Proceedings of
The Sunan Ampel International Conference of Political and Social Sciences (SAICoPSS),
The Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya
Volume 4, 2026, 159-177
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15642/saicopss.2026.4..159-177

SOFT POWER UNDER GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS: CHINA'S PANDA DIPLOMACY RECALL AGAINST JAPAN IN 2026

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the limits of soft power under geopolitical tension through China's recall of the giant pandas Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei from Tokyo's Ueno Zoo in January 2026. China had loaned the pandas to Japan as part of a long-standing panda diplomacy that sustained friendly bilateral ties. The recall followed Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae's November 2025 remarks on Taiwan, which escalated tensions between the two states. This research applies a descriptive qualitative method, using documentation of official statements, media coverage, and policy texts from November 2025 to February 2026, a period that spans the trigger, Beijing's escalating response, the announcement of the pandas' departure, and the original loan expiry date. The data are analyzed using Joseph Nye's soft power concept, with attention to the sender's side of the relationship. The results show three findings. First, Takaichi's remarks shifted the bilateral discourse into a high-political security dispute, which undermined the sender credibility and audience reception that soft power requires. Second, Beijing stepped away from cultural attraction: it recalled the pandas about a month before the loan's scheduled expiry and granted neither a renewal nor a new loan, while applying travel advisories, trade restrictions, and export controls in other domains. Third, because the recall worked as a withheld benefit used to signal displeasure, it is better understood as a movement from soft power toward coercive signaling than as an exercise of soft power itself. The paper contributes a sender-side account of soft power's limits and connects the case to the wider debate on China's coercive diplomacy. It concludes that when high-political security issues take center stage, low-political cultural attraction reaches its limit and is set aside to safeguard core national interests.

Keywords: China, Geopolitical Tensions, Japan, Panda Diplomacy, Soft Power

INTRODUCTION

International relations in the 21st century show how major powers handle their foreign policies during times of crisis, especially when choosing between soft and hard power (Nye, 2004). Soft power is a country's ability to get what it wants through attraction using its culture, political values, and foreign policies rather than using force or

money (Nye, 2004). Through this lens, countries frequently use cultural diplomacy to build a friendly image abroad. A classic example is China's long-standing Panda Diplomacy (Hartig, 2013). Loaning giant pandas to foreign nations has served as a unique public diplomacy tool to boost China's soft power, build good relations, and connect emotionally with foreign publics (Buckingham et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2026).

This study examines the challenges of conducting soft power under geopolitical tension. On one side, China has invested significant effort and resources in building its soft power assets, presenting a cooperative image through both traditional and digital media (Hartig, 2013; Huang & Wang, 2019). On the other side, when sharp political conflicts emerge, especially over sovereignty and regional security disputes, Beijing has shown that it is prepared to suspend, recall, or decline to renew its soft power gestures (Hoffman, 2025; Reuters, 2025). The main question this study addresses is why and how China steps away from soft power during tense political moments, which highlights the limits of cultural attraction in high-stakes diplomacy.

Historically, China’s Panda Diplomacy has been widely studied as a successful way to generate goodwill and improve bilateral ties (Aranceta-Reboredo, 2022; Darmawan et al., n.d.; Hillman & Zhao, 2025; Sasmita & Utomo, 2021). Standard soft power theories usually assume that countries will always try to maintain and showcase their attractive qualities to reduce mistrust and improve their global reputation (Nye, 2004, 2008). Scholars have looked closely at how cultural charm supports hard power and how public diplomacy creates long-term goodwill across different countries (Buckingham et al., 2013; Hartig, 2013). In the context of Sino-Japanese relations, the loan of giant pandas to Tokyo's Ueno Zoo has historically provided a resilient emotional cushion, maintaining grassroots public affection even during routine political friction over historical memory or maritime boundaries (Darmawan et al., n.d.; Smith et al., 2026).

However, recent developments in China-Japan relations present a real-world puzzle. After political tensions flared over regional security issues, the friendly atmosphere around Panda Diplomacy shifted quickly. On November 7, 2025, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi informed the Diet that a Chinese naval blockade of Taiwan could place Japan in a "survival-threatening situation," stating that Tokyo would be legally permitted to implement self-defense alongside the United States (Hoffman, 2025). Beijing reacted swiftly, viewing the statement as a direct challenge to its core national sovereignty (Hoffman, 2025; Reuters, 2025), and followed with travel and study advisories, trade restrictions, and export controls against Japan (Adnkronos, 2026; Asia Times, 2025). Consequently, Tokyo's remaining giant pandas, Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei, were recalled to China in January 2026, about a month before the loan was due to expire on 20 February 2026, with no plans or negotiations to renew the arrangement (CNN, 2026; Japan Times, 2025; Nippon.com, n.d.; Reuters, 2026; The Guardian, 2026; Xinhua, 2026).

Reports describe the event in different terms. “Returned,” “withdrawn,” and “recalled” carry different implications: “return” suggests the routine end of a fixed-term loan, “withdrawal” suggests a unilateral removal, and “recall” suggests a sender-initiated decision to call an asset back. To avoid ambiguity, this paper uses “recall” throughout, defined as the early return of the pandas to China ahead of the loan’s scheduled expiry, together with the absence of any renewal or replacement loan. The definition describes documented facts only. Whether the recall was a political decision or a routine administrative outcome is treated as an empirical question and is assessed in the Results and Discussion.

While some state media outlets attempted to frame the recall as a routine administrative transfer (Global Times, 2026), this paper uses Joseph Nye's theory to show that soft power has hard limits (Nye, 2004). Soft power relies heavily on how the receiving audience feels, and it quickly loses its persuasive force when major security issues come into play (Nye, 2004). When high-politics security concerns take center stage, low-politics cultural charm loses its persuasive capacity (Nye, 2004).

Using a qualitative case study approach (Miles et al., 2014), this research analyzes China’s decision to step back from soft power tools during a political crisis. Persisting with soft power during a high-stakes security crisis yields diminishing returns and can make a country appear weak to domestic and international audiences (Nye, 2004; Smith et al., 2026). The study therefore argues that Beijing set aside soft power to protect its core national security interests once cultural appeal reached its operational boundaries (Nye, 2004).

This paper makes two contributions. First, and most importantly, it offers a sender-side account of soft power’s limits. The existing literature on panda diplomacy mostly examines how pandas generate attraction among receiving publics; this study asks instead why a sender abandons its own instrument of attraction, and what that choice reveals about the conditions under which soft power can be exercised. Second, it connects the case to the wider debate on China’s coercive diplomacy. Poh (2021) examines China’s sanctions practice, a dimension of its statecraft that has received limited in-depth study, and Glaser (2012) documents earlier episodes in which Beijing used trade and travel measures as pressure in disputes with Japan, the Philippines, and Norway. The panda recall extends this debate by showing a cultural instrument being withdrawn alongside economic and administrative measures, which raises the question, addressed in the Results and Discussion, of whether such an act should still be understood as soft power or as closer to coercion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In conducting this research, several scholarly works were reviewed as reference sources to identify existing literature trends and clarify the research gap that this study aims to address. A growing body of international relations literature has thoroughly

examined China's use of giant pandas as a strategic public diplomacy asset across various regional contexts.

First, an article entitled "Panda Diplomacy: The Cutest Part of China's Public Diplomacy" written by Falk Hartig (2013) provides a foundational overview of giant pandas as instruments of state-sponsored public diplomacy. Hartig argues that giant pandas represent an exceptionally effective soft power mechanism because they make people feel something that goes beyond political, cultural, and ideological differences. (Hartig, 2013). According to Hartig, the primary goal of panda diplomacy is to project a good and friendly image of China to foreign publics, thereby generating goodwill that facilitates smoother diplomatic and economic interactions (Hartig, 2013). However, Hartig's analysis focuses primarily on successful deployments during stable or improving bilateral conditions, offering limited insight into how these cultural assets function during acute diplomatic crises.

Second, a study entitled "Diplomats and Refugees: Panda Diplomacy, Soft Cuddly Power, and the New Trajectory in Panda Conservation" by Buckingham, David, and Jepson (2013) traces the historical evolution of China's panda loan practices. The authors categorize panda diplomacy into distinct historical phases: from early Cold War ideological gifting to state leaders, to short-term commercial loans in the late 1980s, and finally to modern long-term scientific conservation loans (Buckingham et al., 2013). Buckingham et al. demonstrate that panda loans are overwhelmingly correlated with high-level trade agreements, resource access, or major geopolitical breakthroughs (Buckingham et al., 2013). Their study clearly shows the economic and political reasons for panda allocations, but it only looks at how loans are kept or renewed as long as institutions work together. It does not look at how loans can be suddenly recalled or not renewed when security breaks down.

Third, a comparative study entitled "Diplomasi Panda dan Hubungan Bilateral China-Jerman Tahun 2016-2019" by Sasmita and Utomo (2021) examines how China utilized giant panda loans to repair bilateral friction with Germany following economic disputes over technological acquisitions. The authors show that China intentionally dispatched pandas Meng Meng and Jiao Qing to the Berlin Zoo in 2017 to restore a supportive diplomatic environment right before the G20 Summit (Sasmita & Utomo, 2021). Their findings suggest that panda diplomacy can actively ease economic tensions between great powers. Similarly, Hillman and Zhao (2025) examine China's 2022 panda loan to Qatar, demonstrating how cultural diplomacy was integrated with the Belt and Road Initiative to solidify economic partnerships in the Middle East.

Fourth, local scholarly literature focusing on Sino-Japanese public diplomacy, such as the work by Darmawan, Damayanti, and Haqqi (2020) entitled "*Diplomasi Panda sebagai Diplomasi Publik Tiongkok terhadap Jepang*," emphasizes the historical role of giant pandas in building emotional bridges between the Japanese public and China since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1972. The authors highlight that Japanese

public affection for giant pandas has historically provided a resilient cushion of grassroots goodwill, which helped stabilize bilateral relations even during routine political friction over historical memory or maritime boundaries (Darmawan et al., 2020).

Furthermore, recent scholarship by Smith, Chen, and Yuan (2026) in "Panda Diplomacy Revisited: State Interests and Public Emotions" explores how animal-based symbolism functions as an emotional anchor in public diplomacy. They argue that while pandas generate strong emotional responses in both domestic and international settings, their diplomatic usefulness is still very uneven. When state interests are aligned, pandas amplify goodwill; however, when fundamental state interests clash, public emotional investment can quickly invert into political disappointment (Smith et al., 2026). Digital public diplomacy literature, such as Huang and Wang (2019), reinforces this view by demonstrating how Chinese state media platforms strategically use more panda images to show softness, but their impact remains limited by how audiences judge the legitimacy of China's foreign policy.

A separate strand of scholarship addresses China’s coercive diplomacy. Glaser (2012) identifies a pattern in which Beijing used trade and travel measures as instruments of pressure, for example by halting rare earth shipments to Japan in 2010, and by blocking Philippine banana imports and stopping travel agencies from sending tour groups to the Philippines in 2012. Poh (2021) examines China’s sanctions practice and observes that this coercive dimension of Chinese economic statecraft has received limited in-depth study. To the extent reviewed here, this literature concentrates on economic and administrative instruments and seldom considers cultural assets such as pandas. The soft power and coercion literatures have therefore developed largely in parallel, and the panda recall sits at the point where they meet.

From the literature reviewed above, existing scholarship predominantly treats panda diplomacy as a positive-sum soft power instrument designed to create, strengthen, or restore bilateral goodwill. Considerable research has examined how pandas generate positive emotions, facilitate business agreements, and project the image of a cooperative state. However, a gap remains. Previous research has paid little attention to what happens when cultural diplomacy runs into high-stakes security disputes that erode political trust, and the literature on China’s coercive diplomacy has seldom considered cultural assets among its instruments. The existing literature therefore does not explain the conditions under which a state recalls, or declines to renew, its soft power assets. This research addresses that gap by examining China’s early recall of giant pandas from Japan in 2026 from the sender’s side, using Joseph Nye’s soft power theory to assess how far cultural attraction can go when low-politics tools clash with high-politics security needs, and by locating the case within the debate on coercive diplomacy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses Joseph S. Nye, Jr.'s Theory of Soft Power to look at China's strategic choice to stop using its soft power tools during geopolitical tension. Rather than treating soft power as an all-covering diplomatic tool, this study focuses specifically on three core conceptual pillars within Nye's framework: the sources of soft power, the structural limits of attraction, and the role of target audience reception. The study also considers the boundary between attraction and coercion, because a gift that is withdrawn to impose a cost may no longer operate as soft power.

Sources of Soft Power

Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes through attraction rather than coercion (hard power) or economic inducements (Nye, 2004, p. 11, 21). Soft power rests on three primary resources: a country's culture (when attractive to others), its political values (when upheld domestically and internationally), and its foreign policies (when seen as legitimate and morally authoritative) (Nye, 2004, p. 29). Cultural diplomacy, such as China's long¬standing Panda Diplomacy aim to acts as a institutionalized mechanism to project these soft power resources abroad (Hartig, 2013; Nye, 2008). By loaning giant pandas to foreign nations, states seek to build emotional connections with target publics, establish goodwill, and create a favorable diplomatic environment that complements broader foreign policy goals (Buckingham et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2026).

Audience Reception

A fundamental premise of Nye's framework is that soft power does not exist in isolation, but its effectiveness depends entirely on the receiving audience (Nye, 2004, p. 31). Unlike hard power, which is based on real assets that can be used by one country alone, soft power depends on the people or government of the target state seeing the giving state's actions as appealing and trustworthy. (Nye, 2004, pp. 31-32). When a sending state's overall foreign policy is perceived as aggressive or threatening, its cultural instruments lose political credibility (Nye, 2004, p. 31). During times of increased geopolitical tension, cultural gestures are seen with more skepticism or thrown out as mere propaganda, which makes them less effective at attracting people or changing political decisions. (Nye, 2004, p. 27, 105).

The Structural Limits of Soft Power in High-Politics

Nye explicitly outlines the structural limitations of soft power (Limits of Soft Power), bringing up the fact that attraction is a long-term, indirect tool that rarely takes place over instant security or sovereignty concerns (Nye, 2004, pp. 30-32, 129). International politics distinguishes between low-politics (such as cultural exchange, environmental cooperation, and public diplomacy) and high-politics (such as territorial integrity, military deterrence, and core security interests). Nye argues that when high-politics security issues come into direct conflict with low-politics attraction, State leaders

always put national security and sovereignty ahead of building a good reputation internationally. (Nye, 2004, p. 30, 129). Furthermore, trying to use soft power during serious security crises does not work very well. (Nye, 2004, p. 31). Continuing friendly cultural diplomacy while engaged in severe political disputes can send contradictory signals, risking the perception of strategic weakness both internationally and to domestic audiences (Nye, 2004, p. 31, 105; Smith et al., 2026). Then, when geopolitical tensions rise to a point where soft power cannot change the behavior of the target state any longer, it makes sense to put cultural tools on hold or suspend them in order to protect core national interests. (Nye, 2004, pp. 30-32).

Soft Power, Coercion, and Withheld Gifts

Nye (2004) distinguishes soft power, which works through attraction, from hard power, which works through coercion (threats) and inducements (payments). The distinction matters for cultural gifts. A gift operates as soft power when its value depends on the recipient's voluntary appreciation and its purpose is to build goodwill. When the sender instead removes or withholds the gift in order to impose a cost on the recipient's government for a policy position, the mechanism changes from attraction to conditional deprivation, which resembles the sanctions and inducements that Nye assigns to hard power.

This study therefore uses three observable criteria to classify an act as attraction-based or coercion-based: first, whether the act aims to win the favor of the target audience or to impose a cost; second, whether it is made conditional on the target's behavior, explicitly or implicitly; and third, whether it forms part of a wider set of pressure measures. These criteria are applied in the Results and Discussion. They are analytical aids rather than sealed categories, since Nye's own framework places soft and hard power on a spectrum of behaviors (Nye, 2004).

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the operational limits of China's soft power in the context of its giant panda recall against Japan in 2026 (Miles et al., 2014). The researcher serves as the primary instrument for collecting data by examining diplomatic documents, media discourses, and official statements to interpret information and derive underlying political meaning (Miles et al., 2014). Data collection is conducted through documentation, including gathering empirical references on China's soft power strategy, panda diplomacy, and Sino-Japanese bilateral relations from official government communications, mainstream media coverage, and academic journal articles.

The author divides the analytical framework into three sections to describe China's strategic choice to set aside soft power tools during high-stakes diplomatic crises. First, the sources of soft power and cultural diplomacy are used to understand how giant pandas function as institutionalized instruments of attraction (Nye, 2004; Hartig, 2013). Second,

the concept of audience reception and political credibility is applied to examine how target publics interpret foreign policy actions during bilateral conflicts (Nye, 2004). Third, the structural limits of soft power in high-politics are examined to analyze whether Beijing's panda recall reflects a deliberate choice to prioritize core national security over low-politics cultural charm (Nye, 2004).

Primarily, soft power refers to a state's ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction and appeal rather than military coercion or financial inducements (Nye, 2004). Soft power rests on three primary resources: a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye, 2004). In Chinese foreign policy, public diplomacy heavily utilizes giant pandas to foster public affection and build long-term goodwill across target nations (Buckingham et al., 2013; Hartig, 2013; Smith et al., 2026). In this research, China's panda diplomacy is conceptualized as a cultural diplomacy mechanism designed to project soft power resources, yet its operational success remains strictly bound to the overall context of international relations (Nye, 2004, 2008).

Furthermore, Joseph Nye's pillars of audience reception and structural limitations are used to structure the results and discussion sections of this research (Nye, 2004). A state's strategic decision to step back from soft power can be measured, first, by observing changes in audience reception and credibility (Nye, 2004). When foreign policy actions are perceived as aggressive, target publics view cultural gestures with heightened skepticism, rendering soft power tools ineffective at changing political behavior (Nye, 2004). Secondly, soft power limitations manifest when high-politics security disputes overshadow low-politics cultural charm (Nye, 2004). State leaders consistently prioritize national security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity over maintaining a positive international image (Nye, 2004). Thirdly, soft power breakdown occurs when continuing cultural attraction risks projecting strategic weakness to domestic and foreign audiences (Nye, 2004; Smith et al., 2026). Under severe political friction, states deliberately suspend or recall cultural assets to protect core national interests.

The empirical context of this research focuses on the 2025-2026 Sino-Japanese diplomatic crisis following Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's parliamentary statement regarding Taiwan (Hoffman, 2025; Reuters, 2025). The resulting political strain led to the premature recall of giant pandas Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei from Tokyo's Ueno Zoo in January 2026 without immediate renewal (CNN, 2026; Japan Times, 2025; Reuters, 2026; The Guardian, 2026; Xinhua, 2026). Following the data analysis procedures outlined by Miles, Saldana, and Huberman (2014), the empirical corpus undergoes data condensation, data display through chronological matrices, and conclusion drawing and verification. In this research, the author assesses whether China's panda recall was a deliberate choice and, if so, how it demonstrates that when high-politics security issues conflict with low-politics attraction, soft power reaches its structural limits and is set aside to safeguard core national interests (Nye, 2004; Miles et al., 2014).

The data period runs from November 2025 to February 2026. It begins on 7 November 2025, when Prime Minister Takaichi made the remarks that triggered the crisis, and ends in February 2026, the month in which the pandas' loan was originally scheduled to expire (20 February 2026). This window covers the full sequence relevant to the research question: the trigger; Beijing's first countermeasures in mid-November; the December 2025 announcement of the pandas' departure; the export controls announced on 6 January 2026; the departure on 27 January 2026; and the original expiry date, which allows the actual recall to be compared with the contractual baseline. Because the research question concerns the sender's decision within a specific crisis, rather than the long-term effects on Japanese public attitudes, a bounded window is sufficient. Its limitations are acknowledged: it cannot show whether a panda loan resumes later or whether the attitudes observed persist, and the findings from a single case support analytic rather than statistical generalization.

To assess whether the recall was deliberate, the study treats three explanations as competing hypotheses: a routine end of a fixed-term loan; a political recall; and a hybrid in which the early return was administratively agreed but the absence of renewal was political. Each is evaluated against four types of evidence: timing relative to the crisis, departure from expected routine (the early return and the absence of any replacement loan), consistency with parallel measures taken against Japan, and the official framing offered by Chinese authorities. Because no document in the corpus records Beijing's internal decision-making, the conclusions are inferences from this pattern of evidence and are stated with corresponding caution.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This study applies Joseph S. Nye's theory of soft power to understand China's decision to stop using its soft power tools during a major political crisis with Japan. Specifically, it examines the recall of the giant pandas Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei from Tokyo's Ueno Zoo in January 2026. Soft power is often treated as an instrument that works under all conditions. The findings of this study, however, show that soft power has strict limits: it cannot operate in isolation and is closely tied to the real-world security conditions between two countries. The results are organized into six parts. The first explores the history of panda diplomacy as a soft power tool. The second examines how political trust and audience reception broke down during the 2025–2026 crisis. The third places the recall within the wider set of measures China took against Japan. The fourth assesses whether the recall was deliberate or routine. The fifth explains the strategic reasons that can be inferred for China's choice to set aside cultural attraction in favor of higher-level political signals. The sixth considers whether using a cultural gift in this way should still be understood as soft power or as closer to coercion.

The Origins of China's Panda Diplomacy and Its Initial Soft Power Appeal

The history of China's panda diplomacy shows that it has always been a highly planned and careful method of cultural diplomacy. For many decades, China has used giant pandas to create attraction, build goodwill with foreign citizens, and create a positive environment for its broader foreign policy goals (Hartig, 2013). In the international relations of East Asia, sending giant pandas to foreign zoos has traditionally been a sign of good news. It usually marks a breakthrough in diplomacy or celebrates strong economic cooperation between China and another nation (Buckingham et al., 2013).

The story of giant pandas in Japan is a clear example of this practice. This history goes back to 1972, when China gifted a pair of pandas to Japan right after the two countries normalized their official state relations under Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei (Smith et al., 2026). Over the following decades, the giant pandas living at Tokyo's Ueno Zoo created a very deep emotional bond with the Japanese public. This love for the pandas grew naturally among regular citizens, and it often remained strong even when the governments of China and Japan were arguing over official state matters.

When diplomatic conditions were normal and stable, this cultural charm acted as a classic tool of soft power. It helped China present itself to the world as a friendly, peaceful, and non-threatening country. The presence of the giant pandas in Japan created positive news stories, brought money through tourism, and made it easier for diplomats from both sides to talk to each other. The continuous presence of these beloved animals created a cultural bridge. This bridge helped to keep public feelings warm even during normal, everyday political disagreements, such as arguments over historical events or minor maritime borders (Darmawan et al., n.d.).

However, this cultural bridge also created a false sense of security. It created an illusion among many observers that cultural soft power is strong enough to survive anything. As Joseph Nye emphasizes, soft power resources do not operate automatically (Nye, 2004). Soft power does not guarantee good political results unless the people receiving the soft power actually trust the country sending it. The charm of cultural symbols like the giant panda is actually very fragile. It depends entirely on the condition of the relationship. If the sending country starts to act in a way that threatens the receiving country, the cultural symbol quickly loses its power. The findings of this study indicate that when a serious security crisis occurs, the friendly feelings created by panda diplomacy cannot save the relationship.

The Collapse of Political Credibility and the Deterioration of Audience Reception

This sudden collapse of trust can be seen clearly in the events of late 2025 and early 2026. The timeline of events shows how quickly soft power can fail when national security is threatened. The crisis began with a major political statement made by Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi in November 2025. While speaking to the Japanese

parliament, Prime Minister Takaichi discussed the security situation surrounding Taiwan. She stated that if China were to create a naval blockade around Taiwan, it could cause a "survival-threatening situation" for the nation of Japan (Hoffman, 2025).

This was not a normal political disagreement. By using specific legal terms that allow Japan to defend itself alongside the United States, Tokyo was making a very serious claim. Japan was officially saying that the safety of Taiwan was directly tied to the survival of Japan itself. Beijing reacted to this with intense anger. China considers Taiwan to be its own territory and a core national interest. Therefore, Beijing viewed Prime Minister Takaichi's statement as an unacceptable challenge to its sovereignty (Hoffman, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Overnight, the relationship between China and Japan changed from a manageable diplomatic argument into a severe security crisis involving the military and national survival.

This rapid escalation in security tensions immediately undermined the two most important requirements for soft power: audience reception and the credibility of the sender (Nye, 2004). According to Nye, if a country wants to use soft power, it must be viewed as credible and trustworthy by the audience. Once Beijing changed its foreign policy tone to focus on military strength and angry diplomatic warnings, its cultural gestures lost much of their power to persuade. The Japanese public was less likely to read the pandas as a sign of the Chinese government's goodwill, because that government was simultaneously issuing warnings and countermeasures over the Taiwan issue.

The public reaction in Tokyo during the recall of Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei in January 2026 shows how this change in feelings took place. The pandas were recalled about a month before the loan's scheduled expiry, and no replacement loan was arranged (CNN, 2026; Japan Times, 2025). When the recall was announced, over 311,500 Japanese citizens applied for a lottery to see the pandas one last time, even though only 4,400 people were allowed to enter the zoo each day (Xinhua, 2026). This demand indicates that the pandas themselves were still deeply loved by the public. What changed was the meaning attached to their departure.

The lottery figures indicate that public affection for the animals themselves remained strong. What changed was the political meaning attached to their departure. Public commentary focused on how the animals were being drawn into a political dispute, and visitors told reporters that they felt sad that innocent creatures were affected by disagreements between politicians (CNN, 2026). An Asahi Shimbun poll reported by Dawn (2026) found that 70 percent of respondents opposed negotiating for new pandas, against 26 percent in favor, which may indicate that attitudes toward the arrangement with Beijing hardened even as attachment to the animals persisted. In Nye's framework, this separation marks the point at which soft power fails: the attraction that pandas generate toward the animals does not transfer into trust in, or favorable attitudes toward, the sender. When an audience interprets a cultural gift as a tool of pressure, the gift no longer functions as an act of friendship, and the goodwill it once produced cannot be

converted into political credibility for the sender (Nye, 2004). Other Chinese Measures Against Japan and the Place of the Recall

The panda recall was not an isolated act. Within days of the Prime Minister's remarks, Beijing introduced a series of administrative and economic measures. According to reporting, China's Ministry of Education issued a study-abroad alert on 14 November 2025 advising Chinese students to reassess their plans for Japan, and the Foreign Ministry issued a travel advisory on 15 November 2025 warning that public security in Japan had deteriorated (Asia Times, 2025). Chinese travel platforms reportedly canceled about 491,000 outbound tickets to Japan in the three days that followed, and Chinese media estimated the loss to Japanese retailers and hotels at roughly US$893 million (Asia Times, 2025). On 19 November, Japanese media reported that China would suspend imports of Japanese aquatic products and had ended consultations on resuming Japanese beef exports (Asia Times, 2025). On 6 January 2026, China's Commerce Ministry announced a ban on exports of dual-use goods to Japanese defense-related end users, calling the Prime Minister's remarks erroneous and a form of interference in China's internal affairs (Adnkronos, 2026).

These measures share a common logic. They impose costs in domains where Japan is materially exposed, namely tourism, trade, and defense supply chains, and they were publicly tied to the Japanese government's position, with the Foreign Ministry spokesperson reportedly warning on 19 November of "firm and resolute countermeasures" if Japan did not retract its statements (Asia Times, 2025). The pandas are the only instrument in this sequence that drew on a cultural and emotional asset. Travel advisories, seafood suspensions, and export controls restrict flows of people and goods, whereas the recall removes a symbol of friendship. Read together, the sequence shows Beijing moving, across domains, from instruments of attraction to instruments of pressure, which is the sender-side shift this paper seeks to explain. It also fits earlier practice: Glaser (2012) records China halting rare earth shipments to Japan in 2010 after the Senkaku boat incident, and blocking Philippine banana imports and stopping tour groups to the Philippines during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff.

The sources reviewed do not show that Beijing formally linked the panda recall to these measures. The claim made here is therefore limited: the recall is consistent with, rather than demonstrably part of, a coordinated pattern of pressure. The next section examines how far that consistency supports an inference of deliberate action.

Was the Recall Deliberate? Political Recall, Routine Non-Renewal, or Administrative Outcome

Three readings of the event are possible. The first is that it was a routine administrative outcome: panda loans are formally framed as joint conservation and research projects with fixed terms (Tokyo Weekender, 2026), and this loan was due to end on 20 February 2026 (Nippon.com, n.d.). Evidence for this reading exists. China's

Foreign Ministry spokesperson linked the return to the existing agreement between the two sides and welcomed Japanese visitors to see the pandas in China, state media framed the return as routine (Global Times, 2026), and one expert quoted by Dawn (2026) observed that China routinely removes pandas from foreign countries and that the move may not have been politically motivated. The early departure was also modest, about a month, and was reportedly agreed with Japanese officials rather than imposed (Tokyo Weekender, 2026).

The second reading is that the recall was political. Four observations support it. First, the announcement of the pandas' departure came in December 2025, in the middle of the crisis (Japan Times, 2025). Second, the departure was brought forward to January, ahead of the contractual date. Third, no renewal or replacement loan was granted, although Japan reportedly sought a new pair and officials saw slim prospects because of the diplomatic rift (Dawn, 2026; Tokyo Weekender, 2026). Fourth, the recall coincided with a cluster of coercive measures against Japan described in the previous section. The same expert who noted the routine character of panda removals added that, in Chinese politics, timing is what matters (Dawn, 2026).

The evidence does not settle the question, because no official Chinese statement links the recall to the Prime Minister's remarks. The best-supported reading is a hybrid. The physical return was the formal end of a loan agreement, and Beijing presented it in those terms. The early timing and the absence of any renewal or replacement are harder to explain as routine, and are better read as political choices expressed through an administratively routine channel. Two further points follow. First, the study's central argument does not depend on proving intent. Under either reading, China did not use panda diplomacy to repair relations during the crisis, and that failure to deploy the instrument is the sender-side limit this paper identifies. Second, the claims in the following sections about Beijing's reasoning are inferences from the pattern of evidence and should be read as such.

This brings the study to its most important question: why did China choose to set aside its own soft power instrument? Why did Beijing recall its pandas early and make no commitment to a new loan, rather than using these beloved animals to calm the angry feelings between the two countries? Applying Joseph Nye's rules about the limits of soft power suggests four reasons, inferred from the evidence above, for China's choice to set aside cultural charm in favor of harder political signals.

Soft Power or Coercion? Classifying the Recall

The recall raises a conceptual question. If a cultural gift is withdrawn to punish another government, can the act still be understood as soft power? Applying the three criteria set out in the Theoretical Framework gives a mixed but informative answer. On the first criterion, the recall did not aim to win the favor of the Japanese audience; it imposed a visible loss on it. On the second, the act was conditional in effect, because it

came after the Foreign Ministry's demand that Japan retract its remarks and was not accompanied by any offer of a new loan, although Beijing never stated the condition explicitly. On the third, the recall formed part of a wider set of pressure measures, as shown above. Two of the three criteria therefore point toward coercion, and the third is ambiguous because the conditionality is implied rather than declared.

The presence of the pandas over five decades was soft power. The recall, as a signal of conditionality aimed at the Japanese government, is closer to coercive signaling. It is nonetheless a mild form: it is symbolic, low-cost to the sender, reversible, and deniable, since it was presented as the end of a loan agreement. This is the point at which the sender-side limit of soft power becomes visible. Soft power does not simply fail; once attraction can no longer be exercised, the asset that carried it is converted into a tool of pressure, and the conversion spends the goodwill the asset had accumulated. The pandas retained their emotional value for Japanese visitors, and it was that value which gave the recall its force as a signal.

For the wider debate on China's coercive diplomacy, the case suggests that Beijing's repertoire is not limited to economic and administrative measures such as trade restrictions and advisories. It can include cultural and symbolic assets built up through soft power, used selectively to register displeasure. For soft power theory, the case suggests that cultural assets are vulnerable to being repurposed by the sender during a crisis, and that repurposing them signals that attraction has been set aside.

China's Decision

The first reason for this strategic choice is the absolute dominance of high-politics over low-politics in international relations. High-politics involves matters of national survival, military security, and territorial borders. Low-politics involves cultural exchange, public diplomacy, and trade. Soft power is an indirect, slow-moving tool that relies on cooperation. Because of this, soft power is poorly suited to resolving immediate, serious threats to a country's borders or sovereignty (Nye, 2004). When Japan made a statement that directly challenged China's core national interests regarding Taiwan, maintaining an appearance of friendly cultural diplomacy offered Beijing little strategic benefit. State leaders will always protect their national security and their territory first. Looking friendly to a foreign public is a very low priority when a country feels that its survival or territory is being threatened. On this reading, China recalled the pandas because cultural attraction cannot stop a military or security threat.

The second major reason involves the danger of sending mixed messages and looking weak to the world. In global politics, if a country tries to use friendly soft power during a serious security crisis, it usually backfires. It creates confusion. If China had allowed the pandas to stay in Japan and continued as though relations were unaffected, it would have sent a contradictory signal (Nye, 2004). On one hand, China would be

warning Japan not to interfere in Taiwan. On the other hand, China would be extending a highly valued cultural privilege to Japan.

If China had done this, Tokyo, Washington, and even the citizens inside China would have viewed Beijing as weak or inconsistent (Smith et al., 2026). They might have thought that China was not actually serious about defending Taiwan. By recalling the pandas and making no commitment to future loans, Beijing was able to make its political message clear. China demonstrated that its cultural gifts and its friendship are strictly conditional. A foreign country cannot challenge China's core security interests and still expect to receive the benefits of China's cultural friendship.

The third reason behind this decision is China's realization that public diplomacy had simply reached its final limit. Joseph Nye clearly states that soft power can change how people feel over a long period of time, but it does not have the power to force a foreign government to change its immediate security policies (Nye, 2004). Beijing understood that the emotional appeal of giant pandas would never be enough to make Japan abandon its military alliance with the United States. The pandas could not reverse Prime Minister Takaichi’s political statements about Taiwan.

Because the pandas could not solve the root political problem, continuing the soft power program offered China little strategic value. Allowing the panda agreement to expire and recalling the animals early served as a safe, low-risk way to show deep political anger. It can be read as a calculated move that illustrates a general pattern in international relations: when high-stakes security problems take over the conversation, cultural attraction reaches its natural limit and must be put aside so the state can focus on protecting its core interests (Nye, 2004).

The fourth and final reason for China's action relates to the unfairness of soft power during a political crisis. When a relationship between two countries is healthy, soft power benefits both sides. The sending country gets a better reputation, and the receiving country gets tourism and cultural enjoyment. However, when a relationship turns hostile, this balance is broken (Nye, 2008). If China had left the pandas in Tokyo during the Taiwan crisis, it would have created an unfair situation. The Japanese public and the Japanese economy would have continued to enjoy the happiness and the financial benefits of the pandas, while the Japanese government continued to take an aggressive stance against China (Hoffman, 2025).

On this reading, Beijing treated this as an imbalance and corrected it by recalling the pandas. By recalling Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei early, China used the absence of the soft power asset as a means of imposing cost. It took away a privilege. By doing this, China forced the Japanese public and the Japanese politicians to directly feel the negative results of their government's actions. The empty panda cages at Ueno Zoo became a highly visible, physical symbol of the broken relationship (Smith et al., 2026). It proved to the receiving country that there is a real, tangible cost to angering a major power over its core security interests.

The recall can therefore be read as a deliberate, though not formally declared, strategic choice rather than an emotional reaction. Panda diplomacy is effective when the political environment is calm and trusting, but Nye's theory indicates that soft power struggles to survive in a hostile environment (Nye, 2004). Once the Taiwan issue was brought into the spotlight, trust between Tokyo and Beijing declined sharply. The Japanese public continued to value the pandas themselves, but their departure was interpreted by many as a political act rather than a routine gesture of friendship, so affection for the animals no longer translated into confidence in Beijing's intentions. Recognizing that soft power could not resolve a security dispute, China set aside its cultural diplomacy. By recalling the pandas, Beijing protected its image of resolve, avoided sending mixed messages, and made the loss of a symbol of friendship visible. This case illustrates that cultural attraction tends to step aside when national security is at stake.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the structural and operational limits of soft power under severe geopolitical tension, using China's recall of the giant pandas Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei from Japan in early 2026 as its case. Grounded in Joseph S. Nye's framework, the research concludes that cultural diplomacy cannot function as an all-weather instrument. Historically, panda diplomacy operated as a low-politics instrument of attraction, creating durable grassroots emotional bonds between the Chinese and Japanese publics that cushioned routine diplomatic friction. That success, however, concealed a vulnerability: the assumption that cultural soft power is universally resilient. The study shows that soft power is conditional, dependent on a baseline of mutual diplomatic trust and a non-threatening strategic environment.

The empirical evidence shows how quickly diplomatic trust can erode when high-stakes security issues emerge. The catalyst was the November 2025 statement in which Prime Minister Takaichi linked Taiwan's security to Japan's survival, which turned a manageable bilateral dispute into a security crisis. This undermined the sender credibility and audience reception that soft power requires. As Beijing shifted toward deterrence rhetoric and a set of countermeasures that included travel and study advisories, trade restrictions, and export controls, its cultural assets lost much of their persuasive capacity. The Japanese public's reaction to the recall in January 2026 illustrates this shift: affection for the pandas themselves remained strong, as the demand for farewell visits shows, but the departure was interpreted by many as political, and affection for the animals did not translate into trust in the sender. Where an audience perceives a cultural gift as an instrument of pressure, cultural attraction ceases to generate political credibility for the sender.

The evidence supports reading Beijing's decision to set aside panda diplomacy as deliberate, although no official statement links the recall to the Taiwan remarks and the

formal framing remained that of a loan reaching its end. The timing of the announcement during the crisis, the early return, the absence of a replacement loan, and the consistency with parallel measures against Japan make a purely routine explanation difficult to sustain, while the argument about the sender's limits holds under either reading, since in both cases the instrument was not used to repair relations. The study identifies four rationales for this choice, all rooted in the structural limits of soft power. First, the recall reflects the primacy of high politics over low politics: faced with a challenge to its core sovereignty claims on Taiwan, China gained little from maintaining the appearance of friendly cultural exchange. Second, recalling the pandas helped Beijing show resolve at home and abroad, and avoided mixed messages that could have signaled weakness. Third, Beijing could not expect soft power to change Tokyo's core security position, so continued cultural engagement had little strategic value. Fourth, leaving the pandas in Tokyo would have let Japan keep the benefits of the relationship while its government took a stance that China regarded as hostile.

The study makes two contributions. It provides a sender-side account of soft power's limits, showing that the limit appears not only when receivers reject attraction but also when the sender stops offering it. It also links the case to the debate on China's coercive diplomacy: to the extent that the recall was meant to signal displeasure, the act moved from attraction toward coercive signaling, a mild, symbolic, and deniable form of pressure that sat alongside harder economic measures. In sum, soft power cannot replace hard power and is constrained by the realities of international geopolitics, and when a state's core security interests are threatened, cultural attraction reaches its limit and is set aside. These findings rest on a single case and a four-month window, and because there is no direct evidence of Beijing's internal reasoning, the intent behind the recall is inferred. Comparative research on other recalled or non-renewed panda loans, and longer-term tracking of Japanese attitudes and of any future panda loan, would test whether the pattern holds.

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