1-2023

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Published online: 03 Jan 2023.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Motivations, Policies and Performance: A Review of China's Culture 'Going Out' Strategy

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ABSTRACT

Few countries have advanced their culture globally as China has done in the last two decades with its culture 'going out' strategy. Promoting cultural goods and services overseas and fostering cultural exchanges, the strategy is also part of the country's efforts to advance its soft power abroad. Broadly, there are two contrasting perspectives on the strategy's performance. Because of its stability and financial muscle, local analysts generally praise it, while the overarching official involvement provokes suspicion in some international contexts. This article provides a neutral assessment of the implementation, achievements, and impact of China's culture 'going out' strategy, investigating its successes and shortfalls.

Introduction

Two decades ago, as part of its broader soft power efforts, China proposed the culture 'going out' or 'going global' strategy. Primarily oriented at fostering cultural exchanges with foreign countries, promoting cultural goods and services exports, and enhancing direct investment and overseas cultural enterprises' operations, the strategy has become a critical asset in China's projection abroad.

The culture 'going out' strategy comprises a substantial share of official policy and financial support, and while it derives from a complex set of motivations, two form its backbone: Economic, with a focus on exploring international cultural markets and narrowing the deficit in cultural trade; and Political, centred at advancing national soft power and improving China's global image. Twenty years after its implementation, the strategy has had mixed results. On the one hand, evidence suggests some positive outcomes: cultural exchanges seem to have increased notably, with the *Confucius Institute*[1] as the beacon leading the way; exponential progress in cultural trade has prompted China to surpass the United States and become the world's largest exporter of cultural goods; the boom in overseas investment and operations, for instance, in overseas mergers and acquisitions (M&A), has substantially impacted the publication and entertainment industries worldwide. But on the other hand, the trade balance in core cultural products

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remains uneven, with cultural products such as films and music still struggling to find markets overseas. Moreover, the efficiency of the strategy in advancing China's soft power internationally is still heavily burdened by some issues: regionally and globally, China is often perceived as an economic and political threat, and the culture 'going out' policy seems to have done little to counteract that perception. Some controversies in the last few years regarding the functions performed by some *Confucius Institutes*, particularly in Europe and the United States, have also fuelled a fair amount of mistrust. This overall discrepancy has also fuelled an academic debate regarding the efficiency and actual impact of the policy: while, in general, China-based scholars hold a positive view of the strategy's achievements, non-China-based scholars are warier when judging its successes.[2] This paper aims to shed light on this dichotomy by analysing the strategy's trajectory, performance, and reception in a balanced way.

This paper uses two methods to analyse and assess China's culture 'going out' strategy: a literature review and a comparative methodology. For the first one, it used the guidelines provided by Petticrew and Roberts (2008) to conduct systematic literature reviews. The sources reviewed included: (1) the related speeches and articles of the leaders of the communist party of China, including Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping. Their words revealed the basis for the government's formulation of China's cultural policy; (2) the original policy documents that China's government and its departments published. These policy texts indicate how China finances its culture abroad policies by providing fiscal subsidies, tax breaks and other favourable policies; (3) statistical data over past years from the Chinese government and other official agencies; (4) international polls data concerning China's national image and soft power. Although this data can't always be used accurately, it provides windows through which to observe foreigners' attitudes towards China; (5) the papers of China's domestic and western scholars, valuable to determine how they perceive and evaluate the strategy. To identify policies, we scanned *Google Scholars* and China's *CNKI.net* using as selection criteria keywords such as "soft power ", 'China's going out strategy', 'China's culture going out', 'China's soft power', 'China's national image', 'cultural trade', 'cultural diplomacy'. After reviewing these sources, the paper raises three key research questions: (1) *What are the main motivations or objectives that guide China's culture 'going out' strategy?* (2) *To support the strategy, what policies did China's government adopt?* (3) *How to evaluate the performance of China's culture 'going out' strategy?*

The second method, comparison, is a fundamental tool of analysis. It plays a central role in concept formation by bringing suggestive similarities and contrasts among cases into focus. Routinely used in testing hypotheses, it can also contribute to the inductive discovery of new hypotheses and theory-building (Collier, 1993), helping to avoid overgeneralization and challenging naïve universalism (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017). This paper uses a comparative method as the primary analytical tool. First, it compares the data changes from a longitudinal lens on cultural exchange, cultural trade and overseas cultural investment before and after the enforcement of the strategy. Second, it compares the comments on the strategy by China-based and non-China-based scholars. A horizontal comparison identified substantial discrepancies in assessing the strategy and its performance. Third, an in-depth analysis and discussion on this gap follow, aiming to explain the disagreement on the assessment. Lastly, the paper puts forward some suggestions for improving China's culture 'going out' strategy.

1. The culture 'going out' strategy at the core of China's international plan of action

The proposal of the culture 'going out' strategy two decades ago, also known as culture 'going global', by the *Communist Party of China* (CPC), the ruling political party of the People's Republic of China (PRC), marks the dawn of an ambitious cultural deployment abroad. As early as the 1950s, Mao Zedong, the first-generation leader of the CPC, called for learning science and culture from advanced foreign cultures, including Western countries. In his famous work *On the Ten Major Relationships*, Mao thought of 'correctly handling the relationships between China and foreign countries' (Mao Zedong, 1956). However, Mao focused on learning from foreign countries and not exporting China's culture abroad. In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping, China's second-generation leader, suggested that the country's opening up to the world should also include the cultural field. Deng's discourses can be seen as the sprout of the culture 'going out' strategic thought (Deng Xiaoping, 1993).

Despite the fast economic growth that followed, China's leaders soon realized that a prominent feature of Chinese politics was the discrepancy between China's use of hard and soft power instruments internationally, in favour of the former.[3] This imbalance affected China's international image and became a challenge in its foreign relations and rise. It was then that China's leaders began to envision culture 'going out' ideas. In 2002, at the China Local Governmental Culture Leaders' Forum, the then Minister of Culture Sun Jiazheng stressed that China had to "melt itself into the international community with more open style; further expand international culture exchange and implement 'going out' strategy". This was the first time a Chinese governmental officer officially put forward the concept of culture 'going out'. Then, the third-generation leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao pushed the strategic thought forward. In 2003, former President Hu manifested that China had to "develop its culture industry targeting overseas markets and actively join international culture competition" (as cited in Wu Biying, 2011). In 2005, Hu underscored that China had to 'speed up the execution of cultural products going-out strategy and promote Chinese culture to go global' (as cited in Lu Shaoqiu, 2013, p. 203). This was the first time a Chinese leader put forward the concept culture 'going out'.

Since then, culture 'going out' began to feature in the CPC's reports and government's plans and become a national strategy. In 2006, China's government issued its *National Culture Reform and Development Plan Outline During the Eleventh Five-Year Period*, which pointed out that one of the top priorities in national culture development was to promote China's culture globally, to turn around the adverse situation of deficit in cultural trade, developing an open-growing pattern that places national culture at the core, meanwhile absorbing beneficial foreign culture, and promoting Chinese culture globally. In 2011, the sixth plenary session of the 17th Central Committee officially upgraded the culture 'going out' policy to a national strategy and called to 'implement "culture going-out strategy" to increase the international influence of Chinese culture'. A year later, China's Ministry of Culture issued its *National Culture Reform and Development Plan Outline during the Twelfth Five-Year period*. The plan proposed five major national development strategies, one of which was 'China's culture going-out strategy'. This was the first time the strategy was officially mentioned in a national five-year plan. That same year 2012, China's Ministry of

Culture launched *The Plan for Redoubling Cultural Industries during the 'Twelfth Five Year Plan' period*. The plan emphasized the culture 'going out' strategy, calling for enhancing 'cultural competitiveness' and a larger share in international cultural markets.

Therefore, the culture 'going out' strategy was first put forward by the leaders of the CCP and then officially adopted by the national development plans. As seen above, the Chinese government is the leading designer and promoter behind the strategy, with a range of carefully orchestrated movements to advance it. Since its introduction two decades ago, the culture 'going out' strategy has become one of China's most recognizable national strategies abroad.

2. Major components of China's culture 'going out' strategy

China's culture 'going out' strategy focuses on three major interconnected domains: international cultural exchanges, cultural trade, and cultural operations.

2.1. Cultural exchanges with foreign countries

International cultural exchanges refer to the temporary, reciprocal, cross-border interactions of artists and other cultural professionals to foster mutual understanding and develop collaborative projects (Ang et al., 2015; Ryan, 2016) between the citizens of China and other countries. In China, most cultural exchange programmes are sponsored and funded by government bodies. To undertake international cultural exchanges, China's government bodies at all levels (national, regional, local) integrate a range of cultural resources and utilize multilateral and bilateral mechanisms to sponsor cultural events such as the *National Culture Year*, the *Chinese Culture Festival*, and *Experience China*, among others. The Chinese government is responsible, amongst others, for: opening overseas *Chinese Culture Centers* and *Confucius Institutes*; building necessary platforms for displaying and experiencing Chinese culture abroad; formulating the plans that facilitate that national philosophy and social science excellence achievements can be exported; organizing the translation of outstanding academic and cultural works to foreign languages; supporting private culture enterprises and non-profit organizations to participate in China-foreign cultural exchange; and, establishing Chinese culture contribution awards and other international cultural and artistic awards.

2.2. Export of cultural goods and services

Promoting the export of cultural goods and services is a significant component of the culture 'going out' strategy. Currently, the Chinese government's actions to promote cultural exports include measures such as: providing support to major enterprises and projects concerning the export of cultural goods and services; compiling and amending the guiding catalogue of exports of cultural goods and services; nurturing a group of export-oriented culture and media enterprises and intermediary agents that possess international competitive edge, so as to turn them into global culture and media conglomerates and famous culture brands worldwide; expanding copyright trade; maintaining the fast growth momentum in the export of books, newspapers, magazines, audio-visual products, e-publications, etc; supporting the export of films, TV-plays,

documentaries, and cartoons; supporting outstanding national films to enter foreign mainstream distribution chains, national games to enter international mainstream markets, digital publications to explore overseas markets; increasing the export volume of cultural goods and services, and gradually reverse the severe deficit in culture trade; establishing professional trade companies and agents that specialize in cultural trade; establishing systematic and effective information platforms and culture trade statistical analysis systems; and, actively taking part in the formulation of international culture trade rules (excerpted from several Chinese government policies on the promotion of cultural exports).

2.3. Investment and operations in foreign countries

The Chinese government believes that direct investment and the operation of cultural enterprises in foreign countries signify a nation's widespread cultural power and a compelling way of promoting culture abroad (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2014). Therefore, it encourages domestic cultural and media firms to conduct FDI to expand China's presence in foreign markets, emphasizing the following initiatives: encouraging domestic cultural and media enterprises to invest in overseas markets; establishing cultural enterprises overseas; encouraging Chinese enterprises to run cinemas, publishing houses, theatres, bookstores, newspapers and magazines, broadcasts and TV stations overseas; encouraging China's culture and media enterprises that engage in Chinese film and television programmes, publications, music, dance, traditional opera, *quyi* (traditional oral performing arts), *wushu* (martial arts), acrobatic, performance and exhibition, to explore overseas markets with diversified forms; and, encouraging cultural enterprises to participate in overseas acquisitions and mergers in the culture and media sectors.

3. Motivations for China's culture 'going out' strategy

The launch of China's culture 'going out' strategy has complex political, economic, social, cultural, and diplomatic motivations (Yong & Hanzhong, 2016). They can be streamlined into two main categories: economic and political, the latter largely encompassing the socio-cultural and diplomatic aspects.

3.1. Economic motivation: exploring international cultural markets and narrowing the deficit in cultural trade

Historically, there has been a significant deficit in terms of China's cultural trade with developed countries. In the mid-2000s, it was still 10:1 (Ding Wei, 2006), with the trade deficit in the film sector even wider than that (Zhang Zhixin, 2008). This deficit was seen as harmful to China's culture sustainable growth and more severely, the excess of external cultural forces as a threat to maintaining the national 'cultural and ideological security' (Jianming & Du, 2005).[4] Therefore, China had to do its utmost to turn around such an adverse situation to increase the export of cultural products and achieve a trade balance with foreign countries. In 2008, Li Changchun (2008), a member of China's Politburo Standing Committee in charge of cultural affairs, emphasized that China had to prioritize

the promotion of its cultural products overseas and expand its share in the world's cultural markets, 'gradually turning around the adverse situation of huge deficit in world cultural trade'.

Today, China's cultural and creative industries can produce large amounts of cultural goods and services such as books, newspapers, magazines, films, TV programs, performing art, cartoons, and games, among others. As with other industries, the cultural industries are now experiencing a supply-exceed-demand phase, where cultural production can meet the demand of domestic consumers and be exported to other countries. For example, more than 10,600 TV episodes were produced in China in 2019, but just about 8,000 of them were needed by domestic TV stations. Out of the 1,037 movies made in China that same year, less than 400 were shown in domestic cinemas.

Due to the deficit in cultural trade and oversupply in the domestic markets, China is in a position to explore other global cultural markets, which can increase economic profits (Junnan & Xiaojing, 2019). The culture 'going out' strategy projects the potential to ease China's overcapacity in cultural production.

3.2. Political motivation: advancing national soft power and improving China's global image

The second primary motivation for the strategy, and perhaps the most important, is political. Joseph Nye defined soft power as a country's ability to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion. Simply put, in behavioural terms, soft power is attractive power (Nye, 2004). China wants to enhance its soft power, express its voice abroad, and safeguard China's cultural and ideological impact by projecting its culture globally (Zen Jie et al., 2016; Su, 2014; Tong, 2012). Soft power can be a crucial element of leadership, and China needs to nurture it to become a global superpower. However, China's soft power has been traditionally weak, troubled with image problems, and the country often found itself at the receiving end of criticism and outrage (CSIS, 2009, p. 8). China is used to disseminate its ideas internationally via its manifold propaganda machines (some of the best well-known include *Xinhua News Agency, CGTN*, and *People's Daily*). But this approach doesn't always work well, dubbed as an 'awkward and unconvincing shibboleth' by critics (Kuhn, 2008) and generally 'poor' by scholars: '[the] government propaganda system is incapable of producing concepts that are attractive to societies with freedom of expression' (Ding Xueliang, as cited in Kuhn, 2008). Culture is one of the main tools governments count on when it comes to increasing the attractiveness of a nation (Bukh, 2014; Nakano & Zhu, 2020), and it can help increase its prestige and improve its image abroad (Ogoura, 2009; Ryan, 2016). Over the years, the Chinese government has recognized that culture can be a more valuable and effective way than governmental propaganda to improve its image and international appeal. Widely, China is regarded as a nation with a unique and rich cultural heritage that can exploit such cultural resources when projecting its soft power. There is an 'underlying logic in the Chinese leadership's desire to promote Chinese culture internationally' (Michael Berry, as cited in Funnell, 2015). As such, the importance of culture as an element of national soft power has been flagged over the years in various speeches by Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. In 2011, former President Hu Jintao called for China's culture to go global to build soft power that is in line with China's international status and 'enhancing culture as part of our country's

soft power' (Hu Jintao, 2011). A few years later, President Xi Jinping declared, 'we should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world'. To Xi, 'China must pay more attention to reshape its global image' and to build a positive image as a 'responsible, justice-safeguarding, peace-loving, socialist country' (Xi Jinping, 2016). Enhancing soft power has become one of the leading foreign policy goals of the Chinese government and has become a priority in the country's international interactions across the globe (Afsah Qazl, 2016; Chen Hongjun, 2016). And culture, central to the 'going out' strategy has become an essential tool in winning the hearts and minds of the world.

4. The culture 'going out' strategy's policy support

Since introducing the culture 'going out' strategy China has formulated numerous pre-ferential policies to support and promote its implementation. The major policy documents issued by China's central government from 2005 to 2020 include all kinds of circulars, action plans and 'guiding opinions'.[5] Regarding the policy tools the Chinese government often uses, these include financial subsidies, special funds, tax rebates, tax reductions, tax exemptions, credit giving, foreign exchange management, insurance services, customs convenience, information services, and talent training. The support from the government bodies also includes overseas marketing programmes in overseas exhibitions, publicity, popularization, training, seminars, and overseas tenders. In addition, the Chinese government has also formulated a series of policies to encourage private capital and players to be involved in the strategy. For example, according to the *Announcement Concerning Promoting Commercial Performing and Overseas Exhibition and Export of Culture Goods* (Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China, 2004), the Chinese government covers half of the international round-trip journey expenses for related enterprises to reduce their financial pressure when going abroad, a support policy still in operation today.

5. The performance of China's culture 'going out' strategy

The following are some of the signs of progress made by the culture 'going out' strategy.

5.1. Surge in cultural exchanges

The Sino-foreign cultural exchanges have become more frequent and ubiquitous since establishing the strategy, with the *Confucius Institute* (CI) (孔子学院) as the leading generator of cultural exchanges. As of August 2019, barely 15 years since the first CI opened in Seoul, South Korea, there were 539 CIs in over 155 countries worldwide, the majority concentrated in Europe (184), America (150), and Asia (126; Confucious Institute, 2019). *Confucius Classrooms* are an extension of the CI programme, committed to promoting the Chinese language and culture in primary and secondary schools and universities worldwide. By the end of June 2019, there were 1,129 *Confucius Classrooms* established in 155 countries in primary and secondary schools. Confucius Institutes/classrooms had a total of 2.32 million students, and over 12.7 million people attended cultural events organized by the institutes. In addition, by 2020, over 50 *China Culture Centers* (中国文

化中心) had been established in cities such as Paris, Berlin, Tokyo, Singapore, and Cairo, to spread and popularize Chinese culture overseas.

Apart from the work of these major institutions, over the last 15 years, China has embarked on many other cultural exchange projects with regions and countries worldwide. For instance, the signing of an MOU on Cultural Cooperation with the *Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (ASEAN) in 2005 prompted the organization of numerous cultural exchange activities. For instance, the *China-ASEAN Cultural Forums* (16 editions in 2021); the China-ASEAN Culture and Arts Weeks; or the celebration in 2014 of the *China-ASEAN Cultural Exchange Year* meant to show 'the richness, uniqueness and diversity of cultures across ASEAN and China' (ASEAN News, 2014). China has also signed cultural cooperation agreements with 21 Latin American and Caribbean countries and signed annual cultural exchange action plans with many of them. In 2016, China and Latin America celebrated a *Cultural Exchange Year* involving hundreds of cultural activities in nearly 30 countries. China has also signed over 70 agreements on cultural exchange and cooperation with 45 African countries. Under the umbrella of the *Forum on China-Africa Cooperation* (中非合作论坛) (FOCAC), hundreds of cultural and art exchange events have taken place in China and the African countries. *The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries* (中国人民对外友好协会) has regional agencies and friendship associations with countries all over the world that regularly organize cultural events and exchanges (CPAFFC, 2021).

5.2. Progress in cultural trade

Alongside the implementation of the culture 'going out' strategy, China's cultural trade has grown rapidly. In 2002, China's total size of cultural trade was US$3.93 billion (Cao Mai, 2016). By 2018, that figure had risen to US$137.01 billion, an increase of 3,486% in 16 years. In 2018, the export volume of cultural goods hit US$99.89 billion, while the import volume of cultural products was US$11.57 billion, which produced a trade surplus of US$88.32 billion (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2019). Over the last 20 years, China has enjoyed double-digit economic growth, an exponential growth that has also benefited the exports of cultural products. In 2010, China surpassed the United States as the lead exporter of cultural goods (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016). By 2013, China's cultural exports were more than double that of the United States, representing US$60.1 billion and US$27.9 billion, respectively (UNESCO, 2016). Progress was made across all cultural sectors. For example, in the book trade, from 2006 to 2015, the proportion of imports to exports of books fell from 15:1 to 1.6:1. In the film trade, in 2004, the overseas ticket office of domestic films was 1.1 billion RMB. In 2017, the overseas ticket office of domestic films, combined with the selling revenue, reached 4.253 billion RMB. In the game industry, the export revenue of China-created online games was close to zero (US$0.07 billion) in 2008. By 2019, the total revenue of online games exports to overseas markets reaped US$11.9 billion (360doc.com, 2020). China's broadcast and digital media industries are similarly thriving beyond its borders, with their primary exports being television dramas and shows. Trends depict a sudden increase in exports since 2015, where China exported 377 million RMB's worth of television dramas, which quickly rose to 510 million and 633 million RMB, respectively, in 2016 and 2017 (Yau, 2021). Chinese media giants such as *iQIYI, Youku*, and *Tencent Video* are also gaining

popularity among international consumers, ranking high among the world's top revenue-earning applications made on *Apple ios* in early 2021 (Qu, 2021). Alluded as China's *Netflix, iQIYI* first entered the international market by contracting its exports through streaming companies like *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime*. The company has since grown rapidly to export large quantities of its content globally with much success via their own international platform. *iQIYI* also co-produced and distributed *Story of Yanxi Palace* to immense international success, as it became the world's most googled TV show in 2018 (BBC, 2018).

5.3. The boom in overseas investment and operations

There has also been a substantial increase in the number and scale of FDI made by Chinese cultural and media enterprises overseas in the past years, often with the support of state banks in China (Kelly, 2018). In the publication industry, more than 500 affiliated agencies had been established worldwide by 2020 (Konhill Media, 2020). Overseas Mergers & Acquisitions (M&A) is one of the most significant channels for China enterprises to go global. The frequency of overseas M&A by China's cultural and media companies has increased conspicuously in recent years. For example, in 2014, *Phoenix Publishing and Media Inc*., bought a whole asset concerning the children's book business of American *Publications International Ltd*., with $US80 million. In 2012, *Dalian Wanda Group* spent over US$2.6 billion purchasing *AMC Entertainment*, the second-largest movie theatre chain in the United States, with over 8,200 cinema screens globally. In 2015, it bought *Hoyts Cinemas*, which counts more than 450 screens and over 55,000 seats in Australia and New Zealand. And in 2017, it acquired *Legendary Entertainment* for US$3.5 billion. *Perfect World Games*, a Chinese game firm, has recently completed a couple of overseas M&A and has established wholly owned subsidiaries in Northern America, Europe, and Japan. Its overseas revenue reached 1.48 billion RMB in 2018, up by 20% year-on-year (Zheng Chaoqian, 2019). Chinese gaming Tech Giants such as *Tencent, NetEase* and *Yoozoo*, taking advantage of the widespread appeal of fictional worlds, are increasing their investment in foreign franchises such as *Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter* and *Game of Thrones*, adapting their products to dominate the growing global mobile game sector, an industry that reached US$175 billion in revenues in 2020 (Ye, 2021). In 2020, *Genshin Impact*, an anime-style adventure mobile game developed by Shanghai-based *miHoYo*, had China and non-China-based launches. The game generated US$245 million in its first month, becoming the biggest mobile role-playing game launch in the US and the biggest revenue generator globally in the App Store and Google Play (Ye, 2020). Investment in co-production ventures also impacts how Chinese culture is distributed and consumed, with the Chinese film and animation industries experiencing an increase in foreign collaborations in recent years. Despite being unsuccessful at the box office, Zhang Yimou's 2016 first English-language film, *The Great Wall*, was a Chinese-American co-production starred by Matt Damon, Hong Kong actor Andy Lau and Chinese actress Jing Tian. The animation movie *Kung Fu Panda 3*, distributed by *20th Century Fox* worldwide and *Oriental DreamWorks* in China, was released first in China to mark the 2016 Chinese New Year celebrations and had separate scripts in Mandarin and English, with the former only shown in China.

6. Discussion

The above provides evidence that overall, China's culture 'going out' strategy has contributed to promoting Sino-foreign cultural exchanges and boosting cultural trade and media FDI. To some degree, it appears that it has also supported the deployment of a cohesive cultural diplomacy strategy that impacts how China is seen or perceived outside its borders and thus affects its soft power tactics' efficacy. However, concerning this efficacy, we have found substantial discrepancies in the assessment of the strategy's performance. In general, most China-based scholars estimate that the culture 'going out' strategy proposed by the Chinese government is on track and has pushed China and its culture onto the global stage (Yakun & Zhaohui, 2013). Scholars support the stance that China's confidence in its culture has increased ever since opening up to the international markets (Zou Guangwen, 2018; Wang Guangyu, 2019; Zhao Qiudi, 2020). After experiencing four development phases, Chinese experts accord in that China's soft power has entered a soaring-growth period since 2005, significantly improving from the 18th and 19th CCP National Congresses in 2012 and 2017 (Wei Youyin, 2018, Li; Wenge, 2018; Ou Yanghui, 2018; Wang Yingmin, 2020). Aware of the 'China Threat' and 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy' rhetoric that inevitably have an impact on the nation's reputation and image, particularly in the West, Chinese scholars argue that exercising soft power through cultural exports will help successfully promote China in a better light (Wang Guangyu, 2019). For instance, according to Sun Yixue, a Professor at Shanghai's Tongji University, institutions such as the *Confucius Institute* are 'a manifestation of Chinese culture that regards harmony as a precious cultural tradition' (as quoted in Zhuang Pinghui, 2020). The strategy plays an important part in promoting Chinese values and the attractiveness of Chinese culture abroad, in addition to 'upholding the country's international image and augmenting its voice on the international stage' (Zhang Yiwu, 2018). Wary that an emphasis on outward cultural expansion can provoke a clash of ideologies (Zhao Qiudi, 2020), local scholars have adopted a cohesion-centred approach, suggesting building solidarity and amicable relations abroad as a stepping stone in enhancing China's global narrative. This necessity to emphasize China's 'good story' weaves a narrative palatable for others from different cultural backgrounds (Wang Guangyu, 2019).[6] In that effort, the advantageous positioning of Chinese diasporas across the globe is underscored, as they can revitalize symbolic interest and connections back to Chinese culture (Zhang Mei, 2016). It is rare to see criticism of the culture 'going out' strategy from domestic scholars. When it happens, the most recurrent discrepancy focuses on shortages of policy support, calling for more powerful policies to promote the implementation of the strategy (Zhu Chunyan & Zhi, 2013; Chunyang, 2012).

On the other hand, a substantial number of non-China-based scholars are more careful to affirm the strategy's success. Although, in general, an increase in China-led international cultural exchanges is acknowledged, in terms of soft power, the overall assessment is that China's culture 'going out 'initiative has helped little in deploying and advancing it. Zhu Zhiqun (2019), a professor and Chair of the Department of International Relations at Bucknell University, underscores that, in general, Western scholars hold the opinion that 'China has a long way to go to become a well-respected global leader holding enough soft power to inspire others'. Joseph S. Nye (2012) dubs China's soft power as 'weak' and highlights the difficulties faced by China when using culture and narrative to create soft

power, particularly 'when they are inconsistent with domestic realities'. In the same line, David Shambaugh (2013) establishes that while China's international reach is increasingly broad, it is shallow with 'little soft power, if any'. Recurrent ideological and political considerations permeating the strategy could be behind this perceived inefficiency. For instance, when discussing the prospects for the Chinese film industry overseas, Liu Qibao, former Politburo member and Director of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the CCP, declared that China should become an international movie power. However, to Liu, its films should take 'socialist core values as a guide' and 'contain more elements of the Chinese dream' (as cited in Coonan, 2014). This 'Chinese dream' vision goes beyond economic development and includes a 'renaissance' of Chinese traditional culture and heritage (Soom-Im & Byung-Hwan, 2015). This prompted Stanley Rosen, a professor of political science at the University of Southern California, to cast doubt over this sought-after international success: 'They'd love to have success overseas. It hasn't happened. I lecture in China on how to internationalize the film industry and increase soft power, but it just hasn't been successful' (as cited in Funnell, 2015). Rosen (2017) links this lack of success to overemphatic political considerations trumping audience demands, which results in 'embarrassing' outcomes in the highly competitive international market.

The efficiency of the contributions made by macro events such as the *Shanghai World Expo* as tools of soft diplomacy also remains a question mark for authors. Svensson (2013) suggests that *Expo 2010* did not contribute so much to a Chinese 'going out' strategy as it was a vehicle for the world 'going in' to China. Winter (2015) questions the authenticity and depth of the cultural exchanges that took place during the event due to China's emphasis on 'detaching cultural understanding from its political complexities' (p. 51). To Davidson (2017), while China's spending on soft power over the last decade has hit US$10 billion a year (more than the combined investment on soft power by the US, the UK, France, Germany, and Japan), it's effort to establish itself as a 'soft superpower' has not outstripped any of its rivals. Despite these massive investments, non-China-based authors generally express their doubts about the role that the 'going out' strategy can play in shaping China's future role in the global order (Nash, 2012; Wang Hongying, 2016) since its soft power still languishes far behind that of its Western rivals, a comparative failure, rather than a success (Davidson, 2017; Nye, 2018b). In contrast, Chinese online celebrities and video bloggers (vloggers) such as Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge encounter broad national and international appeal, particularly among young people, with millions of YouTube subscribers and billions of views in their videos. Part of their widespread success could be due to attractive cultural products that communicate some form of authenticity and speak to the human experience, something often missing in the more ideological tone found in the official narratives.

While domestic experts seem to overestimate the strategy's influence, foreign ones underestimate its reach and impact. This assessment discrepancy on China's 'going out' strategy's performance and impact is significant, with ideological and cultural bias seeming to be behind the divergence. The perceived misalignment led us to explore a middle-ground analysis of China's 'going out' strategy, including successes and failures. Among the strategy's successful elements, we found the following:

First, in a period relatively short, a substantial transformation from being a country that imports culture to an exporting one. That includes, for instance, products such as calligraphy, mask-painting, art, opera and music, but also language and cuisine, amongst

others. The *Confucius Institute* network's work abroad is probably the most prominent example, with an extensive reach in parts of the world traditionally culturally distant from China, such as Africa (Bhaya, 2018). The volume of cultural products consumed by foreign audiences can impact the reach of soft power. In the last few years, people overseas have had more chances to learn about China by reading its books, watching its films and TV programmes, or participating in cultural events. These opportunities have increased due to the growing demand for Chinese digital media through streaming services, particularly in South Korea and Japan. This is noteworthy, considering their entrenched rejection of China's cultural influence and tumultuous diplomatic relations (Dow Jones, 2020). Increasingly, Japanese and South Korean broadcasting companies are purchasing copyright exports to Chinese media, with popular titles including iQIYI's *Nirvana in Fire* (2015) and Tencent Video's *The Untamed* (2019). This increase in volume and the continuity of Chinese cultural exports can make audiences in other countries more receptive towards Chinese culture and give China confidence in its strength as a major ancient and modern civilization.

Second, China's culture 'going out' strategy has also offered opportunities for Chinese people to enter into contact with other world cultures, both overseas and locally, and has provided numerous opportunities for cultural exchange. For instance, The *Expo 2010* in Shanghai was visited by more than 73 million people, making it the most visited universal exposition in history, confirming China's 'willingness to nurture a more cosmopolitan, worldly citizenry' (Winter, 2015, p. 51). International cultural exchanges can create integral bridges between nations and, in some cases, are one of the few platforms available for dialogue. China's complex ties with Japan and South Korea make the cultural exchange a less-threatening platform for mutual exploration and open new avenues for potential collaborations and sharing (Ryan, 2016).

Third, as a result of the implementation of the strategy, China's cultural trade has experienced rapid growth and ultimately has become the world's largest country in terms of cultural trade, with a current export ratio ten times bigger than its imports, approaching US$100 billion in 2018. This is particularly evident in the successful outputs of Chinese broadcasting media and streaming services. The Chinese government is riding on the success of these commercial digital platforms as they are 'outperforming the state's cultural power emissaries' (Keane & Huan, 2018, p. 62), such as the *Confucius Institutes* and performing arts troupes. Even in the Chinese film industry, traditionally a low-intensity export industry compared with other cultural sectors, the recent developments in the exploration of collaboration formulas, co-productions and new models for promoting Chinese films abroad suggest a certain optimism for a Chinese overseas film industry (Rosen, 2017).

Forth, although China's soft power implantation has not been evenly successful (Jacques, 2012), it has witnessed an increase in several regions of the world. For instance, China's international appeal does seem to have improved and expanded over the past years in the Middle East (Kirk, 2015; Globely News, 2022), in Latin America (Kurlantzick, 2006b; Oppenheimer, 2019) and in developing countries in South Asia and Africa (Lee, 2009; Bhaya, 2018), as well as in Southeast Asia (Hruby & Petru, 2019; Kurlantzick, 2006a; Natalia & Alexander, 2019; Petru, 2021; Womack, 2003). As early as 2004, Teo (2004) underscored China's rising cultural influence in the latter when he highlighted elements such as cuisine, calligraphy, cinema, art, acupuncture, herbal medicine, and fashion as

examples of the ubiquitous presence of China in the region. And even in Western countries, traditionally reluctant to admit China's influence, its soft power has improved, with Nye (2005) acknowledging that 'it would be foolish to ignore the gains [China] is making'.

However, China's culture 'going out' strategy has mixed results in two areas. The first is China's ability to export core cultural products, which remains weak. As highlighted above, China is now the world's largest exporter of cultural goods. However, most of the items exported are musical instruments, handicrafts, and jewellery, mostly belonging to the manufacturing industry, with little cultural content. Thus, the trade deficit in core cultural products remains high, pointing towards a lack of attractiveness and competitiveness in their inception in the global cultural markets. It also highlights missed opportunities in terms of soft power potential. For instance, even though China exported US$85 million in TV dramas in 2017, that represents just one-third of the US$239 million exported by South Korea. China has, therefore, room to increase its cultural reach and 'globalize further' (Ferreira, 2019).

As shown in Table 1, China's ability to export some of its cultural content remains low. A few examples illustrate this deficit. The Chinese film *Wolf Warriors II*, released in 2017, achieved significant domestic success, with a box office of over 5.6 billion RMB in mainland China. However, it just produced US$2.72 million in North America, where while audiences generally enjoyed the action, they disliked what was perceived by some critics as 'Chinese nationalist propaganda [that . . .] broke the story flow' (Anderson, 2017). Even when new models for promoting Chinese films abroad are being explored, the results still show mixed results. For example, *Hollywood Adventures* is a Chinese-language film directed by Taiwan-born American director Justin Lin, produced by Chinese entrepreneur Bruno Wu, and shot in Southern California. Despite featuring prominent Chinese stars and having an ambitious budget (US$30 million), it only played in a few Asian markets, with no American release, ranking forty-fourth among all releases in China in 2015 (Box Office Mojo, 2019). Something similar happens with Chinese television: concentrated in specific Asian markets (Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and more recently, as seen above, with growth in Japan and South Korea) and places with substantial overseas Chinese communities (e.g., San Francisco and Toronto), Chinese television programmes, centred around TV dramas, experience challenges breaking into other markets in Europe, Africa, and the Americas (Keane & Huan, 2018).

Table 1. Data on the import and export of cultural products of China in 2018 (US$ Billion).

Item	Import	Export	Gap	Import: Export
Cultural goods (total)	8.93	88.19	79.26	1:9.9
Cultural services (total)	23.22	6.17	−17.05	3.8:1
Books	0.22	0.051	−0.16	4.2:1
Magazines	0.135	0.006	−0.13	22.7:1
Newspapers	0.011	0.000434	−0.01	25.3:1
Audiovisual products, electronic publications and digital publications	0.38	0.029	−0.35	13: 1
Films	25.81	4.25	−21.55	6:1

Sources: Compiled with data from the *National Bureau of Statistics of China* (NBS) and other governmental data.
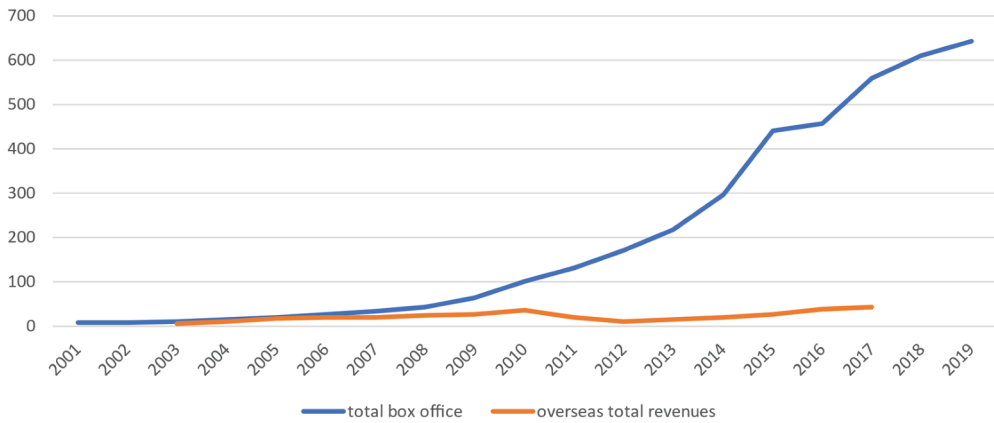
Chart 1. China's domestic total film box office vs. overseas revenue. Sources: Compiled with data released by several Chinese governmental departments.

The second shortfall that questions the 'going global' strategy's success concerns China's image globally. China systematically ranks low in international soft power rankings. *The Soft Power 30: A Global Ranking of Soft Power* report, published in 2019 by England-based *Portland PR Ltd* (2019) and the *USC Center of Public Diplomacy*, placed China 27th out of 30 countries in the ranking, only ahead of Hungary, Turkey, and Russia Federation, and behind countries such as Greece, Czech Republic, and Poland. The report explains that China ranks low (China has consistently ranked in the bottom spots since the report was first published in 2015) due to its curbs on individual rights and poor international policy practice. Polls also seem to support this perception. According to a 2021 *Pew Research Center* report, a median of 27% in 17 advanced economies worldwide has a favourable view of China, while 69% hold a negative view. These unfavourable views of China remain near historic highs in most advanced economies.[7] In the United States, Americans' positive view of China dropped to 20%. In comparison, 73% of Americans have a negative" view of the country. This figure risen to unprecedented 82% in 2022, the highest since 2005. The data highlights how foreign public opinion of China remains largely negative despite the country's efforts at soft power. To explain this trend, analysts speak of 'a great deal of anxiety' about the motivations behind a strategy that 'threatens the existing international order' (Wang Hongying, 2016). For instance, after Dalian Wanda acquired *AMC Entertainment* in 2012, some commentators warned of the dangers inherent to this purchase for American consumers, urging them to counter China's soft power and warning them of a 'real Red Dawn in the not too distant future' (Westerman, 2013). Analysts have also regularly warned of the inherent risks of these overseas investments in entertainment, particularly when they are done without adequate prior evaluation, claiming that they often generate little value and expose firms to unjustified risks (China Policy, 2017).

The *Confucius Institutes* provide another example of this apprehension. Across the world, but particularly in some Western countries, they have sometimes been regarded as cultural invasion tools and have been boycotted, with some teachers treated as spies and asked to leave by local governments (Dale, 2014). In 2014, the *American Association of University Professors* released a statement where it exhorted American universities to

reconsider the agreements with *Hanban* (汉办), the Chinese state agency responsible for the Institutes (AAUP, 2014), as they could pose a threat to academic freedom and scholastic integrity (Bowman, 2019; Graham, 2014). As a result, in 2018, at least ten American Universities closed their *Confucius Institutes* (Redden, 2019). In 2019, a US Senate Report heavily criticized their work and credibility in America (Gunia, 2019). Several universities in France, Sweden, Belgium, and the Netherlands have also closed their Confucius Institutes (Lau, 2019). In 2020, presumably as a reaction against these "overseas propaganda rows" (Zhuang Pinghui, 2020), *Hanban* was rebranded and changed its name to become the *Ministry of Education Centre for Language Education and Cooperation* (教育部中外语言交流中心).[8]

This chain of controversies suggests that some of China's cultural strategies abroad are perceived by some overseas parties more as a 'sharp power' approach rather than the 'soft power' initially intended by the Chinese government. The term 'sharp power', defined by its reliance on 'subversion, bullying and pressure, which combine to promote self-censorship' (The Economist, 2017), was first coined by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig in 2017. They argue that countries like Russia and China influence foreign countries' spheres of media, culture, and academia in "malign and aggressive" ways, using "modern and sophisticated tools" (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). Nye affirms that China often uses its soft-power programs as sharp power (Nye, 2018a),[9] in what some authors have dubbed the "China Threat Theory 3.0" (Koetse, 2018). Self-assurance in the universal application of cultural products or values can quickly transform among audiences who are not entirely receptive or distrustful of political and cultural arrogance. As such, there is still much suspicion about China's cultural products, such as those from the *Confucius Institutes*, as "agents of propaganda" (Rawnsley, 2015).

Recent conflicts over alleged cultural plagiarism and appropriation of other Asian countries' cultural products have also sparked negative responses towards Chinese culture overseas. These include South Korea's kimchi (fermented cabbage), hanbok (traditional clothing), and some historical and cultural figures, and Vietnam's áo dài (the country's national garment), that have recently sparked controversies accusing China of "cultural imperialism" and "cultural theft" (Choi, 2021; Ha, 2019; The Economist, 2021). At the same time, Chinese media companies sometimes market themselves internationally as providers of 'Asian content', which enables intercultural collaborations such as remakes and hybridized adaptations to enter the domestic and foreign markets (Xie Ruolin, 2020). This can receive a positive reception by local audiences, as in the Chinese adaptation by iQIYI of the popular Singaporean drama *The Little Nonya*, a collaboration between Chinese and Singaporean production companies which was lauded for their diverse international casting,[10] or turn sour, as in the case of some Chinese TV shows in South Korea (Davis, 2021; Kim, 2021).

7. Limitations, recommendations and concluding remarks

Our assessment of China's culture 'going-out' has several limitations:

The first one refers to the subject of our analysis. Culture is an elusive and complex term (Hartman, 1997; Milner & Browitt, 2002; Williams, 1976). We tend to frame it by using definitions such as the one from UNESCO (1982),[11] purposely universal, integrative, and all-embracing, so that it can fit as many contexts as possible, including the ones we

discuss in this paper. However, the use of culture as the subject of analysis also implies a fair amount of subjectivity (Ptáčková et al., 2021), and as such, caution and respect need to be exercised when handling it in IR. Thus, when considering China's culture 'going out' strategy, we discuss reasonably measurable items such as the trade and sale of books, films, and music. But also about the handling and sharing of beliefs, ideologies, and values, something much more problematic to measure and assess than the number of spectators that watch a film or 'likes' on a social media platform. Much less when we use culture as a tool of soft power.

The second refers to culture's efficiency in overcoming resistance or even negative perceptions of policies and actions among foreign audiences. Consuming Chinese cultural products such as films, TV shows, or games does not necessarily translate into a growing acceptance or sympathy for China and its government's behaviour. It is also unclear what degree or amount of culture is needed to improve a country's reputation or image. This is something that Naftali (2018), for instance, illustrates in her study of Japanese perceptions among middle-school students in two parts of China. The study demonstrates that it is perfectly possible to be avid consumers of cultural products – in this case, Japanese popular culture – and still feel animosity towards the country of origin and its government. This discrepancy highlights the complexities of (dis)associating the cultural product with the originator of the policies and frameworks that make it possible.

The third one speaks of the disconnection between purpose and impact and is closely linked to the previous two limitations. While, in general, China's goal of sending cultural products and promoting cultural exchanges abroad can be well-intentioned, it still risks having little impact on how the receptor sees the sender. Audiences can interpret the use of culture abroad in an entirely different way from how its creator or source intended. For instance, the purpose may be mutual understanding and respect, but recipients may see the motivations in a very different light (e.g., as a threat or a propaganda tool: see, for instance, Lee, 2011, p. 22). Or, the intention may also be to support specific political and economic interests, which can naively be perceived as innocuous language courses and cultural exchanges, a disconnection Wheeler (2014) highlights when she analyses *Confucius Institute*'s work at the *University of Nairobi* in Kenya. Therefore, there is no guarantee that investment in culture and perceived interest will translate into the desired outcomes (McConnell & Watanabe, 2008; Watanabe, 2008), as it heavily depends on how audiences have socially constructed and filtered the image and the source (Rawnsley, 2021).

With these limitations in mind, we propose a set of recommendations. As we navigate the 21st century's third decade, China could now concentrate on the following items to streamline its culture 'going out' strategy:

- Strengthening its policy support to boost the export of core cultural products such as books, films, TV programmes, and performing arts, as the volume of cultural products consumed by foreign audiences can impact the soft power's reach;

- Focusing on improving the appeal of its cultural products overseas, building efficient global marketing systems, following the trends of success we have observed lately with TV programmes in some Asia-Pacific countries;

- Detaching international cultural exchanges and trading from the country's traditional propaganda machines, removing interferences and cultural hegemony connotations.

China's culture 'going out' strategy is the most critical cultural internationalization strategy proposed by the Chinese government in the 21st century. With the advancement of the strategy, China is substantially impacting the international cultural arena and is positioned to become a world cultural superpower. Positive results are apparent when we look at China's dramatic growth in cultural trade, which has led to a reversal of the trade deficit in cultural goods and the progress made in cultural exchanges. However, the advancement of China's soft power through culture, aiming at improving China's global image, is proving more complicated and, in the last few years, has suffered several setbacks. For the years to come, the culture 'going out' strategy can continue to support China's efforts in advancing measurable goals such as expanding cultural trade and optimizing its economic structure. But most importantly, in a global context where some major powers are gradually withdrawing from effective global leadership, China's culture 'going out' approach can impact world cultural relations for the foreseeable decades. This new leadership is becoming more evident in regions such as Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The culture 'going out' strategy can help diversify the consumption of cultural products, providing broader and deeper avenues for under-standing Chinese cultural proposals. If sustained and conducted wisely, remaining closer to 'soft' rather than 'sharp' approaches, the culture 'going out' strategy could translate, centuries later, into a return of China to its traditional central role as a major player in international cultural relations.

Notes

1. In July 2020, the *Confucius Institute* headquarters in Beijing or *Hanban* (汉办), was rebranded and changed its name to *the Ministry of Education Centre for Language Education and Cooperation* (教育部中外语言交流中心). However, the overseas-based Confucius Institutes maintained their brand name. For more details about the *Confucius Institutes*' current status and roles, please see, sections 5.1 (Surge in Cultural Exchanges), and 6 (Discussion) in this paper.
2. We are aware of the limitations behind this oversimplified way of dividing scholar's work as it pigeonholes them. Today's fluidity of international academic work implies other classifications: many Chinese scholars work outside of China, and foreign scholars are based in China; other scholars are associated with both Chinese and overseas institutions. However, for the purpose of this paper, we refer to the China-based, non-China based dichotomy, as it represents a notable trend that proved helpful when building our argumentation.
3. For example, Hu Jintao believed that China's soft power doesn't match China' international status. Therefore, China must 'strengthen international competition of China's culture and improve China's soft power is a crucially important issue confronting China'. (Jintao, 2016:539). Xi Jinping pointed out that China has successfully solved such problems as 'being beaten', 'being starved', but the problem of 'being scolded' has not solved yet (Jinping, 2016:8).
4. In 2012, President Hu Jintao wrote in the magazine Qiushi (Seeking Truth) that 'we [Chinese] must clearly see that international hostile forces are intensifying the strategic plot of Westernizing and dividing China, and ideological and cultural fields', he said are the focal areas of their long-term infiltration … We should deeply understand the seriousness and complexity of the ideological struggle, always sound the alarm and remain vigilant and take forceful measures to be on guard and respond' (as cited in Wong, 2012). President Xi Jinping called for a 'cultural renaissance' to rejuvenate Chinese values, strength, and moral superiority over Western values, and to renew what he has called 'cultural self-confidence' (Chen Hongjun, 2016).

5. Specifically: *The Circular Concerning Promoting the Export of Performance, Exhibition and Cultural Products*; *The Opinion Concerning Encouraging and Supporting the Export of Cultural Products and Services*; *The Opinion on Promoting Going-out of National News and Publishing Industry*; *The Guidance Catalogue for Cultural Products and Services Export*; *The Circular Concerning further Strengthening the Going-out Project of Broadcast and Film*; *The Cooperation Protocol Concerning Support and Cultivate Key Enterprises and Projects to Export Broadcast, Films and TV Programs*; *The Guiding Opinion of China Exim Bank on Financial Support of the Culture Export*; *The Opinion on Accelerating Development of International Cultural Trade*; *The Guiding Opinion on further Strengthening and Improving the Work of Going Out of Chinese Culture*; *The Guiding Opinion on Strengthening Building of Soft Power on 'the Belt and the Road'*; *The Development Plan for Overseas China's Culture Centres (2012–2020)*; *The Action Plan for Exploring Overseas Cultural Markets*; *The Opinion on Strengthening and Improving the Work of Sino-foreign Cultural Exchanges.*

6. While outward international cultural exports are encouraged by the state, China remains wary of foreign cultures' cultural influence on domestic audiences. Wang Guangyu (2019) and Zhao Qiudi (2020) highlight their concerns over western dominance in the global sphere from a conflict-centred perspective, identifying foreign culture as a source of threat to Chinese values and ideologies. A reluctance to welcome excessive foreign cultural influence can be observed through trends such as the 'cold wave' (寒流), which encourages vigilance against foreign capitalistic culture (Park et al., 2019); and in the regulation of the work of global media platforms in China, perceived as crucial for maintaining the Chinese values of local audiences (Park et al., 2019; Peichi, 2013).

7. According to the same research centre, the percentage of South Koreans with negative sentiments towards China has reached an all-time high, jumping from 31% in 2002 to 77% in 2021, while the percentage of those with positive sentiments decreased from 66% to 22% during the same period. In Japan, the percentages were 80% (unfavourable) and 10% (favourable). (Silver et al., 2021).

8. Sun Yixue, a Professor at Shanghai's Tongji University acknowledges that the name change was 'related to various kinds of pressure, but it is by no means succumbing to them' (as quoted in Zhuang Pinghui, 2020). Regarding the rebranding, Ma Jianfei, the Centre's Director General Ma stated that 'The centre particularly hopes to expand cooperation with relevant institutions in the US and jointly build a more focused, pragmatic, and efficient new model for China-US language exchanges, and strive to contribute to the promotion of China-US cultural exchanges and mutual understanding between the people of the two countries'.

9. Rawnsley (2021), however, labels the term as unnecessary as it 'simply muddy the water even further' in this already complicated debate. Accordingly, China-based authors tend to discredit the validity of the term sharp-power by citing political motivations, particularly driven by the US, behind its popularity (Liu, 2018).

10. Guo Youquan, iQIYI's vice president, highlights the company's emphasis to appeal to Chinese diasporic communities with Asian content, noting cultural exchange as an important bridge between consumers. In his view, *The Little Nonya*'s Chinese adaptation was a source of pride for Singaporeans, who could see their culture and artistes become popularized overseas (Wang Yingmin, 2020).

11. According to UNESCO (1982) 'Culture is a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group. It encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, values systems, traditions and beliefs'.

Disclosure statement

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