《英语新闻评论：程虹——夫人外交》

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Cheng Hong, wife of Premier Li Keqiang and popularly referred to as the "second lady", has added charm to the premier's four-nation visit to Africa. Accompanying her husband for the first time on an official foreign visit, Cheng has provided a shot in the arm for "lady diplomacy".

Fifty years ago, the first visit by Zhou Enlai, then China's premier, to Africa was aimed at achieving a diplomatic breakthrough with the countries in the continent amid the confrontation of two superpowers, the United States and the former Soviet union . Premier Li's visit to the continent, on the other hand, is aimed at consolidating Sino-African relationship, which includes cooperation in industrial, financial and security issues.

To upgrade the Sino-African relationship, the two sides have to not only deepen their official and tangible cooperation, but also take measures to expand civil interactions. And by accompanying her husband on the trip to Africa, Cheng has sent a strong signal that China and Africa are bonded not only by trade, but also by friendship.

"Lady diplomacy" could play a supplementary role in China's public diplomacy. For example, Li is not expected to find time during his busy schedule in Africa to meet civil communities, but Cheng would be a perfect candidate to meet them in person and convey the premier's greetings and good wishes to them.

Neither Peng Liyuan, President Xi Jinping's wife, nor Cheng has an official title, but both play an important role in deepening exchanges with the wives of the leaders of the countries their husbands visit. Since the leaders' wives can communicate more freely and thus reach an agreement on some issues more easily, they can strengthen bilateral relationship on the non-political and non-trade fronts.

By talking with different people in the country her husband visits, Cheng can help ordinary people to better understand China, the Chinese people and their culture. Unlike the leaders who are engaged in formal talks on official policies and cooperation, their wives can focus on much less controversial topics such as education, community service, children and social aid, which are more closely related to ordinary people and will improve mutual understanding of the peoples on the two sides.