THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT AND THE CULTURAL INDUSTRY: CHINA'S EFFORTS IN STRENGTHENING SOFT POWER

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF
POLITICAL SCIENCE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY
ACADEMIC YEAR 2022

THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

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ENTITLED

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was approved as partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Political Science in International Relations
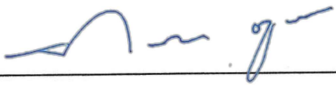
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Thesis Title	THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT AND THE CULTURAL INDUSTRY: CHINA'S EFFORTS IN STRENGTHENING SOFT POWER
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Academic Year	2022

ABSTRACT

China came to value soft power as a means to influence positive international public opinion toward China and to improve its national image. Regarding culture as a significant soft power resource, in recent years, China has made numerous efforts to popularise Chinese culture, one of which is through the "going out" initiative. Aiming to disseminate China's voice to the world, films and TV series represent key cultural products that help communicate with foreign audiences. With the increasing visibility of Chinese films and TV series in the international market, this research examines the Chinese government's role in promoting the cultural industry, particularly movies and television/online series, as a way to boost China's soft power. It also analyses the messages China aims to convey through films and dramas to see its attempt to build China's image. In so doing, the research adopts soft power as a framework to answer the research question: How does China promote its entertainment industry to expand its international influences?

The thesis argues that the Chinese government plays a significant role in reforming its cultural industry by privatising the entertainment industry and facilitating the production and distribution of films and TV dramas abroad, so as to enhance competitiveness in the international market. The term "cultural industry" was featured in the 11th Five-Year Plan as a vital element of the country's economic policy. This

transformation allows entertainment companies to operate using a more competitive business model, by which they must create profitable products. The regulations and controls have also been reduced, leading to a dynamic change and diversification in the contents of online dramas, to the extent that online homosexual novels were adapted into live-action series. Accordingly, such series can attract more audiences, resulting in increased popularity internationally. This became possible because of the government's ambition to digitalise China, including digital media platforms. With the launch of the Internet Plus initiative, online streaming technologies and platforms have become significant distribution channels for Chinese entertainment media.

However, China's soft power is not only limited to the international public; thus, films and dramas serve two targeted groups, Chinese and international audiences. Therefore, the government maintains its control over the contents of certain entertainment products, especially films shown in movie theatres. The messages embedded in movies and dramas rotate around nationalism to win the CPC legitimacy from domestic audiences. Also, they represent narratives that are in line with China's foreign policies, such as Peaceful Rise and Harmonious World, to portray China's positive side and influence the international viewers' opinion. Such control over the content of entertainment media underlies China's paradox of soft power. On the one hand, the party views film and dramas as tools to infuse socialist values and to safeguard the country's ideology at home; on the other hand, China tries to influence global public opinion through entertainment shows which are known to be heavily controlled by the authorities, thus undermining their credibility.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Symbols/Abbreviations	Terms
BL	Boy's Love
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CFG	China Film Group
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
NRTA	National Radio and Television Administration

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

The world is witnessing changes in several areas, and the contemporary global order is facing political and economic challenges. Amid these challenges, world leaders cannot solely adhere to the traditional tool of carrot and stick to gain what they want; thus, a new way of diplomacy with a more tender approach is required to make one country attractive to the world. Joseph Nye, the American political scientist, has introduced the term soft power—the power which rests upon political values, culture, and foreign policy—as an alternative means to conquer people's hearts and minds. Soft power was first introduced to China in the early 1990s by Wang Huning, a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and was well-received by the Chinese authorities and scholars (Keane, 2013; Glaser & Murphy, 2009). Chinese presidents recognised that soft power, particularly Chinese culture, can help promote a favourable image of China and potentially become a driving force of Chinese foreign policy, thus putting considerable effort into building China's soft power.

In the past decade, people may think about or come across many Korean, Japanese or western movies or TV plays when talking about entertainment media or turning on a television in their living room, but few come from China. People may only think about Chinese shows when talking about period dramas. However, nowadays, when talking about China's films and series, there are not just about martial arts and costume shows. Viewers are fascinated with more diversified genres, ranging from traditional Chinese culture, modern life of Chinese people, family drama, action-adventure, suspense-crime, sci-fi and live adaptations of Boy's Love (BL) novels and higher production standards from Chinese domestic movies and series. The 2010s witnessed the beginning of Chinese entertainment entry into international markets through various channels, especially online platforms. More Chinese films and TV series have become more visible to international viewers owing to the changing model from traditional media to digital media. Over-the-top (OTT) media services play a huge

part in exporting Chinese shows overseas, for example a launch of Tencent's video streaming service WeTV which focuses on broadcasting the original Chinese content from Tencent Penguin Pictures; an international version of Baidu's iQiyi online application. Besides those online media, Chinese entertainment companies also expanded their investment abroad, including Dalian Wanda Group's acquisition of AMC cinema chain in the US, making Wanda Group the largest theatre operator in the United States.

In the past years, Chinese shows have appeared on international screens and run away with considerable success, e.g. the BL adaptation '*The Untamed*' which was translated into 11 different languages and broadcast via international TV channels. The Chinese film '*The Wandering Earth*' is another example of China's film industry's accomplishment. Adapted from a novel by Hugo award-winning Liu Cixin and produced by China Film Group Corporation, the movie became China's second highest-grossing film and the third biggest global release of 2019 behind only Marvel Studios, Endgame and Captain Marvel.

In this connection, with the big move of Chinese entertainment entering more and more into an international market, it is significant to examine the role of the Chinese government and its support to the industry in stepping up the use of soft power through entertainment media to project and promote its nation image to the international audiences as well as to support its economic growth since China is now taking a big move in its cultural diplomacy.

1.2 Research objectives

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

1.3 Research question

The question to be addressed in this thesis is as follows: during the Xi Jinping's government, how does China step up the use of its entertainment industry to expand its international influences?

1.4 Hypothesis

The Chinese government promotes its entertainment industry, particularly films and TV series, as an instrument to project a positive image of China to international audiences and domestically boost the CPC's legitimacy.

1.5 Research 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 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. This research regards Chinese entertainment goods, particularly films and TV/online series as a cultural instrument to communicate with the world, aiming to build China's favourable reputation. The research uses the concept of soft power to analyse the message behind the selected case studies to understand the images that China aims to portray, which will have an impact on the country's reputation. The data will also be supplemented by secondary data, including academic journals, reports, and books.

The case study selection is considered based on the following criteria:

— Be a Chinese-made film/series and not co-produced with foreign partner(s);

— Do well on the Box Office record (selected from Top Lifetime Grosses movies in Box Office Mojo record) or have a high rating/view on the platform;

— Embody official ideologies promoted by the state or reflect the government's domestic and foreign policy

The movies and dramas selected as case study are as follows:

— Wolf Warrior II (Wu, 2017)
— The Wandering Earth (Gwo, 2019)
— Chinese Doctor (Lau, 2021)
— You are my glory (Zhi, 2021)
— The Untamed (Cheng & Lam, 2019)

It is noted that due to the situation of COVID-19 outbreak worldwide, which has led to the closure of movie theatres in various countries, the box office record of the movie Chinese Doctor does not follow the criteria. However, the film is purposefully selected because it is interesting to analyse messages China wants to convey to audiences and how China tries to repel the accusation of being the virus's origin.

1.6 Theoretical framework

This research employs soft power as a theoretical framework, aiming to acquire a better understanding of the motivation behind China's massive investment in its soft power enterprise.

Soft power, the concept coined by Joseph Nye, refers to the ability to shape the preferences of others and obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment. A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries admiring its values, emulating its example, and aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness want to follow it (Nye, 2005, p. 5). In other words, Nye proposes that the ability to exert influence over others and build preferences are associated with intangible assets, such as an attractive personality, culture, political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority. Soft power is more than just persuasion or the ability to move people by argument; it is also the ability to attract (Nye, 2008). Accordingly, a country's soft power rests on three resources, namely culture, political values, and foreign policies.

To elaborate more on cultural resources, Nye (2005) defines culture as a set of values and practices that create meaning for society. Culture can be distinguished into high cultures, such as literature, art, and education, and popular culture, which focuses on mass entertainment. Nye explains that when a country's culture includes universal values and policies which promote values and interests that others share, it increases the probability of obtaining its desired outcomes because of the relationships of attraction and duty it creates. If a country can make its value admirable to the extent that other countries are willing to adopt such value, then it may obtain preference in world politics (Nye, 2004). Ang, Isar and Mar (2015) similarly defined "culture" as a thing, a discrete entity, consisting of content – images, ideas and values – that is readily presentable. Importantly, Nye pointes out the government should not take full and direct control of its cultural products and creativities; otherwise, it will undercut the country's soft power attractiveness. He argues that the absence of policies of control itself is a source of attraction (Nye, 2005, p. 17). Hollywood is an example of a private actor which develops its own soft power and helps reinforce the US official foreign policy goals. Culture can become an influential power tool to extend influence beyond words, actions and presence (Jacob, 2017). Especially in the digital age, where people can access information and content quickly and easily, it is even more essential to use culture to promote a country's attractiveness.

Popular culture's position in the political realm is indivisible, as it has become one of the essential tools for one country's narrative. In other words, popular culture is a site where power, ideology, identity and politics of affection and emotion are constituted, produced and materialised, thus guiding individual perception (Grayson et al., 2009). Several attempts in blending world politics into popular culture can be observed in films; for example, the use of international conflicts/events as a backdrop of the film. The war-on-terror theme of Hollywood blockbusters is the case in point. Similarly, Nye states that popular entertainment often contains subliminal images and messages about individualism, consumer choice, and other values that have important political effects (Nye, 2005, p. 46). He emphasises the case of Hollywood films which appeal to foreign people with an image of a rich and powerful country and American lifestyles. Nevertheless, he argues that making one's culture attractive to others and producing soft power depends on the context and is most likely to yield preferred

outcomes when cultures are somewhat similar rather than widely dissimilar (p. 15). Furthermore, popular culture can also help one country to achieve its foreign policy goals (one of the three soft power resources). This argument can be explained through the exportation of American popular culture after the World War II and the Cold War period, which positively contributed to the democratisation of European countries. The ideas transmitted through those American commercial popular culture help rejuvenate and revitalise the European postwar cultures with elementary connotations of freedom, casualness, vitality, liberality, and modernity (p. 49).

According to Nye (2005), government participation in soft power building is not to the same degree as hard power does (p. 14). However, there is still some room for the government to participate; for example, a government can take part in improving public diplomacy or industries/sectors related to soft power building. Nye uses the case of Hollywood movies as an example of a soft power resource created by private actors and often works at cross-purposes to official government policy (p. 15).

Through the lens of soft power, this research focuses on films and TV/online series—one type of popular culture— which serve as storytelling instruments that create an imaginary vision of a particular country, location, community and country's cultures and values through motion pictures. The research explores how Chinese entertainment media convey China's foreign policy goals and export Chinese culture and values to its target audiences and how the government participate in this image-building process to shape other countries' opinions.

1.7 Literature review

The concept of soft power is well accepted by the Chinese government and has become mandatory in China's national policy statement and official documents. However, China's definition of "soft power" goes beyond what Joseph Nye has coined.

Kurlantzick (2007) explains in his book *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* that China regards soft power as anything outside of the military and security realm, including not only popular culture and public diplomacy but also more coercive economic and diplomatic levers such as aid, investment and participation in multilateral organisations. By examining the case of

how the US successfully deployed its soft power through radio broadcasting and film since the Cold War period, he argues that China could use this kind of soft power to strengthen its global power (Kurlantzick, 2007). In addition, he points out that since the notion of 'Peaceful Rise' became one of China's core foreign policies, China has been utilising Chinese culture, arts and language as tools for its cultural diplomacy. Plus, the effort to increase cultural exchange with other countries by the government can be observed through several events; for example, in the case of Thailand, a trip to China conducted for people from every circle of Thai society, such as politicians, artists, academics, aiming to promote Chinese culture and language studies.

To explain the characteristic of Chinese soft power that goes beyond Nye's, according to Michael Barr, the objectives of Beijing's soft power are not limited to international image building; instead, its deployment is as critical at home and abroad (Barr, 2011). To support this argument, Barr uses President Hu's speech at the 17th National Congress of the CPC regarding China's enhancement of cultural industry as a part of soft power, stating that domestically China tries to use soft power to promote national cohesion and creativity; while internationally, soft power is for strengthening China's competitiveness and influence within the international arena (Barr, 2011). Therefore, China's soft power possesses the interrelationship between domestic and international concerns. To complement Barr's point of view, Hong and Liu point out that the expansion of soft power through popular cultures, such as entertainment media, contributes to the acquisition of global discourse power, the consolidation of cultural identity, the strengthening of nationalist sentiment and the reconfiguration of the nation in the era of globalisation (Hong & Liu, 2015).

Owing to globalisation and international competition in the cultural soft power, Beijing has recognised the strategic significance of the cultural industry that it is not just an economic and cultural issue but also a political issue as it has a direct bearing on national security and sovereignty (Jiang, Li, Xu, & Yang, 2019). Hence, the development of the cultural industry is mentioned in the CPC's Five-Year Plans, emphasising the attempt to strengthen China's soft power. Rawnsley (2015) discusses that the world can no longer agree with what Margaret Thatcher said in 2002 that China exports television, not ideas. However, China has become a world factory and continuously sold its socialist value, thus becoming increasingly noticeable worldwide.

China currently acquires more international presence than it has in the past; for example, in terms of popular culture, people are certainly more familiar with China as it becomes more visible on television screens and in movie theatres. According to Flew (2016), popular culture, such as entertainment media, has been appointed as a strategy to enhance international influence and build cultural soft power. Flew argues that entertainment media has great potential to enhance China's international influence and drive its economic growth as the industry is less controlled than news and information media and more open to private capital investment.

However, despite the ambition to export more popular culture, scholars argue that the government is still struggling with the tensions between the objectives of appealing to foreign audiences, ensuring that what is being presented does not deviate from the party line, and market competition (Li & Song, 2015; Edney, 2016). Despite an endeavour to internationalise China's culture abroad, Hong and Liu argue that, on the one hand, the government has allowed entertainment media to be driven by the audience and market-oriented to enhance its competitiveness and presence abroad. However, on the other hand, Beijing still takes a huge part in taking control of the media content to reinforce the CPC's ideology and will in no way terminate its dominance (Hong & Liu, 2015). This poses an effect on the credibility of Chinese soft power projection.

Conclusively, from the existing literature, it can be deduced that the Chinese government has acknowledged the effectiveness of cultural export to enhance and generate a favourable reputation. However, the characteristic of Chinese soft power, which aims to serve both domestically and internationally, also leads to a conflict between political and economic concerns in the cultural industry. Thus, by studying the role of the government and how they step up the use of soft power as well as how they deal with such contradiction, this research will be able to provide an in-depth answer to how the Chinese government takes part in strengthening the use of its cultural industry particularly entertainment media to foster China's soft power objectives.

CHAPTER 2
CHINA'S ENDEAVOUR ON SOFT POWER

After years of reform and opening up since 1978, which led to rapid economic growth and deep integration into the global system, some Western countries have criticised China for being a threat to the international system. The rise of China has been regarded as a concern by some countries that are influenced by the realist school of thought, which sees an emerging-rising power as a threat seeking to expand its national interest (Palit, 2017). China is well aware of such criticism and realises the need to change Western perception, thus coming up with foreign policies and diplomacy that portray China as a peace-loving, cooperative and people-based nation. Realising that to become a significant power and uplift its peoples' well-being, China must ameliorate its negative reputation by showing the world that it is a peaceful nation that aims to co-exist harmoniously with other nations. Such ambitions were well reflected in the speech of former President Hu Jintao:

> the fundamental task and basic goal of China's diplomatic work at present and a certain period in the years to come is to strive for a peaceful and stable international environment, a good-neighbourly and friendly surrounding environment, an environment for equal and mutually beneficial cooperation, and an objective and friendly publicity environment. ("Chinese President Calls,", 2004)

Why is a good reputation important? Robert Jervis highlighted in his work titled *The Logic of Images in International Relations* that on the world stage, the desired image and favourable reputation of one country can often be of greater use than a significant increment of military and economic power (Jervis, 1970, p. 6). In other words, instead of coercing one state to achieve the goals, projecting or portraying a positive and friendly image to conquer hearts and support from other countries can gain more profitable results than using force. For this reason, many countries invest tremendous money and effort in building their international image to produce "Soft Power".

2.1 China's policy on soft power

The notion of soft power is not new to Chinese leaders. It has been recognised as a national strategy and has become mandatory in Chinese foreign policy. China's interest in soft power can be traced back to the post-Tiananmen period in the mid-1990s when the Chinese government decided to integrate more with the international community and work on its global image (Palit, 2017). There are several occasions when Chinese leaders addressed the notion of soft power. For instance, in January 2006, at the Central Foreign Affairs Leadership Group meeting, Hu Jintao emphasised that the increase in the nation's international status and influence would have to be demonstrated in hard power such as the economy, science and technology, and defence, as well as in soft power, particularly culture. On July 2007, the CPPCC[1] Chairman and member of the CPC Politburo Standing Committee, Jia Qinglin urged Chinese officials to "deeply understand the importance of national soft power with cultural construction as the main task, to meet domestic demands and enhance China's competitiveness in the international arena" (as cited in Li, 2008).

The term soft power officially entered the Chinese political lexicon when former President Hu Jintao delivered a speech at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2007. In his speech which signalled the change in the direction of cultural policy, he stated:

> Culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength. We must enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests (…) We must deepen cultural restructuring and improve the policies for supporting non-profit cultural programs, developing the cultural industry and encouraging cultural innovation (…) We must vigorously develop the cultural industry, (…) and enhance the industry's international competitiveness. (Hu, 2007)

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[1] The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference

Under the administration of President Xi Jinping, China has intensified its attention on soft power in order to gain national interest. Since taking office in 2012, his ambition to strengthen Chinese soft power can be observed on several occasions. In 2014 at a group study session of members of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, Xi 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). He further stressed the need to increase China's soft power by commenting:

> To strengthen China's soft power, the country needs to build its capacity in international communication, construct a communication system, better use the new media and increase the creativity, appeal and credibility of China's publicity (…) The stories of China should be well told, voices of China well spread, and characteristics of China well explained. (Xi, 2014)

Moreover, the attempt to enhance the nation's soft power is featured in the country's Five-Year Plan, emphasising the development of cultural soft power and cultural industry. The 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015) stated the need to improve China's cultural industry so as to become one of the backbone industries of the nation. The Plan also included a massive expansion of traditional and popular cultural products, including media, publishing, movies, animations, television series and performance sectors for export.

Continuing through to the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020) written under Xi Jinping's administration, the President vowed to increase China's soft power by increasing support for cultural development and making the cultural industry a pillar of China's national economy by 2020. According to the 14th Five-Year Plan, formally adopted on March 2021, China will continue strengthening its efforts to develop cultural industries and enhance its soft power. Moreover, the government vowed to "establish and improve the incentive mechanism and evaluation system for the conception, production, dissemination, guidance, and promotion of cultural products" and to "strengthen cultural exchanges with foreign countries and multi-level dialogue with global civilisations, innovate and promote international communication to share

China's stories, spread China's voice, and promote people-to-people connectivity through both online and offline channels" ("Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan," 2021).

Chinese leaders perceived soft power as a tool for defensive purposes, including cultivating a better image of China to present to the outside world, correcting foreign misperceptions of China and fending off unwelcome Western cultural and political inroads into China (Li, 2008). Chinese scholars argued that as China expanded its national power and assumed a more significant role on the international stage, China may aim to promote the value of socialism with Chinese characteristics as an alternative to Western values and seek to promote China's development model assertively (Glaser & Murphy, 2009).

According to Li (2008), the Chinese government initiated policies that strived to ensure a peaceful and stable international environment, a neighbourly and friendly environment in surrounding regions, a cooperative environment based on equality and mutual benefits, and an objective and friendly media environment. Accordingly, Chinese traditional values, such as Confucian values, are repackaged and represented in the concepts of 'Peaceful Rise' (*heping jueqi*), 'Peaceful Development' (*heping fazhan*) and 'Harmonious World' (*hexie shijie*), aiming to give the impression that China's foreign policy is benign (Glaser & Murphy, 2009; Du, 2017).

The attempt to blend Chinese ideology into its foreign policies are reflected in China's language choices. In Scott's study on China's choice of language used in its diplomacy, he argues that the terms 'Harmonious World', 'Peaceful Rise', And 'Peace Development' themselves serve as a soft power linguistic tool offered by China as the opposite to the International Relations theory of offensive realism and other inevitable conflicts between China as a rising power and the US as the established power (Scott, 2012). Zheng Bijian shares the same view by discussing that China's peaceful rise is the most favourable counterblow to the theory of the "China Threat" ("China to Be Mainstay", 2004). In Zheng's view, the terms 'Peaceful Rise' and 'Peaceful Development' were coined because "some international communities are also concerned about the potential threat of the rise of China partially because of the ideological bias that has "demonised" China. Accordingly, China needs to build up the image of being both peaceful and civilised in its adhering to the road of peaceful development (Zheng, 2006).

The 'Harmonious World' discourse, wheeled out during Hu Jintao, has become one of the most popular lexicons for discussing Beijing's ideal of international order in the age of China's rise (Sheng, 2008). Domestically, China claims to build a harmonious society while it concurrently vows to build a harmonious world internationally. The concept of a harmonious world is indeed a strategy deployed to enhance China's foreign cultural strategy and improve soft power (Scott, 2012). Furthermore, Scott argues that the concept could be seen as another favourable term to deflect criticism of China's global rise.

2.1.1 China's interpretation of soft power

China apparently has a different interpretation and perception in regard to soft power. Unlike Nye's account that soft power should be conducted on a bottom-up basis with less intervention from state agencies and should be mainly played by non-state actors such as the civil society and private cultural industry (Nye, 2005, p. 17), China's approach to soft power tends to be top-down. It is centralised under the guidance of the Communist Party of China (CPC). This control explains why China's soft power tends to be labelled as propaganda from Western perspectives.

Even though the mainstream understanding of soft power among Chinese scholars is mainly based on Nye's framework, the concept discussed among Chinese academics expands broader than what Nye has proposed (Li, 2008; Lai & Lu, 2012; Zheng & Zhang, 2012). In comparison, significant contributions of Nye's soft power framework emphasise a state's foreign policy and international reputation; the concept viewed by Chinese scholars covers both foreign policy and domestic policy (Zheng & Zhang, 2012). In other words, China utilises soft power in two directions: inward and outward (Fliegel & Kriz, 2020). Glaser and Murphy (2009) call it a "soft power with Chinese characteristics".

Such soft power with Chinese characteristics evolved from two major schools of thought (Glaser & Murphy, 2009 ; Fliegel & Kriz, 2020). The first school of thought, or the mainstream, argues that culture is the core of China's soft power. Well embraced by Chinese leaders, which has significantly impacted policymaking, this school believes that China's long historical background and socialist value system enhance the country's cohesion and attractiveness (Fliegel & Kriz, 2020). Wang

Huning argues that culture is the primary source of Chinese soft power. Discussed in his work in 1993, Wang points out that: "if a country has an admirable culture and ideology system, other countries will tend to follow it (…) it does not have to use its hard power which is expensive and less efficient…" (Wang, 1993, as cited in Glaser & Murphy, 2009). The second school focuses on political power and how soft power resources are used instead of focusing only on the role of culture (Glaser & Murphy, 2009). Yan Xuetong, the leading proponent of this school of thought, argues that "a country's power is comprehensive: it is a combination of "soft power" and "hard power". Soft power refers to the ability to politically mobilise a nation, both internally and externally." (Yan, 2006). Accordingly, China's soft power depends on the government's capability in governance, including a good legal system, ideology and moral principles, and the ability to solve problems such as unequal regional development, corruption and income disparities (Yan, 2006 ; Fliegel & Kriz, 2020).

The two-way soft power projection or the duality of Chinese soft power can clearly be seen in the government's soft power application. China does not focus its soft power building only at the international level through foreign policy, but also at the domestic level on national cohesion, social justice, political reform and anti-corruption, making its governance model attractive to both domestic and international audiences. This reflects a significant departure from Nye's analysis of soft power (Li, 2008). Speaking of China's domestic soft power, Yan (2006) argues that an effort to create soft power in a domestic context, such as dealing with corruption and social problems, is essential as it encompasses two aspects: (1) the ruling party's capability and reaffirming its leading position within the society and (2) a foundation of improving international influence. Fliegel and Kirz (2020) point out that national culture, values and governance must first develop and prove domestically successful until outsiders begin admiring them because it is ultimately a building block that differentiates the country from others. This is the logic behind China's attempt to foster domestic soft power. According to Edney (2014, as cited in Li, 2018), China's soft power links closely to its domestic politics. He explains that China faces a range of existential threats to regime security, including the CPC's legitimacy, criticisms of governmental corruption and territorial sovereignty. As these domestic weaknesses can potentially undermine the CPC's legitimacy, shaping domestic opinions about the ruling party

through soft power may help the CPC solve an internal security predicament by enhancing regime legitimacy and national cohesion.

According to Rawnsley (2012) and Edney (2015), it is important to de-Westernise the understanding of the soft power concept when considering a country with different norms like China, as there are insecurities that underly their soft power strategies, particularly regime security and the CPC legitimacy. President Xi regards domestic soft power as an essential part of the Chinese Dream: the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Fliegel & Kriz, 2020). The "Chinese Dream", which embodies achieving prosperity for the country, the opportunity for people to grow and progress together with the country and a dream for peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit for all nations ("Background: Connotation of Chinese," 2014), is the idea of building national cohesion and creating a nationalist sentiment. Simultaneously, it reflects the socialist value system which China offers to the world as an alternative to Western ideology.

Closely linked with China's domestic soft power is the term 'cultural security', which emerged in China at the end of the 1990s (Keane, 2013, p. 28). Featured in several official statements, the concept has become prominent in China's domestic politics. The cultural component of China's 12th Five-Year Plan states: "Facing increasing global ideological and cultural struggle, it is increasingly urgent to strengthen national cultural capabilities and international competitiveness, to resist the cultural infiltration of foreign hostile forces, and to protect national cultural security" (CPC Central Committee and PRC State Council, 2012, as cited in Edney, 2015). When China entered the World Trade Organisation, scholars complained that Western cultural infiltration into China would make it challenging for the country to maintain cultural independence and to guide public opinion. The CPC has also been concerned that some aspects of foreign soft power, particularly Western-style democratic systems and values, would threaten regime security in China and undermine socialist ideology, values and national cohesion (Edney, 2015). Accordingly, China's cultural security concept involves shielding Chinese culture and values from foreign threats and enhancing the ability of Chinese culture and values to compete for international influence by maintaining their relevance and dynamism (Edney, 2015).

In addition, the concept also links with national security and regime cohesion. Ideology provides the cultural basis for the legitimacy of state power, and national culture is also a source of legitimacy and national cohesion (Han, 2004, as cited in Edney, 2015). There have been some recent research studies which examine the legitimacy of the CPC. One study showed a fundamental shift in the legitimacy debate in China due to the problems caused by economic growth— particularly socioeconomic inequality (Zeng, 2014). Another study conducted by Gilley and Holbig in 2009 stated that 68% of sampled Chinese journal articles about legitimacy took the view that the ruling party's legitimacy was under threat, while 30 per cent claimed the party faced a legitimacy crisis (as cited in Edney, 2015). As China opened up its country and joined the globalised world, the trade-off between the civil rights of citizens and public welfare or economic benefits may not be sufficient to secure the CPC's right to rule in contemporary China. According to Holbig and Gilley (2010), economic performance, nationalism, governance, ideology and culture are essential sources in maintaining the CPC's legitimacy. However, the two scholars argue that the first two sources are vulnerable in varying ways; yet ideology, culture, and governance are more durable. Chinese analysts comment that economic growth may provide a fillip to party legitimacy in a particular period of time; however, it is bound to be exhausted eventually. Economic success undoubtedly has bought about development and prosperity to the country; still, it has also caused negative impacts such as inequalities, environmental degradation, rising people's expectations and shifts in social values. In terms of nationalism, Wan Jun (2003, as cited in Holbig & Gilley, 2010) defines the attempt to build the nationalist sentiment among citizens as a double-edged sword. While nationalism may hold a positive potential for social mobilisation, which could be instrumentalised to overcome a social crisis, it can easily grow out of control and cause a destructive mentality of aggression, especially in a multi-ethnic state like China. Accordingly, there has been a clear shift in emphasis from the economic-nationalistic approach to an ideological institutional approach (Holbig & Gilley, 2010), for example, the emphasis on ideology and collective social values.

In sum, China has carefully analysed American's soft power concept and picked what could be used in and was suitable for the Chinese context (Fliegel & Kriz, 2020). Contrary to Nye's, the Beijing-style soft power is centralised under the

control of the ruling party and targets both domestic and international audiences. With this duality, it is argued that domestically, harmony, equality and patriotism are the ultimate domestic goals of the CPC to maintain social stability (Fliegel & Kriz, 2020); internationally, on the other hand, China aims to influence foreign opinions with an image of a responsible global power and offers the world an alternative socialist value through Its development model.

2.2 China's cultural diplomacy

Despite ongoing debates among scholars on whether one country's culture has the ability to alter the behaviours of another country, culture is still one of the essential tools to influence foreign people in a subtle way, for example the case of US popular culture which attracts people worldwide and represents the American way of life to foreign people outside its soil (Li & Worm, 2010). Even though it takes time to build soft power through the use of culture; however, culture lays a foundation of respect and tolerance by foreign actors, who, over time, may help to shape an international environment conducive to China's growth (Wuthonow, 2008 as cited in Li & Worm, 2011).

The world is currently undergoing a significant change, a change which is defined as "both the momentous consequences of the ongoing development of the world and, more importantly, the historic turning point or a radical shift during world development." (Cui, 2014, as cited in Yang, 2015). China is one of those countries experiencing changes on the world stage with its rapid development. With the daily emerging global trends and challenges faced within the nation, China requires a new way of diplomatic thinking to communicate with its people and the world.

The Chinese government launched the 'Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy', aiming to put forward new ideas, new propositions and new initiatives with distinctive Chinese features and to give clear answers on China's international relations as well as to serve as fundamental guidance for China's foreign policy in the new era (Wang, 2020). At the Inauguration Ceremony of the Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy Studies Centre, Wang Yi, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated that:

Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy carries forward and elevates the fine tradition of the Chinese culture, which embodies a creative transformation and development of traditional Chinese values by drawing extensively from the Chinese culture and enriching it with a new spirit of the times and a commitment to human progress. China's proposal of building a community with a shared future for mankind epitomises a long-cherished Chinese vision of promoting the common good and universal peace. (Wang, 2020)

The objectives of China's diplomacy are to manage international public opinion through external publicity and cultural exchange, to spread the Chinese story to the outside world, and to project a friendly image of China to the world (Aoyama, 2004; Bolewski & Rietig, 2008). China is well aware that its international reputation viewed by the outside world remains mixed. In the West, liberal democratic countries regard China as an unfavourable nation, while under-developed and developing countries perceive China as a good neighbour who does not interfere in their domestic issues. China realises that in the globalisation era, where information flows quickly, a favourable image is required in order to project its power and to be accepted as a global leader. Therefore, during these past decades, it is noticeable that China has continuously developed its soft power through several means, one of which is cultural diplomacy.

One of the primary goals of China's cultural diplomacy is to project a non-threatening and favourable image of China (Lai, 2012). To that end, many Chinese foreign policies uphold the concept which represents Confucian values such as Peaceful Rise, Peaceful Development and Harmonious World to emphasise a non-threatening image as well as to tell the world that China is willing to play an active role in the development, stability, and prosperity in order to establish and preserve a stable and peaceful environment (Bolewski & Rietig, 2008). China's cultural-diplomatic efforts divide into the following categories: first, formal official programmes aiming to improve the international image of China and its cultural influence. These include programmes or policies that guide long-term development and the export of cultural products, seeking to enhance the global influence of the Chinese media and striving to provide a positive perspective of China. Second, international cultural exchange programs and the promotion of cultural exports such as arts, entertainment (i.e. movies,

TV/Web series, and sports), cuisine, and medicine. Third, the promotion of learning the Chinese language and studies (Lai, 2012).

Chinese culture has long been attractive to foreigners, which helps transcends cultures, languages, and national boundaries, especially those whose cultures are different from that of the East. Accordingly, China promotes its unique culture by exporting more dramas or films to the outside world through several channels, such as international film festivals and TV/online distribution. During these decades, China's popular culture, particularly movies and TV/Web series, has slowly gained attention from the global community. Entertainment media has great potential to enhance China's international influence and drive its economic growth since the industry is less controlled than news and information media and more open to private capital investment (Flew, 2016).

As discussed earlier, China's application of soft power has a dual-characteristic where on the one hand, it aims to serve a domestic purpose; and on the other hand, it aims to enhance its reputation abroad. Ondřej (2017) argues that boosting domestic cultural security and global cultural soft power is part of the CPC's broader long-term objectives for improving domestic governance and raising China's international status. He further discusses that the concept of cultural work outlined in Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the National Propaganda and Thought-Work Conference on August 19, 2013 signalled the attempt to intensify and innovate its external and foreign propaganda by creating and accommodating new concepts, categories, and expressions, both domestic and foreign, in order to create more attractive, appealing, proactive, focused, cutting-edge, and in other ways, 'updated' propaganda. According to the speech, Xi promised to cultivate China's cultural excellence and cultural strength in its homeland, aiming to build China into a "socialist cultural power" and to simultaneously raise China's global cultural soft power.

During Xi's era, the CPC outlined its discursive strategy for constructing China's national image. It views culture as the most appropriate communication channel for explaining China's story. Ancient Chinese culture should become a tool for representing China worldwide and explaining China's civilised progress and peaceful development. Moreover, Chinese culture should elucidate the plentiful meanings of the Chinese Dream (Ondřej, 2017). During the 18th National Congress of the Communist

Party of China in 2014, Xi Jinping remarked, "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world.".". Furthermore, Xi called for an increasing "international discursive power" (*guoji huayuquan*) and building an "external discursive system" (*duiwai huayu tixi*). He emphasised that new media should explain China's story, voice, and unique characteristics well, and the discourse targeting international audiences should be more creative, appealing, and credible. Xi also calls for stronger positive propaganda focused on China's history and culture via school education, political studies, historical research, film and television productions, literature, and other channels (Ondřej, 2017).

In January 2017, the General Office of the Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council General Office published the document titled "Suggestions on the Implementation of a Process of Dissemination and Development of the Outstanding Traditional Chinese Culture" to define Chinese culture and the channels for its promotion abroad. Cappelletti discussed that the document has a significant political meaning since it set the agenda for the projection of Chinese culture abroad - something which is not merely a formal and useless government document, but a pragmatic roadmap that all the related departments and actors will need to follow with varying degrees of adherence (Cappelletti, 2017). Under the Suggestions, potential aspects of Chinese cultures are selected, ranging from Chinese traditional culture, modern to popular culture, and the guidelines listed in the document are to be sent to the Chinese officials and actors located in the target countries to make sure that those cultures are in line with what the CPC wished to represent. Accordingly, the aspects of Chinese culture to which foreign audiences will be exposed are thus a set of cultural concepts and patterns emerging from a team of Party cadres, bureaucrats and intellectuals in Beijing who carry on the first selection (issuing guidelines), then by a team of Chinese officials in the target country to make sure that the products align with the local context, conditions and characteristics. The importance of Chinese culture for the projection of Chinese power abroad is underlined in the first sentences of the Suggestions:

> Culture constitutes the blood vessels of the people; it is the very homeland of their spirit. Cultural self-confidence is a fundamental strength, deep-rooted and particularly longstanding. Chinese culture entails unique and sophisticated concepts, adding self-confidence and proudness to the

spiritual inner depths of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation. In building a powerful country with a socialist culture, and enhancing the cultural soft power of the nation, as well as carrying on the great revival of the Chinese nation and of the Chinese Dream, we need to act with timeliness by following these guidelines, in order to develop and disseminate the outstanding Chinese traditional culture. (as cited in Cappelletti, 2017)

Therefore, since the 21st century, cultural diplomacy has become one of the three pillars of China's diplomacy. It is as essential as economic and political diplomacy in China's foreign relations and has become an important part of China's soft power. The cultural values that reach the world through China's cultural diplomacy include harmony, peace, mutual benefit, and win-win cooperation (Cappelletti, 2017).

Since the official pronouncement of the Chinese soft power strategy by former President Hu Jintao at the 17th Congress, embracing culture as one of its core resources, several cultural diplomacy campaigns were launched and supported by the government. Confucius Institute (CI) is an excellent example of China's mega-cultural diplomacy project. It is noticeable that the Chinese government followed the model of cultural diffusion from the West, such as the Goethe-Institutes of Germany, the British Council of the UK and the Alliance Français of France. The CI is an educational institute funded and staffed by the Chinese government. Its primary objective is to introduce the Chinese language and culture; therefore, Confucius Institutes are seen as an institute to diffuse pro-China ideologies and promote China's favourable image globally (Feith, 2014). Despite all controversies, such as academic freedom or subtle advancement of a politicised pro-China worldview, politicians across the globe cannot deny that such efforts to expand the establishment of CI in many regions demonstrate the Chinese government's push for investments in soft power outreach, and that the latter has been an imperative and ongoing campaign of Beijing since the Hu administration (Li, 2018).

After Xi took office in 2012, he called for innovations and new narratives for foreign publicity to further indicate that China's soft power quest is closely associated with media strategies restriction and practices, and refashioning propaganda concepts and methods (Li, 2018). In recent years, it should be mentioned that popular

culture has been gaining more attention among Chinese politicians. On the government level, several works are deployed to promote the country. Since 2013, the Chinese government has produced several videos to communicate and tell China's story to the outside world; in 2013, the 5-minute video titled "How Leaders Are Made" was uploaded to YouTube. President Xi is featured in the video in the form of a cartoon character. The video was ground-breaking in many ways, particularly because it was the first time the Chinese President appeared as a cartoon image in State-endorsed media. The video aims to introduce China's political systems, such as the selection of the Chinese President. By comparing the method of selecting the State's President with the US and the UK, Li points out that the message underlined in this video is that China's President comes from a democratic selection of anyone who is excellent at what they do.

Another example is the music video regarding China's 13th Five-Year Plan named "Shi San Tou", which focuses on its grand strategic guideline of national development. The music video was posted on Xinhua News Agency's Twitter account in October 2015, indicating that the music video's target audience is indeed international. Apart from these two videos representing the notion of 'China rise', the government also launched a series of short-videos named "Following Xi Dada[2]" to tackle the China threat thesis. The series tells the story of Xi's diplomatic visits abroad and attendance at international meetings. Li argues that the "Following Xi Dada" series was made to humanise President Xi as a firm, warm, and affectionate leader, and to tell the world that China will accelerate its harmonious cooperation and co-existence with neighbouring countries and areas. Li concludes that with all the examples, Beijing has been increasingly aware of the output of soft power as well as its efforts to refashion propaganda content and style to better reach targeted audiences. Moreover, Li discusses that recent Chinese propaganda videos deliberately but subtly seek to justify and reinforce the CPC's legitimacy both domestically and internationally, as well as to counter the "China threat" discourse and to humanise national leaders traditionally distanced from the masses. The videos also discard the old-fashioned and

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[2] Xi Dada means Big uncle Xi Jinping.

straightforward teaching modes while turning to new media to embody "soft diplomatic strategies".

CHAPTER 3
THE ROLE OF THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT

3.1 The Chinese government and cultural industry reform

Some scholars hold the view that the efforts to open up its country got China involved in the processes of globalisation and modernisation, which then allowed China to see the competition of diverse cultures of the contemporary world and the moves of some major countries to seek cultural hegemony and cultural infiltration (Jiang et al., 2019, p. xii). Realising that culture can also have a bearing on the political and economic aspects, China recognised the need to develop its cultural sector to become more competitive in the world market, thus leading to the reform of the industry.

China's cultural industry has undergone modernisation to catch up with the globalised world. The industry has gone through three stages of reform: (1) 1978-1992, when cultural reconstruction took place in the wake of the Cultural Revolution; (2) 1993 – 2002, a period where major reforms occurred in all sectors; and (3) 2003 onwards, a period where the cultural industry gradually transfers itself from 'institution' *(shiye)* to 'enterprise' *(chanye)* with the new financing and support model (Keane, 2013). Some scholars called it a period of propelling comprehensive systemic cultural reform forward (Xiang, 2014), and regarded it as a significant breakthrough in an endeavour to develop the cultural sector (Jiang et al., 2019, p. xvii).

The 16th National Congress officially divided the construction of China's cultural industry into non-profit cultural activities provided by the government (i.e. libraries, museums) and cultural activities operated as a business or the cultural industries (i.e. films, publishing, advertising, broadcasting, digital media, design, arts, crafts, and tourism) (Keane, 2013; Shan, 2014). As a consequence, some sectors in China's cultural industry, such as film production, radio and TV station, acquire a dual legal status, meaning that they remain under the guideline of the government but employ entrepreneurial management, which means self-funding or less governmental subsidies (Zhang, 2006; Yang, 2019). According to the data, 93% of the film studios and 93% of the TV producers had been transformed into enterprises (Yang, 2019, p.

21). By separating the cultural sector into public service and commercial purposes, the industry can operate and adjust itself to be suitable and become more competitive in the world market. After the adaptation and with the emergence of the term 'cultural industry' *(wenhua chanye),* the CPC Central Committee and the State Council agreed that the cultural industry should become one of the main pillars of the Chinese national economy since the industry has a potential to become a driving force of China's economy. The government has focused much of its attention on the convergence of technological innovation and cultural creativity; therefore, 'Made in China' is no longer in the mind of the CPC leader, rather 'Created in China'.

China's goal in developing the cultural industry is "to build a modern cultural industry system featuring "balanced structure, wide variety, high technology content, great creativity and competitiveness," by reforming the cultural system and fostering technological innovation" (Jiang et al., 2019, p. xvii). In doing so, the government has launched several policy documents to help support the industry growth, i.e. the Opinion on Trial Work in the Reform of the Cultural system, which formulates measures for distinguishing between the public institution from the industry; the Cultural Industry Promotion Plan which marked the cultural industry as a key element of national economic strategy, Opinion *(yijian)* on guiding support for cultural industry promotion; and the Outline of the Cultural Reform and Development Plan during National 12th Five Year Plan detailing the goals of cultural reform and development by the year 2015.

3.2 Government support for cultural industry

The development of China's cultural industry is a top-down formulation. The major tasks of the government include: (1) formulating and improving policies to develop the key sectors of the cultural industry and to set the direction of cultural production; (2) controlling the development of the industry and cultivating leading cultural enterprises or new business sectors; (3) managing the modern cultural market and expanding international trade in cultural goods; (4) ensuring that healthy products are produced, that the industry is in the right system of values and in line with socialism, and that it facilitates the promotion of socialist cultural and ethical progress; and (5)

promoting the environment for creative business and helping to generate export potential (Xinhua, 2009; Keane & Zhao, 2014; Xiang, 2014; Yang 2019).

In July 2009, the government adopted the Cultural Industry Promotion Plan to promote the development of the cultural industries, with the following objectives: to transform the for-profit cultural institutions into enterprises; to develop better market participants; to inject greater vitality into the cultural industry; and to increase the size of the cultural industry and to make it play a better role in pushing forward economic and social development (Xinhua, 2009). Scholars discuss that the Promotion Plan was an indication that the Chinese government would actively support cultural enterprises to invest in and run businesses both domestically and abroad, as well as participate in cultural activities that contribute to the development of cultural trade (Keane et al., 2021). The Promotion Plan identified eight key cultural sectors, including cultural and creative products, film and television production, publishing, printing and reproduction, advertising, entertainment, conferences and exhibitions, digital content and animations.

China has tremendously invested in building up its cultural industry. China spends more than $10 billion annually on soft power promotion projects (Shambaugh, 2015) and spent approximately $15 billion in 2019 (Xinhua, 2020a). Financial support is one of the key initiatives to encourage investment in the industry. After the official distinction between non-profit cultural programmes and for-profit cultural enterprises, the former continuously receive funding from the government, while the latter must operate in a market-based model. Consequently, several financial support initiatives are launched, and a large budget is allocated to support the industry's growth. A certain amount of budgetary resources is granted to encourage investment in the cultural industry in line with the market economy principles, which provides financial support for all types of cultural enterprises, including direct investment, subsidies, and loans with discounted interest (Yang, 2019, p. 29). In addition, the government has introduced more channels for financing cultural enterprises, and financial institutions set up units to specially handle cultural enterprises' applications for loans and offer low-interest or subsidised loans to help basic sectors of the cultural industry and new sectors that are integrated with technology and the information industry (Yang, 2019, p. 32). 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). Apart from increasing its budget to support the growth of the cultural industry and to widen financial channels, the government grants tax abatement or exemption to cultural enterprises according to the nature and role of those businesses, especially for the popular cultural products, where tax incentives are gradually introduced (Yang, 2019, p. 32). Proper tax breaks are given to press, publication, radio, film and television sectors, as well as sectors receiving special support from the government. Moreover, the government has adjusted the taxation and investment policies for the cultural industry and developed a system that encourages diverse sources of investment and ownership.

Furthermore, incentives are given to producers, enterprises, or organisations that create outstanding works or contribute to the development of cultural products (Yang, 2019, p. 29), such as the China Huabiao Film Awards established by the Ministry of Culture, and the Golden Phoenix Awards and the Hundred Flowers Awards introduced by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television. Furthermore, the government also gives material rewards and honours to individuals and organisations whose works have won international awards (p.30). In terms of the production process, the government provides incentives to cultural enterprises and advances a reform of its cultural system to show its support for the industry's development. By doing so, various awards are established for cultural enterprises and cultural products, i.e., Top 30 Cultural Enterprises, which is granted to enterprises in art, radio and film, press and publication, and new business sectors according to the social and economic benefits brought by them; and the China Animation Award according to the Circular of the State Council General Office on Opinions Concerning the Promotion of China's Animation Industry.

In addition, land is one of the basic production factors and directly impacts the cultural industry. The Chinese government has formulated a series of preferential land policies to boost the growth of the cultural industry, including reducing the limitations on land use by cultural enterprises and discouraging the transfer of land from cultural enterprises to non-cultural enterprises (Yang, 2019, p. 31). To illustrate, situated in the middle of Dongyang City, Zhejiang Province, Hengdian is a good

example of land management for the cultural industry. Since 1996, the Hengdian Group, a privately-owned comprehensive enterprise founded by Xu Wenrong, invested approximately 2 billion Yuan for constructing the Hengdian World Studio. According to the Information Office of Zhejiang Provincial People's Government, one-fourth of Chinese movies, one-third of Chinese TV series, and two-thirds of Chinese costume dramas are shot in Hengdian World Studios every year ("Chinese Entertainment Platforms," 2021). Hengdian World Studios attracts not only domestic directors but also international directors as well as stars to film their movies at these appealing film-shooting sets, for instance: Hero (2002), the martial arts film directed by Zhang Yimou, and Rob Cohen's the Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor (2008).

To improve the quality of Chinese pop culture, such as films and TV series, China strategically allows foreign companies to enter the Chinese market through joint-venture businesses and co-production/co-funding with Chinese enterprises. The government introduced preferential policies to attract foreign investors, aiming to become more competitive in the international market by exchanging new advanced technologies in order to improve their labour skills. In 2012, following the joint-venture strategy, the Oriental DreamWorks was established, with an initial investment of $330 million from the American animation studio DreamWorks Animation, together with three Shanghai-based state-owned groups, including CMC Capital Partners (formerly known as China Media Capital), the Shanghai Media Group, and Shanghai Alliance Investment Limited. This investment focuses on developing original Chinese animation and live-action movies, TV shows and other entertainment catering to the China market. The Oriental is the studio behind the animation Kung Fu Panda 3. According to the New York Times, the Chinese government encouraged such projects so as to strengthen the nation's media and cultural industries (Barboza & Barnes, 2012).

Not only does China gain knowledge and know-how transfer from co-production with foreign partners, but this strategy also helps foreign films avoid quotas imposed by the Chinese government. Film quotas aim to protect domestic cultural production by limiting the amount of import of foreign cultural products (not exceeding 34 films/year) and restricting the amount of foreign investment which can be involved in domestic cultural production. China expects to overtake the United States to become the world's largest 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 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 illustrate positive Chinese elements (O'Connor & Armstrong, 2015). Such conditions give China an assertive role in shaping the movie's content, location, and casting. As the only player who determines market access for foreign films, Tager (2020) discusses that the Chinese government holds the power to negotiate changes in the content of Hollywood and foreign movies to prevent stories that are deemed to be a threat to China's reputation, the CPC's supremacy, and the country's sovereignty as a prerequisite for the access to China's film market. In 2013, Zhang Xun, the President of the state-owned China Film Co-Production Company, gave an interview at the US-China Film Summit held in LA, which well reflected such negotiation power. He stated: "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 has a different version of the film released in China and globally, like *Iron Man 3* (Black, 2013). As a result, the Chinese authorities intensified the reviewing rules for Sino-foreign co-production films (Zhang, 2012). Consequently, *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (Bay, 2014), the co-produced film between U.S.-based Jiaflix and CCTV's China Movie Channel, featured several Chinese stories and elements to pass the strict review criteria 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, a number of Chinese product placement, with only one version of the film being released globally. Scholars call China's influence over Hollywood a strategy of "borrowing a boat to go out on the ocean", referring to China's method of covertly determining or placing the CPC messaging into foreign media outlets, globalising its propaganda in order to influence foreign audiences and dominate the global conversation (Tager, 2020; Allen-Ebrahimian, 2020). However, co-production projects are not always met with success. One example is one of the biggest-budget Sino-US films, directed by renowned Chinese director Zhang Yimou and starred the Hollywood actor Matt Damon— *The Great Wall* (Zhang, 2016). Despite its large budget of $135

million and the film being almost entirely in English, the movie cashed in $334,933,831 grossing worldwide, of which $170,962,106 was from China, $45,125,480 from the US and Canada, and $1,839,603 from Thailand, for example. Mendelson (2017) and Pressberg (2017) commented that the film tried to add elements that would satisfy and appeal both Chinese and American audiences but ended up pleasing neither party. The Chinese elements and historical references make it hard to appeal to non-Chinese viewers, leading to a loss in translation and narrative.

Other than the abovementioned joint-venture strategy, the "going out" initiative is worth mentioning. This initiative encourages Chinese investors and producers to invest in companies abroad and send their pop culture products to foreign audiences. In 2014, China's state-owned film company China Film Group (CFG) made an equity investment in two Legendary Entertainment projects, Seventh Son and Warcraft. This investment marked the first time a state-owned company took a stake in Hollywood films as it aimed to expand to overseas markets. Not only are these two projects in which China had invested, but it is also reported that the famous film *Furious 7* (Wan, 2015) received support from the CFG. The China Film Group was an investor in the film and is said to have taken a nearly 10 per cent stake (Qin, 2015). Taking part as an investor in film production allows Beijing to have a louder voice to indicate the way they want China to be portrayed. This also applies to the case where more Hollywood producers are trying to reach out to Chinese audiences in response to the growing demand for pop culture consumption by the Chinese middle-class population and to avoid the CPC's censorship by portraying China in a positive light. For instance, Qin (2015) discusses that the considerable success of *Transformers: Age of Extinction* in China was attributed to various Chinese elements featured in the film, such as product placement, actors and filming locations, and a targeted marketing campaign. The film earned approximately $317.2 million on the Chinese mainland market in its month-long run ending July 27, 2014.

Last but not least, technology is a primary driving force of cultural development and the innovation goals of culture creators. China pays attention to its digital infrastructure. The country's Five-year Plans clearly state China's attempt to develop its digital technology to foster new areas of economic growth, such as online audio and video, animation, comics, and games. According to the Government Work

Report, China aims to increase support for the digital sector, call for strengthening overall planning for the Digital China initiative, build more digital information infrastructure, develop an integrated national system of big data centres step by step, and apply 5G technology on a larger scale (Xinhua, 2022b).

Officially unveiled in the 2015 Government Work Report, the Internet Plus strategy aims to create a new growth engine and promote the transformation and upgrading of the economy as well as to establish new industrial modes by promoting the integration of mobile internet, cloud computing, big data, and "internet of things" with modern manufacturing, and support the development of e-commerce, internet industry and finance as well as to guide Chinese internet companies' expansion in the international market (Xinhua, 2015; State Council, 2015). In other words, Internet Plus represents China's ambition to use digital technologies to remould the national economic structure and the nation's future (Keane et al., 2021, p. 55).

In terms of culture, the Internet Plus initiative helps deepen the integration of network technologies which supports and leads to the rapid development of modern cultural industries such as online audio-visual entertainment. One great example is the TikTok phenomenon. According to Timmins (2020), TikTok was the most downloaded app of the year 2020, and this application changed the way how people consume media online. This making and sharing short videos application is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance. TikTok is one of the social media platforms that can help disseminate cultural products. To illustrate, statistics from TikTok's website show that 75% of TikTok users say they discover new artists through TikTok and 63% of TikTok users heard new music that they had never heard before on TikTok ("New Studies Quantify," 2021).

The Internet + Culture model (or culture–technology) has become popular among people working in the cultural sector and helps facilitate China's culture "going-out" programme. The Internet and Big Data help not only to bring content producers and audiences closer, but also help create more diverse cultural products by featuring the use of high-technology and information technology, which then leads to a healthier growth of the industry. Many Chinese filmmakers and TV series producers have responded to the government's Internet Plus by turning to the digital content industry in order to find a new way to connect with their customers. Keane, Yu, Zhao and Leong

(2020) observe that while Chinese films struggled to make a significant impression at the foreign box office, greater acceptance of Chinese content took place online. In 2022, the Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council issued the guideline regarding the digitalisation of the cultural industry, stating that China will speed up the digitalisation layout of the industry, cultivate a new batch of cultural enterprises in the fields of cultural data collection, processing, trade, distribution and presentation, and step up financial support and establish national scientific and technological innovation centres and key laboratories for cultural digitalisation (China Daily, 2022). Scholars discuss that Internet + Culture and support for digitalisation will help create new dynamics in both the digital creative industries and the broader digital economy in China (Flew et al., 2019).

3.3 Censorships and controls

"The stories of China should be well told" has become a guideline for China's cultural industry. Hinting behind this directive is the CPC's instruction to all filmmakers, writers, artists and cultural agencies to come up with stories that help correct foreign narratives that jeopardise China's global reputation by showing the world a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance China's cultural soft power (Xi, 2014; Xinhua, 2021). China regards entertainment media as a tool for diffusing political ideology, values, and stories. Its roles are not only to entertain people but also to keep social stability and shape the country's image.

China's cultural contents have always been kept an eye on by government agencies in order to protect its cultural security; in other words, to ensure that the socialist ideology and national stability will not be harmful.

In 2018, there was a shift in the organisations that oversee China's entertainment and media industry. The government placed the regulation of television under the direct control of a new State Council agency called the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) and the regulation of film under the central Publicity Department, aiming to centralise the role of the CPC in regulating all aspects of political, social, and cultural life (Further, 2018). This consolidation reflects the Party's enhanced efforts to control and unify the message in promoting China's soft

power both at home and abroad (Rosen, 2018). Previously, control over media broadcasting was exercised partly through government organs; however, with such emergence, the government will now have direct control over the regulation of film, radio, television, book publishing, internet, and news media (Shullman, 2019)

Under the control of Xi, the censorship scheme is tightened. It is argued that the rules were imposed in order to thoroughly implement Xi Jinping's speech at the national forum on literature, where he stressed that "art must serve a social purpose" (Horwitz & Huang, 2016). Several bans were put into force for tighter control over content broadcasted in China. The Chinese government issued guidelines that ban the following characteristics from appearing on domestic TV programs: (1) abnormal sexual relations or sexual behaviour, including incest, perversion, sexual abuse and homosexuality, prostitution, one-night stands and sexual freedom; (2) glorifying colonialism, ethnic wars and dynastic conquests of other countries; (3) undermining social stability such as displaying love between a young people, smoking and drinking, fighting, and other unhealthy behaviour; (4) depicting luxurious lifestyles, Western values, acts that can be harmful to public morality and adversely affect minors; (5) time travel; and (6) violating the state policies on religion. In addition, the recent regulations announced by the authorities reflect the willingness to control the entertainment industry, for example, a ban on effeminate actors or behaviour on entertainment programmes and a ban on mass voting for reality shows. Broadcasters are instructed to promote China's excellent traditional and revolutionary culture; while effeminate, androgynous male celebrities must be banned as this promotes abnormal aesthetics.

Pop culture has become the source contributing to China's cultural exportation. Over recent years, the proportion of pop culture products exported overseas has gradually increased, especially TV series. Statistics show that Chinese TV drama export values rose from 380 million Yuan in 2015 to 510 million Yuan in 2016 and 633 million Yuan in 2017 (Xinhua, 2017). Chinese TV series have been exported worldwide; more than 1,600 Chinese series have been dubbed into 36 languages, including English, French, Russian, Arabic and Burmese, and broadcasted in more than 100 countries ("Stream of Fine Gold," 2018). These original series were distributed overseas through various platforms, i.e. State television stations and video streaming platforms owned by Chinese companies such as WeTV, iQiyi, and overseas distributors

like Netflix, YouTube, Amazon Prime Video, Rakuten Viki and MyDramaList. The contents of dramas and films exported into overseas markets include historical costume drama, family drama, fantasy drama, martial-art drama, urban romance, romantic love comedy, and a recent hit Boy Love adaptation live-action.

It is worth mentioning that the emergence of online streaming platforms allows private entertainment companies to develop more diversified content, which helps appeal to more international viewers. This is possible due to a relaxed regulation of online content distribution. Unlike film production, which must undergo several stages of project establishment approval and a public screening license, web series only need to be internally approved and reviewed by streaming platforms before broadcasting. Zhou (2015) discusses that the different regulations on media distribution networks reflect the Chinese government's recognition of the roles played by different distribution networks: the influence of a film on DVD or the Internet is less powerful than if the same film is screened in a cinema.

Therefore, among the increasing popularity of Chinese series, one interesting observation is the exportation of the BL live-adaptation or *Dangai* in Chinese— a type of Chinese drama adapted from boys' love (BL) novels; however, the homosexual or sexual elements in the original novel are toned down into a close friendship between male leads. In 2016, a popular Chinese drama *Addicted* (Ding, 2016) was taken off from iQiyi streaming platform just three episodes before the first-season finale because it directly depicted a love story of two male high schoolers. The same situation happened with the online drama *Guardian* (Xie et al., 2018)*,* a series based on a homosexual sci-fi novel. The series was banned from the video streaming service Youku one week after the last episode aired. This is a reflection of the authorities' discomfort regarding homosexuality. However, despite being banned in their homeland, the two dramas aired on several streaming platforms outside of China, with subtitles in more than 20 languages available, e.g. WeTV and Rakuten Viki. Not only did international audiences enjoy watching the two series, but their original novel was also translated into several languages, including Thai. In 2019, another BL live-action *The Untamed* struck huge success for Chinese boy-love adaptation. However, unlike the previous two examples, *the Untamed* has never been taken off-air; instead, the series received positive reviews from 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 and transmitting positive values such as courage and love for one's country. Still, the reviewer never touched upon the relationship between the two male characters.

The exportation of entertainment media encapsulates two main objectives. The first objective is to promote China's favourable image and diffuse the idea of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The second is to generate income, as the Chinese government wanted to make the cultural industry one of its pillar industries for its national economy. According to Rosen (2017), China is facing a contradiction in its policy and dilemma; to put it simply, the control over social ideology versus the ability to sell its products well in the international market. China has been well aware of the perception of foreign audiences viewing their media contents as CPC's propaganda; therefore, to compete with other countries in soft power competition, Chinese films and series must be developed both in terms of content and production. Compared to domestic censorship, where cultural security and state sovereignty matter, in the case of overseas exportation, it is argued that if the exported films/series/animations are not directly related to sensitive topics such as politics or Chinese history, then the authorities do not impose much censorship on them. It is evident that censorship in a domestic market is stricter than overseas, considering that some Chinese films were banned in China but screened abroad. The reason behind that is to safeguard the country's ideology and social patterns. Rosen (2017) discussed that censorship in China is complicated. He stated that currently, there is less censorship imposed upon China's entertainment media, such as films, subject to the condition that the film should not be based on or touch upon sensitive political topics; in this case, less censorship is applied. Rosen used the case of *Coming Home*—the film directed by famous Chinese director Zhang Yimo – as an example. Even though the film was not banned in China, still, it was not promoted by China for Oscar consideration in the best foreign-language category, as it shows the continuation of the Cultural Revolution (Rosen, 2017). Accordingly, Rosen concluded that the CPC adopted the "don't support, don't ban, don't promote" policy.

It is observed that the "don't support, don't ban, don't promote" pattern also applies to BL adaptation in China, which was broadcasted during 2019-2021,

where the producers of BL drama navigated between the commercial interests and the regulations of the NRTA. As long as the scenes do not directly involve a homosexual desire or romantic elements between two males or are modified into a 'bromance' storyline, they will likely get through the Chinese censorship regime. Moreover, as China strengthens its cyberspace clean-ups and platforms by introducing review-and-report mechanisms which reduce sexual content in BL Web novels, this makes the storylines easier to adapt for television and get approval from the authorities to air the live-action adaptation.

However, things changed in 2021 following several incidents in China's entertainment industry, such as celebrity scandals involving tax evasion and sexual assault, excessive viewership focus on Chinese variety shows, and undesirable fan culture. The government considers these incidents a harmful and unhealthy phenomenon to Chinese society and morals, thus heightening restrictions on the industry. In September 2021, the authorities issued a circular ordering joint efforts from government departments to regulate the industry, focusing on the social responsibilities of investors (Huaxia, 2021a). The circular also stated the need to improve the reviewing process of the content of entertainment shows.

New regulations and restrictions were imposed, aiming to clean up the entertainment industry and China's cyberspace. As stated previously regarding the content reviewing process, a new administrative licensing system for online dramas and movies was implemented and imposed from June 2022 onwards. Unlike in the past when content screening would be done by streaming platforms, going forward, production companies must submit their works to NRTA in order to obtain an administrative license— "Online Label" or *wangbiao* in Chinese, which indicates that their online audio-visual works have been reviewed and can be released ("China Issues Administrative," 2022). Once approved, the shows must include the "Online Label" and distribution license number in a prominent position in the program's title and before the show begins, like the "Dragon Label,"—the film's public screening license.

Figure 3.1

"Online Label", an Administrative License for Online Audiovisual Works

Figure 3.2

"Dragon Label", a Film Distribution License

In terms of content, in 2021, the authorities banned effeminate male celebrities and aesthetic shows from appearing on TV and online platforms, instead pledging for a more masculine image of men (Timmins, 2021). Being regarded as unhealthy content by the government poses a negative impact on the BL adaptation series. Following the crackdown in the entertainment industry, BL adaptations also caught the authorities' attention, resulting in calls by authorities for a boycott. In accordance with NRTA's directive calling for an end to BL live-adaption, the Beijing Municipal Radio and Television Bureau has banned the BL genre in films and TV series completely, in order to "create a clean and healthy cyberspace for the capital city" (Zuo, 2022). According to Peng, the boycott is more a result of the alleged social problems, such as chaotic fan culture and online fights between different groups of fans, rather than the content of the BL dramas itself (Peng, 2022, as cited in Zuo, 2022).

BL live adaptations are an excellent example of the Chinese government's paradox in selling entertainment media or keeping the country's ideology in line. The Dangai dramas, i.e. The Untamed and World of Honour, have gained great degrees of success overseas, attracted new audiences to Chinese drama, and cashed in a huge revenue to the industry. However, it went against social values, according to the authorities. This supports Rosen's argument of China's "don't support, don't ban, don't promote" policy. Even though the "don't ban" has been shifted to "ban", the dynamic changes in the government's acts following a wave of chaotic controversies in the industry clearly represented China's paradox of soft power building—the contradictions between state authorities' pursuit of soft power internationally and their efforts to revive the popularity of socialist ideology at home (Xin, 2020). Evidently, the government is ready to impose tighter control over things that can affect social stability or norms set by the authorities.

In sum, dramas and films serve not only as a tool to entertain people but also to carry the ideology, values, lifestyle, and image of that country or society. Unintentional actions and messages seem to win people's hearts more easily than intentionally using propaganda created by the government to attract and persuade people. Sun (2018) calls it a "soft power by accident — the attraction of cultural products that do not pursue overt political ambitions and are neither created nor curated by government (…) cultural products with genuine soft power potential can only come from creative enterprises that arise organically within the non-state sector". In other countries such as South Korea, in contrast, their entertainment industry is not interfered by their government and the creativity of pop culture content is not limited by censorship; thus, their entertainment products are warmly received by global audiences. International audiences have become increasingly familiar with Korean products, food, language, and lifestyle through the K-Wave, such as films, series, and music. Making K-wave a global phenomenon certainly helps generate a country's soft power, whether in terms of its development or cultural power. Accordingly, it is arguable that cultural diplomacy tends to be more successful if it is done by non-State sectors (perhaps with the support of the government in terms of policies to facilitate that industry) rather than State actors; otherwise, it will become what Sun (2018) calls 'soft power by design'— a top-down government soft power initiative.

CHAPTER 4
PRIVATE SECTOR'S RESPONSE TO GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES

Owing to the government's "going-out" strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative, which aim to promote people-to-people bonds through cultural exchange and media cooperation, Chinese entertainment products, such as films and series, have gradually become a hit overseas, especially in Southeast Asia, partly due to its cultural resemblances. Film and series are considered tools that possess both commercial and political power, as they embed social and political ideologies through narratives, scripting, branded product placement and casting; as a result, they shape the formation of individuals' identities, such as political thoughts, attitudes, and lifestyles (Street, 1997; Su, 2016). Instead of seeing entertainment products as a soft power resource, they constitute an instrument through which soft power is projected. Accordingly, movies/TV series are an example of "soft power by accident" (Sun, 2018). After the reform of China's cultural industry and the privatisation of the entertainment industry, the private sector plays a significant role in expanding Chinese popular culture worldwide. Thus, responses from the private sector to the government's policies should not be neglected.

4.1 Advancement to the global film market

Private enterprises are essential actors that help advance Chinese culture to global audiences, one of which is Wanda's bold move to achieve a global position in the film industry.

The Dalian Wanda Group led by Wang Jianlin, who previously served as a deputy to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and a member of the 11th Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference Standing Committee, currently operates several culture-related businesses, including film production and film distribution, stage shows and entertainment chains. Domestically, Wanda has developed several cultural locations in Dalian, Beijing and Guangzhou; with Dalian

focusing on film-making and operations and Beijing on cultural travel (Li, 2012). Internationally, with the approval from the Ministry of Commerce of China, the State Administration of Foreign Exchange and the National Development and Reform Commission, during these past years, Wanda pursued its goal of building a cinema empire with the acquisition of several overseas theatre chains including AMC Entertainment Holdings and Carmike in North America (2012 and 2016 respectively), Hoyts in Australia (2015), Odeon and UCI Cinemas Group in Europe (2016). Through all these acquisitions, Wanda has more than 13,000 movie screens across China, Australia, Europe and the U.S. (Harashima, 2016). In an interview in September 2016, Wang stated that "AMC's boss is Chinese, so more Chinese films should be in their theatres where possible" (Wang, 2016, as cited in Huang, 2016). He also claimed that since the acquisition of AMC by Wanda in 2012, the chain had screened over 50 Chinese films in overseas theatres. In 2016, Wanda acquired Legendary Entertainment, a U.S. movie studio known for producing big-budget global blockbusters such as Godzilla, Inception, and Jurassic World. This represented the largest acquisition of a U.S. production company by a Chinese firm and introduced a new level of influence over Hollywood's cultural landscape and China's ability to project "soft power" worldwide (Miller & Makinen, 2016). It also represented Wang's ambition "to change the landscape of the global film industry and for Chinese film to have a position on the world stage" (Kaiman, 2016).

Nonetheless, Wang's assertive move to Hollywood comes with negative concerns, especially from the U.S. society, over the pro-China propaganda. Some American politicians and media have questioned Wang's Communist Party membership and his close ties to Xi's government, particularly that China may exercise undue control over Hollywood films, not just in terms of distribution but also content, in order to serve China's extensive interests in winning hearts and minds around the world (Rosen, 2017). Zhang and Pelton (2019) conducted an analysis of U.S. media coverage on Wanda's investments in Hollywood, aiming to study the perceptions and attitudes of U.S. society towards Wanda's Hollywood investments. The study is divided into three sub-major themes, including business, attitudes and actions of U.S. society and China's soft power strategy.

The result of the *attitudes and actions of U.S. society* theme showed that there are concerns on political issues such as national security and Wanda's close relationships with Chinese authorities, observed by the quick approval of Wanda's investment by the Chinese government. Under the theme *China's soft power strategy*, the findings reflected the negative tone in the media coverage, manifesting concerns of the U.S. society on Wanda's investments in Hollywood and the connection between Wanda and China's national soft power strategies which aimed to enhance China's influence around the world. This is also in line with Western scholars' concerns about China's sharp power, which is regarded as a detrimental force to democracy in Western societies (Zhang & Pelton, 2019).

Another move from non-state actors that could contribute to the expansion of Chinese cultural power is the private sector's involvement in film co-production and co-financing. As discussed previously, the government issued a regulation allowing foreign firms to invest a maximum of 49% in joint-venture shares with Chinese private firms. China has so far been recognised as one of the most active players in international co-production, owing to co-production with more than 20 countries (Moon & Yin, 2020). Co-production/co-financing comes with conditions that benefit China. In order to obtain approval for the film co-production, the film needed to include scenes shot in China, Chinese actor(s), and illustrate positive Chinese elements (O'Connor & Armstrong, 2015). Such conditions give Chinese firms the power to negotiate with their partner(s) regarding the narrative, location and casting. Several non-state enterprises, such as Alibaba Pictures, Tencent Pictures, DMG Entertainment, Wanda and Huayi Bros, have participated in international co-production or co-funded film production. According to the China Film Co-production Corporation (CFCC), the total number of co-productions with foreign companies from 1979 to 2019 was 1,127 films, most of which were co-productions with Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, and 266 co-productions were partnerships with companies based in foreign countries (Rui, 2020).

Being the second-largest movie-going country in the world, Hollywood filmmakers try to please the Chinese government and its censorship by omitting specific themes, products or events to gain access to the Chinese market and gain commercial profit. China's influence over Hollywood can be observed on several occasions, for instance the film Top Gun: Maverick (2022), a sequel to the 1986 blockbuster. Top Gun

went under controversy after its trailer was released. The iconic leather jacket Tom Cruise wore in the first film differs from the one back in 1986. The difference between the two jackets is that the patches on the back of the jacket no longer have the Taiwanese and Japanese flags, instead being replaced with two ambiguous symbols in the same colour scheme. The possible reason behind this edit is that the film is co-produced between Tencent Pictures and Paramount Pictures.

Powered by vast economic incentives— despite not being co-produced or co-invested by Chinese firms— some filmmakers are ready to self-censor their content in order for their films to be shown in China. Some Hollywood films even use Chinese themes and actors to attract Chinese audiences and to pass the CPC approval. For example, in the film Gravity (2013), a stranded astronaut played by Sandra Bullock used a Chinese spacecraft and docked in the Tiangong space station before safely returning to Earth; in the movie 2012 (2009), a famous disaster movie, humanity is saved because the Chinese government had the foresight to build life-saving arcs.

However, it is important to not forget that in every business in China, there is always a certain standard that the CPC considers as 'cross or not cross the line'. There is no indication as to at which point the CPC's line is considered as having been crossed, but once that line is crossed, the CPC will impose control. Moreover, the Chinese government has never liberated their tight control over the investment of these private companies. For example, in the case of Wanda, CEO Wang was forced to sell his assets, including hotels, theme parks and other real estate assets, to diminish his excessive debt arising from overseas cultural acquisitions and to manage his businesses' cash flow. Cain (2017) noted that since Wang acquired Legendary Picture, such action has attracted intense public scrutiny from Chinese regulators, who opined that Wanda had vastly overpaid for the company, leading to the failure to win the Chinese regulators' approval for the acquisition of Golden Globes show. The government's order on overseas investing by Wanda was part of a campaign to assert greater control over the increasingly powerful private sector, which has always been a source of unease for the CPC's command economy. President Xi has been particularly assertive in wresting strategic and financial decision-making freedoms away from private companies in a wide range of industry sectors, handing competitive advantages over to big state-owned companies that are more directly under the control of the Party's bureaucracy. It is

reported that the CPC decided to block state-owned banks from furnishing any new loans to big companies with aggressive track records of making overseas acquisitions (Cain, 2017). This also shows the government's contradiction in soft power building through the development of the Chinese creative industry.

4.2 Digital platforms

The phenomenon where the traditional form of entertainment media consumption is replaced by online streaming happens in China and globally. According to PwC's Global Consumer Insights Survey, which assesses the behaviour, habits and expectations of 21,480 online consumers in 27 territories, nearly 40% of global consumers stream entertainment at least daily; among Gen Z consumers, cord-cutting for online entertainment is at more than 50% (PwC, 2019). These numbers show that the online audio-visual industry is gradually becoming a core pillar of the entertainment industry, representing the changing trend of entertainment media consumption in the digitalisation era.

Technology increasingly plays a significant role in China's soft power building, and the internet is regarded as a carrier of China's message to the world. The report of Alibaba Research Centre in 2015 stated that "the internet would facilitate cultural consumption by revolutionizing 'screen to online' models, by facilitating interaction between audiences and creators". In other words, the internet acts as a tool for facilitating new media entertainment distribution and consumption models.

After the ratification of Internet Plus, tech entrepreneurs gained remarkable political influence and were hailed as entrepreneurial model leaders (Keane et al., 2021, p. 55). They embraced the strategy by integrating internet technologies into their products, resulting in various innovations in many sectors. For instance, Tencent iQiyi built a TV ecosystem that offers online videos, games and life services in response to the emergence of smart TV (Fan, 2016). According to the National Bureau of Statistics report, the revenue of the cultural businesses linked with 'Internet Plus' rose to 1.29 trillion Yuan in 2020 (Xinhua, 2020a). The report on the development of China's internet audio and video industry announced annually at the China Internet Audio & Video Convention stated that the scale of the internet audio and video industry in the

Chinese market was 454.13 billion Yuan in revenue in 2019, and exceeded 600 billion Yuan in 2020 ("China See More," 2020; Zhang, J, 2021).

In China, the two giant tech companies, Tencent and Baidu, play a leading role in exporting Chinese entertainment media overseas. The emergence of Chinese streaming platforms overseas reflects the ambition to expand Chinese cultural power in response to the government's "going-out" strategy. In recent years, it is noticeable that Chinese tech companies have gained more positions in the global market in digital media platforms, for example, the launching of video streaming platforms by Tencent (WeTV) and Baidu (iQiyi) in Southeast Asia.

In 2019, Tencent launched its first overseas OTT streaming service named "WeTV" in Thailand and Vietnam. Tencent considers countries in Southeast Asia, including Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam, as its key markets for its OTT services due to the fast-growing number of online streaming users, which account for approximately 180 million active users across the region. About 60% of the content on WeTV comprises Chinese series, animations, movies and variety shows. The original contents from Tencent Penguin Picture are the platform's main feature. The shows are available with dubbing in local languages such as Thai, as well as multilingual subtitles, including Chinese, English, Thai, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, and Portuguese. These features are a plus point for WeTV. According to Tencent, WeTV is now taking a lead role in the Advertising Video On Demand (AVOD) market while coming second in Subscription Video On Demand (SVOD) in Thailand (Saelim, 2021). In addition, from January to August 2021, the number of monthly active users (MAU) reached 13 million users in Thailand and 45 million globally (150% growth); the number of daily active users (DAU) in Thailand increased by 63% from 2020. The viewership of Chinese content such as series, variety shows and animations on WeTV grew by 137% compared to 2020. Tencent aims to make WeTV the second-largest streaming platform in Southeast Asia by 2023. In 2020, to further expand WeTV in Southeast Asia, Tencent purchased Iflix, the Malaysian streaming platform with around 25 million active users in hand. The merging of "WeTV-Iflix" fits well with Tencent's expansion plans in Southeast Asia ("China Entertainment Platforms," 2020). A platform like WeTV serves as a "global dual-market approach, providing an opportunity for Chinese content creators to get their

work better known worldwide" (Condit, 2020 as cited in "Chinese Entertainment Platforms," 2020).

Another move from China's leading online video-streaming service was when iQiyi (Baidu-owned streaming platform) officially launched its international version of its application in 2019, providing an easier way for international audiences to explore Chinese content. The same pattern with WeTV is applied to iQiyi content, meaning that their shows are subtitled, and some hit series are dubbed in local languages. iQiyi also announced its strategic partnership with Astro, Malaysia's biggest pay-television service provider, to set up the iQIYI HD channel responsible for Chinese content distribution. In 2020, the number of iQiyi users grew by more than 12 times in Southeast Asia, especially Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia (Mulia, 2021). Until now, the company claims to have distributed over 100 original series and over 200 films to overseas markets, including North America, Southeast Asia, Japan, South Korea and others.

The foregoing data reflects the growing and changing trend in entertainment media consumption. In the past, if people wanted to watch Chinese series, they had to wait for their local TV channel to buy licenses or watch through official Chinese TV channels such as CCTV. However, the emergence of online streaming platforms helps distribute Chinese content to broader audiences across the globe. Nowadays, Chinese content can be found in various applications, not only on Chinese platforms but also on foreign platforms such as Netflix, VIU, and Rakuten Viki. Therefore, those entertainment media are much easier to access than ever before. In addition, as the applications run with an algorithm technology - by clicking on one Chinese series, various recommendations for Chinese content will come up, resulting in more exposure to Chinese content. The online platforms help not only to connect foreigners to Chinese media but also the Chinese diaspora. This links to the notion of soft power with the Chinese characteristic discussed by Glaser and Murphy (2009) that the Chinese government's attempt to generate soft power aims not only to attract or obtain preferable influence over international and domestic audiences.

CHAPTER 5
CASE STUDY

5.1 Chinese films

5.1.1 Wolf warrior 2 (Wu, 2017)

Figure 5.1

Wolf Warrior 2 Official Poster

       Starring and directed by Wu Jing, Wolf Warrior 2 has become China's highest-grossing film, raking in over $870 million since debuting in July 2017 (Box Office Mojo, n.d.-a). Wolf Warrior 2 currently ranks seventy-seventh on Box Office Mojo worldwide lifetime top-grossing films alongside other Hollywood movies, making it one of the highest-grossing non-English films. Another interesting statistic is that the film topped China's box office with its massive $130 million on its opening day across the Chinese mainland, breaking new grounds for China's box office records. Internationally, the film received good responses from international audiences. Data from Box Office Mojo shows that the film earned more than $16 million worldwide: $2,721,100 in the U.S and Canada, $1,351,563 in Australia, $227,311 in New Zealand, $135,000 in the UK, $82,490 in the United Arab Emirates and $75,000 in Thailand (IMDbPro, n.d.-b).

Regarding response from moviegoers, data from the Chinese online community Douban[1] shows that over 877,500 domestic audiences rated this movie 7.1 out of 10, and over 32.4% of all reviewers rated this movie 4 stars out of 5 stars (Douban, n.d.-b). In the comment section, 66% of the comments positively respond to the film, praising the film for showing China's power and creating great national pride. On the other hand, 19% of the commenters gave a neutral review, and 16% criticised the film for its heavy nationalism. Internationally, out of 8,232 IMDb users, the film received a weighted average vote of 5.9 out of 10 (IMDb, n.d.). U.S. users and non-U.S. users equally gave the film a 5.9 score. The review sections showed that the film received mixed comments, ranging from praising the movie as a great action film, and that the film is naïve propaganda.

Inspired by actual Chinese peacekeeping missions and China's evacuation mission in war-torn areas overseas (Fan, 2017), Wolf Warrior 2 depicts the story of Leng Feng, a former Chinese soldier from PLA special forces living in a fictitious African country. After three years of living in Africa, rebel forces come into town, aiming to overthrow the government. Feng, the other African citizens, and all the Chinese living there are now in danger. The Chinese authorities sent in a fleet for repatriation. Once Feng learned that there were still other Chinese factory workers and

Figure 5.2

Leng Feng with Chinese Flag Wrapped around Arm and the Convoy Passing through Rebel Group

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[1] a Chinese online community which focuses on film, books and music recommendations and reviews

Chinses doctors working in a hospital to develop a vaccine for a deadly virus left behind, Feng volunteered to save them. At the hospital, where he met Dr. Chen's daughter named Pasha and an American doctor named Rachel Smith, Dr. Chen was killed by the western mercenaries. After escaping from the hospital, Feng, Pasha and Rachel rushed to the Chinese-owned factory to save the workers and his African godson's mother. The fight with the mercenary troop continues because they want to capture Pasha to get the Lamanla vaccine. Feng joined hands with the two Chinese workers, one being also a former PLA soldier, to fight the mercenaries to protect the other innocent Chinese and African people. In the end, after learning that the massive battle caused casualties, the Chinese fleet decided to fire missiles and sent out tanks to help. Feng successfully killed the leader of the mercenary troops. The ending scene shows Feng leading the survival crew in convoy, having a Chinese flag wrapped around his arm, passing through rebel territory until they reached the UN camp.

The film corresponds to the Chinese government's political narrative. First is the message directed to the Chinese people. The film reflects an attempt to build a nationalist sentiment and pride in being Chinese. For instance, the scene where the two protagonists, Leng Feng and Rachel, argued about how China and the U.S. treated their citizens differently during a crisis, perfectly represents the Chinese government's resolution to protect its citizens from harmful events. While China sheltered and evacuated its citizens and foreign nationals during the civil war, the U.S. Embassy neglected citizens by closing its embassy, and the only way to contact them was via Twitter, as no one answered the phone. The film further emphasises this resolution in the end credits showing a picture of a Chinese passport with the following message: *"Citizens of the People's Republic of China. When you encounter danger in a foreign land, do not give up! Please remember, at your back stands a strong motherland.".* As well as the famous tagline *"Whoever offends China will be terminated no matter how far away they are"*, these examples represent China's power and resolution to protect Chinese citizens; this promise touches upon its citizens' pride. The iconic ending scene in which Leng Feng wraps a Chinese flag around his arm to show the rebels when rebels block his convoy demonstrates China's power; when the rebels see China's flag, they shout: *"Hold your fire, it is the Chinese".*

On top of that, the film reflects the geopolitical dimension of China in the African continent to help enhance China's image as a good neighbour. Over the years, the world has witnessed China's effort to expand its role in the world's political and economic landscapes, one of which is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 by President Xi. The BRI emphasises policy coordination, infrastructure, trade, financial, and people-to-people (education, culture and scientific exchange) connectivity. Throughout the film, several scenes show the viewers China's link to Africa in those areas, which is a reference to BRI's success in the continent. These include trade and businesses, a Chinese-sponsored hospital with Chinese doctors and medical assistants, 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 and Africans back to China after the riot attacked the city. Despite the fictional setting, it is worth mentioning that in reality, China is the second-largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget and has established a naval base in Djibouti in North Africa.

Figure 5.3

Wolf Warrior 2: Picture of Chinese Passport at the Ending Credit

According to data from the China Africa Research Initiative (CARI) at Johns Hopkins University, China's concessional loan to Africa totals around $5 billion per year (Hornby & Hancock, 2018, as cited in Risberg, 2019). Scholars have analysed the effects of Chinese-financed infrastructure on economic activity and found

that Chinese investments in "connective infrastructure" produce positive economic spillovers, resulting in a more equal distribution of economic activity (Bluhm et al., 2018; Risberg, 2019).

Portraying China as a good friend to Africa corresponds with China's Belt and Road initiative. The film demonstrates Africa's dependence upon China's capital, aid and development. Such portrayal may help the Chinese audiences have a better understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative as well as its achievements in Africa as a way to project China's power overseas. Simultaneously, the film may help international viewers see China's advancement in Africa in a more positive light, fighting against the accusations of "debt trap diplomacy".

In terms of people-to-people relations, the film demonstrates Sino-African economic relations through Chinese businesses in Africa. The film portrays China's good neighbour image by offering trade opportunities, providing factory jobs for the locals, and building hospitals. The film also tries to show Chinese people's attitudes towards Africans, such as Leng Feng's adoption of an African child as his godson, the marriage between Chinese factory men and African women, and the Chinese factory owner's decision to rescue all of his workers, including African people. This is to answer the government's call for a harmonious world and the creation of a community of shared futures.

5.2.1 The Wandering Earth (Gwo, 2019)

Figure 5.4

The Wandering Earth Official Poster

Adapted from the novel of China's Hugo Award Winner Liu Cixin, The Wandering Earth gained attention from moviegoers globally and became the third

highest-grossing film of 2019. Since its premiere in February 2019, The Wandering Earth's revenue exceeded $899 million, becoming the second Chinese-made film to enter Box Office Mojo's top lifetime grosses chart and the second-highest grossing film of all time in China's box office record, second to Wolf Warrior 2 (Box Office Mojo, n.d.-b; Xinhua, 2019b). In China, the film pulled in more than $179 million on its first release date and $699,992,512 grossing worldwide. Outside mainland China, the film earned over $8.8 million comprising: $5,932,039 million from the U.S. and Canada, $1,066,904 from Australia, $224,778 from New Zealand and $99,844 from South Korea (IMDbPro, n.d.-a). Furthermore, The Wandering Earth made its debut on Netflix, the US streaming platform, which will be translated into 28 languages and released in 190 countries globally (China Daily, 2019).

Regarding responses from views, more than 1,823,000 domestic audiences in Douban gave The Wandering Earth a score of 7.9; 36.3% and 34.8% of the voters rated the movie with 4 and 5 stars, respectively (Douban, n.d.-a). The positive reviews commended the film for its excellent production and engagement with Chinese culture. Internationally, 31,117 foreign viewers on IMDb gave the film a weighted average vote of 5.9 out of 10. Some viewers applaud the film for its great production, storyline and the opportunity to learn Chinese culture; on the other hand, some viewers said the movie's plotline is too absurd.

Apart from the film's economic success, the stated-own newspaper such as Xinhua and People's Daily regarded the film as a "new dawn for China's sci-fi filmmaking" (Xinhua, 2019) and "a milestone in the development of Chinese sci-fi film" owing to its outstanding plot, professional production process and the film's interpretation of traditional values about family, heroism and patriotism (Xinhua, 2019b). The film took two years to complete its post-production and special effects work. The film production, including props and scenes, is made and built by Chinese crew members, and Chinese companies produced 75% of its special effects (Xinhua, 2019a). Generally, sci-fi movies released in China are mostly Hollywood imports. Thus, The Wandering Earth marks an essential step for China's sci-fi film market to develop the Chinese style of sci-fi movies to compete with the West.

The Wandering Earth is a patriotic Chinese film about a mission to rescue the earth led by the Chinese force, i.e. astronaut Liu Peiqiang who works on an

international space station and his son Liu Qi. The earth is dying, and the Sun is rapidly expanding; therefore, for the survival of humankind, every country united and set up the United Earth Government (UEG). The UEG initiated "The Wandering Earth" project seeking to sail earth to a new solar system. Under this project, thousands of Earth Engines, infusion-powered engines, were installed around the planet to help push the earth out of the solar system. However, after 17 years of its long journey, disaster happened when the earth travelled near Jupiter. The unexpected Jupiter's gravitational spike effect caused the failure of many Earth engines. Failure to restart all malfunctioning facilities in time, the earth would ultimately collide with Jupiter. The teams of rescuers from around the planet had only 37 hours to complete the biggest rescue mission to save the Wandering Earth Project. Liu Qi, his sister Duoduo and grandfather Han Zi'ang were accidentally involved in the rescue mission. They and the Chinese military rescue team led by Captain Wang Lei were assigned to deliver the Lighter Core, an Earth engine's trigger device, to Hangzhou Earth Engine Station to restart the machine.

Meanwhile, on the international space station, seeing no possibility for the earth to get away from Jupiter's gravitational pull, the UEG had decided to abandon the Wandering Earth Project and leave all people on earth to die. Liu Peiqiang (Liu Qi's father) refused to follow orders and tried to persuade the UEG to find another solution. However, he failed. During that desperate time, Peiqiang received a call from Duoduo. He was asked to contact the UEG to deploy more rescue teams to Sulawesi for reinforcement as Liu Qi and his Chinese rescue crew planned to light up Jupiter to propel earth away from it. The UEG objected to their request because they saw no possibility of success; however, Peiqiang made a powerful statement to the UEG: *"today is the first day of Chinese New Year. It was meant to be a day of reunion. As a father, I do not want it to be the last reunion. I refuse to yield. There is nothing we cannot lose. For the sake of our children, I beg you."*; in the end, the UEG decided to help broadcast their request to every individual on earth, but the decision of whether to help would rest upon them, as it was not considered as an order from the UEG.

Figure 5.5

The Wandering Earth: Chinese Rescue Team

After the broadcast of Duoduo's request, all rescuers, regardless of nationality, arrived at Sulawesi in time and were able to start the engines. At the same time, Peiqiang, after knowing that his son's mission might fail to propel the earth away from Jupiter, decided to sacrifice himself to complete this mission. He set fire to some part of the space station by using a bottle of vodka that a Russian cosmonaut smuggled on board and headed the international space to Jupiter, carrying 300,000 tons of fuel to ignite the mix of atmosphere. The explosion radius at the end helped propel the earth away from the gravitational pull of Jupiter. After this disaster, all humankind survives, and the earth safely continues its journey toward the new solar system.

First, the audience can notice the similarity between the protagonists of The Wandering Earth and Wolf Warrior 2: a hero who upholds the socialist ideology. The Chinese Confucius's values are vividly presented throughout the film, including love for the hometown (earth), a people-oriented mindset and collectivism.

Unlike other Hollywood catastrophic films whose plotline is to find a 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 sacrificing their life. Moreover, the film introduces the audience to another characteristic of Chinese heroism: the leadership of the Chinese people. Chinese civilians, scientists and military personnel are the ones who lead the world during difficult times when people had lost hope. For example, Duoduo, a young girl, delivered a compelling message worldwide asking for reinforcement at Sulawesi's Earth engine, and the Chinese crew bit the bullet until the very end to regenerate the engine despite

losing their life. This implies that China is an important actor and possesses a leading role on the world stage and shows that "China's bravery and perseverance will bring about a global unity never known to mankind before" (Cheng, 2019).

Furthermore, The Wandering Earth emphasises collective values and international cooperation. This is also in line with the notion of China's harmonious world. The film depicts the idea of collectivism through the scene when the Chinese protagonists lead the rescue teams of different nationalities to start the engines. This represents the Chinese belief in collective wisdom over individual heroism of western ideology. Therefore, the rescue mission led by the Chinese astronauts and other nations tells the audience that Chinese people see themselves as part of the collective humankind and that its actions are not led by nationalist interests, but by the widely supported value of protecting the global community (Silk, 2020).

In essence, The Wandering Earth represents a solid patriotic plotline aiming to build nationalist sentiment among Chinese audiences owing to the leadership of all Chinese protagonists in the film. The way in which China was portrayed as having led the world through a global catastrophe can potentially make the Chinese people proud of their nation. On the other hand, the film also speaks to international audiences by conveying an image of China as a powerful and harmonious rising global superpower.

5.3.1 Chinese Doctors (Lau, 2021)

Figure 5.6

Chinese Doctors Official Poster

        Chinese Doctors is a film based on actual events of COVID-19 transmission in Wuhan. The film, directed by Hong Kong director Andrew Lau, pays tribute to the medical staff at the Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital, front-line workers, volunteers and people living in Wuhan for their devotion to fight against the outbreak, while aiming to depict China in a positive light following the outbreak of COVID-19 and to win domestic and international support. The film features actual footage from news and events happening in Wuhan, such as the arrival of the UN disease investigation team and their press conference after the investigation, the dispatch of task forces from across China to Hubei, the construction of a field hospital providing 1,600 beds for patients which was completed in just ten days, and the donations of medical supply such as face masks to foreign countries.

        Released in July 2021, Chinese Doctors took the top spot at the Chinese box office, pulling in $53 million on its first day of release and grossing over $197 million in its last week (Box Office Mojo, n.d.-a). The film was also released in overseas theatres, including North America, Australia, and New Zealand. However, the film only cashed in $47,000 in total from its overseas release (Box Office Mojo, n.d.-a). Still, the film is available on online streaming platforms, such as Rakuten Viki, iTunes and Amazon Prime Video.

The film advocates patriotic sentiment, aiming primarily at domestic audiences. The COVID-19 outbreak led to a shutdown of Wuhan, and several restrictions were imposed. President Xi was under tremendous pressure and faced an outpouring of anger and criticism of the CPC from its citizens. Thus, making a film that portrays the government's unwavering efforts in handling the outbreak situation may help maintain the CPC's support and legitimacy. Consequently, the film repeatedly inserts scenes and lines showing how Xi and the CPC deal with the outbreak, such as the setup of a task force by the National Health Commission, epidemiological investigation and city-wide disinfection, and medical staff reinforcement at Wuhan and Hubei. The scene showing the meeting among the National Health Commission members also reflects the commitment of the government to take care of their citizens: *"One hospital bed does not only represent a single patient, but it also represents an entire family. It is the key to stability for society. What you need, we give. Who you need, we send. Anything you need, the country will give. But there is one requirement, we need to put the patients first."* Therefore, under the government's guidance and adherence to collective values and love for their people and homeland, the medical staff and all front-line personnel work tirelessly to save the lives of COVID-19 patients to win the heart and support of people.

Maintaining China's position in the international arena is also essential. The film tends to embrace the official narrative from the government about the transparency of virus investigation. The film features a visit of the UN disease investigation team and the press conference held in Beijing where Bruce Aylward, co-head of the China-WHO Joint Mission said: *"To the people in Wuhan, it is recognised. The world is in your debt, and when this disease finishes, hopefully, we will have a chance to thank the people in Wuhan for the role that they played in it".* This aims to fight against questions from other countries about China's transparency of COVID-19 information and to show that China cooperates reasonably with international organisations such as the WHO.

As a new rising power, China cannot let the COVID-19 outbreak tarnish its reputation and cannot let the world see them as a malfunctioning government with a poor public healthcare system. Therefore, the message embedded in this film is a triumphant story of how China won against the disease, which can later be applied to

other countries as a model to crop the ongoing outbreak. There are scenes in which Xi called for a meeting with the Politburo Standing Committee to create the task force to ensure proper execution, openness and transparency with respect to the prevention work and information. The film attempts to tell the outside world that China dealt with the disease with a responsible attitude, consistently updated the world on information about the virus, actively responded to concerns, and elevated cooperation with the international community.

The film also represents traditional Chinese values, which are entirely different from those of the West, through the scene where the UN disease investigation team arrived in Wuhan. One scientist surprisingly asked the Chinese officials how China could keep more than 10 million people at home during the outbreak. The Chinese official answered: *"It is the Chinese culture that emphasises strong collective values and altruistic spirits"*. This is how China introduced the Chinese way of thinking as an alternative to Western democratic values. In other words, instead of saying that the government forces people to stay in their homes, China represents itself as a country where people devote themselves and unitedly join hands to fight against the virus in accordance with their collective values.

5.2 Chinese TV/Web dramas

Figure 5.7

You Are My Glory Official Poster

5.2.1 You are my glory (Zhi, 2021)

Premiered in July 2021, You are my glory (produced by Tencent) became the most-viewed series on Tencent's streaming platforms, with more than 3.6 billion views in mainland China. Internationally, thanks to internet streaming platforms, which allow foreign viewers to access Chinese dramas more conveniently and in a real-time manner, the drama gained much attention from international audiences. The drama received positive feedback from viewers, as evidenced by its rating on streaming platforms, including a 9.5/10 from Rakuten Viki, 9.2/10 from WeTV, and 8.8/10 from MydramaList. Out of 14k reviews on Rakuten Viki, many international viewers said that they watched the drama on its first premiere and returned to re-watch it several times on the platform.

Like the other Chinese streaming platforms, Tencent also embraces the 'telling China stories well' approach, as guided by President Xi, when bringing Chinese content to the world. According to an interview with China Daily, Tencent's vice president Edward Cheng said that in line with that directive, the company had enhanced the coordination between the troika units responsible for the production and promotion of film and television works, aiming to ensure that "the prerequisite for China's cultural works to reach a broader foreign audience, especially younger generations, is to have excellent China stories well told," (Cheng, 2021)

The drama depicts a life and love story between a famous superstar Qiao Jingjing and an aerospace engineer Yu Tu, who works at a State-owned space conglomerate. The two former high school classmates were brought back together through an online game. The first eight episodes of the drama talk about an online game, "*Glory of the King*", of which Qiao Jinjing is the ambassador. However, due to her lack of gaming skills, which is inconsistent with her title as the game's ambassador, who is very good at gaming, she had to join the e-sport competition to prove her skill and prevent herself from losing the game endorsements. While practising the game, Jingjing accidentally met Yu Tu, her old high school classmate, through the online game, and Yu Tu then became her gaming coach. The latter half of the series talks about the life of an aerospace engineer, including research and the launch of a Chinese spacecraft.

First, the drama reflects an attempt to build a nationalist sentiment and pride in being Chinese. For instance, the male lead Yu Tu works as an aerospace engineer at a state-owned space conglomerate devoting himself to develop 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 pay and less free time or finding a new job in the financial sector for higher income and more time for his parents. Ultimately, he chooses to serve the country by continuing to work for the government to enhance China's aerospace capability. This depicts the devotion of oneself to the nation's development. In addition, the scenes where the 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.

Figure 5.8

You Are My Glory: Chinese People Celebrating the Launch of China's Spacecraft


Second, the Confucian value of the parent-child relationship and responsibility is reflected in the male protagonist. The drama reflects the struggle of Yu Tu, who at first could not decide whether to continue his dream job as an aerospace

engineer on a low pay and have little time to take care of his parents, or to change his job and go into the Finance sector, which provides higher income and more free time. This also represents the life situation that most members of the Chinese young generation face as they have their parents to take care of.

The latter half of the drama talks mainly about China's aerospace industry after the male protagonist decides to continue his career as a space engineer. This promotes China's ambition and achievement in space technology and the competition in this field among developed and developing countries. The production team and the writer received advice from, and had sections of the script concerning space industry operations fact-checked and proofread by the Shanghai Academy of Spaceflight Technology, the academy under the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp. Thus, the drama also helps people, both domestic and international audiences, better understand and pay attention to China's aerospace industry.

Figure 5.9

You Are My Glory: China's Aerospace Industry (left) and People Celebrating Chinese New Year (right)
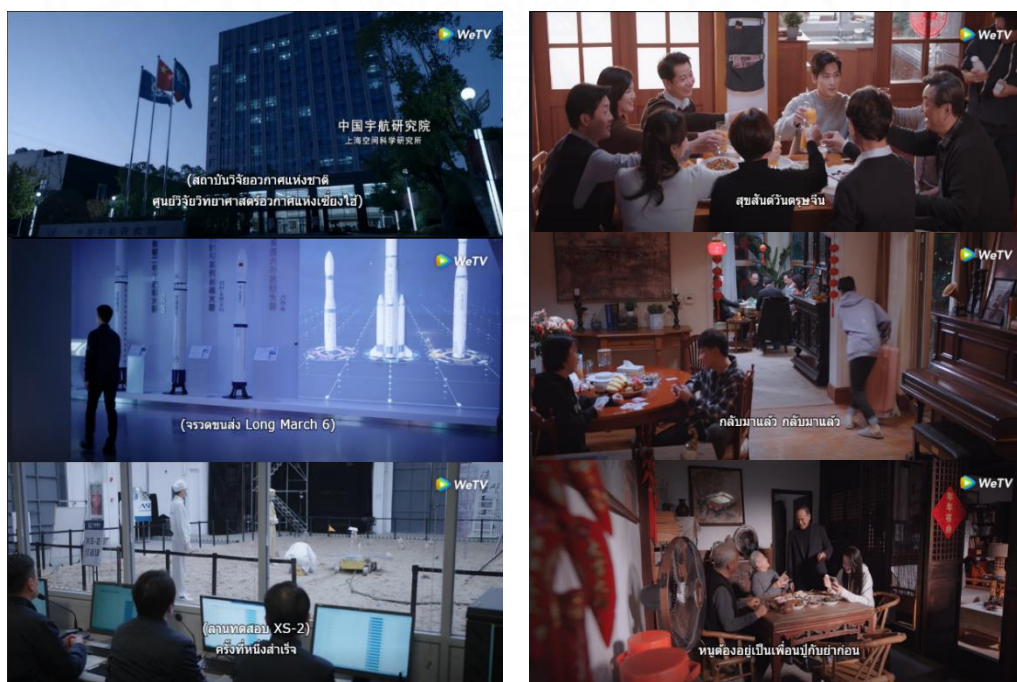
Furthermore, the drama also introduces international audiences to the Chinese way of life and culture, including Chinese traditions such as family gatherings during Chinese New Year, and contemporary life in a modern city like Shanghai. International viewers get to learn about the life of the Chinese people, which may potentially decrease the negative stereotype of China.

5.2.2 The Untamed (Cheng & Lam, 2019)

Jointly produced by Tencent Penguin Pictures and NewStyle Media, The Untamed is an adaptation of a BL Novel (Danmei) named The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation. In China, the popularity of The Untamed is unquestionable. The drama reached 6.5 billion views only four months after the initial release of its first episode and just celebrated its incredible milestone of 10 billion streaming views on Tencent's Video in December 2021. This number is only confined to Tencent Video's streaming platform in China. The drama also became a global phenomenon, such that various foreign online streaming platforms and T.V. channels, namely Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Rakuten Viki, South Korea's Asia UHD and Japan's Wowow, bought its copyright. It has since been translated into 11 languages, including Thai. The show helped increase the number of new WeTV Thailand users in Thailand by approximately 250% and raised the WeTV application download count to one million downloads/month (Aonteera, 2020).

Figure 5.10

Scenes from The Untamed (left); The Untamed Official Poster (right)

Sixteen years ago, five clans took control of the cultivation world, including Gusu Lan, Yunmeng Jiang, Qinghe Nie, Qishan Wen, and Lanling Jin. Wei Wuxian from the Yunmeng Jiang clan met his friend Lan Wangji of the Gusu Lan clan when he participated in the training at Gusu Lan sect. One day, the two men accidentally fall into a river, bringing them to meet one of Gusu Lan's ancestors. The ancestor gave them a piece of Yin metal, which in the past had been destroyed into pieces and sealed off in different places. Due to the Yin metal, Lan Wangji received an order from his teacher to find the other pieces of the Yun metal. The pair went through many adventures and trials together and became good friends.

They also found out that the head of the Wen clan wanted to expand his power by using the Yin mental to rule the world and started to destroy the other clans resulting in the death of the head of Yunmeng Jiang, Wuxian's adoptive parents. Jiang Zheng, Wei Wuxian's brother, also lost his golden core. Knowing that the golden core is essential for Jiang Zheng as it is the core integral for cultivation and Jiang Zheng will become the new head of the Yunmeng Jiang clan, Wei Wuxian decided to give his golden core to Jiang Zheng secretly. Losing his golden core caused Wei Wuxian to be unable to use his power and sword. The Wen family captured him and threw him into the deadly mountain. Fortunately, he survived and started learning black magic after losing his golden core. After reuniting with his family, the Yunmeng Jiang clan, he got into a fight with his brother as he attempted to protect the innocent members of the Wen from unfair persecution. This led to a disaster resulting in the tragic death of Wei Wuxian. Sixteen years later, Wei Wuxian reappeared. He met his friend Lan Wangji once again. The pair reunited to solve the mystery behind the evil events in their past and eventually defeated the true culprit.

In terms of cultural soft power projected through this series, the Chinese core values of selflessness and a people-oriented mindset are depicted in the two young protagonists; one being a man who selflessly sacrifices his life to protect the innocent from any unfair persecution; the other a righteous, honest and loyal to his loved ones and family. These characteristics help shape a narrative about Chinese people, portraying them in a positive light.

The second interesting point is that the series is adapted from a BL novel. However, to avoid censorship, the live adaptation has adjusted the relationship

between the two male protagonists into *Dangai*. Accordingly, without touching much upon homosexual relationships, the series received a positive review 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). In addition, the drama was recommended by China.org.cn as one of the top must-watch Chinese dramas that became popular overseas in 2019 (Wang, 2020).

The success of The Untamed led to the purchase of approximately 60 boys-love novels by production companies, and many *dangai* dramas are expected to release through online streaming platforms. Ji (2020) discusses that the BL adaptations are gradually becoming a significant income for entertainment companies in China to draw upon. However, due to the crackdown on China's entertainment industry in 2021, resulting from toxic fandom culture among the youth, Chinese authorities have imposed several guidelines and regulations which also impact the *dangai* industry. Authorities, such as Beijing Municipal Radio and Television Bureau and NRTA, issued orders to wholly ban the live adaption of boys' love novels. They asked the producers and companies to stick to realistic works amid the nation's drive for comprehensive entertainment regulation (GT Staff Reporters, 2021). The attempt to clean up China's cyberspace came with a new license system for online shows and movies. During these past years, Chinese domestic web drama production enjoyed loose regulation from the government, meaning that previously, the shows only needed to be internally approved and reviewed by streaming platforms for their release (He, 2022). Nevertheless, the new regulation imposes that the production companies must now acquire an administrative license for online audiovisual works from the NRTA by having the drama or movie reviewed before airing on streaming platforms ("China Issues Administrative," 2022).

China is facing a contradiction in its policy and dilemma: the control over social ideology versus the ability to sell its products well in the international market (Rosen, 2017). In the case of *dangai* dramas, it is hard to deny that after the success of *The Untamed*, boy love live adaptations have become a hit in China's entertainment industry and gradually became one of the primary sources of income

from both domestic and international markets. Nevertheless, with the action from the government, it is undeniable that the authorities are not afraid to crack down on the highly profitable sectors in exchange for control over political and ideological security. Thus, it would be interesting to see the future of live adaptation of boy love works in China.

5.3 Analysis of China's messages to the world and its people

Through the case studies above, it is evident that the messages embedded in the films and series correspond to China's soft power objectives discussed in the previous chapter. According to Edney (2015), "soft power is primarily relevant to the enhancement of regime legitimacy where a significant component of the moral justification for maintaining the current system is based on the regime's ability to improve the international status of the national unit". Accordingly, the case studies show endeavours to appease domestic audiences by illustrating China's power in global affairs and acceptance from foreign nations as a rising great power in order to bolster the party's right to rule. Simultaneously, the case studies also touch upon China's willingness to improve the country's image by promoting itself as a responsible great power. Observably, the messages conveyed through these entertainment media are in line with the concept of the Chinese Dream and Harmonious World and responsible great power.

5.3.1 Patriotic plotline: The creation of a national pride

In the case studies above, their central premise concentrated on the attachment to one's family, motherland and humankind, which helps create patriotic feelings. The viewers see the sacrifice of protagonists primarily associated with the government or military. This plotline can help the CPC gain favour from the domestic audience and strengthen its legitimacy owing to its devotion to the people. In addition, the commitment to serving and protecting the Chinese people can create a strong sense of belonging and superiority toward the Chinese nationality.

Secondly, the movies and T.V. series portray China as a rising world leader. During a disaster or wartime, China is the first to lead the mission to save the

world or the life of the people. Domestic audiences may feel pride in their government for their devotion to humankind and leadership. Not only the government's actions that the Chinese citizens can beg about, but the Chinese philosophy embedded in the story, which differs from western thinking, also makes them proud.

Lately, President Xi continuously emphasises promoting patriotism and enhancing national pride among the people, especially the youth. Love for one's country and national pride unite the people in a difficult time; patriotism is the most profound attachment of the Chinese people to their motherland and one of the most fundamental driving forces of different stages of China's development (Shu, 2022). At the Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China on July 1, 2021, Xi described the Chinese as "people who uphold justice and have a strong sense of pride and confidence". He also called for the unity of the Chinese people as the "patriotic united front is an important means for the Party to unite all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation, both at home and abroad, behind the goal of national rejuvenation (Xi, 2021)". It is undeniable that Xi Jinping upholds a solid nationalist governing philosophy. The many challenges at home and abroad, such as the unrest in Hong Kong, the economic slowdown by the trade war and the COVID-19 pandemic, have shaken the legitimacy of the CPC; thus, the best resource to win people's trust in the Party is to build nationalistic fervour. Consequently, instead of remaining low-key like what China did in the past, the CPC has changed its mindset and started to build a more positive and confident image: China is now strong enough to protect its citizens and lead the world (Gao, 2019).

5.3.2 Core socialist values: Collectivism and dedication

Written in the Constitution, one of the fourteen-point fundamental principles according to Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era is upholding core socialist values; dedication is one of those listed twelve moral principles[2]. Patriotic and dedicated citizens are essential for realising the Chinese Dream, national rejuvenation and establishing a prosperous nation (Gow, 2017); such

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[2] Core socialist values comprise a set of moral principles summarized by central authorities as prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendliness (Huaxia, 2020)

moral is clearly shown through the protagonists in the four case studies. Chinese culture is based on collectivism and the family as the centre, emphasising the family, clan, religion and country (Lhapeerakul, 2019). Therefore, as a message to the Chinese audiences, those protagonists exhibit the willingness to put collective interest over their own needs, which corresponds with the Chinese government's call for a "model citizen" who respects their home country and puts the collective needs of the state above their individual desires (Zeng, 2018; Clifford & Romaniuk, 2021).

Moreover, to international audiences, the Chinese heroism that upholds core values of the Chinese tradition of collectivism and patriotic sentiment is considered an alternative to the U.S.'s cultural and ideological dominance and gives the audience new clarity on the world's good hero (Schwartzel, 2022). This also offers foreign viewers a window into the Chinese ideology so as to better understand China and enhance China's cultural and ideological power. Plus, such message makes room for China to win positive public opinion toward China as a country which is ready to step up for the world.

5.3.3 Community of shared future for mankind

With Xi Jinping in power, China insists that it never seeks hegemony, emphasising the notion of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation. Foot (2018) discusses that with the belief that Western influence is in decline, China is now promoting a set of beliefs about the contributions that China can make to global governance, to the provision of global and regional public goods, and the contribution that its exemplary model for development and democracy offers to the world.

It is noticeable that films embedded the CPC's Harmonious World policy into their story to show that China encourages international cooperation to build "a community with a shared future for mankind", such as the Belt and Road Initiative in Wolf Warriors 2. Even though the initiative is not directly mentioned; however, viewers can still refer to it when watching the films by seeing the development China brings to the city, i.e. Chinese hospitals and Chinese businesses. According to China, the BRI serves as a platform to build a community with a shared future for mankind

(Xinhua, 2022), and despite being originated in China, the BRI belongs to the world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, n.d.).

5.3.4 Reshaping the "China threat" narrative and improving national image

The case studies show China's attempts to reshape the China threat narrative, which the U.S. and its allies have accused China of. The U.S. and Western countries view China as a threat to the international order and a country that aspires to attain world hegemony. The Wandering Earth represents one of China's attempts to counteract this narrative. For example, the aerospace industry has become China's top economic and scientific priority. However, the U.S. and its allies accuse China's space programme of threatening their national security. To prevent this narrative from becoming widely-accepted by other nations, the Chinese government has made great efforts to ensure that its space programme is not a threat to those values shared by the U.S. and its allies, and its technological rise will threaten the autonomy and interests of other nations (Silk, 2020). Instead, China's aerospace programme will benefit humankind and the international community. With this example, it is observable that China uses films and dramas to pass the message to the audiences regarding its encouragement of international cooperation.

Furthermore, in recent years, Chinese movies and TV shows have gone global with diversified themes, helping audiences to view China in many different aspects. On the one hand, historical and costume dramas appeal to viewers to see more about the history of China; on the other hand, the dramas based on the life of contemporary Chinese people allow viewers to experience the modern life of Chinese people and be able to better understand Chinese people and crop the negative stereotypes that view China as an old and conservative country. The films and series also allow international viewers to become more familiar with the Chinese way of thinking and culture, and promote China's tourism and cultures, such as traditional music and costumes. As Rao pointed out, "The increasing number of Chinese movies and TV series going overseas reflects the improvement of China's overall national strength, cultural soft power and cultural influence" (Rao, 2022).

5.3.5 China's technological developments and capabilities

Technology and innovation have become tools for international influence in the digital era. Alongside other countries, China has entered a technology competition and is competing for dominance in technology because the production of advanced technologies provides economic strength, military power, and an intangible benefit of perceived leadership (Lewis, 2018). It is observable that technologies and innovation become one of the key features in the four case studies, including military, aerospace, medical, gaming technologies and innovation. In line with the slogan "From Made in China to Created in China", these films and TV programs are great tools for showcasing China's technological capabilities and to build the image of a technologically advanced society that reflects "innovative productivity" (Su, 2004, as cited in Keane, 2007, p. 85).

In conclusion, it is clear that China put considerable effort into building soft power through films and series. A benign image will help create a more favourable image among the international audience, thus further enhancing a country's soft power (Fan, 2008, as cited in Kahraman, 2017, p. 94). Accordingly, these positive sides may help pacify the negative narrative about China and the stereotypes viewed by outsiders. Simultaneously, it helps generate confidence in the homeland among Chinese citizens and promotes a sense of belonging among themselves and the nation.

However, it is important to note that despite the efforts to send out those messages, the audiences may have different levels of acceptance and interpretation of the contents, due to several conditions, including the relations between the recipient country and China, individual perceptions, different backgrounds in terms of culture, education, history, language and political system.

In line with the Chinese Dream, the themes of films and series, even produced by private companies, lately focus more on nationalist sentiments. This can imply that the government is intensifying its attempt to strengthen national cohesion through domestic soft power. Unlike Chinese people, who may be more familiar with patriotic themed movies, international audiences may find it difficult to understand China's efforts to convey its collective wisdom and nationalist ideas. Moreover, contents heavily concentrated on patriotism tend to be viewed as propaganda by the

State, which then lessens soft power credibility. Nevertheless, even among Chinese netizens, the nationalist plotline of the case studies also received mixed responses.

By looking at Box Office data, the films selected as case studies show that Chinese-made films which heavily embody patriotic themes sold better in China than abroad, considering that the over 90% of the revenue of the three selected main-melody films was generated domestically. Such a significant gap in ticket sales may result from the language barrier and cultural differences among audiences, especially those whose culture is very distant from Chinese culture. Viewers who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture, philosophy and history may find it hard to understand or get lost in the narrative while watching Chinese shows. To illustrate, in the film Wolf Warrior 2, there is one scene when the antagonistic European mercenary was fighting Leng Feng. He says: "people like you will always be inferior to people like me; get used to it, get fucking used to it". This scene refers to the period called the "Century of Humiliation" when the Chinese empire was invaded by foreign powers. However, Leng Feng responded— "That is fucking history"— reflects China's current international position on the world stage. People may interpret such dialogue differently based on each person's knowledge of Chinese history.

Political attitudes and international relations play an important part in international viewers' interpretation and reception of messages hidden in the movie/series. For instance, according to various polls on the perception of China's soft power in Europe, European people differentiate between China as a country—that is Chinese government—and the Chinese people. However, negative perceptions about China still arise due to dissatisfaction with China's economic growth - which may affect their countries' employment and industries – as well as China's authoritarian political system and the human rights situation in China (d'Hooghe, 2010). Hence, with such perception, it is questionable whether the film could be converted into tangible soft power outcomes and shape people's attitudes, opinions or behaviour.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

The notion of soft power has been warmly embraced and discussed in China. Ever since the idea of soft power became one of the core policies in China's national strategy, China has put tremendous efforts into achieving its quest for soft power to create a positive narrative of China and to strengthen CPC legitimacy and nationalist sentiment in its homeland. Soft power officially entered China's politics when former President Hu Jintao addressed the idea at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2007. Since then, soft power has been included in several official documents, such as the country's Five-Year Plan.

It is worth mentioning that China expands the soft power concept broader than Nye's. First, instead of taking a passive role and letting civil society and the private sector be active actors who flourish the country's soft power, China insists on controlling the projection of soft power through a top-down approach. Second, China projects its soft power in two directions: inward and outward, meaning that the Beijing-style soft power focuses not only on international audiences but also on domestic audiences, unlike the American concept, which concentrates on international influence. These two significant differences represent a major departure from Nye's soft power stipulation. Domestic soft power is essential for China as it has continuously been facing several internal crises; thus, building patriotism and harmony within the Chinese society represents a key goal for the CPC to assure and strengthen its legitimacy. Simultaneously, Beijing has also been attacked by various international criticisms; therefore, China seeks to foster its international soft power through aiming to influence foreign opinions by presenting itself as a responsible power and showcasing the Chinese traditional socialist value as an alternative to Western ideology.

Chinese leaders view culture as an important tool for augmenting China's soft power. Chinese culture has long been attractive to foreigners, especially those whose cultures are different from those of the East. Thus, in the past decades, the world has witnessed China's effort to sell its culture to its international neighbours to show

the charm of Chinese culture to the world. China's route for cultural soft power took off decades ago and has achieved considerable progress throughout these past years.

Popular culture, like film and drama, are potential instruments to transmit preferable messages and ideology to audiences and can even lead to behavioural change. In these past few years, China has been promoting soft power through films and TV series. The parade of Chinese entertainment media enters into the international market reflects the Chinese government's efforts to enhance China's soft power and to "tell China's story well." This effort can be seen through various occasions, such as film festivals, a channel to represent Chinese culture, lifestyle, and values. It is noticeable that more film festivals hosted by state agencies or co-hosted with the private sector are organised both in mainland China and abroad; for example, the famous Beijing International Film Festival (BJIFF) and Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF); the Chinese American Film Festival (CAFF) held annually in November in Los Angeles, San Francisco and other cities in the U.S.; the Chinese Film Festival 2022, held in Luxembourg, featured six contemporary Chinese films, including the Chinese mega-hit The Wandering Earth; the Chinese Film Week 2022 in Melbourne, Australia, screening seven Chinese films, including Chinese Doctor. The effort to disseminate China's story and culture to the world is not only limited to the organisation of film festivals. It also includes a series of documentary films aired on CCTV6 both online and offline e.g. 100 episodes of Chinese history on the CCTV6 YouTube channel with English subtitles.

As discussed above, the Chinese government appears to have a great interest in sending out its cultural products in terms of popular culture, such as movies and TV/Web dramas. Therefore, since 2013, China's cultural industry has undergone several reforms to enhance its competitiveness in the market. The reforms led to the distinction between public cultural services provided by the government and the cultural industry run by private sectors, which then allowed the industry to come up with the works that serve the need of the consumers. However, despite the distinction, the industry remains under the supervision of the State in terms of content. Moreover, the government provides several means of support to facilitate industry growth, including financial support such as tax exemption and widening financing channels so the producers and creators can access loans; and preferential policies for land use in

order to build film studios and locations. Moreover, the government encourages more inbound and outbound co-production investment in the film industry, allowing Chinese production companies to gain know-how from foreign producers and have more negotiation power regarding the movie content.

Also of importance is the issue of digitalisation. A big push from the government to enhance its digital economy led to a transition from traditional media to digital media, which then helps create tremendous changes in the consumption of Chinese entertainment products. The Internet Plus+Culture initiative enhances cultural innovations and the digital economy. The Internet is a vast marketplace where consumers can freely select various cultural entertainment products based on their preferences. The arrival of online streaming platforms allows people to access more Chinese entertainment content with diverse genres. Thus, a "soft power by accident" becomes easier to diffuse.

In terms of content and censorship, the past decade has seen changes and development in China's film and dramas. In recent years, the content of Chinese dramas has become more diverse to the extent that BL live adaptations make inroads into the industry. In 2019, the Chinese drama The Untamed, adapted from a BL novel, became a smashing success among international and domestic viewers. The drama gained huge attention globally, especially in Asia. The topic related to the show became the top No. 1 Twitter trending topic during its broadcast. In the past, viewers may not expect this type of adaptation in China, but thanks to a less severe control over online content distribution, which only requires in-house screening, the show was successfully released and became one of the Chinese drama mega-hits in 2019, drawing more attention from foreign audiences to Chinese shows. In addition, a slight relaxation in the government's control over online content allows entertainment companies to develop dramas that meet market demand. Therefore, more trending topics on social media platforms such as Twitter related to Chinese content have become more noticeable lately, thus creating more visibility for Chinese dramas. The relaxation not only applies to online dramas, but also to the online distribution of Chinese films. In China, films have long been used for propagandist purposes, thus undergoing approval before playing on big screens. However, the dual-track censorship mechanism allows film producers to enjoy relatively relaxed censorship from the authorities. Films that do

not get approved for public screening can still enter the market through online platforms.

Movies and dramas help illustrate the image, cultural values and characteristics which China wants to spread globally. According to the analysis of the five case studies, the key messages of those shows correspond to China's soft power objectives and its foreign policies, such as the well-known slogans "peaceful rise" and "a community with a shared future for mankind". These shows represent China's attempt to mitigate an unfavourable image of China by using a harmonious world and peaceful co-existence narrative, e.g. the Belt and Road Initiative, cooperation between China and international institutions/organisations. Moreover, as the films and dramas are embedded with Chinese ideology and values, they help international viewers to gain a clearer picture of socialism with Chinese characteristics notion, which China aims to establish as an alternative to Western political and developmental values. In addition, they also focus on glorifying and honouring the sacrifice of Chinese heroes who devote themselves to the country and family in order to strengthen nationalist sentiment and promote a sense of belonging among Chinese citizens and the nation. In addition, it is also worth mentioning that 'a technologically advanced and creative country' are another characteristic that China attempts to brand itself through those films and dramas. High-quality entertainment shows can attract more viewers, and in addition to that, they increase china's soft power. The Wandering Earth and You are my glory reflect the slogan "From Made in China" to "Created in China". They ease the old image of China and represent an image of "innovative productivity".

In conclusion, the Chinese government's efforts to strengthen its soft power could be seen in various forms, including its role in implementing suitable policies, infrastructure and ecosystem that accommodate and facilitate the creative industry's growth and competitiveness. In addition, the authorities take a considerable part in directing the content of entertainment products to narrate the story favourable to its regime and shape China's favourable image against the China threat discourse.

However, it is worth noting that despite its efforts to expand Chinese culture worldwide and become another cultural powerhouse, the result and viewer's perceptions are still mixed. Compared to South Korea, the success of its K-Wave is a global phenomenon. China and South Korea used to share some common

characteristics; their cultural works served political objectives, and their creative freedom was repressed and strictly regulated. Nonetheless, changes in South Korea's politics and the end of the authoritarian rule of the military government led to a shift in the government's perception of the industry. The cultural industry was viewed as a potential sector to improve the country's economic growth. The South Korean government has implemented various supports similar to what the Chinese government offered to the industry, ranging from financial to digital infrastructure support.

Despite similar forms of support, creative freedom is a big difference between the two countries. With the ability to freely create their cultural works resulting in more innovative and attractive works, content of Korean films and dramas are high-quality and successfully attract people across the world. Unlike South Korea, China still proactively regulates its entertainment media in order to ensure that the CPC's propaganda and its ideologies are well followed. Therefore, there are ongoing debates among audiences regarding the credibility of Chinese content in attempting to influence viewers' opinions with China's political interests, especially in "Main Melody" films like Wolf Warrior 2 and The Wandering Earth. Comparing Chinese TV series and films, it is almost certain that the former has grown more popular than the latter and are seen as vehicles for political propaganda. TV and online series received more positive feedback and attracted more foreign audiences than films, seeing from comments on several OTT services websites. The reason behind the different levels of success could be due to plot lines of Chinese dramas that do not heavily focus on a patriotic theme or are politicised to serve the need of the CPC, thus making the show easier to follow and digest by viewers. This argument is also reflected in the Box Office data of the three selected films; it is clear that these Main Melody films sold better in China than abroad. Public viewers tend to favour watching shows produced by liberal countries since their content is not heavily regulated by government authorities. Thus, China may have to weigh the outcomes between slightly losing its tight control, in exchange for popularity in its entertainment media, especially the film industry, to win the hearts of more viewers or continuing with its propagandist model, which decreases China's opportunity to become one of the world's cultural powerhouse and to change to the world view of China.

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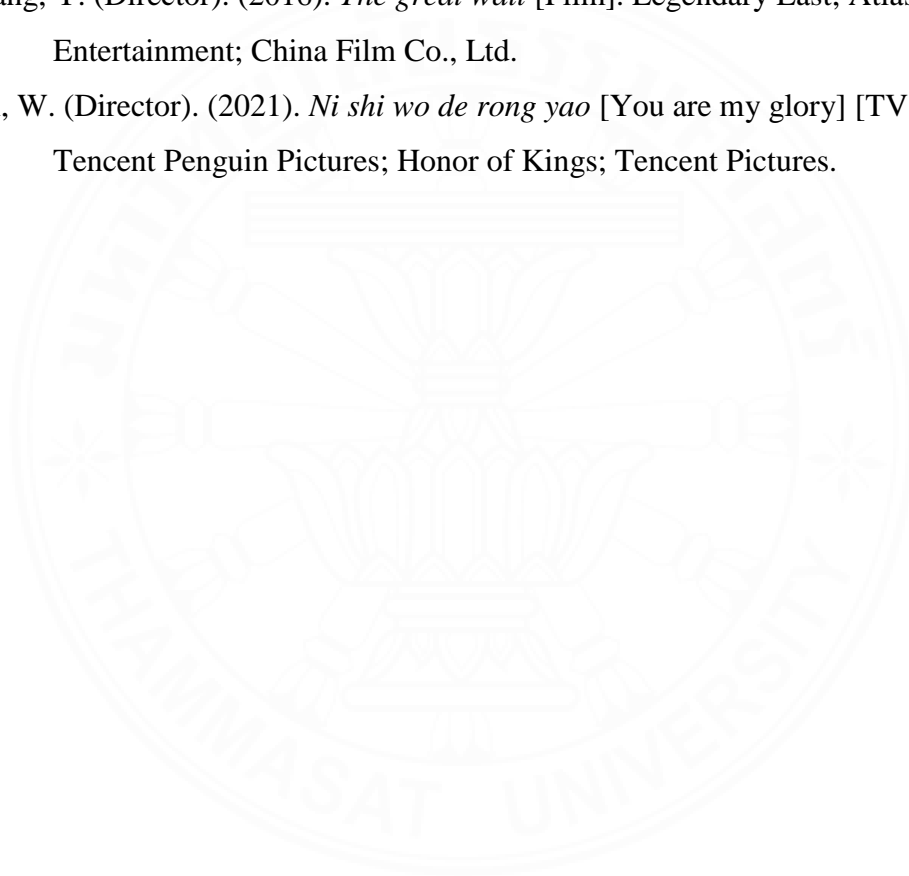
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