

Chinese Government's Inability to Use Film – One of the Most Powerful Cultural Tools of
Soft Power Expansion – to Achieve Its Soft Power Expansion Goals:
Lessons for China to Tackle Its Soft Power-Deficit Problem

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Abstract

Many scholars of Chinese soft power commonly believe that despite the fact that China has been working hard to achieve successful soft power expansion, one of the biggest factors that leads to Chinese soft power deficit or failure of the Chinese government to effectively trump “China threat” is its inability to use its cultural industries as a tool to fulfill its soft power expansion goals. This is a major obstacle to China in achieving its goal of successful Chinese soft power expansion, as it is said that culture is the most traditional and powerful source of soft power expansion. This paper, through its exploration of a specific cultural industry of China – its film industry – and China’s failure to use it successfully as a tool of soft power expansion, will strive to find out what is inducing this failure in order to produce a concrete lesson that China can take away to tackle its soft power deficit issue. This phenomenon in which China is unable to achieve successful soft power expansion through films is an interesting outlier case, for films are viewed by scholars as one of the most “powerful” cultural tools of soft power expansion (Lovric 2016). Through looking at the case studies of Japan and South Korea of how their film industries have granted them successful soft power expansion, and by comparing these cases to the unsuccessful case of China and its film industry, this paper will argue that the barrier to the Chinese government’s soft power expansion achievement through its film industry is not the government intervention in itself, but the fashion in which the CCP intervenes: in the form of censorship that discourages creative content from flourishing in a bottom-up fashion (due to its historic and present view of films as medium of spreading political propaganda). This leads to the overarching argument of this paper that: although cultural industries like films have the capacity to serve as powerful tools of soft power expansion, governments should note that a condition to this success is that cultural industries should be encouraged to develop organically from within the society rather than in a top-down fashion with heavy governmental involvement in the form of censorship.

Introduction

Joseph Nye, the coiner of the term soft power, argues that in the current world, a country would not survive solely with its “economic and military assets”, and that it has become necessary for countries to expand their soft power – to pay attention to and strive for a positive “world opinion” of their images (Nye 2008, 96). China, through the course of its rapid economic development and becoming widely recognized as a new global superpower, has become one of these countries that has realized the increasing need to improve its global image – away from being portrayed as being authoritarian, corrupt, and lacking in human rights consciousness, to being recognized as a legitimate and influential nation worthy of respect. The Chinese government’s explicit statements regarding its commitment to consolidate a better image of itself through soft power expansion efforts can be traced all the way back to Mao’s regime in his Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, but were declared more formally in recent years within Hu Jintao’s “proposal of ‘peaceful rise theory’ and ‘harmonious world’”, and even more explicitly within President Xi Jinping’s speech in 2014, when he announced that the Communist Party’s goal is to “increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s messages to the world” (Cho and Jeong 2008, 459; Shambaugh 2015, 99). China’s efforts to adopt and apply this idea of “soft power”, or “软实力 (ruanshili)”, to boost its image domestically and internationally took many forms over the years; however, according to many scholars, China is said to be currently experiencing a soft power deficit, not seeing favorable survey poll results done among different populations in several countries which asked how people thought of China (Shambaugh 2015). There are scholars with differing viewpoints on Chinese soft power, but they commonly believe that one of the biggest factors that leads to Chinese soft power expansion deficit, or the Chinese government’s failure to trump the notion of “China threat” is its inability to use cultural industries. This is detrimental to Chinese efforts to expand soft power, for culture is viewed as the most traditional and powerful source of soft power expansion (which countries that are seeking to achieve successful soft power expansion like China should resort to using).

This paper will thus explore the specific case of how China’s films are bringing about soft power deficit in China, and pose the question of why, despite the fact that film is said to be “one of the most powerful cultural tools in communicating social messages to the public, as well as influencing politicians and government all over the world”, films made in China only bring about negative spotlights to the country (Lovric 2016). In fact, most successful films in foreign countries that could be often mistakenly known by the public to have been “made in China” have actually been made in Taiwan or Hong Kong, outside of Mainland China.¹ For instance, the famous *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* that earned nearly \$200 million over the world is the product of Director Ang Lee - who is from Taiwan (Cain n.d.). *Kungfu Hustle*, *Drunken Master*, and *The Forbidden Kingdom* - these are all products that were created outside of Mainland China, in Hong Kong. Another example in which successful Chinese cultural movie that was made outside of China is the *Kung Fu Panda* series made by DreamWorks Animation in US, which earned around \$1.3 billion internationally; in fact, the CCP officials were impressed by the faithful traditional Chinese values put forth by *Kung Fu Panda* series, leading them to talk with Jeffrey Katzenberg, the

¹ The question of whether Hong Kong and Taiwan belongs to China is a separate debate that this paper does not engage in; however, they are both in fact considered as Autonomous regions with different economic and political systems from that of Mainland China, and are considered to have cinema industries that have developed separately and are thus distinct from that of Mainland China.

Chairman of DreamWorks to set up a joint venture in the future (Cain n.d.). This is why, some people like Robert Cain, an entertainment consultant who works in China, argues that “China's best hope for improving its global image will be to enlist outsiders—storytelling mercenaries, or modern-day de Toquevilles, if you prefer—to shine a light on that nation's best, brightest, and most universal values” (Cain n.d.). However, it is important to consider that when representation of China is done continually by foreign sources, the resulting soft power is at risk of unsustainability and misrepresentation. What's more is, when China does actually get its own films out to the foreign markets, the outcomes are not successful; Chinese government's political narrative or visions that are embedded within Chinese films come off as rather tacky, responded to with negativity by foreign audiences – even the ones that are co-produced with foreign producers and directors. Some recent films created by 5th Generation directors like Zhang Yimou has gained attention in the international film community, but these are all movies that were critical of Chinese government and society, worsening Chinese image around the world rather than boosting Chinese soft power.² Overall, it is fair to state that China does not have an iconic cultural industry that it can use as a resource to fulfill its soft power expansion goals, like Hollywood of US, Bollywood of India, or animation films of Japan, despite the fact that there is in fact a huge demand for Chinese cultural products internationally (Li 2009, 145).

This paper will delve into case studies of Japan and South Korea - countries that experienced successful soft power expansion through their film industries. From looking at the Japanese and South Korean film industries' historical developmental processes, the paper will look at how their governments were heavily involved in censoring films in the past, but have slowly changed to being less or indirectly involved; whereas in the case of China, the government's view of film industry as a means to preach party values in the past continues to this day. Such fashion in which the Chinese government interferes into its film industry 1) causes lessened artistic autonomy that ultimately hinders the development of an original Chinese film industry “brand” that can be marketed sustainably, and also, 2) leads to even those films that actually make it to foreign box offices to be responded with negativity - as their containment of political values diminish their artistic values and likeability. By comparing the successful Japanese and South Korean cases of soft power expansion through film industries to the unsuccessful case of China, the paper will argue that the Chinese government's barrier to successfully converting and using its film industry as a tool of soft power expansion is not the government's intervention itself, but the ways in which the Chinese government intervenes into the film industry: in the form of censoring the films at their creation stage. From this finding, the paper will go back to the bigger picture of Chinese soft power deficit as a whole, and argue that if the Chinese government truly wants to achieve successful Chinese soft power expansion, it needs to realize that although cultural industries have the capacity to serve as powerful tools of soft power expansion, the condition is that they need to be developed more naturally from within the society rather than in a top-down fashion with the government's heavy involvement in the form of censorship.

Literature Review

The literature review section of this paper will look at existing literatures on soft power and Chinese soft power, and how many scholars regard culture as one of the most traditional and powerful source of soft power that countries like China should use (rather than

² Fifth Generation directors are a group of rebellious directors who challenged the Chinese government's ideologies with politically provocative films.

economic or political leverages), but also, how many of these scholars claim that China is failing to use its cultural industry due to the ways in which the Chinese government interferes into the cultural industries. The literature review will convey the value of this thesis then: that through its exploration of a specific cultural industry of China – its film industry – and China’s failure to use it successfully as a tool of soft power expansion, this thesis will try to provide a concrete causal factor to Chinese soft power deficit that the Chinese government can take away as a lesson to tackle its soft power deficit issue.

Soft Power’s Most Powerful Source (Culture) & China’s Inability to Use it Successfully

According to Joseph Nye, soft power is the power of “attraction and seduction”, and the “ability to shape the preferences of others” without having to use hard power sources like economic payment and military intimidation (Nye 2008, 95). Joseph Nye had stated in his work that soft power of a country rests on three sources: “its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority” (Nye 2008, 96). Out of these three sources, Nye focuses heavily on the first source– culture – in his works; for instance, he describes the United States as a “democratic” country that “was a relative latecomer to the idea of using information and culture for the purposes of diplomacy”, but that its eventual attention to expanding soft power through spreading US culture has allowed it to become one of the most powerful countries in the world (Nye 2008, 97). In the case of China, Zhao Qizheng amplifies the powerfulness of culture as a source of soft power expansion by stating “China cannot become a cultural superpower until China has a sufficient market share in the world’s culture market. Only when China becomes a cultural superpower, it is possible for China to be a world superpower” (Li 2009, 145).

According to Li Mingjiang, Chinese leaders do recognize such need for China to focus on cultural exports, and are ambitious to become a major cultural exporter, because they are aware that that cultural exports can help the promotion and dissemination of Chinese culture while counterbalancing US’s cultural dominance, which will lead to the enhancement of Chinese soft power, which will then, “increase China’s comprehensive power in the world” (Li 2009, 144-145). Li also points out that there is in fact “a vast market demand for Chinese culture in the world”, and that China does have the “many cultural resources to become a major world power” (Li 2009, 145).

However, despite such supposed readiness of the Chinese government to export cultural products and the desire among foreign countries to import them, many scholars point out that the Chinese government, instead of focusing on cultural products, uses its intimidating economic and political leverages as a tool of soft power “via initiatives like the enormous ‘One Belt, One Road’ program”, and by investing in overseas infrastructure projects that could simultaneously “increase its economic reach while also bolstering its image” (Ford 2017). To look at the sheer extent of the Chinese government’s economic investment into its soft power expansion efforts, it has been reported that “China contributed \$50 billion to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank upon its founding, \$40 billion for its Silk Road Fund, \$25 billion for the Maritime Silk Road, and another \$41 billion to the New Development Bank (established by BRICS states: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa)” (Albert 2017). One of the most well known critics of such Chinese soft power strategy, David Shambaugh, states in his work that “for all the billions of dollars China is spending on these efforts, it has yet to see any demonstrable improvement in its global image”, and that in fact, “the country’s reputation has steadily deteriorated” according to

public opinion surveys and polls (Shambaugh 2015,107). He explains the reason behind the failure is that “Chinese government approaches public diplomacy the same way it constructs high-speed rail or builds infrastructure – by investing money and expecting to see development”; he points that in order to carry out successful soft power, the Chinese government has to recognize that “soft power cannot be bought. It must be earned” (Shambaugh 2015,107). In fact, scholars like Shambaugh, Kurlantzick, and Nye himself, point out that the ways in which the Chinese government uses its economic leverages as a tool for soft power results in blurring of the lines between hard and soft power, leading to its soft power deficit problem (Ford 2017; “China Is Spending Billions to Make the World Love It: Can Money Buy That Sort of Thing?” 2017; Nye 2015; Kurlantzick 2007).

On the other hand, some scholars also point out the limitations within these existing literatures; Michael Barr argues there are fundamental limitations to the claims within those who argue that China’s definition of soft power includes economic and political leverage and that such particularity of Chinese soft power strategy is the very reason why Chinese soft power is going to be unsuccessful. Barr targets Kurlantzick directly in his literature, saying that while Kurlantzick argues that “China has expanded the definition of soft power beyond Nye’s original meaning” by including economic and political leverages as well, Kurlantzick “curiously gives no references for his assertion, even though there is a veritable explosion of literature on soft power in Chinese”; in other words, Barr argues that “claims that the Chinese themselves define soft power to include coercive economic measures” put forth by scholars like Kurlantzick and Shambaugh “do not stand up to the evidence” (Barr 2011, 17-18, Kurlantzick 2007). Furthermore, Barr goes on to state “if one seeks to subsume hard and soft power so that coercion is now part of soft power, then the utility of the concept is so badly tarnished that it becomes of little analytical value” (Barr 2011, 18).

It is true that the very concept of soft power should be differentiated from hard power, and Barr’s idea (that it seems as though some scholars might be willing to flex the definition of soft power to view Chinese actions as “threats”) evokes the actuality of the degree of acceptance for “China Threat” discourse that exists in academia. Byambakhand Luguusharav complements Barr’s point of view that “soft power lies in the soft use of power to nurture a state’s attraction, persuasiveness, and appeal” – and that this distinction must be kept clear; “if culture, ideology, and values are utilized for coercion, these cannot be counted as ‘soft power’, even though their associating sources are ‘soft’” (Luguusharav 2011, 6-7). Shogo Suzuki also agrees, stating that in the case of Chinese soft power, many scholars fail to make successful distinctions between Chinese government’s use of soft power and hard power, perhaps motivated by their underlying acceptance of China threat theory (Suzuki 2009).

However, beyond this debate (of whether or not Chinese government’s use of “hard” sources should be counted into its efforts of soft power expansion), what these literatures commonly hint that in order for China’s soft power expansion efforts to be successful, China has to “tackle the international community’s concerns about China head-on, and explain why the Chinese system has its merits, where the country is headed, and why China is not a threat to others”, and that in order to do this, it should resort to culture as its main source of soft power expansion rather than economic or political sources (Zhao 2015). However, it is alarming to know that in the case of China, many scholars say that there seems to be soft power deficit caused by China’s very inability to make use of its cultural sources (Lovric 2016, 31).

For instance, Kingsley Edney states that “China’s soft power strategy in the cultural sphere has always suffered from the tension between the twin objectives of appealing to foreign audiences and ensuring that what is being presented does not deviate from the party line. At least in the short term, for many in the cultural industries the incentives to conform are likely to outweigh the desire to push creative boundaries” (Edney 2016). Scholars like him believe that Chinese government causes its own soft power deficit problem by interfering in wrong way into its cultural sectors, such as education. An example of an effort made by the Chinese government in its culture-education sector is how it started promoting Chinese language and culture through constructing Confucius Institutes (which are “nonprofit organizations affiliated with China’s Ministry of Education” that “provide Mandarin languages courses, cooking and calligraphy classes, and celebrations for Chinese national holidays”), establishing 500 of them in total around the globe by April 2017 (Albert 2017). This was originally viewed as a smart move that could have contributed a lot to China’s soft power expansion efforts; however, scholars now state that teaching Chinese culture through such institute “can win only so much goodwill” if the Chinese government continues to intervene into the Confucius Institutes in inappropriate ways that attract controversy and antagonize its neighbors. For instance, McMaster University in Canada has discontinued its ties to the Confucius Institute program following an incident in 2013 over its employee being prohibited to follow Falun Gong, which is a forbidden religion in China; in another case, the head of Confucius Institute from China had ordered during a European Chinese-studies conference held in 2014, for programme including Taiwanese educational program to be “ripped out” (“China Is Spending Billions to Make the World Love It: Can Money Buy That Sort of Thing?” 2017). In both of these controversial cases, what was hindering the Chinese government was its own inability to let go of its need to intervene in its cultural industries - carrying out censorship measures through the Confucius Institute. Because such efforts of the Chinese government to expand soft power through its culture has been failing, scholars like Bruno Lovric go the distant of stating that, in China, “the most powerful resource – culture, has been somewhat ignored” (Lovric 2016, 32).

Conclusively, it can be deduced from looking at these existing literatures that China’s inability to use its culture is a big barrier to its soft power expansion goals as a whole, as culture is viewed as the best source of soft power that the Chinese government is advised to use. Thus, by studying a specific cultural industry of China – its film industry – and striving to find out why the Chinese government is unable to successfully use it to achieve its soft power goals through its film industry, this paper will be able to propose a concrete lesson for the Chinese government that it can take away to solve its soft power deficit issue.

Introduction to Case Studies: Film And Soft Power

Film is said to be “one of the most powerful cultural tools in communicating social messages to the public, as well as influencing politicians and government all over the world” (Lovric 2016). Joseph Nye, a former US Assistant Secretary of Defense and the original creator of the term soft power himself, states in his early work surrounding soft power of US, that exporting of Hollywood films have in fact contributed greatly to the consolidation of positive global perception and attraction towards US over the years (Nye 2008, 95). Similarly, Daya Kishan Thussu, a Professor of International Communication at the University of Westminster in London and the Founder of the Sage journal Global Media and Communication, writes in his work surrounding the soft power of India, that the globalization of the country’s popular Hindi film industry have served successfully as an instrument of soft power expansion for India (Thussu 2016). Although some scholars state that soft power

expansion through popular culture has its limitation in that it does not foster a “serious” cross-border dialogue and is often carried out in a one-sided projection system, popular cultural products like films are nevertheless harmless and light-hearted forms of entertainment that have the capacity to appeal to people of all social classes and backgrounds, able to serve as an incredibly effective tool for countries to brand themselves (Iwabuchi 2015). In fact, how countries that realized such usefulness of popular culture diplomacy has committed time and money to promote these industries – such as in the case of Japan’s “Cool Japan” project that signifies its aspiration of becoming a cultural superpower, or the case in which huge amounts of funding and even a president speech was dedicated to the distribution of K-pop cultural products in South Korea – show that film industry is an important tool of soft power expansion that countries like China should focus on using (Iwabuchi 2015; Kim and Dal 2016).

This section will look into the case studies of Japan and South Korea specifically, of how their film industries have successfully granted soft power expansion to these countries, and use the observations gained from these case studies to make comparison with the unsuccessful case of China and its film industry to understand as to what is acting as a barrier to China’s case. These two countries were picked because they are China’s neighbors that are said to have “paved” a “path” for China to follow in terms of their successful cultural exports cases; the animation films of Japan and K-dramas/movies of South Korea that have created enormous fandoms across the globe and have allowed foreigners to develop interest in cultures of these countries that they might have not even have traveled to or heard of beforehand (Keane 2010; Y. Kim 2013).

Japan

Arguably, the most well recognized case of successful soft power expansion among Asian countries is Japan and its cultural industries. More specifically, Japan’s animation and manga films and television shows have boosted the nation’s image and brand internationally. It was stated all the way back in 2002 that:

"Japanese culture has transcended U.S. demand or approval. Director and actor Takeshi Kitano, arguably the Japanese film industry's most noteworthy recent export, was first embraced in Europe, then in the United States. At...Berlin Film Festival, Hayao Miyazaki's Spirited Away became the first animation feature ever to win a top festival prize. A major publishing show in Frankfurt, for the first time, opened an exhibition of Japanese manga" (McGray 2002, 46).

Douglas McGray continues to point out that Japanese success through film and television industry have resulted in other countries’ products drawing “heavily on Japanese anime and manga for inspiration”, able to be recognized in Hollywood films and popular television series, such as *The Matrix*, *Ghost In Shell*, *Death Note* – conveying vividly how Japanese film industry has successfully granted Japan with soft power, for it has led people from other countries to become naturally attracted to Japanese art, wanting to imitate what Japan is putting forth (McGray 2002, 46).

In the past, the Japanese government had heavily censored its film production process; the Film Law of 1939 (which was inspired by and thus resembled Nazi’s Film Law of 1934) required all filmmakers to undergo stringent processes to create and distribute

movies, such as having to pass “aptitude tests” designed by the government to remain in their film professions, and getting approvals on all of their scripts from the government prior to shooting so that the government could determine whether they were politically appropriate (Kitamura 2017). The intensity of government censorship in the film industry peaked especially high during the imperialist era, when the Japanese government wanted filmmakers to create “cinema of the national population” that could “reinforce the Japanese government’s expansionist agendas” (Kitamura 2017).

Stringent policies continued until mid 1990s, but these censorship measures started to gradually diminish, as the Japanese government, after its defeat from WWII, wanted to erase its image as an intimidating military power, and instead, to promote its soft power. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs started to realize the soft power potential in its cultural products, and initiated the “Cool Japan” project, in which government funds were set aside to help Japanese companies investing overseas (especially in cultural industries) to “explode Japanese attractive goods and services on a worldwide scale” (“Cool Japan Initiative” 2014). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared formally that it aims to use “pop-culture, in addition to traditional culture and art, as its primary tools for cultural diplomacy” and “further the understand and trust of Japan” worldwide – organizing and supporting events like Japan International Manga Award, Anime Ambassador project, and the World Cosplay Summit (“Pop-Culture Diplomacy” 2017).

Nowadays, the film and television production market of Japan is described to be “non-regulatory and very competitive” (Sugaya 2004, 14). Unlike many other countries, Japanese film market does not even have a domestic film quota – which means that foreign films can compete freely with domestic Japanese films.

Today, there is one organization that overlooks the cultural aspect of Japanese film and television products: the ACA (Agency for Cultural Affairs), and in 2003, The ACA had created the four basic principles of the Japanese film production: 1) “Film is a synthetic art involving literature, drama, music, art, and architecture”, 2) “Film is an entertainment for all ages”, 3) “Film will create intellectual property values in the age of Information Technologies”, and 4) “Film contributes to a mutual understanding of the world” (Sugaya 2004, 9). These four principles convey that the Japanese government believes that their films should promote universally accepted and enjoyable Japanese culture around the world, which contrasts significantly from the agenda put forth by the past imperial government. Other government agencies also participate in the market, but they are said to be more concerned with the economic issues, and only one of them – The MPMHPT (The Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications) – technically has the job of regulating the content of cultural products (Sugaya 2004).

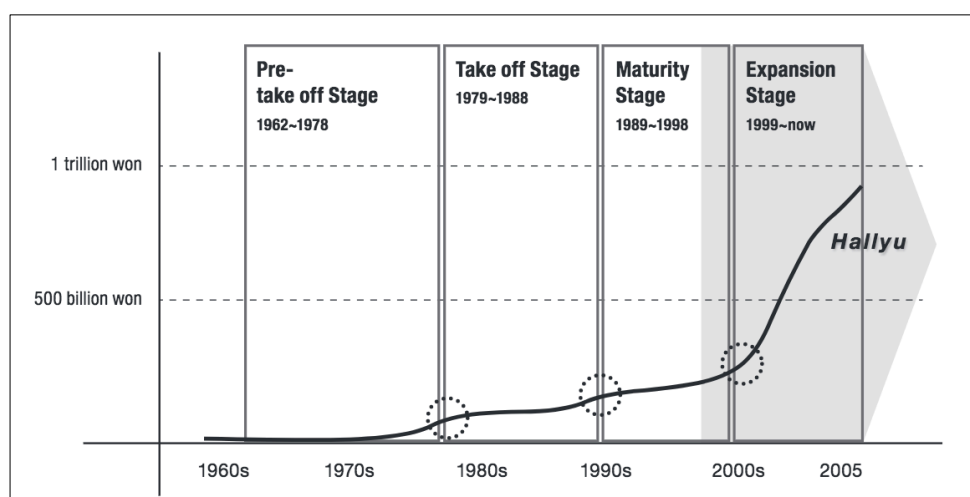
South Korea

Another very well recognized case of successful international soft power expansion through cultural industry is South Korea and the rise of “Hallyu”, translated as the “Korean wave”. Joseph Nye himself had stated that South Korea has the resources for soft power expansion – “from fashion and film to music and cuisine” – and is successfully growing its soft power through using these cultural resources efficiently (Nye 2009). In the case of its film industry, South Korea has not yet been able to establish as unique of a niche brand (like that of Japan and its animation and manga films), but it is said that “Korea’s pursuit of indigenous movie blockbusters has turned it into an international producer and distributor of

localized global movies” (Lee 2011, 45). Movies like *Old Boy*, *The Host*, and *Memories of Murder* were recognized in international film festivals, and were even recreated in other countries (Rist 2004).

Another soaring cultural industry in South Korea very closely related to the film industry is its television drama industry, known internationally as the K-drama industry. Korean romantic soap operas and traditional historical dramas have become increasingly popular over the world, penetrating its neighbors like China, Japan, Thailand, and Taiwan, as well as European, Middle Eastern, Latin American countries, and US (Y. Kim 2013). The South Korean dramas are also known to have generated income in other sectors of South Korean economy; for instance, the K-dramas are said to have “triggered a surge of Japanese tourists who toured sites depicted in their favorite shows” throughout the years (Lovric 2016, 32). Both Korean films and K-dramas have also started to establish grounds on US-based online movie and TV streaming service like Netflix, and renowned South Korean director like Joon-ho Bong have created movies like the *Snowpiercer* and *Okja* that stars international celebrities (like Chris Evans and Tilda Swinton) that are watched by international viewers.

Similar to Japan, South Korean film and television industries were under heavy government control in its earlier days, characterized by national policy movies that preached the government’s political agenda; foreign film/television products’ entries, domestic products’ content, and distribution system were all strictly regulated under the government’s rule (M. Kim 2011, 177). Because of the strict content censorship, “it was difficult to produce movies that could be universally accepted”, which resulted in the failure of the government’s intention to boost the film industry” (M. Kim 2011). This period is marked as the Pre-takeoff Stage in the table beneath, in which the film industry of South Korea was at their earliest developmental state, not making much revenue at all.



"Development Stage Division of the Film Industry in Korea " (M. Kim 2011, 177)

However, the direction of governmental support started to change gradually; prior to 1985, “films that reflected government’s goals (were) the object of support”, but after 1985, “films with artistic values have become the ones to receive support” (M. Kim 2011, 174). This push for creativity was caused by the “trend of globalization” and the following wave of deregulation policies, as the Korean government realized that regulations obstructed development of the domestic film industry (M. Kim 2011, 174). Some supporting policies for the domestic industry were set in motion as well, such as the educational support through

establishing Korean Academy of Film Arts (KAFA) which produced successful directors and producers, and financial support in forms of loans and investment that encouraged private investors to invest in the film industry (M. Kim 2011, 179). Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim state that:

“The Kim Dae-jung government’s (1998-2003) proactive support for the local industry without intervention, that is, without impeding the freedom of expression and creativity released after government censorship was eliminated in 1996, was critical to the changing face of Korean cinema... As a result, a new cartel of corporate/executive producers brought a ruthless efficiency to the industry by maintaining and fine-tuning the core elements of “high-concept” filmmaking, while generating new venture capital and ensuring accountability to their shareholder and customers (cinema audiences) rather than pandering to the whims of auteur filmmakers” (Yecies and Shim 2015, 254).

This resulted in an unprecedented growth period of culture consumption known as Hallyu, or Korean Wave 1.0 - shown on the table above.³ The “big four” vertically integrated investor-distributors today are CJ E&EM, Showbox, Lotte Entertainment, and N.E.W., and they are the dominant players in the industry that collaborate closely with Ministries of Culture, Sports, and Tourism as well as Foreign Affairs (Yecies and Shim 2015). The film industry today became a competitive ground in which these powerful government-supported conglomerates all strive to produce film products that would be marketable to both domestic and foreign audiences. The Korean government also started to use its film and K-drama (as well as K-pop) industries “at the core of its cultural diplomacy and nation branding efforts” – which can be witnessed in the establishment of Council on Nation Branding, appointment of celebrities as tourism ambassadors, and in former President Park Geun-hye’s summit diplomacy that involved her participation in cultural events featuring in modern and traditional Korean culture whenever she visited other countries (Faure 2016).

In conclusion, it can be seen in the case of South Korea that “indirect financial support and infrastructure support were more effective than direct financial support” (M. Kim 2011, 179). The success of Korean films and television industry overseas now is a result of the South Korean government’s realization over time that strict regulations of contents obstructed development of the domestic film industry, and that the government should rather resort to indirect aids that boost the industry economically but still allow space for creativity to flourish from bottom-up.

In both cases of Japan and South Korea, it can be seen that the government’s control over the film industry today have become very lenient compared to the past; government intervention still exists, but in the form of indirect financial aid that encourages the rapid dissemination of their cultural products abroad. In the case of China, as seen in the literature review section, the government’s intervention in itself has been criticized widely to be the cause of its soft power expansion failure, but from observing the case of Japan and South Korea, it can be seen that government intervention done in the right ways leads to enlargement of the countries’ soft power expansion potential (In the case of Japan, some

³ South Koreans often say that Hallyu is divided into 1.0 and 2.0, where the first part is when domestic market consumption increased, then latter as when the government realized the potential of the industries and started to market and export them to foreign countries.

scholars even point out that the Japanese film industry is on an unsuccessful path nowadays, and that this gloomy outlook is caused by its lack of more protectionist policies). So, it is fair to state that it is not the government intervention itself, but the method of government intervention employed by the Chinese government that must be at the heart of its film industry's inability to expand China's soft power.

China & Its Films

From looking at the different case studies above, it is fair to state that China is an outlier in a sense that its entertainment industry, or specifically its film industry, because not only are films made in China unable to grant the Chinese government with successful soft power expansion, but also worsens the global perception of China and the Chinese government unlike the film industries of Japan and South Korea. Now, this section will look at the history of the Chinese film industry, and observe how the Chinese government has historically viewed the film industry as a means to preach party values to argue that the barrier to Chinese soft power expansion through films is the government's intervention into the films in their stages of creation, which, 1) causes lessened artistic autonomy that ultimately hinders the development of an original Chinese film industry "brand" that can be marketed sustainably, and also, 2) leads to even those films that actually make it to foreign box offices to be responded with negativity - as their containment of political values diminish their artistic values and likeability.

History of Chinese Film Industry

The Chinese film industry was set up originally as a centralized, public institution, controlled under a "vertical management system extending from the central government to local administrations, with many administrative and regional barriers" (Su 2014, 99). It was in the 1980s-90s, as China gradually started shifting to private economy, when film, along with other popular cultural products, started to be produced for the sake of entertainment and profit with the loosened grip of the Chinese Communist Party's political agenda (Su 2014; Jihong and Kraus 2002). However, the process of lessening political control over popular cultural products is described to have been a slow process in China, especially in its film industry; "even after Party supervision began to slacken in areas such as painting exhibitions, book and magazine publishing, drama and music, the film industry remained (along with television) unusual among the arts in being subject to pre-production censorship, because the Party was "reluctant to loosen its grip on an important tool for propaganda" (Jihong and Kraus 2002, 421). The party, while carrying out economic reforms, had also simultaneously "decided to reemphasize the film industry's propaganda value", requiring studios to produce "major melody" films "centered around the mainstream Party ideology" - which were not responded with positivity among audiences (Jihong and Kraus 2002, 422). At the same time, however, the Party had abolished most of the government subsidy system that had previously existed for the film industry that allowed, "even dull movies...an assured audience" (because the party used to buy group tickets to distribute to the workers) (Jihong and Kraus 2002). In summary, the economic reform of film industry done in a limited fashion not only made films that were still under heavy government control less competitive among other art industries that were given more space for creativity at the time, but also meant less economic security for the film industry compared to its old times when the government distribution system provided subsidies. These factors led to an unprecedented decline in movie attendance and ticket sales, causing severe financial crisis of the film industry; "in the first half of 1992 alone, the financial loss of state-owned film

studios reached 70 million Yuan, and 6000 film-business-related enterprises either closed or transitioned to other businesses” (Su 2014, 100).

In efforts to revive its film industry, the Chinese government decided to start recognizing the market forces, and took measures to create better commercial films (Jihong and Kraus 2002, 422). First, the Chinese government abolished “state monopoly over distribution after 1993”, inviting non-state investment to the film industry which was now restructured by cutting off inefficient production groups and merging the rest into fewer, strengthened groups (Jihong and Kraus 2002, 422). Second, the Chinese government started importing Hollywood films in a controlled fashion (only 10 blockbusters annually) (Su 2014, 100). Third, the Chinese government used the revenue collected from Hollywood movies to then “create a more attractive form of propaganda through a peculiar hybrid of political authority and market forces the updated major melody film” (Su 2014, 102; Jihong and Kraus 2002, 429). These melody films were referred to as the “main melody” films (zhuxuanlu) or “excellent quality” films (jingpin), which the Chinese Film Bureau described as films that “unify education, art and entertainment” – or in another words, films that can be marketable and do well at the box office, but also fulfill the idea of “yiwo wei zhu, wei wo suo yong” – to “serve China’s needs and national interests and should be made muse of for China’s gains and goals” (Su 2014,101; Jihong and Kraus 2002, 430). The film studios, although were first cautious in creating films that were more liberalized from Party politics, after being encouraged by government officials, successfully created films that found “middle ground between official propaganda and commercial entertainment” (Jihong and Kraus 2002, 430). These new mainstream major melody films were able to gain popularity due to the filmmakers’ clever strategies of using well-known commercial celebrities that helped to blur the line between fun, accessible commercial films and major melody films (which were previously thought to be dull and unsophisticated); the characters’ background stories and struggles were also designed so that the audience could relate more to them – they were no longer directly preaching Communist Party’s political values, but embodied them in their altruistic and heroic actions (Jihong and Kraus 2002, 428).

The Chinese government’s adoption of Hollywood-like marketing tactics of “bombarding audiences with newspaper reports, television advertisements and radio broadcasting” also helped to popularize the films, eventually leading to success of films like *Not One Less* or *Leaving Lei Feng* (Jihong and Kraus 200, 431). Although these reform measures taken by the government meant that Communist Party values were “toned down to fit a consumer-driven society”, it can be seen that the government still controlled the film industry to perpetuate its ideologies (Jihong and Kraus 2002, 432).

The noncommittal economic liberalization of the film industry was continued, as the State Administration of Radio Film (SARFT) and the Ministry of Culture issued documents in 2000s to allow foreign private capital to enter into Chinese film production, allowing them to establish studios and produce films in China, but there were also many restriction outlined for them; foreign film studios had to be jointly owned by a Chinese state-owned studio (with the Chinese counterpart having more power) (Su 2014, 103). This created a boom in the film industry as it created investment friendly environment for the domestic film studios, but the foreign investors and film studios were limited heavily – leading to transnational corporations like the Warner Bros. International Cinemas withdrawing from the Chinese market by the end of 2006 (Su 2014, 103-105).

It can be seen that since its very origin, the film industry of China has historically been viewed as a method to preach CCP's political ideologies and expand its soft power of national cohesion domestically, and although the Chinese government brought about economic liberalization reforms over the years to create less political and more commercial films, it still has control over the film industry and uses film as a medium of spreading party values.

Chinese Government's Intervention Into Its Film Industry – Continued

To this day, the State Administration of Radio Film (SARFT) controls Chinese film industry very heavily; its “primary duty is to align art content with the state requirements and policies”, and it has the power to “request modification of film stories, change of plots and characters, as well as to revoke shooting permits or distribution rights” (Lovric 2016, 33). In November of 2012, Hu Jintao addressed the Party Congress with the following words: “To develop a strong socialist culture in China, we must take the socialist path of promoting cultural advance with Chinese characteristics. We should adhere to the goal of serving the people and socialism, the policy of having a *hundred flowers bloom* and a *hundred schools of thought contend*, and the principle of maintaining close contact with reality, life and the people” (“Full Text of Hu Jintao’s Report at 18th Party Congress” 2012). At first, one will notice in this speech that Hu Jintao was trying to urge the domestic artists and writers to promote Chinese culture around the world; but when looking more closely, one will also be able to sense how the speech eerily echoes Chairman Mao’s Hundred Flowers Campaign.⁴ It is fair to interpret his statement as Hu Jintao trying to send an encouraging yet chilling message to the Chinese artists. This is contrasted highly from the case studies of Japan and South Korea, which showed that these two governments in the past had strict censorship powers over their film industry, but realized that gradually, their controls had to be loosened for the sake of boosting originality and creativity for their films’ market competitiveness.

As Michael Keane states, “the overt pedagogical framing of much domestic content operates as a form of ‘cultural discount’ in regional markets. In other words, the political accent diminishes the value of the product”; this is reflected in the current state of Chinese films that are unsuccessful in the market (Keane 2010, 49). For instance, the movie *Kung-Fu Yoga*, starring Jackie Chan with Stanley Tong, who in the plot embark together on a journey to find the lost treasures in Tibet, has been widely criticized as being “overdose of cultural stereotypes” - a “mangled mess” (Bhushan 2017; McLean-Dreyfus 2017; Pulver 2017). Originally planned to be a joint venture project between China and India’s film industries that resulted from a co-production agreement signed by China and India in 2014, the film ended up being produced by the Chinese film company alone as the Indian company ended up pulling out of the project midway (McLean-Dreyfus 2017). The film was a success in China, now ranking as the third highest-grossing domestic films in China for 2017, but foreign film critics and audiences, especially those in India, responded with discontent and even anger. These sentiments are fair, as cultural misappropriations can be noticed from the title of the film itself, which angered journalists like Tanul Thakur from the Wire, who comments that the film reeks of “orientalism”, describing that the director and his crew of the film “look like the kind of people who come to India, pay for a ‘slum tour’, go back to their countries,

⁴ Hundred Flowers Campaign was a liberalization movement carried out by Chairman Mao in 1956, which encouraged Chinese people to openly criticize the Chinese Communist Party; the campaign was halted soon after, and the government carried out an Anti-Rightist Campaign and cracked down on those who criticized the government earlier – sending them to labor camps and prisons.

patting themselves on the back, claiming to have understood an entire country” (Thakur 2017). Some critics also noticed that there are “bizarre” scenes and dialogues that contains Chinese government’s propaganda, such as “when Chan’s character is asked by an official to “help the Belt and Road initiative”, a wide-ranging pan-Asian economic plan inspired by the Silk Road, which aims to consolidate China’s regional dominance” (Pulver 2017). This shows how “producers, such as animation ships, are charged first and foremost with the responsibility of educating the children of China and resisting the impact of foreign competition. The pleasures of the viewer and the profitability of the product must take a back seat to such concerns” (Keane 2010, 131). Also, the film starts out by everyone in China talking in English, as if the Chinese government wants to desperately portray that China has ascended to being an international nation. From looking at the harsh reviews of the film, a writer from East Asia Program at the Lowry Institute writes that “badged as an example of Sino-Indian film cooperation, Kung-Fu Yoga can also be viewed as part of China’s wider soft power strategy”, but “despite China’s best efforts to make its mark on the global film industry... global domination by the Chinese film industry is still some way off”, and “its soft power strategy is still in a nascent stage” (McLean-Dreyfus 2017).

In the case of South Korea and Japan, their cultural products do contain historical contents, but are nonetheless popularly accepted, because their historical elements are not forcefully inserted into the plots by governments that lack objective outlooks on history or have goals to promote their political agendas. Looking at the case of South Korean K-dramas more specifically, Hannah Jun states in her work that in fact, “more recently, Korean dramas such as *My Love from the Star* (2014), *Descendants of the Sun* (2016) and *The Legend of the Blue Sea* (2016-2017) have included more fantastic or surreal elements, such as time/space travel and wartime plots, within a framework of Korean history” (Jun 2017, 155).

Furthermore, in China, due to the state control over the film industry accompanied by stringent censorship measures, artistic autonomy is lessened, which results in lessened potential for more original and more sustainable Chinese film industry to be developed naturally. Now, China’s endeavors to revive its film industry has led to its recent success in finding a viable state-industry collaboration system in which the studios produces more marketable commercial major melody films; domestically, the Chinese government has indeed successfully revived its dying film industry this way and “grossed more than 6.5 billion U.S. dollars in 2015 and are expected to top 11.9 billion by the end of 2017, which would propel China to overtake the U.S. as the highest grossing country in box office sales” (Rosen 2017). However, this success seems to be unstable, because it is sustained through copying of ideas and censorship of materials from other countries. In fact, China has been often criticized for blatantly copying South Korean shows; on social media, South Koreans have been referring to China the “copycat nation”, that “they cannot do anything but copy Korean art and entertainment”. Furthermore, while copying South Korean entertainment products, China started to ban them from entering China – a measure which was intensified even more after the THAAD incident – which has been angering the South Korean populous even more. This is not limited to South Korea, but also, US, as China continues to censor Hollywood films (Wang and Liu 2013). A Chinese movie executive commented that “Chinese movies have done well at the box office, and Hollywood has suffered”, however, he went on to state that “it is a not fair game”, since “Hollywood studios are only allowed to show 30 films a year or so, and they have to be distributed through China Film Group [the state distributor]. They cannot market their movies; they cannot even decide when they will be released. When the Superman movie came out, all that people knew over here was that it was an American film with special effects. No one had heard of Superman” (Moore 2013).

There seems to be an issue of China unable to create its original form of art that sells well in the market, and focusing its energy on blocking other entertainment products from entering its country. This is a prime example how China is often criticized for participating in “negative” soft power strategies rather than “positive” soft power strategies – how it does not focus on the actual positive soft power strategies of establishing and spreading its original cultural values, and instead, engages in the negative soft power strategies of censoring and criticizing other cultures to make its own look better comparatively (Callahan 2015).

Another particularity of Chinese soft power that is significant to keep in mind here is how Chinese government’s soft power efforts are both inward (domestic) and outward (abroad). In her report about Chinese soft power and China’s soft power expansion activities, Sayama explains, “in China’s case, the government’s strategy and tactics are strongly associated with shaping Chinese society rather than publicizing its achievements” (Sayama 2016, 2). Michael Barr complements this view by stating in his work that “...whilst many commentators in China are loyal to Nye’s definition and understanding of soft power, there is one key difference: in China, soft power is not limited to international image-building. Rather, its deployment is as critical at home within the country as it is abroad” (Barr 2011, 28). Michael Barr points to the 117th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2007, when Hu Jintao announced that the “Party must enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people’s basic cultural rights and interests”; here, Barr looks at how this statement demonstrates how domestically, China tries to use soft power to “promote national cohesion and creativity”, while internationally, it tries to use soft power to “strengthen China’s competitiveness within the international arena” (Barr 2011, 30, 35). Barr argues generally that this particularity of Chinese soft power successfully brands China as a confident and unified nation led by a strong national government, but he also does believe that “there are obvious limits to this exercise”:

“With one hand China promotes the values of diversity, peaceful rise and harmony. With another hand it controls access to social networking sites and detains anyone who questions the Party... These moves of raw state power inevitably harm Beijing’s own effort to promote a peaceful image” (Barr 2012, 83).

Joseph Nye had also stated that “it is important to remember that the same words and images that are most successful in communicating to a domestic audience may have negative effects on a foreign audience” (Nye 2008, 104). The dual roles which soft power takes on in China is important to recognize because it supports my argument regarding how China has historically viewed film as a medium of spreading political propaganda – its soft power expansion - domestically, and fails to recognize that when keeping this view intact and continuing to censor films at their creation stage, its international soft power expansion through films is going to continue to fail (and its domestic success is highly unlikely to last forever as domestic film viewers are continued to be exposed to foreign products).

Conclusively, what is acting as a barrier to China’s use of film industry as a soft power expansion is the Chinese government’s historical understanding of film as a propaganda, which results in its censorship of the films at its creation stage – ultimately resulting in low quality films that are not marketable to foreign audiences and even to the domestic audiences in the long run – implying its lessened potential to be used as a tool of soft power expansion. The Chinese government needs to discontinue its interference into the film industry in order to promote the development of original films that could be marketed

sustainably, as “telling authentically Chinese stories (instead of perpetuating hackneyed cultural clichés) is more likely to resonate with global audiences, ensuring both box office success and a genuine interest in Chinese culture. A freer and bottom-up approach to both film-making and soft-power propagation will allow China's cultural influence to rival the staying power of established soft-power countries” (McLean-Dreyfus 2017). The government’s hold over the film industry could “at least in theory, be used for altering films and improving the country’s image abroad; but in practice, such blatant instrumentalization of the national film industry comes at the expense of lowering film’s creative input, international credibility and the reduction of soft power potential” (Lovric 2016, 33).

Conclusion

David Shambaugh comments in a video about Chinese soft power that “soft power is like a country that is a magnet, that attracts others to you, others want to emulate you, they respect you, they value your... political system... In other words they want to be like you. That’s soft power. It comes from society. It does not come from the government” (Center for Strategic & International Studies). The Chinese government must recognize that the resources of soft power must arise naturally from the society, and that these resources something that is “organic” and inherent in the political or social culture of the country – not artificially created by the government (Center for Strategic & International Studies Nye 2015; Shambaugh 2015; Sayama 2016). Indeed, “What China fails to understand is that despite its world-class culture, cuisine, and human capital, and despite its extraordinary economic rise over the last several decades, so long as its political system denies, rather than enables, free human development, its propaganda efforts will face an uphill battle” (Shambaugh 2015,107).

At this point, the outlooks for Chinese soft power expansion might look dim; however, China has in theory, a great potential to exert soft power due to its sheer historical existence and cultural background. Furthermore, from looking at the case studies of Japan and South Korea, it can be deduced that it does not mean that the Chinese government cannot interfere at all into its film industry. In fact, government interference done in the right fashion (focusing on indirect financial aid and on the distribution process) will benefit the Chinese film industry.

In order for China to tackle the issue of its inability to use its films as a tool of soft power expansion, the Chinese government must recognize that innovation from the bottom up is essential. Although this will entail a long-term process, organic innovation that arises among Chinese artists will ensure genuine Chinese art to be disseminated across the world in a sustainable fashion, allowing Chinese nationals to represent and speak for their own culture.

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