

COOL CHINA RISES: HOW GAMING, INFLUENCERS, AND POP CULTURE ARE REDEFINING CHINA'S GLOBAL IMAGE

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Global perceptions of China are improving among younger generations, driven not by state messaging but by a bottom-up “Cool China” phenomenon. Chinese video games, short dramas, music, influencer content, and consumer brands like Pop Mart are gaining international audiences through market forces rather than government promotion. The rise of short-video platforms has shifted agenda-setting power from traditional media to individual creators, enabling China’s image to shift through authentic, uncoordinated content rather than conventional public diplomacy. Yet cultural appeal has its limits: enjoying Chinese products does not necessarily lead to political sympathy, and whether “Cool China” can cultivate deeper affinity remains an open question.

(Click on the link to read the above in [Chinese](#), [French](#) and [Spanish](#))

Chinese:

“酷中国”崛起：游戏、网红与流行文化如何重塑中国的全球形象

年轻一代对中国的看法正在改善，这一转变并非源于官方宣传，而是由自下而上的“酷中国”现象所推动。中国的电子游戏、短剧、音乐、网红内容以及泡泡玛特等消费品牌正通过市场力量而非政府推广赢得国际受众。短视频平台的兴起舆论主导权从传统媒体转移到了个体创作者手中，使中国形象得以通过真实、自发的内容实现转变，而非依赖传统的公共外交手段。然而，文化吸引力有其局限性：喜爱中国产品并不必然带来政治上的好感，而“酷中国”能否培育更深层的认同感，仍是一个悬而未决的问题。

French:

LE “COOL CHINA” EN PLEIN ESSOR : COMMENT LES JEUX VIDEO, LES INFLUENCEURS ET LA POP CULTURE REDEFINISSENT L’IMAGE DE LA CHINE A L’INTERNATIONAL

La perception de la Chine à l’international s’améliore chez les jeunes générations, non pas sous l’effet de la communication étatique, mais grâce à un phénomène « Cool China » venu de la base. Les jeux vidéo chinois, les mini-séries, la musique, les contenus d’influenceurs et des marques grand public comme Pop Mart gagnent la reconnaissance du public à l’international sous l’effet de dynamiques marchandes plutôt que de la promotion gouvernementale. L’essor des plateformes mobiles de partage de vidéos a déplacé le pouvoir de mise à l’agenda des médias traditionnels vers les créateurs individuels, permettant à l’image de la Chine d’évoluer à travers des contenus authentiques et non coordonnés plutôt que par la diplomatie publique conventionnelle. Toutefois, l’attrait culturel a ses limites : apprécier des produits chinois n’entraîne pas nécessairement une sympathie politique, et la question de savoir si le phénomène « Cool China » peut susciter une affinité plus profonde demeure ouverte.

Spanish:

EL “COOL CHINA” EN ASCENSO: CÓMO LOS VIDEOJUEGOS, LOS INFLUENCERS Y LA CULTURA POP ESTÁN REDEFINIENDO LA IMAGEN GLOBAL DE CHINA

Las percepciones globales sobre China están mejorando entre las generaciones más jóvenes, impulsadas no por la comunicación estatal, sino por un fenómeno ascendente de “Cool China”. Los videojuegos chinos, los minidramas, la música, el contenido de influencers y marcas de consumo como Pop Mart están ganando audiencias internacionales gracias a las fuerzas del mercado, más que a la promoción gubernamental. El auge de las plataformas de video corto ha trasladado el poder de fijar la agenda de los medios tradicionales a los creadores individuales,

lo que permite que la imagen de China cambie mediante contenido auténtico y no coordinado, en lugar de la diplomacia pública convencional. Sin embargo, el atractivo cultural tiene sus límites: disfrutar de productos chinos no necesariamente conduce a simpatía política, y si “Cool China” puede cultivar una afinidad más profunda sigue siendo una cuestión abierta.

COOL CHINA RISES: HOW GAMING, INFLUENCERS, AND POP CULTURE ARE REDEFINING CHINA'S GLOBAL IMAGE

PAN Chaohong*

The Rise of “Cool China”

1. Recent polling data suggest that perceptions of China have improved, particularly among younger audiences. *The Economist*'s data, which surveyed 32,000 people in 32 countries in the second half of 2025, showed that, increasingly, people preferred to have China rather than the United States as the leading world power. The preference for China is especially significant among young people: among 18- to 24-years olds the United States and China are almost tied for preference at 41% and 39% respectively, while among respondents 65 years or older, the United States has a 30% lead.¹ Data from Brand Finance indicated a similar trend, with China's favourability climbing to second place in its soft power ranking, just below the United States.
2. This shift coincides with two parallel developments: the emergence of Chinese cultural products that resonate as a “cool China” narrative and a decline in American soft power. Lin Jian, a spokesperson for China's foreign ministry, declared China is “increasingly cool”.² Such narrative has also been adopted by western media such as *The Economist*.³ In this context, “cool” suggests more than simple popularity. It conveys a sense of stylistic edge and cultural distinctiveness that many young people find compelling. Much as Japan's cultural ascent in the 1980s and South Korea's Hallyu provided an

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¹ <https://www.economist.com/china/2025/11/13/chinas-growing-global-fan-club>, accessed 20 November 2025.

² <http://www.news.cn/world/20250612/5fb7493300e44b638aae5ccfb522de4f/c.html>, accessed 20 November 2025.

³ <https://www.economist.com/china/2025/05/20/how-china-became-cool>, accessed 23 November 2025.

alternative to the Euro-American mainstream, China's expanding cultural footprint today may be exerting a similar pull.

3. The rise of the "Cool China" narrative suggests that China's "tell the China story well" initiative has entered a new phase. Rather than relying on state-backed messaging, the approach now increasingly draws on privately produced cultural products, like video games, influencer content, and pop culture phenomena, to generate "cool" global appeal, especially among younger generations.⁴ The change marks a transition in China's global image-making from top-down communication to bottom-up engagement.
4. Several recent developments demonstrate this shift: the global success of the video game *Black Myth: Wukong*, American streamer IShowSpeed's widely viewed China tour, the worldwide popularity of Pop Mart's Labubu, and so on. This Background Brief examines three facets of China's evolving cultural influence: its expanding cultural output, the role of influencers in shaping perceptions, and the worldwide rise of Pop Mart and Labubu. It concludes by assessing the implications and limitations of these developments for China's public diplomacy.

China's Cultural Output: eSport and Gaming

5. Gaming has emerged as a critical arena for soft power competition. Countries increasingly recognise that video games offer a unique platform to project cultural narratives and values to global audiences. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has invested billions in its gaming industry as part of Vision 2030, positioning itself as a hub for e-sports and content creation.⁵ China has taken a similar approach, incorporating the gaming industry into its 14th Five-Year Plan as part of a strategy to "strengthen the development of national cultural export bases".⁶

⁴ <https://www.economist.com/china/2025/05/20/how-china-became-cool>, accessed 18 November 2025.

⁵ <https://www.economist.com/culture/2025/10/03/how-saudi-arabia-became-a-video-game-superpower>, accessed 23 November 2025.

⁶ https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-03/13/content_5592681.htm, accessed 23 November 2025.

6. Chinese games have achieved remarkable global penetration in recent years. *Black Myth: Wukong*, released in August 2024, sold over 20 million copies within months and set new sales records on Steam.⁷ *Genshin Impact*, launched in 2020, became the fastest mobile game to reach \$1 billion in revenue (within six months)⁸ and maintains strong momentum, with monthly active users growing from 9.3 million to 15.2 million over the past year.⁹ As of July 2025, Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong ranked as the game’s top markets by revenue per download,¹⁰ while the United States ranked second in total downloads.¹¹ *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang* dominates in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam.¹² These successes demonstrate that Chinese gaming products can compete effectively – and in some markets, dominate – in the global cultural marketplace.
7. Chinese games have also garnered significant recognition from the global gaming industry. *Black Myth: Wukong* won Best Action Game and Players’ Voice at The Game Awards 2024 – often referred to as the “Oscars of gaming”.¹³ *Wuthering Waves*, developed by Guangzhou-based Kuro Games, won the Players’ Voice Award at The Game Awards 2025.¹⁴ These awards are particularly meaningful given their selection processes: at The Game Awards, most categories are determined by an international jury of over 100 media outlets (90%) combined with public voting (10%), while the Players’

⁷ <https://www.matthewball.co/all/wukong>, accessed 23 November 2025.

⁸ <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/777890-fastest-mobile-game-to-reach-1-billion-in-revenue#>, accessed 23 November 2025.

⁹ <https://news.bittopup.com/news/genshin-impact-2025-15.2m-players-0.8b-revenue>, accessed 24 November 2025.

¹⁰ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1295196/genshin-impact-arpu-country/>, accessed 24 November 2025.

¹¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1329253/genshin-impact-downloads-region-markets/>, accessed 24 November 2025.

¹² <https://sensortower.com/blog/mobile-legends-revenue-500-million>, accessed 24 November 2025.

¹³ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12969320/awards/>, accessed 7 January 2026.

¹⁴ <https://www.thegamer.com/wuthering-waves-game-awards-players-voice/>, accessed 7 January 2026.

Voice Award is 100% fan-voted through multiple rounds of public voting.¹⁵ The fact that Chinese games have won both jury-recognised and purely fan-voted awards demonstrates that they have achieved not only acclaim from industry professionals, but also widespread popularity among international players.

8. The Chinese government's approach to the gaming industry reflects both support and constraint. It recognises gaming as integral to its broader cultural strategy, and local governments provide industry subsidies, including tax incentives and incubator support.¹⁶ However, this support co-exists with regulatory constraints, including strict content controls, limits on gaming hours for minors, and approval processes that can delay or block releases.¹⁷ Overall, these policies create a supportive yet restrictive environment. The success of Chinese games is primarily driven by the creativity and capabilities of private companies like Game Science and miHoYo, with little evidence of direct government involvement in their creative processes.
9. Chinese games have become cultural ambassadors due to their deep integration of Chinese mythology and traditional elements. *Black Myth: Wukong* draws directly from the classical novel *Journey to the West*, introducing global audiences to foundational narratives of Chinese mythology, while *Genshin Impact* incorporates narrative themes rooted in Chinese culture. *Genshin Impact*'s Lantern Rite Festival, inspired by Chinese New Year, emphasises family reunion – players experience the actual customs of Chinese spring festival and can gain in-game benefits by logging in during the event's seven consecutive days, mirroring the duration of the traditional Spring Festival. Through such immersive engagement, Chinese cultural traditions are being introduced to global audiences in interactive and accessible ways.

¹⁵ <https://www.talkesport.com/articles/game-awards-voting-process/>, accessed 7 January 2026.

¹⁶ <http://ccipic.com/h-nd-1669.html>, accessed 24 November 2025.

¹⁷ <https://www.chinalegalexperts.com/news/china-gaming-laws>, accessed 24 November 2025.

China's Cultural Output: C-Drama and Short-Dramas

10. In recent years, Chinese drama, commonly referred to as C-drama, has emerged as a significant force in global entertainment, increasingly challenging the dominance of Korean drama (K-drama). This rise manifests through two distinct formats: traditional long-form series distributed internationally via platforms like Netflix, Viki, and iQIYI with English subtitles, and the more recent explosion of short-dramas, bite-sized, vertically filmed episodes delivered through Chinese-developed apps such as ReelShort and DramaBox. Together, these formats are expanding China's presence in global entertainment markets and raising questions about their implications for soft power.
11. China's strategy to promote domestic dramas internationally traces back to 2001, when several ministries released the "Regulations for the Implementation of the Going Global Project of Radio, Film and Television".¹⁸ The breakthrough moment came in 2018 when *Story of Yanxi Palace* became the most Googled TV show globally, despite Google being blocked in mainland China.¹⁹ Through iQIYI's international service and licensing to platforms like Viki and Amazon Prime Video, the drama reached more than 70 markets worldwide.²⁰
12. C-drama audiences remain heavily concentrated in culturally similar regions. According to AMPD analytics,²¹ Chinese dramas surpassed US dramas on video-on-demand platforms in Southeast Asia in 2024, capturing roughly 40% user share in the free content category.²² Chinese streaming platforms iQIYI and WeTV now control 40%

¹⁸ <http://www.nopss.gov.cn/n/2013/0312/c357475-20763916.html>, accessed 30 November 2025.

¹⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-46630781>, accessed 30 November 2025.

²⁰ <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/iqiyi-expands-global-footprint-with-extensive-international-distribution-of-historical-costume-drama-story-of-yanxi-palace-300695345.html>, accessed 30 November 2025.

²¹ AMPD Analytics is a market intelligence firm that provides data and analysis on the global video game industry, including player engagement, monetisation, and market trends.

²² <https://www.bastillepost.com/global/article/4620777-c-dramas-captivate-global-viewers-for-their-distinctive-aesthetics-improved-production-quality>, accessed 30 November 2025.

of the streaming market in Thailand, exceeding the 30% held by American services.²³ Beyond Southeast Asia, penetration remains limited but growing: iQIYI reported over 30% membership revenue growth in the United Kingdom and Australia in late 2024.²⁴

13. Different from the traditional drama market, where Chinese companies must compete with international streaming platforms, Chinese producers fully dominate the overseas short-drama market, especially the lucrative US market. The US market alone generated \$819 million in 2024,²⁵ and Chinese developers occupy 41 of the world's top 50 short-drama apps by revenue, capturing over 80% of the market.²⁶ The two leading platforms, ReelShort and DramaBox, are both Chinese-owned and generated US\$214 million and US\$217 million in app store revenue respectively in 2024.²⁷
14. Unlike traditional long-form dramas that simply add subtitles to content made for Chinese audiences, short-drama companies hire local teams to create fully localised productions tailored to each market..²⁸ Yet the underlying narrative structures remain distinctly Chinese. For example, ReelShort adapts Chinese web novel tropes such as “dominant CEO” and “sweet revenge” to Western settings, incorporating Hollywood-familiar elements like vampires and werewolves.²⁹ While audiences may not even realise they are using a Chinese-owned app, these localised dramas still carry the narrative logic popularised by Chinese web novels, a quiet but potentially far-reaching form of cultural influence.

²³ <https://asia.nikkei.com/business/media-entertainment/china-s-streaming-companies-gain-on-netflix-in-southeast-asia>, accessed 30 November 2025.

²⁴ <https://www.yicaiglobal.com/news/chinas-iqiyi-sinks-after-posting-declining-2024-earnings-despite-positive-outlook>, accessed 30 November 2025.

²⁵ <https://qazinform.com/news/micro-drama-revenues-in-china-set-to-surpass-box-office-in-2025-264472>, accessed 30 November 2025.

²⁶ <https://www.ecns.cn/cns-wire/2025-06-25/detail-ihestqvx5320134.shtml>, accessed 30 November 2025.

²⁷ <https://deadline.com/2025/04/micro-drama-apps-asia-150m-active-users-omdia-report-1236358305/>, accessed 30 November 2025.

²⁸ <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202511/15/WS691866baa310d6866eb29b29.html>, accessed 30 November 2025.

²⁹ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202311/1302520.shtml>, accessed 30 November 2025.

China's Cultural Output: Music and Skai Isyourgod

15. In 2025, a Gen-Z rapper from Guangdong became the most viral Chinese singer in the world, at least according to Spotify, where his monthly listener count exceeded 4 million³⁰ – surpassing Jay Chou's records of 2.9 million.³¹ The rise of Skai Isyourgod began when his 2024 album *Stacks from All Sides* went viral on Douyin, then spread globally through TikTok and Instagram, putting him on the global stage. His popularity has since extended to live shows: he completed his first European tour in September 2025³² and embarked on his first North American tour in November.³³
16. Skai Isyourgod's international fans often do not understand a word he is saying, making his global fame even more remarkable. His music blends Memphis rap, a style familiar to global audiences, with Cantonese culture, making it accessible to non-Chinese speakers. As many in his YouTube's comment sections openly admit: "Understanding 0%. Vibing 100%."³⁴ Skai Isyourgod's song "Stacks from All Sides" even created the TikTok meme "sushi don't lie", after non-Chinese speakers misheard the lyric *ziqu donglai*, which actually means "purple air comes from the east", a traditional symbol of good fortune.³⁵ This playful mishearing has only boosted his popularity, as fans now treat it as part of his charm.
17. Yet even without understanding the lyrics, listening to Skai Isyourgod offers meaningful exposure to Chinese linguistic and cultural elements. For example, expressions like

³⁰ <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2025/07/chinese-rappers-turning-hometown-slang-into-chart-toppers/>, accessed 1 December 2025.

³¹ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/showbiz/2025/08/21/remember-the-rapping-cat-tiktok-its-chinese-creator-who-beat-jay-chou-is-set-to-perform-in-kl-and-sabah-from-aug-29-video/188386>, accessed 2 December 2025.

³² <https://www.onionproduction.com/skaip>, accessed 1 December 2025.

³³ <https://asiabloom.com/2025/10/18/skai-isyourgod-announces-first-north-american-tour/>, accessed 1 December 2025.

³⁴ <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2025/07/chinese-rappers-turning-hometown-slang-into-chart-toppers/>, accessed 2 December 2025.

³⁵ Ibid.

“God bless you with mountains of gold and silver. God teach you not to interrupt a fight between a tiger and a dragon” echo traditional Chinese sayings about fortune and the dramatic world of “*jianghu* rivalries”,³⁶ carrying a sense of mystery and adventure. Such imagery may tap into Western audiences’ long-held curiosity about the East, potentially drawing them toward a deeper interest in Chinese culture.

18. In the comment section of one of Skai Isyourgod’s videos, a viewer wrote: “A flourishing art scene and artistic pursuit usually doesn’t thrive well in a country that stifles free speech... but every once in a while, gems like this pop out...”³⁷ A comment like this reflects a genuine surprise at seeing creative expression emerge from China, challenging some Western assumptions about the country as a rigid, authoritarian state. While Skai Isyourgod may not reshape political perceptions of China, his music reveals a more vibrant, dynamic side of China to global audiences.

The #ChinaTravel Phenomenon: IShowSpeed

19. In late 2023, China began significantly relaxing its visa policies to revive its tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁸ By late 2025, China had established mutual visa exemption agreements with 25 countries. For many other countries, including the United States, foreigners can enjoy a “240-hour” visa-free transit stay.³⁹ The impact has been substantial: in 2024, a total of 20.1 million foreign travellers gained visa-free entry, surging by 112% from the previous year,⁴⁰ and in the third quarter 2025, visa-free arrivals increased another 48.3% year-on-year.⁴¹ The visa-visa transit policy gives

³⁶ In Chinese *wuxia* tradition, *jianghu* (literally “rivers and lakes”) refers to a world of martial artists, wandering swordsmen, and secret societies operating outside official authority. *Jianghu* rivalries describes the conflicts within this realm, often fuelled by honour and revenge.

³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yupEwQ6qCd0>, accessed 6 December 2025.

³⁸ https://www.gov.cn/lianbo/bumen/202311/content_6915808.htm, accessed 6 December 2025.

³⁹ <https://www.nia.gov.cn/n741440/n741577/c1731205/content.html>, accessed 6 December 2025.

⁴⁰ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3294698/china-welcomed-20-million-visa-free-visitors-2024-more-tourism-incentives-way>, accessed 6 December 2025.

⁴¹ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202510/1345791.shtml>, accessed 6 December 2025.

foreign visitors ample time to explore different cities in China, paving the way for a new wave of travellers, including social media influencers whose live-streamed content would offer their global audiences an unfiltered look at China.

20. Among these visitors, American YouTuber Darren Watkins Jr., known online as IShowSpeed, has attracted the most attention. With nearly 46.3 million YouTube subscribers,⁴² the 20-year-old content creator embarked on a multi-city tour of China in late March 2025, live-streaming his adventures to millions of viewers worldwide. He visited Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Chongqing, Shenzhen, and Changsha, with his Chongqing livestream alone drawing 9.6 million viewers. His unscripted broadcasts showcased not only Chinese culture, but also China's technological advancements in everyday settings: in Shenzhen, he experienced drone-delivered food and took a flight in an eVTOL (electric vertical take-off and landing) aircraft.⁴³
21. Such an image of China challenges many Western audiences' long-held perceptions of the country, which, in much of the Western media, is portrayed as a repressive autocracy with human rights issues. But when the focus shifts from politics to everyday life, such as high-speed rail and ubiquitous internet access,⁴⁴ China becomes much easier to appreciate. For instance, in the comment section of IShowSpeed's Chongqing tour video, one viewer wrote, "Speed went to the future (2077)...", while another said, "This is the only country in the world where you can take a long walk underground and still have internet. Damn, China is built different!"⁴⁵

⁴² <https://www.youtube.com/@IShowSpeed/search?query=China>, accessed 7 December 2025.

⁴³ This is a battery-powered aircraft capable of vertical take-off and landing, and it is often referred to as "flying taxi".

⁴⁴ <https://english.cctv.com/2025/04/05/ARTIjTt0sOnGAh7vf1ZFXaIc250405.shtml>, accessed 7 December 2025.

⁴⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtIID6uxwwk&t=1s>, accessed 7 December 2025.

22. Some have speculated that the Chinese government paid IShowSpeed to make the trip, but his team has denied this claim.⁴⁶ In fact, traveling to China had already become trendy in mid-2023, with many lesser-known influencers visiting China and documenting their experiences. According to TikTok’s data analytics, the tag #chinatravel has grown steadily more popular since early 2023, when the country began relaxing its visa policies.⁴⁷ This suggests that the China travel trend is more likely a genuine market-driven phenomenon.
23. The virality of #chinatravel indicates that social media, especially short-video platforms, provides a new way to showcase a country’s image. Before the rise of these platforms, traditional media and corporations dominated agenda setting, but social media has enabled ordinary people to express their own perspectives. As a result, the long-held negative image of China shaped by Western media is being reconsidered. Through short videos, a performance-based form of public diplomacy – “see what I have experienced” – becomes easier to practise.

Consumer Trends: Pop Mart and Labubu

24. For decades, East Asian pop culture trends have largely flowed from Japan and South Korea. Japan gave the world Hello Kitty, Pokémon, and the broader “kawaii” aesthetic that defines cute merchandise globally. South Korea’s Hallyu wave brought K-pop, K-dramas, and K-beauty to international audiences, turning Korean cultural exports into a multi-billion-dollar industry.⁴⁸ China, despite its economic rise, remained largely absent from this cultural trendsetting – until now. For the first time, a Chinese brand has captured the imagination of young consumers worldwide: Pop Mart and its iconic character Labubu.

⁴⁶ <https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/a/cmplxtara-mahadevan/ishowspeed-team-denies-chinese-government-paying-streaming-tour>, accessed 7 December 2025.

⁴⁷ <https://ads.tiktok.com/business/creativecenter/hashtag/chinatravel/pc/en?countryCode=SG&period=7>, accessed 8 December 2025.

⁴⁸ <https://tradecouncil.org/south-korea-leverages-cultural-exports-for-economic-growth/>, accessed 9 December 2025.

25. Labubu is an elf-like plush toy with pointed ears, a toothy grin, and a scruffy appearance. It was an illustrated character created by Hong Kong artist Kasing Lung in 2015 and later turned into a toy when Chinese company Pop Mart partnered with Lung in 2019. The toy gained explosive global popularity in April 2024 after Lisa, the K-pop star from Blackpink, was spotted with a Labubu keychain on her bag. Since then, celebrities like Rihanna and Lady Gaga have been seen with the dolls, making them a global fashion trend.⁴⁹ According to an insider interviewed by the author, Pop Mart did not pay any celebrities for endorsements because the cost would have been too high. As a result, the virality of Labubu is a market-driven phenomenon.
26. Pop Mart's overseas revenue has increased sharply over the years. In 2024, this reached 5.07 billion *renminbi* (RMB), up 375.2% from 2023.⁵⁰ The projected 2025 overseas revenue is RMB 13.1 billion, more than doubling that of the previous year.⁵¹ The fastest-growing overseas markets for Pop Mart are in the Americas, especially the United States. In the first half of 2025, revenue in the Americas increased by 1,142.3%.⁵² This was followed by Europe, where first-quarter revenue grew by 600%,⁵³ and Asia-Pacific, where first-half revenue rose by 257.8%.⁵⁴ Notably, the overseas market accounted for about 40% of Pop Mart's total revenue in the first half of 2025.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/fashion/celebrity-style/article/3322360/celebrity-labubu-lovers-bts-v-lady-gaga-blackpinks-lisa-and-dua-lipa-are-all-fans>, accessed 9 December 2025.

⁵⁰ <https://kr-asia.com/pop-marts-global-push-pays-off-as-revenue-doubles-in-2024>, accessed 9 December 2025.

⁵¹ <https://www.spglobal.com/market-intelligence/en/news-insights/research/pop-mart-s-viral-collectibles-to-fuel-overseas-revenue-surge>, accessed 9 December 2025.

⁵² <https://technode.com/2025/08/21/pop-mart-posts-strong-h1-2025-results-focuses-on-us-market/#>, accessed 9 December 2025.

⁵³ https://www.moomoo.com/news/post/51911681/europe-and-america-also-exploded-pop-mart-s-q1-revenue?level=1&data_ticket=1765264733285537, accessed 9 December 2025.

⁵⁴ <https://equalocean.com/news/2025082221636#>, accessed 9 December 2025.

⁵⁵ https://prod-out-res.popmart.com/cms/INTERIM_RESULTS_ANNOUNCEMENT_FOR_THE_SIX_MONTHS_ENDED_30_JUNE_2025_c6a7290528.pdf, accessed 9 December 2025.

27. Most Labubu buyers are young people aged 25 to 34, who carry the plush toy everywhere,⁵⁶ hanging it on their keychains or bags. What makes it so appealing? Labubu embodies what the Japanese call *kimo-kawaii* or ugly-cute.⁵⁷ With its sharp teeth and mischievous expression, Labubu defies the polished standards of conventional cuteness, appealing to younger consumers who seek a playful rebellion.⁵⁸
28. This marks the first time China has set a popular fashion trend of this scale, and it is considered a successful cultural export that represents China's soft power. Although overseas consumers may not immediately recognise Labubu as a Chinese brand due to its lack of obvious Chinese cultural elements, they will increasingly encounter Pop Mart's Chinese identity as the brand expands globally. This represents a subtle but significant shift: young people around the world are now associating "cool" with a product originating from China, a country many once pictured as authoritarian, rigid, and uncool.
29. Labubu may also reshape perceptions of "Made in China". For decades, this label was associated with cheap utility products, rather than premium emotional-value products. When young consumers willingly pay premium prices for a Chinese-designed plush toy and proudly display it on their bags, that old stereotype begins to crack. From electric vehicles to DeepSeek to a plush toy with sharp teeth, Chinese products are rewriting the "Made in China" narrative.

What "Cool China" Reveals

30. The cases examined in this brief show a coherent phenomenon: the emergence of a "cool China" narrative that is reshaping perceptions of the country, particularly among younger generations. Those "cool China" cases share common features: they are all

⁵⁶ <https://www.demandsage.com/labubu-statistics>, accessed 9 December 2025.

⁵⁷ <https://www.scmp.com/postmag/culture/article/3321861/what-makes-labubu-so-lovable-psychology-behind-ugly-cute-appeal>, accessed 9 December 2025.

⁵⁸ <https://www.prestigeonline.com/sg/lifestyle/culture-plus-entertainment/labubu-trend-pop-mart-toy-craze-2025/>, accessed 9 December 2025.

bottom-up, market-driven, and rooted in lived experiences, which is different from traditional top-down public diplomacy led by governments and institutions. Ultimately, it is the short-video platforms that are driving this shift.

31. Such platforms have decentralised the production and spread of national images. In traditional public diplomacy, the main actors were mostly large institutions such as governments, state media, and multinational corporations. Now, individual creators are helping to shape China's image abroad. IShowSpeed is a 20-year-old streamer whose broadcasts have reached nearly 10 million viewers; Skai Isyourgod gained influence through TikTok and Douyin without any marketing support. The global success of *Black Myth: Wukong* grew through thousands of gaming streamers, and Labubu's popularity came more from user-generated videos than from Pop Mart's official advertising. This shift from institutional to individual communicators gives "Cool China" content an authenticity that official messaging cannot match.
32. Social media platforms have also disrupted traditional patterns of agenda-setting. Before their rise, mainstream media organisations largely controlled how countries were portrayed internationally. Now, a single YouTube livestream can reach millions of viewers with content. The #chinatravel trend on TikTok exemplifies this shift: ordinary travellers and influencers, not journalists or diplomats, are now producing and sharing their own portrayals of China.
33. What makes "Cool China" distinctive is the nature of its appeal. Traditional soft power, particularly that of the United States, relies heavily on political values and ideology. "Cool China" operates differently: these cultural products do not promote China's political system, but offer compelling experiences. The implicit message is not "China's system is superior" but "look at what China can produce and offer" – a pragmatic approach. To some degree, this challenges Joseph Nye's classic framework, which emphasises culture, political values, and foreign policy as the foundations of soft power. By these criteria, China has long faced structural disadvantages. For the first time since the Cold War, an authoritarian country is becoming increasingly likable to global audiences, not by defending its political model but by demonstrating what it can deliver.

34. However, the limitations of “Cool China” also deserve consideration. Cultural consumption does not necessarily translate into political sympathy: a teenager may spend hundreds of hours in *Genshin Impact* while still holding critical views of China’s policies toward Xinjiang or Taiwan. There is also the question of sustainability, as “Cool China” currently rests on a set of specific hits, and cultural industries are unpredictable. This approach may win consumers, but whether it can cultivate the deeper affinity that shapes political attitudes remains an open question. “Cool China” may prove to be a valuable complement to, but not a substitute for, the harder work of addressing the political concerns that continue to shape China’s global reputation.

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