

Strengthening China's Soft Power: The Chinese Government and Pop Culture

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ABSTRACT

For decades, several governments have focused on using culture and ideology as diplomatic instruments for international communication and propaganda in addition to economic incentives and military strength, or hard power. In addition to its other international actions, China also values cultural diplomacy and builds soft power to improve its image and win allies. The expanding Chinese entertainment industry has become more visible in the international market in recent years. This research examines the Chinese government's role in supporting the cultural industry, especially pop culture, including film and television series, to boost national soft power and income.

บทคัดย่อ

หลายปีมานี้ รัฐบาลของประเทศต่าง ๆ ได้หันมาใช้วัฒนธรรมและอุดมการณ์แนวคิดเป็นเครื่องมือทางการทูตเพื่อสื่อสารกับประชาคมโลกหรือเป็นเครื่องมือสำหรับการโฆษณาชวนเชื่อ (propaganda) เพิ่มเติมจากแรงจูงใจทางเศรษฐกิจและศักยภาพทางการทหารหรือที่เรียกว่าอำนาจอย่างแข็ง (hard power) นอกเหนือจากภารกิจด้านการต่างประเทศอื่น ๆ สาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีนจากได้หันมาให้ความสำคัญกับการใช้การทูตวัฒนธรรมและการสร้างอำนาจละมุน (soft power) เพื่อที่จะพัฒนาและส่งเสริมภาพลักษณ์ของประเทศรวมถึงสร้างเครือข่ายพันธมิตร ในช่วงหลายปีที่ผ่านมาจะเห็นได้ว่าอุตสาหกรรมบันเทิงจีนขยายตัวไปยังประเทศต่าง ๆ มากยิ่งขึ้น ดังนั้น งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้จึงถูกจัดทำขึ้นมาเพื่อศึกษาบทบาทและการสนับสนุนของภาครัฐต่ออุตสาหกรรมวัฒนธรรมจีน โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในด้านวัฒนธรรมสมัยนิยม (pop-culture) เช่น ภาพยนตร์ ละคร เพื่อส่งเสริมการสร้างอำนาจละมุน รวมถึงเสริมสร้างรายได้ของประเทศ

Keywords: China, Soft power, Popular culture

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Introduction

With the declining significance of hard power, many governments have turned their attention to the notion of soft power developed by American political scientist Joseph Nye. Culture is an essential instrument to create soft power to influence and persuade others (Nye, 2004, p. 11). China also acknowledges the importance of soft power and tries to build it to improve its reputation and win allies. Unlike high culture, which is hard to diffuse due to cultural differences among people with different nationalities and backgrounds, pop culture catches more attention of many countries' leaders. Recently, pop culture has become the source contributing to China's culture exportation. The proportion of pop culture exported overseas has gradually increased. Thus, with the increasing visibility of the Chinese entertainment goods in the international market, it is significant to examine the role of the Chinese government and its support to the industry to see how such efforts in developing China's cultural industry attribute to a more substantial soft power of China and the country's income.

Objectives of the study

This research aims to analyze the role of the Chinese government (during President Xi Jinping's administration) in facilitating the growth of China's cultural industry, focusing on pop culture, i.e., film and TV/Web series. The research will also provide an in-depth answer to how the involvement of the Chinese government in the country's pop culture industry helps create a preferable narrative of China globally as well as strengthen the domestic royalty and increase the country's income. The research findings will lead to a better understanding of Chinese soft power building effort in responding to challenges associated with the current situation of China on the global stage.

Methodology

This research is qualitative research focusing on the analysis of the role of the Chinese government in supporting the cultural industry and the analysis of the content of Chinese films and TV/online series. The author selects Chinese movies and dramas to analyze the message conveyed through these cultural products. The primary data used for the analysis comes from the following sources: speeches of the Presidents and related authorities, official documents, news and press releases, films and TV/online series. The data will also be supplemented by secondary data, including academic journals, reports, and books. The research employs three interconnected frameworks, namely soft power, cultural diplomacy, and nation branding. This research regards Chinese entertainment goods as a cultural-diplomatic instrument to communicate with the world, aiming to build China's favorable reputation. The research uses the concept of nation branding to analyse the message behind the selected examples to understand the nation's images that China aims to portray, which will impact the country's soft power.

Results

Soft Power: A Nation's Policy

The notion of soft power was introduced to China in the early 1990s by Wang Huning, a member of the CPC Political Bureau. Soft power officially entered the Chinese political lexicon following President Hu Jintao's speech at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2007. He said: "Culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and China must enhance the influence of Chinese culture worldwide" (Hu, 2007). Under President Xi Jinping, the development of the cultural industry has intensified as he vowed to "promote China's cultural soft power by disseminating modern Chinese values and showing the charm of Chinese culture to the world" (Xi, 2014). The country's Five-year Plans reflect the attempt to develop its cultural industry with the outline of a massive expansion of traditional and popular culture products such as publishing, movie, animation, television series, and performance sectors. China aims to develop the cultural industry to become a pillar of its national economy by 2020 (Xinhua 2017).

Scholars discuss that China's concept of soft power encompasses the interrelationship between domestic and international concerns (Li, 2008; Hong & Liu, 2015). Accordingly, China emphasizes that soft power must not be developed only as a defensive instrument to correct foreign public's misperceptions or to strengthen China's international competitiveness; however, it must also serve domestic purposes, including promotion of nationalist sentiment, domestic loyalty to the CCP, and strengthening the nation's economy.

Cultural diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy has become a communication channel for constructing a nation's image. China's cultural diplomatic efforts divide into the following categories: (1) formal official programs and policies that guide long-term development and the export of cultural products, (2) international cultural exchange programs and the promotion of cultural exports such as arts, entertainment (i. e. movies, TV series, and sports), and (3) promotion of learning the Chinese language (Lai, 2012). These channels help China to foster people-to-people ties with its audiences worldwide. For instance, during his visit to the country's Congress in Buenos Aires on July 19, Xi gave a set of Chinese DVDs as the state gifts to Argentina's Vice President Amado Boudou. This action is considered a more modern approach and an opportunity to open another window for the world to see the real China.

The role of government in supporting the growth of the cultural industry

The development of China's cultural industry is a top-down formulation. However, it does not mean that enterprises or private entities do not involve in the process. Yang (2019) stated that China's cultural products have a dual nature, meaning that they serve for education and also for entertainment, or in other words, for public interest and also for profit. Therefore, the dual nature requires participation from both enterprises and the government (Yang, 2019, p. 19). The significant tasks of the government include: (1) to formulate and improve policies to develop the cultural industry and set the direction of

cultural production, (2) to control the development of the industry and to cultivate leading cultural enterprise or new business sectors, (3) to manage the modern cultural market and to expand international trade in cultural goods, (4) to ensure the industry is in line with socialism and helps to promote socialist cultural and ethical progress, and (5) promote the environment for creative business (Keane & Zhao, 2014; Xiang, 2014; Yang 2019). While the government is in charge of creating a healthy environment for the industry's growth, the tasks of both state-owned and private enterprises are to create cultural products that bring economic and social benefits to the country (Yang, 2019, p. 19).

China has reformed its cultural sector several times. The year 2003 onwards was regarded as a crucial period for the Chinese cultural sector to shift to the more competitive industry model to foster its growth: the transformation from 'institution' (*shiye*) to 'enterprise' (*chanye*) (Zhang, 2006; Keane, 2013). The 16th National Congress of the CPC distinguished the cultural sector between public cultural services provided by state-supported agencies such as public cultural facilities (libraries, museums) and cultural industries (Shan, 2014). China's cultural industry includes films, publishing, advertising, broadcasting, digital media, design, arts, crafts, and tourism (Keane, 2013; Shan, 2014). Consequently, some sectors in China's cultural industry, such as film production, radio and TV station, have acquired a dual legal status, meaning that they remain under the supervision of the government but employ entrepreneurial management (self-funding/less governmental subsidies) (Zhang, 2006; Yang, 2019). According to the data, as of 2012, 93% of the film studios and 93% of the TV producers had been transformed into enterprises (Yang, 2019, p. 21).

Financial support: Financial support is one of the key initiatives to encourage investment in the industry. The government allocated a vast budget, about \$15 billion in 2019, to support the industry (Xinhua, 2020), and introduced new models for financial support. For example, in April 2009, the Bank of China (BOC) and the Ministry of Culture signed the Agreement for Strategic Cooperation to Support the Development of Culture Industry to comprehensively promote the industry's development. In addition, the BOC has developed credit products and supplies to support cultural enterprises regardless of their business size (Bank of China, 2011). According to Yang (2019), the government grants tax incentives to popular cultural businesses and tax exemption/differential tax to cultural enterprises according to the nature and role of business. In addition, the government gives incentives and material rewards to producers, enterprises, or organizations whose works contribute to the development of cultural products or win international awards and recognition.

Infrastructure support: The government launches several infrastructure projects to upgrade and ensure the smooth expansion of the cultural industry. First, the government initiated preferential land policies, including reducing the limitations on land use by cultural enterprises, discouraging the transfer of land for cultural enterprises to non-cultural enterprises (Yang, 2019, p. 31). The construction of film locations also benefits from these policies, resulting in several large-scale cultural parks in China, which have become famous tourist spots for international visitors: Hengdian World Studio, Shanghai Film

Park, Zhongshan TV and Film City in Guangdong province, Tongli Shooting Base in Jiangsu province, Wanda Qingdao Studio.

At the same time, China pays attention to its digital infrastructure. The country's Five-year Plans clearly state China's attempt to develop its digital technology in fostering new areas of economic growth, such as online audio and video, animation, comics, and games¹. In addition, the Internet Plus (Internet+) strategy was announced "to create a new growth engine and to promote the transformation and upgrading of the economy as well as to establish new industrial modes and to guide Chinese internet companies' expansion in the international market" (Xinhua, 2015; State Council, 2015). The strategy influences China's entertainment industry. The model of 'Internet+Culture' becomes popular among people working in the cultural sector, and many producers turn their attention to online audio-visual entertainment to seek a new market for their products. Scholars discuss that Internet+Culture helps create new dynamics in both digital creative industries and the broader digital economy in China (Flew et al., 2019). Moreover, it allows Chinese internet companies to further expand their digital products such as online streaming applications to international markets, for instance, online streaming platforms such as WeTV Thailand and iQiyi (international version). The international version of these Chinese streaming platforms allows Chinese entertainment content to be more accessible.

Investment policy: China strategically allows foreign companies to enter the Chinese film market through joint-venture business and co-production/co-funding with Chinese enterprises for inbound investment. At the same time, it encourages state-owned and private enterprises to invest abroad and send out their pop culture products in terms of outbound investment.

China expects to overtake the United States to become the world's biggest movie market; thus, filmmakers are eager to access China's film market to make money. Co-production is an excellent means to do so, and it also comes with conditions that benefit China. In order to obtain approval for the film co-production with Chinese firms, the film should contain scenes shot in China, Chinese actors, and illustrating positive Chinese elements (O'Connor & Armstrong, 2015, p. 8). Such conditions give China an assertive role in shaping the movie's content, film location and casting. This investment strategy also attracts foreign producers who seek a way to enter the Chinese film market because it helps them avoid the film quota system controlled by the Chinese authority. As the only player who determines the market access for foreign films, Tager (2020) discussed that the Chinese government holds power to negotiate changes in the content of Hollywood and foreign movies to prevent stories that deem a threat to the supremacy of the CCP and the country's sovereignty as a prerequisite for the access to China's film market. In 2013 at the US-China Film Summit held in LA, the President of China Film Co-Production Company (state-owned company) Zhang Xun reflected such negotiation power at the Summit by stating: "We have a huge market and we want to share it with you. We want films that are heavily invested in Chinese culture, not one or two shots. We want to see positive Chinese images" (Zhang, 2013, as cited in Pulver, 2013). His comment referred to the "so-called co-production" which features only a few

Chinese elements or having a different version of the film released in China and globally like Iron Man 3 (Black, 2013); as a result, the authority has intensified the reviewing rules for Sino-foreign co-production films (Zhang, 2012). Consequently, the Transformers: Age of Extinction (Bay, 2014), the co-produced film between U.S.-based Jiaflix and the CCTV's China Movie Channel, featured several Chinese stories and elements to pass the strict review of a joint-production, including action sequences set in Hong Kong and mainland China featuring its national landmarks such as the Great Wall, Chinese actors, number of Chinese product placement, only one version of the film are released globally. Scholars call China's influence over Hollywood as a strategy to "Borrowing a boat to go out on the ocean," referring to China's method of covertly determining or placing the CCP messaging into foreign media outlets, globalizing its propaganda in order to influence foreign audiences and dominate the global conversation (Tager, 2020; Ebrahimian 2020).

In addition, more Chinese investments have entered the international film market during these past years, for instance, Wanda's acquisition of several overseas theatre chains and film studios such as Legendary Entertainment. The overseas investments not only help China have more influence and negotiation power on film production to shape the narrative of China; they also enhance the production skill of Chinese film producers and people working in the film industry by working with high-skilled labor from Hollywood. This results in a better quality of Chinese films and TV series.

Case study: Analysis of Chinese films and drama content

The famous directive of President Xi "the stories of China should be well told, voices of China well spread, and characteristics of China well explained" (Xi, 2014) has become the guidelines for the production of culture media for which filmmakers, writers, artists, and cultural agencies have to follow. TV/web dramas and films serve as cultural tools to entertain people and deploy Chinese ideology, values, lifestyle, and image of that country or image society. Thus, cultural migration that comes in the form of "soft power by accident" (Sun, 2018) cannot be neglected. Recently, China's pop culture, such as films, dramas, and television programs, has entered more into the international market due to internet networks and online streaming platforms. Following the nation branding theory, the content of Chinese films and series will be observed to analyze messages and images that China wants to project to the audiences. As of this writing, the author selects 2 Chinese films and 2 Chinese TV/Web series for the analysis.

Wolf Warrior 2 (Wu, 2017) represents China's ambition to create a Chinese hero who upholds China's socialist ideology: selflessness, love for the country, loyalty to friends and a people-oriented mindset. The protagonist Leng Feng, a former Chinese soldier from PLA special forces who undergoes a solo mission to help rescue Chinese medical staff and workers from local African rebels, represents such a model of a Chinese hero.

By observing the film, the key messages aimed at the domestic audience are the CCP's commitment to protecting its citizens and nationalist sentiment. Such messages reflect in several scenes,

including the famous tagline "Whoever offends China will be hunted down no matter how far away they are" and the scene when the two protagonists argue about how China and the U.S. treat their citizens differently in the time of crisis. Furthermore, in terms of the international aspect, the film reflects the geopolitical dimension of China in the African continent, especially in terms of Sino-African people-to-people relations as well as economic relations and China's military power, including trading and businesses, the hospital operated by the Chinese workforce, marriage between Sino-African couples, China's participation in the UN peacekeeping mission, and the Chinese naval troops serving in Africa conducting an evacuation mission carrying both Chinese citizens and African allies back to China after the riot attacked the city.

Through these examples, the movie tries to persuade the global audience by convincing that China is a friendly neighbor willing to help others in times of crisis. At the same time, it also responds to the effort of the CCP to create a sense of superiority of being Chinese citizens among the Chinese viewers.

The Wandering Earth (Gwo, 2019) is a good example of a Chinese film that reflects China's harmonious world ambition and a hero with Chinese characteristics. The traditional Chinese Confucius values are vividly presented throughout the film, including love for the hometown (earth), a people-oriented mindset and collectivism. For instance, unlike other Hollywood catastrophic films whose plotline is to find the way to escape from earth to another planet for the survival of humankind, the Wandering Earth represents the Chinese spirit of protecting the homeland despite having to sacrifice their life. This notion depicts through the scene when Liu Peiqiang, a Chinese astronaut working for the Chinese government in the international space station, tries to push the earth away from the solar system by sacrificing himself on a suicide mission to move the earth away from the gravitational pull of Jupiter. Moreover, the film also depicts the idea of collectivism guiding through the scene when the Chinese protagonists lead the rescue teams with different nationalities from across the world to start the planetary engines. This represents Chinese belief in collective wisdom over individual heroism of western ideology. Lastly, the film depicts China's leadership, meaning that China can lead the world through crisis owing to its selflessness, love for humanity and capability, i. e., engineers who can solve this complex problem.

You are my glory (Zhi, 2021) is an example of a Chinese TV/Web series that reflects Xi's guideline on cultural works: "disseminate contemporary Chinese values and embody Chinese traditional culture" (Xi 2014). The drama talks to the domestic audiences regarding Confucius values and the pride of being Chinese. For example, the male lead Yu Tu works as an aerospace engineer at a state-owned space conglomerate and is devoted to developing China's aerospace projects. At the beginning of the story, the viewer can perceive the struggle Yu Tu is facing. He has to choose between working as an aerospace engineer with low payment and less free time or finding a new job in the financial sector for a better income and more time for his parents. In the end, he chooses to continue working for the

government. This scene depicts Chinese values on parent-child relationship and responsibility (as a child who takes good care of his parents) and devotion of oneself to the nation's development. The scenes when Chinese people gather to watch and celebrate the launch of China's spacecraft and the man riding a taxi in New York who joyfully shares the spacecraft news with the American taxi driver is another crucial scene that depicts Chinese nationalism. The drama also introduces international audiences to the Chinese way of life, including Chinese traditions and contemporary life in a modern city like Shanghai, advancing Chinese technology, such as the gaming industry and aerospace.

The Untamed (Cheng & Lam, 2019), one of China's famous Boy's love (BL) Web series, is an exciting phenomenon. Even though China has decriminalized homosexuality since 1997, LGBTQ+ topics remain taboo, and same-sex marriage is illegal in China. Thus, it is interesting to see Chinese BL live adaptation entering the Chinese and international market. The Untamed is an adaptation of a BL novel named *Mo Dao Zu Shi*, or *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*. The drama attracts many viewers worldwide, and various foreign online streaming platforms and TV channels have bought its copyright, namely Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Rakuten Viki, South Korea's Asia UHD and Japan's Wowow. This costume drama tells the story of the two-male protagonist from two different clans: the Gusu Lan and the Yunmeng Jiang. Wei Wuxian from Jiang clan represents a young man who selflessly sacrifices his life to protect the innocent from any unfair persecution; another one is Lan Wangji who is righteous, honest and loyal to his love-one.

Despite the explicit homosexual relationship in the original novel, the live-adaptation has toned down the love story of the male protagonists into a close friendship between male leads (bromance) to avoid censorship. Without touching upon homosexual relationships, this online series received positive reviews from the *People's Daily*, a state-owned newspaper, for its "wonderful presentation of Chinese characteristics" by showing traditional cultural elements through exquisite costumes, traditional Chinese music instruments, as well as transmitting positive values, such as courage and love for one's country (Ji, 2020). By only touching upon Chinese traditional values and omitting the relationship between the two male leads, this action of the state's newspaper is a paradoxical acknowledgment of the power of boys' love genre on the one hand and the maintenance of plausible deniability by the authority about the genre's non-heteronormative origins on the other (Baecker and Hao 2021).

From the analysis of the two movies and two series, it can be concluded that:

Domestic audience: It is observable that most of the protagonists are associated with the Chinese military or work for the government. These people are ready to sacrifice their life to save the life of others or for the country. Such portrayal displays that the existence of CCP and Chinese authorities are essential to Chinese society. Second, they try to create superiority and nationalist sentiment to Chinese citizens and present China's power in the international arena.

International audience: The messages from the selected case studies try to advance a specific political agenda and vision of China, such as an image of a powerful and harmonious rising global

superpower under the benign leadership of the Communist Party. Moreover, they try to convey an image of China as a peaceful, modern and technologically advanced society. This effort is to change the global public opinion and public conversation about China to foster and facilitate more favorable policies towards China by the governments of other countries.

Discussion and Conclusions

Through all findings above, it can be concluded that the Chinese government's efforts in strengthening soft power include (1) an effort to enhance its soft power's tools and (2) an effort to build its nation branding through films and series. Entertainment goods like films and TV series are cultural soft power and have been used as the tools for cultural diplomacy. The Chinese government plays a significant part in facilitating the growth of its entertainment industry to improve the quality of its entertainment goods, as discussed in the section above. Higher quality of entertainment goods can attract more viewers, and in addition to that, it reflects china's soft power. The *Wandering Earth* is a good representation of the development of China's film industrialization. In line with the slogan "From Made in China to Created in China", this movie eases the old image of China and reflect the image of "innovative productivity" (Su, 2004, as cited in Keane, 2007, p.85), significantly in terms of China's aerospace and science and technology.

Furthermore, China has put considerable efforts into building its nation branding to project a positive image and gain soft power. According to the aforementioned case studies, their contents profoundly embrace Confucius values and try to showcase the image of China as a prosperous country with advancing technologies and as a rising superpower that seeks peaceful and harmonious coexistence and shares the mutual benefit with other nations. This is in line with Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream", which he defined as the dream of pursuing the country's strength, rejuvenation of the nation and happiness of the people, at the same time, international peace, development, cooperation, and common prosperity of the World (Cao, 2021).

"A successful nation branding campaign will help create a more favorable image among the international audience, thus further enhancing a country's soft power" (Fan, 2008, as cited in Kahraman, 2017, p.94). Therefore, branding themselves with the images mentioned above helps China build a good reputation and may potentially fight stereotypes of china, which will then contribute to its economic development by attracting more foreign investors and tourists to the country. At the same time, it helps generate confidence in the homeland among Chinese citizens and promotes a sense of belonging among themselves and the nation (Barr, 2012). This also refers to soft power with Chinese characteristics discussed by scholars such as Glaser & Murphy (2009) and Barr (2012), stating that china's soft power project emphasizes on building international reputation and domestic royalty.

The phenomenon of BL adaptation in China is another point to discuss further. Interestingly, in 2020, over 60 BL novels were purchased for live adaptation, and some are currently in their filming process. Therefore, more Chinese BL adaptations can be expected in the next few years. Hence, it

cannot be denied that BL came to prominence in China's pop culture and gradually became one of the main cultural products to generate income for the Chinese entertainment industry. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that Chinese BL adaptations are mainly costume drama, and the plotline is toned down to a bromance relationship rather than showing an explicit homosexual love story in order to stay within the limit that the authority has set. The BL phenomenon also leads to the question of whether China is more open to the LGBTQ+ issues or just because these BL adaptations can generate income for China, leading to a slight relaxation of its censorship in exchange for exportability, as describes as "plausible deniability" (Baecker & Hao, 2021). This question also aligns with China's attempt to brand itself as a modern and more open society to the outside world.

Through this all, it can be concluded that the Chinese government has put considerable efforts in strengthening its soft power. It is worth noting that soft power takes time to build, but once its impact is generated, such attraction and persuasion create long-term changes.

Note

1. See Chapter 68 of the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) and Chapter 5 of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025).

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