent limitations in accessing Twitter's API, data is still accessible through

69 Manor and Crilley, ‘The Mediatisation of Ministries of Foreign Affairs: Diplomacy in the New Media Ecology’.

scrapers like TwExportly.⁷⁰ Other platforms like Facebook and Instagram are either less accessible or provide less textual data. Second, Twitter still plays a key role in the contemporary media landscape, as traditional media often depends on Twitter to find stories and disseminate news.⁷¹ Twitter's influence in shaping narrative is thus unique among social media platforms. Finally, Twitter users tend to be more elite and interested in news and politics, making it a key platform for public and cultural diplomacy.⁷²

The time period analysed spans from the day of account launch (as early as 2009) to December 15, 2023. The dataset includes tweets but not retweets, as retweeted content may not originate from the account in question and because TwExportly had limitations in scraping all retweets. See Appendix A for more details.

This research includes only English-language Twitter accounts and tweets in English. This ensures tweets are focused on how countries “explain [themselves] to the world” and avoid content targeted for domestic audiences.⁷³ Additionally, VADER sentiment analysis is not as developed or accurate in non-English languages. Therefore, the French-language accounts of the *IF* and *AF* headquarters were excluded. The *CI* headquarters do not have a Twitter account.

This research was conducted in the following steps: (1) data collection, (2) VADER scoring, (3) coding, (4) word frequency analysis, and (5) thematic analysis.

Data Collection

Using TwExportly, I scraped all tweets from the French MFA's English-language Twitter account (@FranceDiplo_EN) and the Spokesperson of the Chinese MFA (@MFA_China). I then scraped tweets from the 15 most active *Alliance Française* and *Institut Français* accounts and the 15 most active *CI* accounts. After removing retweets and non-English tweets, the dataset comprised of 50,406 tweets for the French case study and 17,402 for the Chinese case study. More details on data collection are provided in Appendix B.

A table listing all the Twitter accounts used in this research for France and China is presented below (Fig. 3).

70 Stokel-Walker, ‘TechScape: Why Twitter ending free access to its APIs should be a “wake-up call”’.

71 Stennis, ‘Defining what makes Twitter's audience unique’.

72 Blank, ‘The Digital Divide Among Twitter Users and Its Implications for Social Research’, pp. 679–97.

73 Cull, ‘The Long Road to Public Diplomacy 2.0: The Internet in US Public Diplomacy’, pp. 123–139.

Account Name	Twitter Handle	English-Language Tweets	Cultural Diplomatic Tweets	Percent of Tweets that are Cultural Diplomatic Tweets	Follower Count
French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs (English Language Account)	@FranceDiplo_EN	15,617	1,273	8.2%	142,300
Institut Français UK	@ifru_london	6,089	6,089	100.0%	23,400
French Institute Alliance Française - New York City	@FIAFNY	5,710	5,710	100.0%	8,187
Alliance Française DC	@FranceDC	5,210	5,210	100.0%	4,504
Alliance Française Accra	@AF_Accra	4,988	4,988	100.0%	6,562
Institut français d'Ecosse (IF Scotland)	@ifecosse	4,600	4,600	100.0%	3,912
Alliance Française Dublin	@afdublin	3,156	3,156	100.0%	7,098
Médiathèque de l'Institut français du Royaume-Uni (IF UK Library)	@library_ifru	2,773	2,773	100.0%	4,414
Institut français UAE	@IFintheUAE	1,566	1,566	100.0%	3,537
Institut français d'Indonésie (IF Indonesia)	@IFI_Indonesia	557	557	100.0%	21,100
Institut français Egypte (IF Egypt)	@ifegypte	140	140	100.0%	9,083
Total Number of Cultural Diplomatic Tweets (France)		36,062			
Total Number of Tweets Analyzed (France)		50,406			

FIGURE 3 Twitter accounts used in this research (France)

Account Name	Twitter Handle	English-Language Tweets	Cultural Diplomatic Tweets	Percent of Tweets that are Cultural Diplomatic Tweets	Follower Count
China Ministry of Foreign Affairs	@MFA_China	4,057	192	4.7%	676,500
De Montfort University Confucius Institute, UK	@DMU_CI	1,577	1,577	100.0%	805
Confucius Institute U.S. Center, USA	@CIUSCenter	1,501	1,501	100.0%	919
Manchester Confucius Institute, UK	@ConfuciusMCR	1,319	1,319	100.0%	1,887
Confucius Institute for Business at State University of New York (SUNY), USA	@confuciusbiz	1,250	1,250	100.0%	1,862
Universit College London Confucius Institute, UK	@UCL_IOE_CI	1,165	1,165	100.0%	1,523
Oxford Brookes Confucius Institute, UK	@OBUConfucius	1,141	1,141	100.0%	1,242
University of Kentucky Confucius Institute, USA	@UKConfucius	1,078	1,078	100.0%	534
Confucius Institute at University of Hull, UK	@HullConfucius	828	828	100.0%	556
Confucius Institute in Auckland, NZ	@ConfuciusNZ	826	826	100.0%	527
Confucius Institute for Scotland's Schools, UK	@CISSSStrathclyde	721	721	100.0%	1,073
Confucius Institute at Coventry University, UK	@ConfuciusCovuni	545	545	100.0%	385
Confucius Institute at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David	@ConfuciusTSD	474	474	100.0%	405
Confucius Institute at Makerere University, Uganda	@MakConfucius	456	456	100.0%	1,790
London Confucius Institute for Traditional Medicine	@CI4TCM	348	348	100.0%	951
Groningen Confucius Institute, Netherlands	@GCI_tweets	116	116	100.0%	500
Total Number of Cultural Diplomatic Tweets (China)		13,537			
Total Number of Tweets Analyzed (China)		17,402			

FIGURE 3A Twitter accounts used in this research (China)

VADER Scoring

Valence Aware Dictionary for Sentiment Reasoning (VADER) is a NLTK module that creates sentiment scores for text. While numerous sentiment analysis tools have emerged over the past 15 years, VADER is “specifically attuned to sentiments expressed in social media.”⁷⁴ VADER has outperformed human raters and is widely used in academic publications.⁷⁵ By attributing a polarity (positive/negative/neutral) and intensity of emotion to words and phrases, VADER calculates an aggregate score for a tweet, ranging from -1 (most negative) and 1 (most positive). VADER is generally viewed as superior to other sentiment analysis models as it incorporates punctuation, slang, and emojis in calculating sentiment intensity.⁷⁶ VADER has been used to research tweets on various topics including the 2016 US election, Brexit, and Taiwanese public diplomacy campaigns.⁷⁷ This study is among the first to use VADER to analyse tweets by MFA’s and state-affiliated cultural organisations. See Appendix C for detailed examples on how VADER scores specific tweets.

To obtain a VADER score for all the tweets in the dataset, a Python script was applied to the 50,406 tweets in the French dataset and the 17,402 tweets in the Chinese dataset. This included 15,617 @FranceDiplo_EN tweets, 34,789 AF/IF tweets, 4,057 @MFA_China tweets, and 13,345 CI tweets.

Coding

Next, I coded each tweet “cultural diplomacy” or “not cultural diplomacy.” Given AF/IF’s mission to share and promote “the beauty of French language and culture” and support “French culture internationally,” all AF/IF tweets were coded “cultural diplomacy.”⁷⁸ Similarly, because the CI’s mission includes “conducting Chinese language teaching” and “running language and cultural exchange programs,” all CI tweets were coded “cultural diplomacy.”⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Hutto, ‘VADER Sentiment Analysis’.

⁷⁵ Hutto and Gilbert, ‘VADER: A Parsimonious Rule-based Model for Sentiment Analysis of Social Media Text’.

⁷⁶ Georgiadou *et al.*, ‘Big data analytics and international negotiations: Sentiment analysis of Brexit negotiating outcomes’.

⁷⁷ Elbagir, and Yang, ‘Twitter Sentiment Analysis Using Natural Language Toolkit and VADER Sentiment’; Georgiadou *et al.*, ‘Big data analytics and international negotiations: Sentiment analysis of Brexit negotiating outcomes’; Choo, *et al.*, ‘How #TaiwanCanHelp Reverberates: An Exploratory Analysis of Advocacy Hashtag on Twitter’.

⁷⁸ *Alliance Française, Alliance Française de Paris; Institut Français, ‘Our missions’.*

⁷⁹ *Confucius Institute, 2020.*

For @FranceDiplo_EN and @MFA_China, coding was done manually using a deductive coding approach. To facilitate the manual coding process, I applied a sorting tool of 89 keywords associated with cultural diplomacy such as “art,” “celebration,” “music,” and “tradition.”⁸⁰ Once completed, I identified 1,463 cultural diplomatic tweets from @FranceDiplo_EN and 192 tweets from @MFA_China. Adding these to the AF/IF and CI datasets provided me with a comprehensive dataset of cultural diplomatic tweets from France and China.

Next, I distinguished between “performing” and “non-performing” tweets. Many AF/IF tweets and CI tweets had low engagement, with some attracting fewer than 5 likes. (see Fig. 3). Defining an engagement score as the sum of likes, retweets, bookmarks, and comments, I separated all the cultural tweets into “performing” (score of 30 or higher) and “non-performing” (score below 30). I made this distinction because cultural diplomacy as defined in this study implies that an audience receives the messages being sent. Tweets with engagement scores below 30 had such low visibility they likely played no role in how states use cultural diplomacy on social media to enhance their power.

The results of the VADER scoring and subsequent coding are shown in the table below (Fig. 4).

A few results stand out. The French MFA had a larger percentage of cultural diplomatic tweets (8.2%) than the Chinese MFA (4.7%). Both France (2.9%) and China (2.7%) had a small percentage of “performing tweets” among their cultural diplomatic tweets. Both countries had cultural diplomatic tweets with higher VADER scores than their non-cultural diplomatic tweets. Interestingly,

	Tweet Count	VADER score	VADER Score	Min VADER Score	Standard Deviation VADER score
All @FranceDiplo_EN Tweets	15617	0.16	0.99	-0.98	0.48
@FranceDiplo_EN Tweets coded 'Cultural Diplomacy'	1274	0.37	0.98	-0.91	0.39
All AF/IF Institute Tweets	34789	0.38	0.99	-0.96	0.39
All AF/IF Tweets coded 'Cultural Diplomacy'	34789	0.38	0.99	-0.96	0.39
Total French Cultural Tweets	36062	0.38	0.99	-0.96	0.39
Total "performing" French Cultural Tweets	1061	0.55	0.98	-0.91	0.37
All @MFA_China Tweets	4057	0.14	0.98	-0.98	0.54
@MFA_China Tweets coded 'Cultural Diplomacy'	192	0.32	0.98	-0.95	0.54
All Confucius Institute Tweets	13345	0.42	0.99	-0.96	0.38
All Confucius Institute Tweets coded 'Cultural Diplomacy'	13345	0.42	0.99	-0.96	0.38
Total Chinese Cultural Tweets	13537	0.42	0.99	-0.96	0.39
Total "performing" Chinese Cultural Tweets	365	0.49	0.99	-0.95	0.48

FIGURE 4 VADER scores for French and Chinese cultural diplomatic tweets

80 Lamont, *Research Methods in International Relations*, pp. 109–111.

there was no significant VADER score differences between France and China, whether comparing total tweets or cultural diplomatic tweets specifically. “Performing” tweets generally had higher VADER scores than “non-performing” tweets, especially for France.

Word Frequency

Word frequency analysis, which examines the number of times a word appears in a text, has been used for decades across disciplines including linguistics, psychology, political science, and information.⁸¹ In this research, word frequency analysis helps identify themes and other patterns for qualitative evaluation.

Fig. 5. shows bar charts of the most common words in “performing” French and Chinese cultural diplomatic tweets. The top ten words in the Chinese tweets were “chinese”, “china”, “US” (case-sensitive), “students”, “history”, “year”, “confucius”, “institute”, “people”, and “new”. The top ten words in the French tweets were “french”, “france”, “win”, “simply”, “tickets”, “world”, “competition”, “film”, “free”, and “book”.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis encompasses a range of techniques to identify themes in text. While the term described various research approaches in the later 20th century, Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke’s seminal paper set the standard for defining thematic analysis and its methods.⁸² According to Braun and Clarke, themes do not “emerge” from a “murky pond” of data, but rather are developed from the researcher’s expertise in a “very active process of pattern formation and identification.”⁸³ Crucially, the research question is the main driver in identifying and refining themes. In this study, word frequency analysis serves as an initial step to identify thematic directions. Other factors influencing theme selection include France and China’s unique digital and cultural diplomatic histories and their publicly stated goals concerning the digitalisation of cultural diplomacy. Ultimately, themes were chosen based on their relevance to answering the research question—how France and China engage in cultural diplomacy on social media to expand their power.

81 Baayen, *Word Frequency Distributions*; Brysbaert *et al.*, ‘The word frequency effect: a review of recent developments and implications for the choice of frequency estimates in German’, pp. 412–424; Wilkerson and Casas, ‘Large-Scale Computerized Text Analysis in Political Science: Opportunities and Challenges’, pp. 529–544; Carroll and Roeloffs, ‘Computer selection of keywords using word-frequency analysis’, pp. 227–233.

82 Braun and Clarke, ‘Using thematic analysis in psychology’; Terry *et al.*, ‘Thematic Analysis’.

83 Braun and Clarke, ‘Using thematic analysis in psychology’; Terry *et al.*, ‘Thematic Analysis’, p. 27.

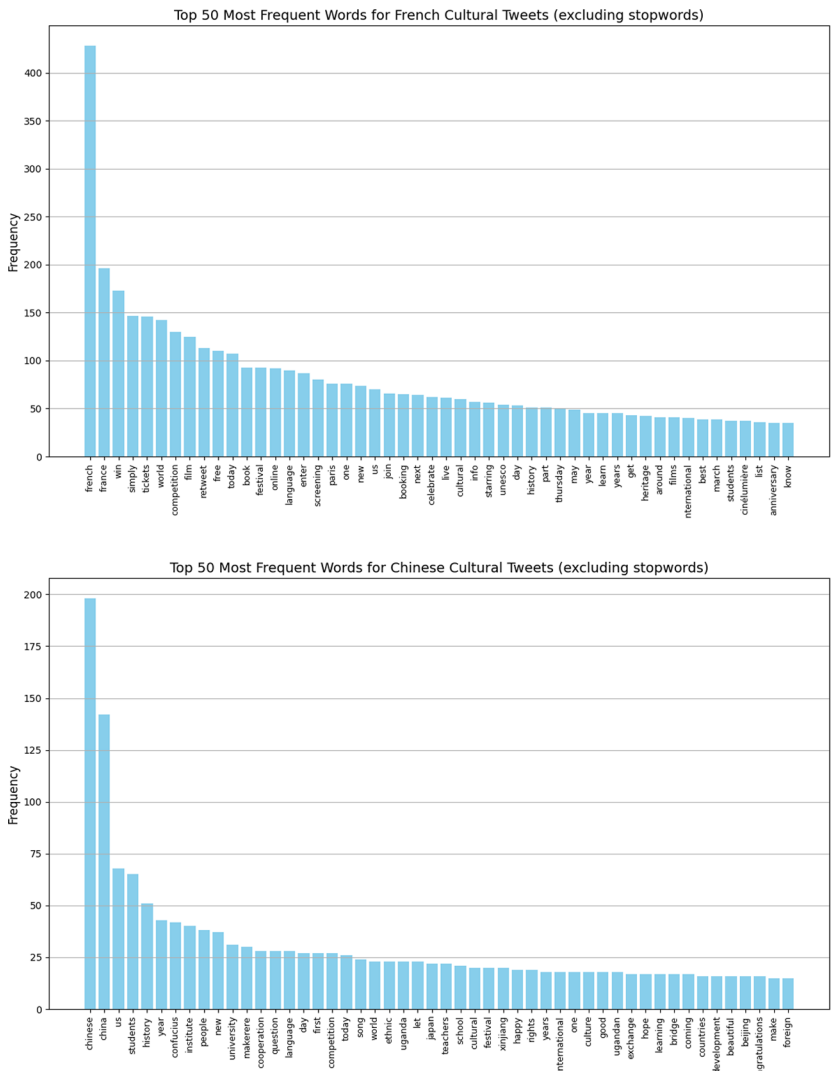


FIGURE 5 Word Frequency for Chinese and French Cultural Diplomatic Tweets

Results

China's Cultural Diplomacy on Twitter

The word frequency and thematic analysis of the Chinese cultural diplomatic tweets revealed three main themes. First, China uses cultural diplomacy on social media to portray its culture as rich and interesting, as seen in frequent mentions of “china” and “chinese,” often referring to Chinese language and

culture. In these tweets, China's importance in human history is often evoked alongside references to China's grandeur. For example, one widely shared @MFA_China tweet features a video of MFA spokesperson Wang Wenbin with the following subtitles: "The Chinese language with its profound cultural heritage, and rich cultural implications, is attracting more and more foreign learners."⁸⁴ These messages portraying Chinese culture as a high-value culture are mobilised to strengthen the perception that China is singularly qualified to exert cultural authority in the international system. One April 2022 @MFA_China tweet states, "Traditional Chinese medicine is a precious heirloom of the Chinese nation and a treasure to all mankind. China has sent #TCM experts to 29 countries and regions to help fight COVID-19."⁸⁵ Here, China is again highlighting its culture as a high-value culture, in this case demonstrating how its unique culture empowers it to help countries in need.

The second way that China uses cultural diplomacy on social media to advance its influence is by promoting narratives that undermine US or Western leadership. Many of the anti-US tweets from @MFA_China have particularly high engagement rates. One @MFA_China tweet from June 2022 had an engagement score of over 1,000: "Speaking of forced labor, the US should have a look at its own history & reality. The US is known historically for its original sin of slave trade. Today, it still has serious problems of human trafficking & forced labor."⁸⁶ This tweet is likely in response to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, a US law that went into effect that same month prohibiting imports linked to forced labour in Xinjiang.⁸⁷ Repressive regimes often disparage so-called "Western" rhetoric about human rights and universal values to deflect attention from their own poor human rights records.⁸⁸ @MFA_China frequently cultivates such narratives, including that Western rhetoric on human rights is "hypocritical."⁸⁹

Indeed, criticising the US is an extremely common theme in @MFA_China's cultural tweets. "US" is the third most frequently used word in the dataset, after "china" and "chinese". By comparison, not a single country other than France appeared in the top 50 words in the French dataset. Among Chinese tweets with engagement score above 30, the US or Japan is mentioned in almost a quarter of tweets. Unsurprisingly, the average VADER score of a Chinese digital

84 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 July 2021.

85 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8 April 2022.

86 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8 June 2022.

87 Human Rights Watch, 'China: US Law Against Uyghur Forced Labor Takes Effect'.

88 Inboden, 'China and Authoritarian Collaboration', pp. 505–517; Inboden, 'Five Questions on Countering Authoritarian Influence in the UN Human Rights System'.

89 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 4 December 2019.

diplomatic tweet mentioning the “US”, “Japan”, or the “West,” is 0.09, barely positive and far below the average of all the tweets (0.55).

Still, not all tweets mentioning the US are critical, (“The US is one of the first countries to cooperate with China on panda conservation and research ... Together we’ve bred 17 cute panda cubs, connecting the hearts of Chinese and Americans”).⁹⁰ These messages of “panda diplomacy” may be selectively released to “soften” the confrontational messages and create a more balanced feed for @MFA_China.⁹¹ More often however, mentions of the US contain direct condemnations of US leadership and draw sharp comparisons between China and the US, often on cultural grounds. In the early days of the Covid pandemic @MFA_China sent this tweet alongside an inspirational-sounding video promoting national unity, “Bloomberg: ‘the idea of sacrificing one’s self [sic] for a greater national goal is deeply-embedded in Chinese culture.’ Exactly! That’s the way we are. So many touching stories of self-sacrifice pop up during our fight against #2019_nCoV”.⁹² In this tweet, @MFA_China proudly emphasises self-sacrifice as an “embedded” cultural trait. Exalting the need for collective sacrifice is a well-documented rhetorical technique of authoritarian regimes.⁹³ In presenting self-sacrifice as Chinese cultural trait, @MFA_China distinguishes Chinese culture from “Western” culture and provides a basis for China to claim greater cultural authority.

Finally, China links its culture to the “miracle” of its economic success over the past 30 years and its subsequent investments in education and development abroad. In making this link, China bolsters its cultural authority over other states, especially those receiving Chinese development financing. Using both triumphant language (“China has won the largest battle against poverty in human history & eradicated absolute poverty at home ...”) and support for student and cultural exchanges (“China’s mainland is ready to receive every Honduran student in Taiwan”), China projects itself as a benevolent global actor.⁹⁴ Indeed, “students” is the fourth-most used word in Chinese cultural diplomatic tweets (after “china”, “chinese”, and “US”). The overall impression is that China’s language and culture contribute to its economic success and

90 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28 September 2023.

91 Hartig, ‘Panda Diplomacy: The Cutest Part of China’s Public Diplomacy’; Huang and Wang, ‘Panda engagement’ in China’s digital public diplomacy’.

92 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 6 February 2020.

93 Pumar, ‘How Revolutions Justify Themselves’, p. 121; Kneuer, ‘Legitimation beyond ideology: authoritarian regimes and the construction of missions’.

94 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17 October 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 27 March 2023.

that studying them can help other countries replicate China’s success. A video tweet from the Confucius Institute at Makerere University in Uganda with a high engagement score encapsulates this. It features an interview of a Uganda CI student who says: “Since I started learning Chinese, my life and career plans changed.”⁹⁵ The student then describes his travels to China where he learned about “Chairman Mao’s thought” and “Deng Xiaoping’s theory of reform and opening up.” He concludes by stating his hope of continuing to “disseminate the values of ... diplomatic relations between China and Africa.”⁹⁶ By facilitating student exchanges and teaching Chinese culture worldwide, China displays its cultural leadership and authority. Spreading this message on Twitter allows it to grow its “cultural soft power”.⁹⁷ In accordance with Lukes’ three-dimensional theory of power, greater cultural authority often leads to greater power.

A chart of these three themes of the Chinese cultural tweets and their associated VADER scores can be viewed below (Fig. 6).

France’s Cultural Diplomacy on Twitter

Incorporating word frequency analysis with a close reading of the tweets and their historical, political, and diplomatic contexts, I identified three themes in the French cultural diplomatic tweets. VADER scores for each theme can be found in Fig. 7. These themes each represent how France uses its cultural diplomacy on social media to grow its cultural authority.

First, France promotes the French language as unique, beautiful, and worth learning through its MFA account and the *AF/IF* network. It also presents French culture as rich and celebratory. Cultural tweets from both @FranceDiplo_EN and from the *AF/IF* accounts are promotional and highly

	Number of Tweets	Average VADER Score	Max VADER Score	Min VADER Score	Standard Deviation
Theme 1: Chinese culture and its rich heritage	154	0.61	0.99	-0.54	0.35
Theme 2: US and 'Western' leadership	86	0.09	0.94	-0.95	0.60
Theme 3: Educational exchanges and development success	99	0.65	0.98	-0.93	0.34
Uncategorized	26	0.55	0.95	-0.51	0.44
Total	365	0.55	0.95	-0.51	0.44

FIGURE 6 VADER score by Theme (China)

95 Confucius Institute at Makerere University.
96 Confucius Institute at Makerere University.
97 Becard and Menechelli, ‘Chinese Cultural Diplomacy: instruments in China’s strategy for international insertion in the 21st Century.’

	Number of Tweets	Average VADER Score	Max VADER Score	Min VADER Score	Standard Deviation
Theme 1: French language and culture as a high-value culture	432	0.48	0.98	-0.66	0.36
Theme 2: Hosting and promotion of cultural events	522	0.64	0.98	-0.73	0.33
Theme 3: French universal values, human rights, etc	28	0.35	0.92	-0.89	0.50
Uncategorized	79	0.43	0.95	-0.91	0.46
Total	1061	0.55	0.98	-0.91	0.37

FIGURE 7 VADER score by Theme (France)

engaging. On New Year’s Eve 2018, @FranceDiplo_EN tweeted: “#Food: The 8 things you need to know about the world’s favorite beverage, #champagne” with a photo of champagne flutes linking to a government website educating visitors about champagne.⁹⁸ As Fig. 7 shows, tweets championing French language and culture had a strongly positive VADER score (0.48) although not as high as tweets promoting cultural events (0.64). In the champagne example, the French MFA is reminding the world that a classic drink associated with celebration and life milestones is French. This type of educational tweet illustrates France’s cultural authority and presents an image of French culture as timeless and welcoming.

A second prevalent theme in French cultural tweets was the promotion of cultural events. Common words like “win,” “tickets,” and “competition,” indicate efforts by AF/IF chapters to drive engagement. One particularly successful example by *Alliance Française* Dublin in November 2021 reads: “#Win tickets for the @afdublin #screening at @IFI_Dub #French #Film #Festival, “Between Two Worlds” Starring Juliette Binoche, on November 24th 6.10pm! To enter the #competition, simply #Like & #Retweet.”⁹⁹ *Between Two Worlds* (French: *Ouistreham*) is a film about a French journalist who goes undercover as a ferry cleaner to experience the struggles of low-income workers. This is not a patriotic film—it shines a light directly on labour injustices in France. Yet, as a liberal democracy with freedom of expression, France supports IF chapters that screen films depicting ugly aspects of French society. The screening was presumably well attended, as this tweet’s engagement ranked in the top 1% within the dataset of French cultural tweets.

In accordance with IF’s mission to become a “grand international cultural agency,” IF and AF also frequently feature non-French art and artists.¹⁰⁰ For

98 France Diplomacy, 31 December 2018.
99 *Alliance Française* Dublin.
100 Macron, ‘Le programme, *La République En Marche!*’

example, AF Accra hosted popular British-Ghanian hip hop artist M3NSA to celebrate his new album, an event widely promoted on Twitter.¹⁰¹ The most striking examples of cultural promotion from IF and AF accounts are those which challenge standard versions of French history and openly criticize France's not-so-distant colonial past. In March 2022, IF UK invited French-Moroccan writer Leïla Slimani to speak and tweeted this quote of hers from the event: "It is not because colonialization ended that its impacts aren't still felt. The bodies [of the colonized] remain colonized and contaminated, which allows colonialism's impacts to continue."¹⁰² Although never explicitly stated, a listener could easily make the connection between the "contaminated" bodies of the colonised and France's recent immigration reforms, including a proposed December 2023 law that facilitates deportations and restricts welfare benefits for immigrants.¹⁰³

A film screening at French Institute-*Alliance Française* (FIAF) in New York offers another example of IF/AF events promoting art critical of France. Hosting acclaimed French actress Isabelle Huppert and screening her 1981 film *Coup de Torchon*, FIAF tweeted that the film was "a reckoning with France's colonial legacy and an examination of the universal nature of evil."¹⁰⁴ In this tweet, FIAF highlights France's painful colonial history and even seems to acknowledge France's past "evil." Here, FIAF is not just showcasing artists critical of France but is condemning past actions of the French government. This tweet underscores the de-centralised nature of France's cultural diplomacy on social media and the freedom of expression France grants its civil servants.

These repudiations of French colonialism and their contemporary echoes, disseminated by *Institut Français* and paid for by the French government, point to sharp differences between the French and Chinese approach to cultural diplomacy. For France, funding cultural centres that disseminate French culture, even on politically charged issues, is a worthwhile end in and of itself. This is true even when the cultural discourse is critical of France. Since 2017, IF's budget has increased by 15%, suggesting that France believes IF's mission of promoting "cultural diversity" is enhancing France's cultural diplomacy, "an essential tool of [French] influence."¹⁰⁵ France's hands-off approach to managing AF/IF events embodies the "universal value" of free expression consistent with IF's motto of "liberty, creativity, and diversity" (*Institut*

¹⁰¹ *Alliance Française Accra*.

¹⁰² *Institut Français UK*.

¹⁰³ Corbet and Ganley, 'France's Macron defends divisive immigration bill and denies it marks tilt by government to right.'

¹⁰⁴ *FIAF*, 2019.

¹⁰⁵ *Ministère de la Culture*, 'Cultural Digital Strategy'; *Institut Français*, 'Institut Français-Liberty, Creativity, Diversity', 2024; Macron, 'Le programme, La République En Marche'

Français, 2023).¹⁰⁶ Despite being on French government payroll, IF directors have significant freedom to invite speakers and artists critical of France.

The third noteworthy theme in French diplomatic tweets was the notion of French universalism, emphasising human rights both at home and abroad. Although the specific terms “universalism” and “human rights” do not appear in the top 50 most frequent words, universalist themes often appear in tweets from @FranceDiplo_EN and IF/AF accounts. One particularly high-engagement tweet recognized the 70th anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, stating that human rights are France’s “universal and indisputable heritage.”¹⁰⁷ As “vectors” for democratisation and free expression, France’s cultural networks play a key role in supporting this “universal heritage.” France’s “universal” values are even promoted in homages to French historical figures: “Today we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Louis Pasteur. #Pasteur was convinced of the humanist and universal values of research and dedicated his life to developing a new way to do it.”¹⁰⁸ Universal values are even linked to historical monuments: “Over 1,000 years, its silhouette has become an emblem of French universalism. Its Abbey is the symbol of who we are: a people of builders.”¹⁰⁹

@FranceDiplo_EN’s advocacy of universal values is most poignant in tweets directly acknowledging France’s past crimes. In October 2022 @FranceDiplo_EN tweeted, “In Paris, 61 years ago, a crackdown on a demonstration of members of the Algerian independence movement wounded hundreds and killed dozens. Inexcusable crimes for the French Republic. France has not forgotten the victims. The truth is the only path to a shared future.”¹¹⁰ This explicit recognition of French state complicity in the murder of protestors reflects France’s genuine effort to live up to its universal values. @FranceDiplo_EN’s acknowledgements of French state involvement in the rounding up of Jewish people during the Holocaust have a similar effect.¹¹¹ Because tweets mentioning French “universalism” often covered difficult topics, these tweets had the lowest VADER score of three groupings of French tweets (0.35).

The unscripted and critical nature of France’s cultural diplomatic communication gives France’s cultural promotion a certain credibility and offers evidence that France is trying to live up to its professed values, including freedom of expression. This genuine manifestation of French “universal values” helps France enhance its cultural authority.

106 *Institut Français*, ‘Institut Français- Liberty, Creativity, Diversity’, 2024

107 France Diplomacy, 10 December 2018.

108 France Diplomacy, 27 December 2022.

109 France Diplomacy, 6 June 2023.

110 France Diplomacy, 17 October 2022.

111 France Diplomacy, 6 December 2022.

Discussion, Limitations, and Further Research

This study aimed to answer the research question: *how are states using cultural diplomacy on social media to expand their power?* It did so by conducting a comparative analysis of French and Chinese cultural diplomatic tweets using VADER sentiment tools, word frequency analysis, and thematic analysis. This research uncovered three prevalent themes in the cultural diplomatic discourse of each country. Chinese cultural diplomacy on Twitter advances the following strictly defined narratives: (1) Chinese language and culture is a high-value language and culture, (2) US/Western cultural leadership is untrustworthy and unreliable, and (3) China's culture helps explain its remarkable economic success as well as its benevolence and generosity towards developing nations. While France's cultural diplomacy also (1) promotes its language and culture as a high-value culture, the similarities with China end there. France's cultural diplomacy on social media regularly emphasizes universalist themes consistent with liberal, democratic regimes. These themes include that (2) France is an international cultural standard-bearer and thus supports talented artists from all over the world, and that (3) France's cultural diplomacy acts as a "vector" for spreading universal values, which means showcasing artistic and government voices critical of French colonial history and contemporary French society.

France's promotion of non-French artists and of "universal values" stands in sharp contrast with China's centralised, top-down approach to cultural diplomacy on social media. @MFA_China and the CIs adhere to a disciplined message that invariably reflects positively on China. While France's MEAE occasionally posted messages acknowledging for historical wrongs, no equivalent messages could be found in the Chinese dataset. Indeed, China's focus on criticising Western leadership in its cultural diplomacy online suggests it believes cultural authority is zero-sum, where one state's gain is another's loss. Seen through this lens, China criticises "Western" cultural authority in order to bolster its own. Moreover, by presenting "universal values" as little more than a hollow appeal to Western cultural authority, China can more easily advance its own alternative narratives of "national rejuvenation" and individual "self-sacrifice." After all, the suppression of universal values including freedom of expression is an essential part of the CCP's strategy to maintain its uncontested rule over China's 1.2 billion people.¹¹² Taken together, the comparative case studies of France and China demonstrate that regime type can have a significant influence in how states digitalise their cultural diplomacy to enhance their power.

¹¹² Moynihan and Patel, 'Restrictions on online freedom of expression in China.'

This research has several limitations. First, it only included Twitter data. Research including other platforms could enrich these findings. Second, this research only examined MFAs and state-supported cultural networks. Additional research including embassy and consular accounts could enhance this study, especially for China, whose embassies' presence on Twitter predates @MFA_China. Third, this research did not emphasise regional variations in communication strategies of CIs and IF/AF chapters. Exploring such variations, especially for CIs which have different strategies based on geographic region, could yield valuable insights. Finally, this study could benefit from deeper contextualization from field interviews with French and Chinese diplomats responsible for cultural diplomatic content online.

Further research, possibly using surveys, could be conducted to see if exposure to social media posts of French or Chinese cultural diplomacy yields any measurable change in public opinion. Specifically, a follow-up study could explore the differences in effectiveness between China's relentlessly on-message cultural content and France's more open-ended and less centralised approach. While measuring causality between public diplomacy and public opinion is a perennial challenge, France and China's starkly different approaches could be a basis for additional comparative research.¹¹³ Such research would enhance the value of this study.

Looking ahead, the digitalisation of cultural diplomacy is likely to attract sustained attention from diplomacy and communication scholars. The number of social media users worldwide is expected to increase by nearly 1 billion over the next four years (Wong, 2023).¹¹⁴ As the reach and influence of digital media continues to grow, states will increasingly seek to digitalize their cultural diplomacy to enhance their power.

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Appendix A:

Scope of Research: Tweets and Retweets

Retweets were excluded from the dataset. Retweets are when a Twitter user forwards an existing tweet to their followers so that the forwarded tweet appears on their feed. The user can choose to add their own commentary as well. I excluded retweets for two reasons. First, the focus of this research is on cultural diplomatic content created by MFAs and state-affiliated cultural organizations. Retweeted content may not necessarily reflect the precise views of the MFAs or cultural organizations in question. Second, TwExportly scraped all tweets but only some of the retweets from the accounts I analyzed. I was unable to systematically determine why some retweets were scraped and why others were not. As a result, to maintain the consistency and rigor of the dataset, I decided to exclude all retweets.

Appendix B:

Collecting tweets of France's digital cultural diplomacy began with scrapping tweets from the French MFA's English language account on Twitter, @FranceDiplo_EN. In the initial scraping, 18,497 posts were collected. After removing retweets and non-English tweets, 15,617 tweets remained, ranging from the account's first ever tweet on December 16, 2011 until December 15, 2023.

Next, I identified the top 15 most active *Alliance Française* and *Institut Français (AF/IF)* accounts on Twitter. Using TwExportly, tweets from these 15 accounts were scraped and non-English and retweets were removed. I applied the same process for the Chinese MFA, @MFA_China. Initially, 5,101 tweets and retweets were scraped. After removing retweets and non-English tweets, 4,057 tweets remained. I then identified the 15 most active Confucius Institute (CI) accounts on Twitter. Using TwExportly, tweets from these 15 accounts were scraped and non-English and retweets were removed. By the end of this process, I had identified 50,406 tweets for the French case study and 17,402 for the Chinese case study.

Appendix C:

While VADER can be used to evaluate both the sentiment of a tweet and the reactions it generates, this research will focus only on the VADER scores of the tweets themselves. VADER scores are based on the relative amount of positive or negative language in a tweet. For example, on the Czech National Day on October 28th, @FranceDiplo_EN tweeted, “Happy National Day to our Czech friends! As trusted partners within the EU, we share a common commitment to building a stronger and more powerful Europe.”¹¹⁵ This tweet, which contained only positive language, scored 0.96. By contrast, tweets with more negative language score lower. In July 2022, following reports that Japan would significantly increase its defense spending, @MFA_China tweeted: “China urges the Japanese side to earnestly reflect on its history of aggression and stop hyping up so-called security threats in its neighboring area to justify its military build-up.”¹¹⁶ Words like “aggression” and “threats” contributed to this tweet’s VADER score of -0.59. Both tweets can be viewed below.



¹¹⁵ France Diplomacy, 28 October 2023.

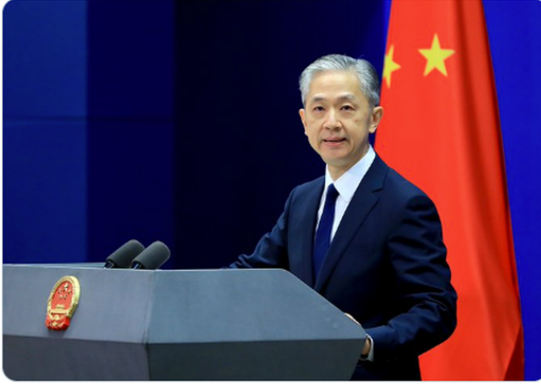
¹¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22 July 2022.



Spokesperson发言人办公室
@MFA_China

...

China urges the Japanese side to earnestly reflect on its history of aggression and stop hyping up so-called security threats in its neighboring area to justify its military build-up.



8:56 AM · Jul 22, 2022

Appendix D:

The data used to support the findings of this study are available upon request. Please contact the author directly at remi.meehan@sciencespo.fr. Alternatively, please contact Sciences Po-CERI at +33 (0) 1 58 71 70 00 or info.ceri@sciencespo.fr.