

**EVOLVING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL-
ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF CHINESE
POPULAR CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Executive Summary

1. Popular cultural choices for Chinese audiences expanded after the economic reform period with a wide array of TV programmes, Korean drama series, Japanese anime and reality TV offerings for people with different interests.
2. In their popular cultural products, Chinese interpretations of family values and orientations are constantly evolving. The idea of family orientation and social rituals/arrangements like marriage becomes more complicated in the 21st century as these themes actively interacted with idealised heroic values and gender issues.
3. Genres in Chinese textualised and novelised popular culture are also constantly undergoing innovation, reflecting China's evolution when it comes of age in the 21st century as an economic superpower and a major technological powerhouse.
4. In producing popular cultural products, producers would have to be mindful of Chinese state regulations. Popular culture content providers also have to be conscious of boundary markers laid down by the ministry of culture.
5. Besides domestic offerings, Chinese popular cultural consumers are also recipients of regional strains of popular culture. Chinese youngsters are fans of romantic Korean television programmes with Cinderella fairy-tale themes.
6. While TV was one of the first evolutionary steps for Chinese mass popular culture to move from the post-Maoist age to the reform era and further to the materialistic consumption society in the post-reform era, it is no longer the only medium of innovation in Chinese popular cultural industry. The 21st century marks the advent of new media technologies.
7. Tik Tok, one of the most sought-after start-ups in the world, is seen as the first Chinese social media outfit to attract international non-Chinese users as compared to WeChat which is mostly utilised by Chinese-speaking and/or Chinese individuals overseas. It is blazing the way for other China-based social media platforms.

8. Chinese popular cultural products are enjoying some global successes recently and its outreach is felt as far away as Africa. Chinese TV series like *Monster Hunt*, *Nirvana in Fire* and *Ode to Joy* were marketed in many countries with success and interest from others as far away as Tanzania.
9. The Chinese authorities also believe that a pan-Asian cultural renaissance will drive East Asians to appreciate each other's cultures.
10. Indeed, China has geopolitical tensions with many peripheral countries but other analysts argue that Chinese popular cultural product appreciation can take place through separation of politics and culture. Even in regional geopolitical rival Vietnam, Chinese films and TV dramas have attracted fandom due to their similar cultures.

EVOLVING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL-ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF CHINESE POPULAR CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

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From Old Media to New Media

- 1.1 In the 21st century, Chinese consumers believe they have come of age when it comes to popular cultural entertainment domestically. They can now tune in to a wide selection of TV channels (quizzes/variety shows), South Korean drama offerings, and Japanese animation and reality TV programmes. In particular, South Korean popular culture has influenced China's youngsters with the increase in Korean pop songs and TV series shown in China starting from the early 21st century.¹ Notably, China will be a massive consumer market for Southeast Asian popular cultural products as well.
- 1.2 When the Thai popular cultural boom (including its highly popular horror movies) hit East Asia, it had a natural export market in Southeast Asia but the Thais are keen to capture the Chinese market (second largest in the world). For example, the movie *Bad Genius* (2017) earned more than US\$42.6 million in box office in China.² Consumption of popular culture goes both ways as young Thais are also fascinated by Chinese app Tik Tok. Panupong Ketlekwat, a 21-year-old Thai college student who has 20,000 followers by showing his lip-syncing ability for popular songs, feels empowered by the freedom to show off his skills, personality and lifestyle when he

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¹ *Xinhua News Agency*, "China, ROK to Cooperate on Films, TV Plays" dated 20 November 2002 in China International Information Centre [downloaded on 1 January 2019], available at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/culture/49405.htm>.

² CGTN, "How the spread of Asian popular culture contributed to a positive Pan-Asian identity" dated 14 May 2019 in CGTN [downloaded on 14 May 2019], available at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d414f7a596a4e34457a6333566d54/index.html>.

expressed that “[i]t is a new way to express ourselves, to make people know more about us”.³

- 1.3 The Chinese authorities also believe that a pan-Asian cultural renaissance will drive East Asians to appreciate each other’s cultures. CGTN argues that Japanese youths are picking up the Korean language to join Korean entertainment companies. On the other hand, Chinese youngsters are fans of romantic Korean television programmes with Cinderella fairy-tale themes and Southeast Asians such as the Vietnamese and Thais are glued to Chinese period dramas, fascinated with the costume designs and love interests in the palace.⁴

Domestic Growth

- 2.1 Experts believe that the domestic Chinese popular cultural entertainment boom started in the 1990s. There were periods of transition from “new-period culture” in the 1970s/1980s (an accent on idealism and culture reflecting a hybrid planned economy) to the “post-new-period culture” in the 1990s (reflecting the rapid economic development of a market economy), and further to the 21st century of energetic media investments/technologies and information reaching households through different media.⁵ Much of this development was manifested on the television medium.
- 2.2 While TV was one of the first evolutionary steps for Chinese mass popular culture to enter the post-Maoist age into the reform era before transitioning from the reform era to the materialistic consumption society in the post-reform era, it is no longer the only medium of innovation in Chinese popular cultural industry. The 21st century marks the advent of new media technologies, including the Industry 4.0 technologies of smartphones and social media. Chinese tech giant Bytedance-owned Tik Tok (the global version of Douyin) is probably one of the most successful

³ *Xinhua*, “China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products” dated 30 July 2019 in NewsInAsia [downloaded on 30 July 2019], available at <https://newsin.asia/china-storms-global-pop-culture-with-its-iconic-new-products/>.

⁴ CGTN, “How the spread of Asian popular culture contributed to a positive Pan-Asian identity”.

⁵ *China Daily*, “Pop Culture Goes Global” dated 10 June 2003 in the China Internet Information Centre [downloaded on 1 January 2020], available at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2003/Jun/66589.htm>.

phenomena from China; it has a global presence and the same strategy as Twitter in getting their users to upload brief and disparate contents (shortened texts and micro-vids).

- 2.3 Tik Tok, one of the most sought-after start-ups in the world, is seen as the first Chinese social media outfit to attract international non-Chinese users as compared to WeChat which is mostly utilised by Chinese-speaking and/or Chinese individuals overseas. It is blazing the way for other China-based social media platforms like Weibo, WeChat, You Ku and Blued to penetrate the international consumer market.⁶ Tik Tok appears to have struck a chord with denizens of the globalised world. For example, dancer Afshan, a Tik Tok star performer, argues that the app has given people on the street a platform to demonstrate their talents and reach out to others in an egalitarian fashion through commonalities and universal humanity without social barriers like caste or religion.⁷

The Evolution of Chinese TV Programming and Popular Culture

- 3.1 Popular culture in China would not be possible without a medium. TV sets proliferated in the early 1980s, entered households by the late 1980s and made TV drama series *Kewang (Yearning)* a runaway hit with millions of Chinese in 1990; by the mid-1990s, local provincial TV channels obtained access to satellite transmission and screened the highly popular game shows, *Kuaile Dabenyang (Happy Citadel)* on Hunan Satellite TV.⁸ TV transitioned from offering news/info to an entertainment centre (along with booms in VCD and DVD manufacturing) to a leading medium of the “cultural industries” (including copyrighted creative products like literature, music and TV/film), and officially becoming what is known in China as the “new century culture”.⁹

⁶ Chen, Xu, “TikTok is popular, but Chinese apps still have a lot to learn about global markets” dated 2 April 2019 in Theconversation [downloaded on 2 April 2019], available at <https://theconversation.com/tiktok-is-popular-but-chinese-apps-still-have-a-lot-to-learn-about-global-markets-113039>.

⁷ *Xinhua*, “China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products”.

⁸ *China Daily*, “Pop Culture Goes Global”.

⁹ *Ibid.*

- 3.2 In fact, many successful television programmes originated as written works, so was Chinese television programming. Joining television programming's slow march to exportation, the trend in literary popular culture would bear fruits overseas in the 21st century. One example is Hugo Award-winning writer Liu Cixin's sci-fi *The Three-Body Trilogy*, which was introduced to the world by Hayakawa Publishing Corporation with great fanfare in July 2019; it topped Amazon's bestselling literary fiction chart in Japan and was into its tenth reprint (86,000 copies) within a week.¹⁰
- 3.3 Domestically, new consumers of popular culture in China emerged in the 1990s as "new masses", middle socioeconomic class urbanites who become both consumers and producers with their curiosity about fashion trends/ideas/social experimentalism and "new aesthetics" (urban cities instead of rural country becoming the major nucleus of cultural ideas in TV culture). In "new aesthetics", tensions and lack of commonalities between rural and urban denizens and their income gap is a focal point in Chinese popular culture contents, while Chinese audiences are simultaneously bombarded by idol worship, soap operas, animation, game shows and fashion aesthetics from Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.¹¹ The gap between the urbanites and rural folks highlights how the former is highly integrated into the globalised world and cosmopolitan cities while the latter is trapped in primordial conditions.
- 3.4 The widespread Chinese consumption of other Northeast Asian popular cultural productions eventually became a two-way cultural flow in the 21st century when Chinese popular cultural products began their export drive overseas. In December 2017, *China Daily* reported that China's television series exports hit RMB510 million (US\$77.8 million) in 2016 (up from US\$380 million in 2015); this trend grew alongside an increase in domestically produced television drama series sold to the global audience who adored Chinese period dramas like "Empresses in the Palace" (2011).¹² The Chinese international smash hit, *The Wandering Earth*, made more than US\$700,822,057 from the global market [state-owned *Xinhua News*

¹⁰ *Xinhua*, "China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products".

¹¹ *China Daily*, "Pop Culture Goes Global".

¹² CGTN, "How the spread of Asian popular culture contributed to a positive Pan-Asian identity".

Agency noted, by comparison, Star Wars IV (A New Hope) made US\$786,598,007].¹³

- 3.5 The tastes of Chinese popular culture consumption began to converge with Asian audiences who seem to appreciate similar pop cultural products shaped by globalisation and regionalisation. Consequently, Japanese, Korean and Chinese pop idol contents, soap operas, love stories, themes of opulent lifestyles, aesthetics of pretty faces/chic clothes and materialism in the form of large properties/hot wheels became the common consumption aspirations for most contemporary Northeast Asian youngsters.¹⁴ Chinese state media argued that East Asian countries are finding similarities in their tastes of music, movies and warm feelings for each other's societies and culture, including popular cultural mediums like songs and films.¹⁵
- 3.6 The mutually resonating aspects of Northeast Asian culture also open up the avenue for regional collaboration. In 2002, China and South Korea representatives signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on China-ROK cultural exchanges at a China-ROK folk culture industries forum in Shanghai to cooperate on movie-making, and carry out dialogues on laws/regulations for the industry and TV series production.¹⁶ Seo Hee-Deok, president of the ROK Asia Culture Exchange Conference, represented a wide spectrum of Korean stakeholders in the cultural arena in this exchange.
- 3.7 Besides motion pictures, popular fiction and television series, Chinese popular music during this period became grittier, angrier and raw in a sophisticated manner. Chinese popular culture integrated with the global musical scene, receiving regional and international influences while cross-fertilising and connecting with them. Many music labels grew organically out of independent operators. For example, indie label Fanyin was inexperienced, young (founded in 2001 with no major international

¹³ *Xinhua*, "China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products".

¹⁴ *China Daily*, "Pop Culture Goes Global".

¹⁵ CGTN, "How the spread of Asian popular culture contributed to a positive Pan-Asian identity".

¹⁶ *Xinhua News Agency*, "China, ROK to Cooperate on Films, TV Plays" dated 20 November 2002 in China International Information Center [downloaded on 1 January 2019], available at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/culture/49405.htm>.

success) and small-scale, with no large capital for taking on riskier creative works; though it had no distribution channels of its own, it was unique and special unlike state-sponsored mass-produced plastic bubble-gum pop, and appealed to a growing fandom in alternative music and offers unique local sounds.¹⁷

- 3.8 The dislocation themes embedded in and common to the plots of Northeast Asian TV dramas reflect married life in crisis torn apart by the pressures of urban lifestyles and soaked with political commentaries, indicating the transition from a naïve and peaceful life in the planned economy era to the complicated contesting priorities of urban lifestyles in the decades of market economy.¹⁸ Several case studies show this trend in the new aesthetics movement.
- 3.9 The first case study is the TV drama series “Lailai Wangwang (Busy Life)” derived from Chi Li's novel. The plot revolved around an executive in mid-life crisis who became involved in an affair that created turbulence in his career and amongst family members, and destroyed his harmonious household; it was a commentary on legitimate marriages in the innocent planned era that were torn apart by rampant materialism and excessive consumption in the market economy era.¹⁹
- 3.10 The evolution of the family theme did not stop there. Notably, Chinese interpretations of family values and orientations are constantly evolving. The idea of family orientation and social rituals/arrangements like marriage becomes more complicated in the 21st century as these themes actively interacted with idealised heroic values and gender issues. Such evolutionary thematic features are detected and picked up by foreign consumers of Chinese popular culture who consider them unique and refreshing. Foreign fans noticed such uniqueness of Chinese popular cultural products. Zak Dychtwald, long-time Californian author involved in China-US cultural and track II people-to-people interactions, argued: “I think it (Chinese fantasy novels) offers a different point of view... There are different ideas of what

¹⁷ Shanghai Star, “Bringing Chinese Pop to the World” dated 6 June 2003 in China Internet Information Centre [downloaded on 1 January 2019], available at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/culture/66339.htm>.

¹⁸ *China Daily*, “Pop Culture Goes Global”.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

it means to be a hero. There are different ideas of what it means to be family-oriented ... different ideas of what it means to be masculine or feminine”.²⁰

- 3.11 Throughout the 1990s, Chinese television dramas continued to struggle with themes on family values, traditional norms and contesting ideas of materialism and consumption. The 1990-era new aesthetic movement differed from the reform-era TV series and movies with the extramarital affairs theme in the early 1980s. The 1980s version tended to highlight the actions and consequences of betrayal bordering on idealism with a dose of esoteric thinking, though “Busy Life” was far grittier with a hard realist grip, and grounded in materialism, sexual desires and hedonism.²¹ There were no moral lessons from the affair, no references to traditional values or struggles with modernity, simply individual desires and personal narratives; and in the background, it featured the political contradiction that arose in the immediate post-Cultural Revolution era when the politically connected wife lost prestige and power to the husband who gained economic power in the reform era.²²
- 3.12 While the new aesthetic movement captured domestic Chinese audiences in the 1990s with its morality-neutral plots and contents bereft of traditional values, another change could be observed in the 21st century. In comparison with the 1990s genre, Chinese traditional elements make a big impact in the post-new aesthetic movement era as self-confident Chinese productions are consumed domestically as well as exported overseas. Novels depicting Chinese traditional values and religions have become popular in the 21st century. There are spin-off effects from the popular cultural boom in the novel genre. Some argue that Chinese fantasy novels facilitated growing overseas interest in traditional Chinese philosophies like Taoism that highlights harmony/equilibrium and balance in life (the yin and the yang).²³ Some of these popular novels are then transformed into films and televised series for domestic and global audiences.

²⁰ *Xinhua*, “China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products”.

²¹ *China Daily*, “Pop Culture Goes Global”.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Xinhua*, “China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products”.

- 3.13 Another example of the 1990s-era new aesthetic movement production is *Kong Jingzi* (*Empty Mirror*, 2002) which featured a materialistic unprincipled elder sister Sun Li seeking social liberation and freedom while younger sis Sun Yan followed a conventional path emphasising stability, both of whom were trying to cope with moral values in a flux in the age of globalisation.²⁴ There were shows about the rural-urban divide as well. The well-received and extensively re-broadcasted TV drama series, *General Manager Liu Laogen*, had a plot based on the expansion of private enterprises into the countryside; Liu's Longquan Villa Resort intrusion in the countryside was emblematic of the message of rampant capitalism driven by globalisation extending its influence into idealised peace of the countryside.²⁵
- 3.14 The new masses phenomenon emphasised social changes amongst the lower socioeconomic classes as the TV-based popular cultural products reflected a transition from the diminishing prestige of political ideologies to the rising power of materialism and consumerism. Genres in Chinese textualised and novelised popular culture were constantly undergoing innovation. Such changes would undergo another round of evolution when China comes of age in the 21st century as an economic superpower and a major technological powerhouse. As Japanese novelist and intellectual Toya Tachihara put it, "This is the golden age (of Chinese sci-fi)...has the latest scientific knowledge and unique Chinese culture and history, which help produce a unique kind of science fiction that no other country has".²⁶

Successes of Chinese Social Media-Based Popular Culture Overseas

- 4.1 Chinese popular sub-cultural success first attracted the attention of the international media in the early 21st century. In 2003, Chinese popular cultural music countenanced a boom in alternative music, particularly in the Qibao area in Shanghai nestled in the southwest suburban area where the then *Far Eastern Economic Review* (*FEER*) featured Shanghai's first small indie label of Fanyin

²⁴ *China Daily*, "Pop Culture Goes Global".

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Xinhua*, "China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products".

Music, one of the scant 20 or so indie labels in China.²⁷ As Fanyin is a small set-up its marketing costs and expenditures are negligible and distribution costs cheap; its lean production plus cutting edge music scored some successes like Beijing-based The Flowers which sold over half a million copies of their debut album in 1998.²⁸ As *FEER* was an important economic review magazine widely read in the region and the world, the feature placed Shanghai's burgeoning alternative music scene on the world map in a small way, but a big step for the Chinese indie scene on the world map.

4.2 The early 21st century also coincided with the global phenomenon of the rise of China. China was the flavour of the moment, with fast economic growth, growing global leadership role, highly admired developmental model and coming-of-age party with the 2008 Olympics. China was enamoured with the world and the world was fascinated with all things culturally Chinese. It was perhaps a renaissance moment in contemporary Chinese popular cultural imagery. Driven by international attention and affection, China was also determined to share its cultural ideas with the rest of the world and the state was eager to fund such ventures.

4.3 With economic power, China used its tremendous resources to spread its popular culture overseas. To increase exposure of Chinese popular culture to the global audience and propel it to greater fandom, China turned to language training as a means to facilitate foreigners in appreciating Chinese popular culture. Chinese language education is given a boost by Beijing through the Confucius Institute funded by the Chinese government. In recognition of the importance of language to access both Chinese popular and traditional cultures, in 2006, Walter Payton College Preparatory High School partnered East China Normal University (ECNU) in Shanghai to jointly establish the Confucius Institute in Chicago.²⁹

²⁷ Shanghai Star, "Bringing Chinese Pop to the World" dated 6 June 2003 in China Internet Information Centre [downloaded on 1 January 2019], available at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/culture/66339.htm>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *Xinhua*, "Spotlight: Chinese language, culture growing increasingly popular worldwide" dated 28 July 2017 in Xinhuanet [downloaded on 1 January 2020], available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/28/c_136481302.htm.

- 4.4 Language proficiency is closely tied to cultural appreciation. There are some hardcore Western fandom in the West who insist on reading the original Chinese-language prints of popular novels, instead of the translated versions. Zak Dychtwald, Californian author steeped in the ways of China-US cultural interactions, argued that Chinese editions of Chinese fantasy novels intrigued youths in the West. He pointed out that reading Chinese language editions of these fantasy novels gives Western youths a refreshing Chinese perspective of Western ideas/themes, hence diversifying readers' understanding of the world.³⁰
- 4.5 The Chinese language acquisition boom is known as "Mandarin fever", attracting especially youths to the Chinese language and culture; by the end of 2016, 1,073 courses were taught in 512 Confucius Institutes across 140 countries/regions to foreigners, underlining career opportunities in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).³¹ For those who cannot read Mandarin, translated books, subtitled TV programmes and digitally translated products are the next best choice.
- 4.6 Even traditional popular cultural medium for the masses like printed/textual sci-fi books is attracting attention in the West. With the translation of Liu Cixin's sci-fi, *The Three-Body Trilogy*, to the Japanese language, it became accessible to its fans. "I bought the Japanese version as soon as it was published. I started to read after work at six o'clock and I finished reading the whole book at 12 o'clock at night. It's really wonderful... In terms of theme, it is quite different from European, American and Japanese science fiction ... It's not about intuition or destiny. It's about humans' hard work and rational thinking that opens up the future", said 27-year old Japanese reader Daichi Nakashima enthusiastically, struck by the "distinctive Chinese cultural characteristics" and "scientific details" of the contents.³²
- 4.7 Another of Liu Cixin's short story, *The Wandering Earth*, was on the "Recommended" shelf in the biggest British chain bookstore Waterstones of London, while another of his science fiction book titled, *The Three-Body Problem*,

³⁰ *Xinhua*, "China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products".

³¹ *Xinhua*, "Spotlight: Chinese language, culture growing increasingly popular worldwide".

³² *Xinhua*, "China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products".

was well-loved by British fans who even enquired about subsequent release dates for other books in the series.³³ Other literary themes have also attracted attention from Japanese fandom. In the popular fictional novel community, there is already a fandom growing around Chinese martial arts *Wuxia* literature. To break down the language barriers and decode complicated plots, these novels are fan-translated into foreign languages for the global audience. One of these fan-translating websites is Wuxiaworld.com run by Lai Jingping (also known as RWX), a Chinese American who gathered translators and readers to his cause: “Wuxiaworld starts like a fan website, and is proof of the concept that Chinese culture, if done properly, has the chance to be spread to Western markets”.³⁴

- 4.8 Not only in the developed West like the United States and UK, Chinese popular cultural products are also enjoying some global successes and their outreach is felt as far away as Africa. Chinese TV series like *Monster Hunt*, *Nirvana in Fire* and *Ode to Joy* were marketed to many countries with success.³⁵ President of Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation Clermont Mszana felt close to the Chinese people through such popular cultural products in “sharing happiness, sorrows and dreams”.³⁶
- 4.9 Tik Tok is truly a global Chinese tech/popular cultural product when it ranked fourth in the list of most downloaded non-game app for 2018 globally; requiring only basic upload skills, downloads for the app reached one billion people, mostly users under 30 years old, in February 2019, according to app analytics Sensor Tower.³⁷ Despite its success, Tik Tok still has a long learning curve when it comes to capturing markets outside of mainland China. Through international strategic outlook and overcoming domestic content-filtering pressures as well as fandom preferences, ByteDance’s international outreach is sophisticated. Cognisant of the fact that Chinese internet cultural trends may not always fly with the global audience, ByteDance has created cultural platforms that cater for international needs. For

³³ *Xinhua*, “Spotlight: Chinese language, culture growing increasingly popular worldwide”.

³⁴ *Xinhua*, “China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products”.

³⁵ Chen, Xu, “TikTok is popular, but Chinese apps still have a lot to learn about global markets”.

³⁶ Chen, Xu, “TikTok is popular, but Chinese apps still have a lot to learn about global markets”.

³⁷ *Xinhua*, “China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products”.

instance Tik Tok (not Douyin) has a panel of Westernised emoticons and stickers on its platform.³⁸

The Idea of Soft Power and Popular Culture

- 5.1 In its most classical form, soft power refers to the ability to influence other states without force or coercion. Major leading Northeast Asian states, China, Japan and South Korea, are all seeking to increase and project their soft power regionally and possibly internationally. In accordance with traditional understanding of soft power, a state gets its soft power mainly from three aspects: cultural attraction, adherence to political principles, and conduct of foreign affairs based on legitimacy and morality.³⁹ *Asia Times* Navin Subedi interpreted Joseph Nye's soft power definition as the capability of a state to compel others to behave according to its desires without using force or coercion; he conceptualised it as a "carrot" to seduce and influence others and any country that can use both hard and soft powers effectively will be strong.⁴⁰
- 5.2 A country's soft power is reliant on its international image and prestige and, in the case of state-centred China, the government formulated policies to boost China's soft power coupled with public diplomacy to create a positive global image of China.⁴¹ According to Elizabeth Economy, CV Starr senior fellow and director for Asia Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, China has begun to garner soft power in addition to hard power like economic strength and military capabilities, a policy that Elizabeth Economy and Joseph Nye attributed to the early 1990s. In 2007 at the 17th Party Congress, it got an extra boost when former Chinese President Hu

³⁸ Chen, Xu, "TikTok is popular, but Chinese apps still have a lot to learn about global markets".

³⁹ Nye, Joseph S, "What are the limits of China's soft power?" dated 10 July 2015 in World Economic Forum (WEF) [downloaded on 1 January 2020], available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/07/what-are-the-limits-of-chinas-soft-power/>.

⁴⁰ Subedi, Navin, "China's quest for soft power" dated 26 June 2019 in *Asia Times* [downloaded on 26 June 2019], available at <https://asiatimes.com/2019/06/chinas-quest-for-the-soft-power/>.

⁴¹ China Power Team, "Is China's soft power strategy working?" dated 27 February 2016 in *China Power* [downloaded on 1 January 2020], available at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/international>.

Jintao publicly associated the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation with China's capacity to deploy soft power.⁴²

- 5.3 There is an economic angle to popular cultural consumption and production as well. The powerful Korean Wave (a popular cultural strain of music, movies and drama serials) made up 0.2% of Korean gross domestic product in 2004 (about US\$1.87 billion) and further added US\$11.6 billion to the South Korean economy in 2014.⁴³ Some examples of Chinese soft power in dollars and cents include the Beijing Olympics from 8 to 24 August 2008. The event attracted a 4.7 billion audience or 70% of global population according to Nielsen Media Research data.⁴⁴ While China invested in *Xinhua*/CCTV's global outreach, it has also experienced massive failures like *Monster Hunt* making only US\$21,000 in ticket sales in the United States in January 2016 versus US\$381 million in domestic Chinese ticket sales in 2015.⁴⁵

Public Diplomacy and Cultural Products

- 6.1 Joseph Nye, former dean of the Kennedy School of Government Harvard University,⁴⁶ opined that China believes that it cannot be an international power without acquiring the capability to attract others through soft power. This gives rise to the role of public diplomacy in soft power generation, including the ability to tap into existing assets and resources and put them to maximum use.
- 6.2 China has inherent strong qualities that make it a potential candidate to generate soft power. In terms of cultural assets, China is an age-old civilisation with a long and rich culture (e.g. martial arts, Beijing Opera, and ancient philosophy and texts) and a long tradition of wonderful cuisines and culinary cultures. Politically, China has won support for being the self-styled champion of the developing world, helping

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ CGTN, "How the spread of Asian popular culture contributed to a positive Pan-Asian identity".

⁴⁴ China Power Team, "Is China's soft power strategy working?"

⁴⁵ China Power Team, "Is China's soft power strategy working?"

⁴⁶ Nye later became University Distinguished Service Professor, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

developing economies without ideological strings attached (e.g. demanding liberal democratic change, or upgrading of human rights) and without stipulating military alliances.⁴⁷ However, these assets by themselves are not sufficient to produce diplomacy and political outcomes. They have to be shaped by state resources, agendas and funding to be effective in regional and global affairs.

- 6.3 In 2007, President Hu Jintao informed the CCP that China's increasing power meant that it would intimidate peripheral countries and push them to form alignments to hedge against Chinese power; there was thus a necessity to formulate ways to make China less intimidating.⁴⁸ Elizabeth Economy argued that China has a soft power mechanism with three components that seek to develop (i) content; (ii) traditional culture in art, music, literature, Traditional Chinese Medicine and Confucianism; and (iii) mechanisms for soft power projection and platforms such as investments in the domestic travel and tourism industry.⁴⁹
- 6.4 On traditional culture, studies have been carried out to identify the attractiveness of Chinese literary works and popular fiction. According to a Twitter survey examining why Chinese novels became popular, about 30% of the 3,000 respondents indicated that cultural elements in the novels were the most attractive features while about 50% felt that such values as social justice found in the works resonated with them and about 22% liked immersing themselves in the alternative reality created by the writers.⁵⁰
- 6.5 On mechanisms and platforms for soft power projections, Nye argued that China uses public diplomacy as one component of this capability by convincing others that its policies are legitimate and attractive and from its economic performance that lifts hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, earning admiration from others.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Wong, John, "China's Rising Economic Soft Power" dated 25 March 2016 in The Asia Dialogue University of Nottingham Asia Research Institute [downloaded on 1 January 2020], available at <https://theasiadialogue.com/2016/03/25/chinas-rising-economic-soft-power/>.

⁴⁸ Nye, Joseph S, "What are the limits of China's soft power?"

⁴⁹ China Power Team, "Is China's soft power strategy working?"

⁵⁰ *Xinhua*, "China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products".

⁵¹ China Power Team, "Is China's soft power strategy working?"

David Shambaugh, leading East Asian expert, defined soft power as a magnet that lures others to you and make others want to emulate, respect, value your political system and be like you; in his view, it cannot be driven by the government.⁵²

6.6 In the case of New Media, some critics consider Chinese-owned digital apps to be ‘global apps with Chinese regulations’. Sometimes, BtyeDance and Douyin face sanctions from the all-powerful Chinese state. In April 2018, Chinese internet regulators accused ByteDance of proliferating “unwholesome” content through Douyin to under-aged users and then profiting by live-streaming or uploading advertising vids on Douyin, using at the same time peer pressure to attract more followers by deploying under-aged individuals to record suggestive movements and/or dances.⁵³ Yet, Tik Tok is extremely self-empowering for young adults. Traditional dancer 22-year-old Noor Afshan did not make the final cut for a reality TV show in India but posted her dance moves on Chinese app Tik Tok, which permits 15-second video uploads for sharing; the post attracted 3.3 million fans and made US\$700 monthly (1/3 of average Indian monthly salary) from product endorsements alone.⁵⁴

6.7 Accused of inappropriateness with young users, Tik Tok is the latest tech giant to run into headwinds with the authorities. Academic literatures attribute the success of overseas-based Tik Tok ironically to staying outside the Great Firewall that censors the digital contents of domestic tech giants like Douyin even though both apps belong to the same company. The same structure has created problems for other Chinese tech giants. The Firewall prevents non-Chinese social media from penetrating the Chinese market. China-based WeChat faced challenges in entering the non-Chinese market when they were not authorised to hire international soccer celebrity Lionel Messi as the paid ambassador for their advertising campaign.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Chen, Xu, “TikTok is popular, but Chinese apps still have a lot to learn about global markets”.

⁵⁴ *Xinhua*, “China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products”.

⁵⁵ Chen, Xu, “TikTok is popular, but Chinese apps still have a lot to learn about global markets”.

- 6.8 Western users are afraid that the same kind of undesirable contents or uncomfortable heavy-handed handling of Douyin may start to infect the liberal-democratic Western digital sphere. It was not the first time that the Chinese authorities moved against the tech giants. The year 2014 was a major year of crackdown on the popular cultural contents of Chinese tech giants. The ministry of culture cited “bloody, terror and violent content” in comics/animation on 21 websites (including those of China Telecom and Tencent) and in May 2014, Sina Corp. was penalised RMB5.1 million for “unhealthy and indecent content” on its main website and thereafter in August, Baidu was warned after pornography was found in its storage.⁵⁶
- 6.9 The government-centred approach does not seem to resonate well with many in the global audience. Like Hu, Chinese President Xi Jinping has the same opinion that despite its economic prowess and aid overseas, China’s image and standing in the world are not proportionate to its economic power. Xi is hence keen to turn China into a “socialist cultural superpower”, which runs into similar problems faced by all current and former socialist countries in their promotion of soft power.⁵⁷
- 6.10 Linguistically (and culturally by extrapolation), many see the Confucius Institute programme as the lodestone of Chinese cultural soft power influence. China’s ministry of education has founded 500 Confucius Institutes in 125 countries since 2004 to teach Chinese language and culture globally and foster cultural exchanges.⁵⁸ Language is only a component of the overall package. China exerts both economic and cultural influences. Nye noted that the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank provides billions of dollars of aid/investments during official trips overseas by political elites while Shambaugh pointed out China is also ahead of the United States in spending approximately US\$10 billion annually in “external propaganda” (compared to US spending of only US\$666 million on public diplomacy in 2014).⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Reuters, “China To Fine Internet Firms Tencent, Baidu For Porn: Xinhua” dated 2 December 2014 in the Business Insider website [downloaded 1 January 2020], available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-to-fine-internet-firms-tencent-baidu-for-porn-xinhua-2014-12?IR=T>.

⁵⁷ Wong, John, “China’s Rising Economic Soft Power”.

⁵⁸ China Power Team, “Is China’s soft power strategy working?”

⁵⁹ Nye, Joseph S, “What are the limits of China’s soft power?”

- 6.11 In the non-economic fields, Chinese soft power initiatives are also going strong. China Global TV Network (CGTN) and *Global Times* present China's side of the narrative on global affairs, while growing foreign students and Chinese scholarships from the developing world in its institutions of higher learning (China is second to the United States in terms of the number of international university students in the world) are sources of Chinese soft power.⁶⁰ Promoting popular culture contents overseas needs materials to resonate with global audiences. A good example of soft popular cultural power is the successful TV series that China has managed to market overseas. For example, *Empresses in the Palace* (2011) was a 76-episode Qing dynasty series (1644-1911) that was abridged into a six-episode mini-series for Netflix in 2015. Widely shown in Korea and Japan, it was a period drama about Emperor Yongzheng's concubine Zhen Huan who fought hard to survive palace intrigues.⁶¹
- 6.12 China enjoys more export success in developing economies. From the viewpoint of some non-Western developing states, they see a different China. Chinese supplies of high-quality and affordable products, self-proclaimed non-interference policy, offers of infrastructure-building capabilities and perceptions of Western capitalism floundering in the 2008 Global Financial Crisis strike resonance with the developing economies, allowing China to develop its cultural soft power.⁶² Against this backdrop of a rising China with its growing strength and power, Chinese state media believed that the cultural pendulum has shifted towards East Asia and that China is developing its own brand of popular culture for consumption by these societies.
- 6.13 In the cultural sphere, Chinese state-owned media believes that the Asian cultural renaissance has arrived. The state-owned media believed that between 2009 and 2019, contemporary East Asian popular culture has had global traction by keeping up with global trends and winning fandom internationally so much so that confident

⁶⁰ Subedi, Navin, "China's quest for soft power".

⁶¹ CGTN, "How the spread of Asian popular culture contributed to a positive Pan-Asian identity".

⁶² Subedi, Navin, "China's quest for soft power".

East Asian youths are now looking at their own popular culture when they were formerly only fascinated with Western popular cultures.⁶³

Critics from the West

- 7.1 There are limits to Chinese social media's marketing and image-making efforts. Even successful and cutting-edge products like Tik Tok have their own challenges in penetrating the Western consumer market. For example, Tik Tok continued featuring the *meibai* (美白, beautiful whitening) photo tool derived from Douyin even though Western audiences are not in need of skin-whitening functions in their social media apps, indicating some ways to go in understanding the idiosyncratic needs of Western audiences when it comes to social media use.⁶⁴ At the same time, Tik Tok has features that are appreciated by East Asian users. Thai youngster Sona Rai explains her fascination with Tik Tok: "My favourite aspect of TikTok culture is how it enables the creation of video memes, and how it's a fairly low barrier to join in and create your own...I realize it (TikTok) is powered by AI but it feels delightfully human".⁶⁵ The challenge may therefore be catering to culturally segmented markets and their differing needs in the future.
- 7.2 There are other parochial features of Chinese tech products that are under scrutiny from the international community; for example, in the financial sector, WeChat Pay can only be used by Chinese citizens and Chinese bank accounts and, in another example, ByteDance CEO Zhang Yiming ramped up content moderation by increasing moderator staff from 6,000 to 10,000.⁶⁶ It is unclear how many will be deployed to Tik Tok and whether content standards are the same for American and Chinese users and whether future developments are subjected to unpredictable circumstances and non-transparent social media regulation within China that can affect the external outreach.⁶⁷

⁶³ CGTN, "How the spread of Asian popular culture contributed to a positive Pan-Asian identity".

⁶⁴ Chen, Xu, "TikTok is popular, but Chinese apps still have a lot to learn about global markets".

⁶⁵ *Xinhua*, "China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products".

⁶⁶ Chen, Xu, "TikTok is popular, but Chinese apps still have a lot to learn about global markets".

⁶⁷ Ibid.

- 7.3 In marketing products overseas, Chinese popular cultural producers and tech giants also have to pay attention to domestic legal stipulations. Chinese state regulations have to be navigated carefully. Popular culture content providers also have to be mindful of boundary markers laid down by the ministry of culture. The ministry penalised 11 online firms like Tencent Holdings and Baidu for disseminating pornography, gambling and violence as part of an anti-pornography campaign in April 2014 to “clean up” the internet as they challenged “accepted moral values”.⁶⁸
- 7.4 There are also issues with intellectual property rights (IPR) protection. The problem of piracy looms large. It accounts for 95% of China's music sales in the early 2000s because selling originals at typical prices of RMB40 to RMB50 can mean low sales because their pirated version may only be a few dollars; ultimately, only small labels can survive low product pricing to compete with IPR pirates due to low operating expenses.⁶⁹
- 7.5 Beyond aesthetics, marketing and functional aspects, some in the West are also wary of the political impact of Chinese popular cultural outreach and its soft power potential. They see Chinese popular culture not as a stand-alone socio-cultural phenomenon but highly integrated with diplomacy, political ideology, regional/world domination, economic exploitation, political censorship and curtailing of human rights. Western critics regarded these as the darker aspects of Chinese popular cultural outreach.
- 7.6 For Elizabeth Economy, China’s ability to get hundreds of millions of people out of impoverishment makes it a potential developmental showcase particularly for authoritarian regimes in Africa, Latin America and parts of Southeast Asia. To Joseph Nye, the soft power influence of China’s development is uneven as it resonates with Africa/Latin America more than Asia where it has territorial conflicts with Japan, India, Vietnam and the Philippines.⁷⁰ Some Sinologists argued that the characteristics of an ideological one-party system with curtailed freedom for its

⁶⁸ Reuters, “China To Fine Internet Firms Tencent, Baidu For Porn: Xinhua”.

⁶⁹ Shanghai Star, “Bringing Chinese Pop to the World” dated 6 June 2003 in China Internet Information Centre [downloaded on 1 January 2019], available at <http://www.china.org.cn/english/culture/66339.htm>.

⁷⁰ China Power Team, “Is China’s soft power strategy working?”

society make China inherently unattractive and rank it at the lowest end of global soft power ranking. This forces it to rely on economic power rather than soft power in global affairs and to use it like a “carrot” shaping agenda while promoting its economic initiatives.⁷¹

- 7.7 Nye argued that one of the enemies of Chinese soft power is nationalism which rears its head in territorial disputes resulting in tensions with its neighbours.⁷² State propaganda tend to stoke the fires of Chinese nationalism to maintain control.⁷³ Chinese policymakers appear to have differing priorities on this. For the Chinese authorities, the preference is for popular cultural contents that meet state regulations and fit state agendas. Deputy director of the market department of the ministry of culture, Liu Qiang, published the financial penalties for tech giants with unsavoury contents in a major crackdown in 2014 with the warning: “We hope that major companies can shoulder their due, social responsibilities and offer healthy, quality, cultural products”.⁷⁴
- 7.8 David Shambaugh has expounded his views on Chinese soft power. He argued that the Chinese extended their home-grown propaganda machine and internationalised its function and public diplomacy by using such mechanisms have not be very useful. Despite massive investments placed into it, benchmarks like ambiguous favourability ratings had been mostly negative and declining to 20% between 2009 and 2015.⁷⁵
- 7.9 For some Western observers, a weakness of Chinese soft power is the lack of alternative opinions. Nye argued that China does not have the mechanisms to accept criticism from civil society or the private sector, thus non-state sources of soft power influences cannot show dissent on China’s unpopular policies in the way critiques

⁷¹ Wong, John, “China’s Rising Economic Soft Power”.

⁷² Nye, Joseph S., “What are the limits of China’s soft power?”

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Reuters, “China To Fine Internet Firms Tencent, Baidu For Porn: Xinhua”.

⁷⁵ China Power Team, “Is China’s soft power strategy working?”

of US government's unpopular decisions such as US invasion of Iraq are able to do so.⁷⁶

7.10 The critics are also concerned about China's soft power institutions. Shambaugh also pointed out that China's Confucius Institutes are debatably effective because US and European intellectuals are worried of the clash with Western ideas of freedom of inquiry, teaching, thought and/or if they are Trojan horses in Chinese propaganda. Personally, Shambaugh thinks that they are benignly about language, culture, cooking and film appreciation.⁷⁷ Elizabeth Economy noted there are more than 400 Confucius Institutes in the world that are most successful in language training while other impacts beyond that are ambiguous (mainly limited by political willingness of the Chinese authorities to fund/propagate them).⁷⁸ Nye cautioned against political interference by the institutes though he thinks the overall mission is a positive attribute.⁷⁹

7.11 Culturally, there are also differing receptions and acceptance of contents in China and the West. Common Sense Media Chief Executive Officer James P Steyer is a critic of Chinese contents on Tik Tok/Douyin. He warned that kids on TikTok are "significantly too young for it"; in March 2019, Tik Tok was penalised approximately US\$5.2 million by the US Federal Trade Commission for the violation of Children's Online Privacy Protection Act; overall, Western observers are concerned about ByteDance's lack of structural mechanisms preventing under-aged users on Douyin/Tik Tok in China.⁸⁰

7.12 China is still inexperienced with projecting its soft power but it is already taking steps to address and counter Western scrutiny of its state-associated popular cultural industries. For example, Tik Tok avoided problems of state filtering by not combining Chinese and global digital spheres, creating an autonomous app for

⁷⁶ Nye, Joseph S, "What are the limits of China's soft power?"

⁷⁷ China Power Team, "Is China's soft power strategy working?"

⁷⁸ China Power Team, "Is China's soft power strategy working?"

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Chen, Xu, "TikTok is popular, but Chinese apps still have a lot to learn about global markets".

overseas outreach; ByteDance also invested approximately US\$920 million in acquiring Musical.ly on 2 August 2018 to capture the US teenage market to shed off its Chinese origins.⁸¹

- 7.13 While there are critiques of Chinese popular cultural exports, soft power and state agendas, some countries appear to be responding to China's multilateral initiatives to promote its cultural products overseas and to consume products from other countries in return. According to *Nikkei Asian Review*, First Secretary Sa-ngopkarn Mounghthong of the Thai Embassy in Beijing associated China's Thai Wave boom to the Belt and Road Initiative that intensified deepened cultural exchanges between China and Southeast Asia.⁸²
- 7.14 Besides Southeast Asia, Chinese popular cultural products are also attracting a cult following in major Northeast Asian markets like Japan. Referring to Liu Cixin's works and Chen Qiufan's pioneering sci-fi book *The Waste Tide* (2019) published in Japan, Japanese sci-fi connoisseur/sociologist/translator Nozomi Omori noted: "Most of the readers are in their 30s, (but) there are also younger readers ... Sci-fi readers aged 50 to 60 also buy it ... In the future, Chinese sci-fi will become a genre that will be remembered by science fiction fans".⁸³
- 7.15 Indeed, China has geopolitical tensions with many peripheral countries but other analysts argue that it may be possible that Chinese popular cultural product appreciation can take place through separation of politics and culture. Even in regional geopolitical rival Vietnam, Researcher Tran Thi of the Institute of Chinese Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences acknowledged that Chinese films and TV dramas attracted fandom due to their similar cultures (and political systems) through a spectrum of Chinese television programmes such as *We Are In Love* and *Where Are We Going, Dad?*.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² CGTN, "How the spread of Asian popular culture contributed to a positive Pan-Asian identity".

⁸³ *Xinhua*, "China storms global pop culture with its iconic new products".

⁸⁴ Chen, Xu, "TikTok is popular, but Chinese apps still have a lot to learn about global markets".