



# The Role of China's Public Diplomacy in Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative in Oman through Communication: An Examination of the Integrated Model of Public Diplomacy

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## Abstract

The shift from government-to-government diplomacy to government-to-people, or even people-to-people diplomacy, brings about an absolute map to be filled and reveals the similarities between public relations (PR) and public diplomacy (PD). Public diplomacy involves such activities as cultural exchange programs, academic exchanges and business-community interactions; the objective of all these activities is to influence public opinion on a global scale.

The current research aims to identify, explore and evaluate the role of China's public diplomacy model, which has been practiced in the Sultanate of Oman, through communication implemented by Chinese trans-national corporations (TNCs) (specifically, the Wanfang Oman Company) to promote China's domestic and international objectives within Oman, particularly the Chinese initiative "One Belt One Road".

The theoretical framework of this research examines the integrated model of public diplomacy; i.e., applying a public diplomacy approach based on public relations theory. Correspondingly, the author employed Cull's (2008) public diplomacy approach, based on Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four model of public relations.

The methodology of this research analyses secondary data taken from the literature and provides a historical review of the China-Oman Industrial Zone, the Wanfang Company's official website, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports, various news items and official speeches given by the Chinese ambassador to Oman. It also analyses primary data by conducting in depth-interviews of 39 Omani students at the Ningxia Polytechnic University in China to explore the message content of students' social media platforms.

Based on the results of this analysis, the author provides a number of recommendations to aid Chinese Public Diplomacy in achieving its core objective of promoting Belt and Road initiative in Omani society. For example, Chinese public diplomacy players should focus on the two-way communication model, particularly through social media; as such tools can effectively enhance the mediated public diplomacy approach.

**Keywords:** China; Oman; OBOR; Public relations; Integrated public diplomacy

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## Introduction

Since the twentieth century, public diplomacy has played a major role in influencing the policies, culture and ideologies of many countries, and has contributed to the expansion of international relations politically, socially, economically and culturally. It

has largely surpassed traditional diplomacy due to its unique characteristics, like smoothness and flexibility in communicating with foreign objectives [1,2].

Public diplomacy can be defined as: government communication with international audiences, "in an attempt to bring about

understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies" [3]. Similarly, public diplomacy has quickly adapted to the development of new communication tools.

Globalization has strongly influenced communication between states, and the technological revolution has enhanced the ability of experts and policy makers to reach a global audience [4]. Yahya [2] has argued that public diplomacy is nothing more than international public relations. More recent public diplomacy approaches, in both academia and politics, are characterized by the emphasis on communication, engagement, and building relationships with foreign audiences [5,6].

The objectives of public diplomacy can vary widely, from short-term to long-term, among the numerous vehicles available to impact foreign people's opinions of and attitudes toward a nation, corporation or any other non-state actor [7]. These vehicles include individual/relational experience, interpersonal impact, and strategic communication, all of which can be conveyed through traditional mass communication or social media platforms [7]. The practice of public diplomacy has experienced diverse and varied methods, with its content and its main objective of achieving the goals of the State's foreign policy in foreign societies.

The People's Republic of China has begun to formally apply public diplomacy, since the emergence of the so-called reform and opening-up policy. D'Hooghe [8] has claimed that Chinese policymakers and academics progressively acknowledge that non-state actors, such as civil society organizations, business societies, universities, research organizations, and individuals of standing, all have a role to play. In China, the term "public diplomacy" is often also used to refer to public affairs: informing domestic audiences about China's foreign policy and diplomacy.

As China begins to play a larger part in international affairs, it needs to employ an effective diplomatic approach through public diplomacy to accurately promote its national strategy, i.e., the "Belt and Road Initial" [9].

Therefore, this research presents a case study of Chinese trans-national corporations (TNCs), specifically the "Wanfang Company"—a leading Chinese investment company in the China-Oman (Duqm) Industrial Zone. This company in particular is considered to be fundamental to the One Belt One Road initiative in Oman, as non-state actors play a significant role in helping China achieve its foreign objectives.

Our analysis of the literature and historical review of the China-Oman Industrial Zone, as well as Wanfang's Web site, CSR strategy and news tactics, indicates that Wanfang promotes a development model of public diplomacy through the following aspects of communication: international public relations, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and people exchange.

Meanwhile, the current research aims to identify, explore and evaluate the role of China's public diplomacy model in the country's international relations with the Sultanate of Oman through communications implemented by Chinese trans-national corporations (TNCs) such as the Wanfang Oman Company.

In regards to the above argument, the current research addresses three main questions to achieve the following research objectives:

- What is the approach of China's public diplomacy model implemented in Oman?
- How does the Chinese government employ public diplomacy to support its foreign objectives in Oman?
- Have the Chinese Trans-national Corporations (TNCs) succeeded in promoting the OBOR initiative in Oman?

In the meantime, to respond to the research questions, the author has been inspired by Golan's [10] integrated model of public diplomacy to examine the practices of Chinese public diplomacy through communication on different levels: short-term, medium-term and long-term.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### Public diplomacy and China

Globalization has resulted in the growth of international public relations, as transnational organizations enter new markets and adapt their strategic communications efforts to cultural differences. Moreover, it has created a new role in public diplomacy for multinational corporations; whereas traditional diplomacy was conducted between governments, public diplomacy is no longer simply the onus of a government [11]. Indeed, public diplomacy is multidirectional, and players include non-state actors who contribute to the diplomatic process by helping build a nation's reputations.

In addition, Candace and Danijela [12] have noted that the nature of diplomacy has been completely altered by the confluence of globalization and instantaneous communication enabled by social media. While more secretive, diplomat-to-diplomat encounters are still an important part of diplomacy. However, the increasingly important role of public opinion and the involvement of non-governmental entities in foreign policy formation have resulted in the recognized need for governments to communicate not only with other governments, but directly with people in other countries.

Effective new public diplomacy is a two-way communication process in which organizations and governments not only communicate their preferences but also listen to their target audiences [13]. Another distinguishing feature of new public diplomacy is the involvement of non-state actors [14-16], which are often perceived as more credible in the eyes of the public.

Riordan [17] has suggested that, in conducting new public diplomacy, governments play the role of facilitators and entrepreneurs, in that they identify opportunities and engage relevant institutions. Such an interactive view of public diplomacy suggests the importance of the role of relationship management [5,18]. Likewise, cultural diplomacy and media diplomacy may continue to be important tools of public diplomacy. According to Nancy Snow [19], new public diplomacy has experienced some significant changes over the old diplomacy model:

- Public-to-Public (P2P) communication: communication now occurs between groups of people, rather than between governments or between governments and the public.
- Unofficial (NGOs, private citizens, practitioners) character: anyone can now start an initiative to export or manage a country's reputation.
- Everybody's doing it: absolute participation.
- Active and participatory public.
- Dialogue and exchange-oriented, two-way symmetric.

China's leaders invest an enormous amount of money and effort into projecting a certain image of China by developing public diplomacy skills and policies; therefore, public diplomacy has become a key element of China's foreign policy approach [8].

China wants to be seen as a stable, trustworthy, and responsible economic partner: a rising economic power that the international community does not have to fear. This is the goal of China's good neighbour policy and the "harmonious world" and "peaceful rise" strategies [8], which seek to depict the economic welfare and countries could enjoy by collaborating with China, as opposed to the headaches inherent in conflict and opposition.

The Chinese government has always used image to enhance its foreign policies, particularly in 2013 when China established the "Belt and Road" initiative by granting new chances for Chinese corporations going global [20].

In 2015, the Chinese State Council issued numerous ideas on growing a new system of open economy, which planned to launch new rules to promote the "going global" strategy and to enhance the position of multi-corporations and individuals in outbound investment, endeavour to advance the quality and efficiency of outbound investment, and to urge Chinese corporations to create a good image abroad [20].

In December 2016, the State Council Information Office of China issued guidelines for Chinese firms entitled, "The Right to Development: China's Philosophy, Practice and Contribution". These guidelines specified that China supports the values of mutual respect, equality of dealing, win-win collaboration, and shared development, and encourage the welfares of its own people and the public interests of others to shape the community ideal of a shared future [20].

China has begun to concentrate on mass media to promote its image. Chinese legislators and analysts are clearly aware that they face a very challenging international media atmosphere. They have noted that the global media system is marked by extreme inequality. News agencies in developed countries—such as the Associated Press, Reuters, and Agency France-Press—control much of the world's news reporting (Hongying, 2003). Confucius Institutes (CIs) are the main tool the Chinese government uses to popularize Chinese culture beyond the country's borders [21].

### The integrated model of public diplomacy

Public diplomacy scholars and practitioners have struggled to formulate a comprehensive model of public diplomacy that can examine the public diplomacy activities from a multi-

layered perspective; this is crucial as the characteristics of public diplomacy overlap with several academic fields, such as international public relations, international broadcasting, corporate social responsibility, international relations, cultural studies, social sciences and social media [22]. For instance, Zaharna [23] has emphasized that the most demanding object on the public diplomacy research agenda is the requirement for multiple models of public diplomacy, because culture has not been measure of the public diplomacy investigation that most of public diplomacy approaches have been talked about "old diplomacy" and "new diplomacy".

Moreover, Efe Diana [24] have proposed a model to evaluate the effects of public diplomacy projects by building a link between social media communication movements and the perception of countries by spectators. They conducted a social network analysis to discover the relational performance and a four-dimensional model of country images to analyse the informational consequences of public diplomacy schemes. They found that the social network analysis has potential to examine the interactions between specialists and audiences, as well as among spectators.

Similarly, Signitzer and Coombs [1] have urged public relations scholars to embark on empirical research on public diplomacy—grounded in public relations theories—to abridge convergence of both research backgrounds. Yun [25] has developed a theory for building public diplomacy, precisely for the features of public diplomacy performance and the environment and significance of excellence in public diplomacy, depending on the public relations frameworks.

The relational public diplomacy model that both the public and private sectors can employ to build cross-cultural interactions and ultimately reduce tensions between nations and people [26]. Clearly, the relational approach is suitable to use in the recent growth of "corporate" [15] and "network" [27] diplomacy, as well as "citizen" or "privatized" diplomacy [28-30].

However, to fill the intellectual gap in public diplomacy studies, Golan [10] has proposed an integrated model of public diplomacy (Figure 1), which aims to examine the comprehensive practices of public diplomacy based on public relations perspectives.

Golan [10] has categorized public diplomacy practices into the following three time periods:

1. Short-term (mediated public diplomacy): The government

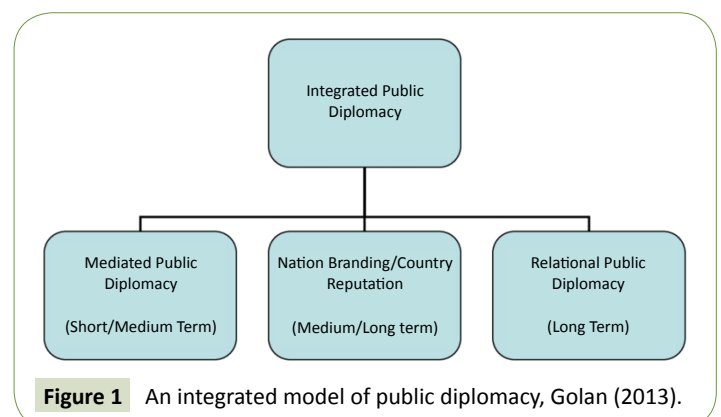


Figure 1 An integrated model of public diplomacy, Golan (2013).

or organization strategically attempts to control the agenda by building on international broadcasting, framing global news media and employing strategic communication delivered through mass communication and social media.

2. **Medium-term (nation branding and country reputation):** The government or organization attempts to build a favourable image in foreign nations through media coverage, advertisements and international corporate social responsibility. The country's reputation completely depends on the success of mediated public diplomacy.

3. **Long-term (relational public diplomacy):** The government or organization attempts to build and maintain long-term relationships through corporations and NGOs, delivered by exchange programs and aid, to nurture beneficial relationships with foreign publics.

Significantly, Golan [10] has stated that a comprehensive understanding of public diplomacy cannot be accomplished over examine mediated, nation branding or relational public diplomacy alone. Ultimately, the success or failure of public diplomacy depends on how a certain country or organization manages its relationship building (**Figure 1**).

## Research Design and Methodology

The methodology of the current study is based on qualitative research methods (content analysis), for which a single case study (the China-Oman (Duqm) industrial zone) is used to describe, explain and evaluate the role of China's public diplomacy in promoting the "Belt and Road Initiative" in Omani society through communications between the Chinese trans-national corporation "Wanfeng Company" and Omani students involved in the Wanfang Company's business.

To answer the research questions, all secondary data (relevant literature, the Wanfang Company's official website, CSR reports, news items and official speeches of the Chinese ambassador to Oman) and primary data (interviews with 39 Omani students at the Ningxia Polytechnic University in China in March 2018) were analysed to explore the message content of the students' social media platforms (**Appendix 1**).

The interviews were designed to obtain in-depth information to answer the research questions and determine the correlation between students' usage of social media to promote china's image and the Chinese public diplomacy objectives.

In accordance with the core concept of the integrated model of public diplomacy, which is applying a public diplomacy approach based on public relations theory, the author used Cull's [31] public diplomacy approach based on Grunig and Hunt's [32] four model of public relations. Both models share concepts and objectives that could be applicable to examine the convergences between public diplomacy and public relations scholarship.

Nicholas Cull (2008) has characterized public diplomacy into five general approaches:

1. **Listening:** Seeking to understand the opinions and information of the target audience by listening.

2. **Advocacy:** An active role where the sender endeavours to promote a certain idea or policy that profits them.

3. **Cultural diplomacy:** Promoting a country's cultural assets and activities.

4. **Exchange diplomacy:** Simultaneously sending abroad and receiving people for a period of study, thus exporting ideas and ways of doing things.

5. **International broadcasting (news):** An effort to manage the international atmosphere through mass media resources to involve and engage the foreign public.

Whereas, Grunig and Hunt [32] have established the most-known public relations four model:

- **Press a gentry/publicity:** One-way promotional efforts that seek to maximize public exposure, primarily through mass media channels.

- **Public information:** One-way dissemination of information.

- **Two-way asymmetrical:** Two-way "systematic persuasion" designed to gain the support of the public for the self-interest of the persuader.

- **Two-way symmetrical:** Two-way dialogue and engagement that seeks to achieve a mutual understanding between and benefits for both the organization and the public.

The author has divided the analysis framework into three sections:

First, analysing the Wanfang Company's corporate social responsibility programs and news based on Grunig and Hunt's [32] PR model and Golan's [10] integrated model of public diplomacy (**Table 1**).

Second, analysing Omani students' usage of social media based on Cull's (2008) public diplomacy approach and Golan's [10] integrated model of public diplomacy (**Table 2**).

Third, combining the results of the company's content analysis

**Table 1** Wanfang Company CSR practices & News Publishing (content analysis).

Grunig and Hunt (1984)	Golan (2013)	
PR	Integrated PD	
Press a gentry/publicity	Short-term	Mediated PD
Public information	Short-term	Mediated PD
Two-way Asymmetrical	Medium-term	Nation Branding/Country Reputation
Two-way symmetrical	Long-term	Relational

**Table 2** Omani students' usage of social media to promote China's Image and "Belt Road" initiative (In-depth interview).

Nicholas Cull (2008)	Golan (2013)	
PD	Integrated PD	
Advocacy	Short-term	Mediated PD
Listening	Short-term	Mediated PD
Cultural diplomacy	Medium-term	Country/Reputation
Exchange diplomacy	Long-term	Relational
International broadcasting (news)	Short-term	Mediated PD

and the students' interviews to reveal any convergences between the public relations model and public diplomacy model, and link it with the integrated model of public diplomacy to respond to the three main research questions (Table 3).

## Overview of China-Oman (Duqm) Industrial Park

In 2013, the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, announced China's initiative for the so-called 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and 'Maritime Silk Road of the Twenty-First Century'. These constitute modern versions of the centuries-old Silk Road trade routes. On land, the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' would run through Central Asia and Europe, while the Maritime Silk Road would focus on Southeast, South and North Asia. These two ideas were ultimately combined into the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative (OBOR), with China as its hub [33].

The Belt and Road is a development initiative and framework proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping that focuses on connectivity and cooperation among countries, primarily between the People's Republic of China and the rest of Eurasia. The China-Oman (Duqm) Industrial Park is one such representative project.

Significantly, Oman is the third main country in the Arabian Peninsula. It is the traffic centre of three continents (South Asian Sub-Continent, West Asia, and East Africa) and three seas (Arabian Sea, Oman Sea, and Indian Ocean). It occupies the "Gulf Throat", i.e., the Strait of Hormuz, which makes Oman's location of strategic importance [34]. In contrast to many of its neighbours, Oman's strategic value to China (within the context of its One Belt, One Road initiative) is further enhanced by its relative peaceful and stable disposition. Oman's location opposite Pakistan's Gwadar Port—an important link to China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—could make it a major link through western China [35].

China and Oman have a long history of communication since ancient time. After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and modern-day Oman, the two nations, however, have had a tumultuous relationship. Nevertheless, bilateral relations rapidly improved after the mid-1970s [36].

Oman's influence as a maritime and imperial power has extended beyond the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf to coastal East Africa and Gwadar in Balochistan in modern Pakistan—all areas that would be connected by the Maritime Silk Road [35].

Table 3 Merging PR & PD to integrated PD.

Grunig and Hunt (1984)	Nicholas Cull (2008)	Golan (2013)	
PR	PD	Integrated PD	
Press a gentry/ publicity	Advocacy	Short-term	Mediated PD
Public information	International broadcasting (news)	Short-term	Mediated PD
Two-way Asymmetrical	Listening	Short-term	Mediated PD
	Cultural diplomacy	Medium-term	Country/ Reputation
Two-way symmetrical	Exchange diplomacy	Long-term	Relational

China is also keen to benefit from Oman's expanding road networks and railway system, which will connect Sohar Port and Free zone to the existing Omani and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) transportation corridors that extend into the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In the long-term, these features will give Oman a competitive advantage over other established logistical and transportation hubs in the region [35].

China and Oman have enhanced the mechanisms of cultural communication, such as through the construction of the exhibition of Chinese culture in Muscat Art Festival, the establishment of the Arabic and Islamic Cultural Studies Centre in Peking University and Chinese classes being offered in Sultan Qaboos University. Oman was the only stop in the Gulf and the Middle East for the Olympic torch traveling from Greece toward China in 2008 [36].

The former ambassador of China in Oman, His Excellency Fulong [37], has asserted that the Sultanate of Oman is at the forefront of all the countries in the region to build a "belt and road" with China, and that Oman has become a constant supporter and advocate. Also, he mentioned that Oman is one of the first countries to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Moreover, the Sultanate has actively participated in the establishment of a system of communication and interdependence in the region and has a fruitful triangular cooperation with China in Tanzania, Turkey (Figure 2).



## Wanfang trans-national corporation

"Oman Wanfang LLC was established in 2016 as the developer and operator of China-Oman (Duqm) Industrial Park and the company has responded to the Chinese national policies (mainly the one belt, one road international capacity cooperation initiative"<sup>1</sup>.

"On May 23, 2016, H.E. Yahya Al-Jabri, Chairperson of Special Economic Zone Authority in Duqm (SEZAD) has signed on behalf of Omani side on the cooperation, usufruct, and development agreement to build the China-Omani industrial park in Duqm. Ali Shah, Chairperson of Oman Wanfang L.L.C, signed the agreement on behalf of the Chinese side"<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>(<http://www.cawanfang.com/zcms/wwwroot/zawfen/index.shtml>)

<sup>2</sup>(<http://duqm.gov.om.2016>)

The historical, political, and economic relations between Oman and the Republic of China date back many centuries. "Under the reign of the modern Renaissance, the Sultanate seeks to translate these relations both politically and economically for the benefit of the peoples of the two countries,"<sup>3</sup> indicated Al-Jabri.

His Excellency Yu Fulong—The Former Ambassador of the People's Republic of China in the Sultanate of Oman—(19 March 2017) addressed a speech in Oman's Diplomatic Institution concerning China's One Belt, One Road initiative. He said that, in recent years, the "Belt and Road" (the economic belt of the Silk Road and the Silk Road in the 21<sup>st</sup> century) has become a warmer term for our Omani friends regarding China, with some calling it the New Silk Road.

Even though the "Belt and Road" initiative is owned by China, the countries of the world will all benefit from it. Three years have passed since the launch of the initiative, and it has already produced rich outcomes in international cooperation and has been rapidly swept up by the world's lands to become an international and internationally acclaimed producer and a platform for international cooperation. The initiative's success in responding to the urgent requirements of the countries along the "Belt and Road" in promoting cooperation based on mutual benefit [37].

He added that the Sultanate of Oman is at the forefront within the region to build a "belt and road" with China and, moreover, that Oman has become a constant supporter. Oman was also one of the first countries to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as a founding country. Indeed, the first loan was obtained from the bank to finance the second packages of the port of Duqm in Oman [37].

The two sides have exerted significant effort to expand cooperation in the field of production capacity through the establishment of the "China Industrial City" in the Duqm Special Economic Zone. The project is one of only two parks built by China in the Middle East. It is the largest park established by one country in Duqm to date. Helping build the city will not only contribute to the development of Oman's economic diversification, but it will also help increase local employment and upgrade the professional competence of Omani youth [37].

Fulong [37] concluded his speech by addressing China's three main objectives for the next OBOR forum in Beijing: First, to gather the common denominators among the countries of the world, integrate the development strategies, and subsequently determine the main direction to achieve integration and, ultimately, common prosperity; Second, to identify areas of import to cooperation and to identify a set of cooperative projects based on the interconnectivity of infrastructure, trade, investment, financial support and human exchange; Third, to establish a long-term cooperation mechanism to build the "belt and road", which will serve as a stable and pragmatic partnership network.

<sup>3</sup>(<http://duqm.gov.om>. 2016)

## Finding and Discussion

### Wanfeng company's official website and CSR programs

According to the Wanfang Company's official webpage, it operates four main corporate social responsibility programs. The author has categorized each program based on Grunig and Hunt's [32] PR model, after first decoding the core message of each (Table 4).

The results indicate that Wanfang's CSR programs seek to empower the Omani job market by creating job opportunities and offering Omani youth the chance to participate in an exchange program. Both are considered to be two-way symmetrical communication methods with Omani society. Moreover, the company has sought to build a favourable image of China in Oman by building hospitals and schools. Thus, relational public diplomacy and country reputation diplomacy are most employed by the Wanfang Company through the use of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs.

Strategic CSR initiatives in particular can have a significant impact on developing and transitional countries, where they have the potential to not only reduce poverty and affect public policy issues, but also to contribute to societal transformation [38].

### Wanfeng's news publishing method

Unexpectedly, the author found that Wanfang Company's has no official social media platform. The company is not even publishing any news or press releases on its official website. The company has dealing with Omani and Chinese news media outlets to disseminate its news and events. Thus, the author used the Google Search Engine to collect all news items related to the company's activities, using keywords like "Wanfeng Oman" and "China-Oman Industrial Park" and collecting information from 2016 (the year the company was established) until the first quarter of 2019.

Only 17 news items related to the "Wanfeng Oman" and "China-Oman Industrial Park" business activities could be found using Google. After decoding the news based on Grunig and Hunt's [32] PR model, the results reveal that the company has disseminated all news using a one-way communication model (Table 5). Consequently, mediated public diplomacy has been the most employed by Wanfang for the purpose of news dissemination.

### Omani international students in China

"In March 2017, Wanfang LLC, the main investor in the China-Oman (Duqm) industrial park, has sent 39 Omani students to study and train in Ningxia polytechnic University in China for a two-year period as the first batch of 1000 students who will train in China and, subsequently, work in the China-Oman industrial park"<sup>4</sup>. The cooperation between the Omani ministry of higher education and the academic partnership projects with OBOR has created more opportunities for Omani colleges to develop academic and internship linkages over joint exchange programs [33].

<sup>4</sup><https://www.pressreader.com/oman/times-of-oman.2017>

**Table 4** Wanfang CSR Programs.

No	Coding/ CSR Programs	Decoding	Grunig and Hunt (1984) PR model	Golan (2014) Integrated PD
1	To provide 1,200 to 1,500 jobs for Omanis	Engagement/Empowerment	Two-way symmetrical	Relational
2	To send over 1,000 Omani students to China for training.	Exchange/ Engagement	Two-way symmetrical	Relational
3	To build a school with US\$ 15 million for residents in the park.	Building Favourable Image	Two-way Asymmetrical	Country/Reputation
4	To build a hospital with US\$100 million for residents inner and outer of the park.	Building Favourable Image	Two-way Asymmetrical	Country/Reputation

**Table 5** Wanfang's News.

No	News title Message Coding	Theme of News Message Decoding	Media outlet	Published date	Grunig and Hunt (1984) PR model	Golan -2013 Integrated PD
1	China, Oman establish industrial park to boost bilateral cooperation	Promoting belt and road initiative	Xinhua agency	19-12-2018	Publicity	Mediated PD
2	Wanfang commercial-residential complex Start construction in China-Oman industrial park	Developing & Facilities	Xinhua agency	17-04-2018	Public Information	Mediated PD
3	Omani students undergo training at Chinese centre	Sending Omani student for training in China	Times of Oman	14-07-2018	Publicity	Mediated PD
4	Belt and Road generates growing passion for China among Middle East Youth	Promoting belt and road initiative	Xinhua agency	12-09-2018	Publicity	Mediated PD
5	China's Wanfang to establish building material market in Oman's special economic zone	Developing & Services	Xinhua agency	05-06-2018	Public Information	Mediated PD
6	Oman Wanfang plans 25 new projects in Duqm	Chinese Investment	Times of Oman	12-07-2018	Public Information	Mediated PD
7	China-Oman economic cooperation in full swing amid closer China-Arab ties	Strengthen bilateral-relations	Xinhua agency	22-09-2018	Publicity	Mediated PD
8	Oman Wanfang plans OMR400m infrastructure investment in Duqm	Chinese Investment	Times of Oman	08-05-2017	Public Information	Mediated PD
9	Chinese firms commit \$3.1billion investment in Duqm free zone	Chinese Investment	Times of Oman	22-04-2017	Public Information	Mediated PD
10	Chinese firm to start \$94m solar project work in Oman by year-end	Chinese Investment	Times of Oman	17-09-2017	Public Information	Mediated PD
11	Expect more Chinese investment in Duqm: Oman Wanfang CEO	Chinese Investment	Times of Oman	12-01-2019	Publicity	Mediated PD
12	\$3.2b invested on China-Oman Industrial Park in Duqm	Chinese Investment	Oman Observer	12-08-2017	Publicity	Mediated PD
13	\$98 million Chinese blankets project planned in Duqm SEZ	Chinese Investment	Oman Observer	22-08-2018	Publicity	Mediated PD
14	Work kicks off on Wanfang commercial and residential complex in Duqm SEZ	Developing & Facilities	Oman Observer	17-04-2018	Publicity	Mediated PD
15	China plans mega projects, including refinery, in Duqm	Chinese Investment	Times of Oman	23-05-2016	Publicity	Mediated PD
16	Sino-Omani industrial park project to offer 1,000 scholarships for Omanis	Sending Omani student for training in China	Oman Observer	25-03-2017	Publicity	Mediated PD
17	Sino-Omani Industrial City work to start on April 19	Announcement	Times of Oman	08-04-2017	Public Information	Mediated PD

The author asked five main questions of the interviewees (39 Omani students) based on Cull's [31] public diplomacy approach and Golan's [10] integrated model of public diplomacy (**Table 6**).

The first question sought to explore students' awareness of the Belt and Road initiative and to discover if they are promoting

the initiative in Oman through their social media platforms. Surprisingly, none of the 39 students had heard about the Belt and Road initiative. For instance, Sultan Al-mughairi stated that, "I have never heard about the Belt and Road", and Ghaith Al-hadi noted, "What is Belt and Road? I have no idea about this

**Table 6** In-depth interview based on Nicholas Cull (2008) PD approach.

Nicholas Cull (2008)		Golan (2013)	
PD		Integrated PD	
1-Do you promote the Belt and Road initiative through your social media platform? Why?	Advocacy	Short-term	Mediated PD
2-Do you pay attention to your followers' comments in your social media platform which they asking about Wanfang's scholarship in China? And do you reply to all of them?	Listening	Short-term	Mediated PD
3-Do you share any type of Chinese culture in your social media platform? Why?	Cultural diplomacy	Medium-term	Country
			Reputation
4-Is there any one of your followers in your social media platform presented their wiliness to apply for this Wanfang's scholarship in China? Why?	Exchange diplomacy	Long-term	Relational
5-Do you share any Chinese news in your social media platforms?	International broadcasting (news)	Short-term	Mediated PD

initiative". These answers are unexpected, as the China-Oman (Duqm) Industrial Park is the groundwork of the One Belt One Road Initiative in Oman, and these students are the main non-state actors in this project.

The second question sought to measure the extent to which the students share their time in China with people back home in Oman on social media, as well as measure the information posted by students on social media that could assist Wanfang's CSR strategy, specifically by evaluating the success of the scholarship program.

The interviewees' responses to the second question reveal that 33 out of 39 students were paying fully attention to their followers' inquiries into Wanfang's scholarship program on social media, while 25 out of 39 students only responded to comments from close friends; For instance, Malik AL-battashi said, "I have always been replying to my friends in my Instagram platform through advising them on how to apply for Wanfang' scholarship next year", while Ali AL-zadjali claimed, "Unfortunately I have no time to reply for all of my followers in social media platform, I just respond to my close friends who are really willing to get this worthy opportunity".

In addition, the third question aimed to identify the role of Omani students' social media usage in promoting Chinese culture and creating a favourable image of China in Oman. We found that 36 out of 39 of the interviewees promoted Chinese culture in some form, such as through food, architecture, museums and language. Thus, social media can be seen as an opportunity to engage in a two-way form of public diplomacy, by creating spaces for the exchange of alternative viewpoints [39]. For instance, Said AL-hikmani asserted, "I usually share the most beautiful scenes of China on my social media platforms particularly the ancient buildings". His colleague Mohammed AL-abri added, "My perception toward the Chinese food has been totally changed, before I came to China I was afraid that I would not like the Chinese food, but now I am sharing the pictures of tasty Chinese food with my friends in Oman through my social media platforms".

The fourth question aimed to investigate the motivations that led Omani students to accept and promote this scholarship, as well as the role of Omani international students in China by shaping public opinion in Oman and favourably portraying the Chinese image.

The author found that numerous Omani youth are seeking to enrol in Wanfang Company's scholarship. All of the interviewees discussed their main reasons for wanting to enrol, beyond simply being inspired by the motivational videos and beautiful photos that they have sent to their followers. Most stated being interested in the opportunity because the scholarship guaranteed a career that offered a stable and clear vision of the future. For example, Mansoor AL-majaali stated, "the most questions I received in my social media platform that is it real that you will work immediately in China-Oman industrial zone after you graduate from China?" His colleague, Assad AL-junaibi, further noted, "I was not accepting this scholarship if it were not combined with job opportunity, since I have many friends which have graduated already in Oman since years ago and still they are jobseeker".

The fifth question aimed to determine whether the students are interested in Chinese news and if they are influenced by Chinese media. It also sought to measure the students' role in transmitting Chinese news to Oman through their social media platforms.

Astonishingly, none of the interviewees were interested in Chinese news, so they did not transmit any news to Oman through their social media accounts. For instance, Yahya AL-bulushi indicated, "I have no time to read news, since we have very intensive courses", while Badar AL-fahdi stated, "I used to read news in Oman through social media platforms but until now I am exploring the life and culture in China through interpersonal communication".

### Merging the PR and PD based on integrated public diplomacy

The table below confirms Golan's argument on the relationship between public relations theories and public diplomacy theories. Meanwhile this merging helped answer the main research question by combining Grunig and Hunt's [32] public relations model with Cull's [31] public diplomacy approach and Golan's [10] integrated model of public diplomacy (**Table 7**).

The above results indicate that China's public diplomacy in Oman, which has primarily been practiced through the non-state actor the Wanfang Company, has preferred to participate in relational public diplomacy by offering a scholarship exchange program for



**Table 7** Merging the Results of Company and Students based on Integrated PD.

Grunig and Hunt (1984)	Nicholas Cull (2008)	Golan (2013)		Company (CSR & News)	Students
PR	PD	Integrated PD		PR	PD
Press a gentry/publicity	Advocacy	Short-term	Mediated PD	10 out of 17 news	None
Public information	International broadcasting (news)	Short-term	Mediated PD	7 out of 17 news	None
Two-way Asymmetrical	Listening	Short-term	Mediated PD	None	25 out of 39 interviewees
	Cultural diplomacy	Medium-term	Country/Reputation	2 CSR program	36 out of 39 interviewees
Two-way symmetrical	Exchange diplomacy	Long-term	Relational	2 CSR program	39 out of 39 interviewees

Omani youth and by creating job opportunities for Omani locals. Also, it has employed a country reputation diplomacy approach by building schools and hospitals to create a good image of China in Oman.

However, the Wanfang Company has hardly employed a mediated public diplomacy approach and, furthermore, it has relied on the old one-way communication model by neglecting the interactivity offered by social media platforms.

As a result, there is an overall lack of communication between the Wanfang Company and Omani international students; for instance, the students still have no idea about the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. While the Wanfang Company has succeeded in promoting the Belt and Road initiative in general, the company's ignorance of two-way forms of communication in mediated public diplomacy has limited the promotion process.

On the other hand, international Omani students in China have played a significant role in enhancing Chinese public diplomacy in Oman through new social media platforms, particularly by strengthening relational public diplomacy and county reputation diplomacy. However, the one-way communication approach employed by the Wanfang Company made it impossible for the students to promote the Belt and Road initiative or any other type of Chinese news.

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## Conclusion

This research has revealed and evaluated China's public diplomacy in Oman in terms of promoting the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative [10]. This study has made several new contributions to the literature by combining Grunig and Hunt's [32] four model of public relations with Cull's [31] public diplomacy approach.

Chinese public diplomacy in Oman has primarily been undertaken by non-state actors, primarily the Wanfang Corporation, which has focused more on relational public diplomacy and country-reputation public diplomacy than on mediated public diplomacy. In other words, Chinese non-state actors employed a one-way communication approach to mediated public diplomacy and almost entirely ignored two-way forms of communication such as social media. However, the ignorance of Chinese non-state actors of the effectiveness of social media has been compensated by Omani international students.

To conclude, Chinese public diplomacy has been able to successfully promote OBOR in Oman, particularly through China's trans-continental OBOR economic connectivity, which enabled Oman to leverage several opportunities to achieve its development goals of diversification, enhanced productivity, and employment creation [33]. Overall, the author recommends that Chinese public diplomacy players employ a two-way communication model, particularly through the use of social media, to enhance the mediated public diplomacy approach.

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