Wolf Warrior Diplomacy and Chinese Soft Power: K-Pop as a Testing Ground

Increasingly in the latter half of the 20th century, authoritarianism and soft power have shown to be rather incompatible as our experiences have shown through a number of different events. In each instance, countries with authoritarian and oppressive political rulers were snubbed and denied chances – with varying degree of success – to recast themselves through the building up of their soft power. Today, the world still faces such authoritarian states and actors aiming to build up their soft power bases so as to be able to influence foreign audiences and recast their images in a better light, including the People’s Republic of China (China) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, with the opening up of a new diplomatic era of “wolf warrior diplomacy” lead by Xi Jinping and the emergence of a much more assertive, aggressive, and bellicose style of diplomacy and foreign policy, a number of questions are sure to emerge. For the purposes of this paper, two of these questions are especially important. One is the question of how this wolf warrior diplomacy will impact Chinese soft power prospects in the future and the second is the question of whether it is possible to anticipate the forms and scale of this impact through forms of soft power available to us and to China today.

This is certainly no easy task, especially so because Chinese soft power is limited and there are no socio-cultural spaces created by Chinese soft power which could be analyzed for such an impact. Furthermore, if they existed it would only be possible to measure outside reaction to such spaces in the face of wolf warrior diplomacy, leaving out internal changes and community reactions to the introduction of wolf warrior style actions to their socio-cultural space. In addition, no Chinese soft power socio-cultural space could mirror the global democratic order which would be the primary target of the wolf warriors, as well as the primary reactors to their actions. However, it is possible to locate a socio-cultural space which would then act as a
microcosm for the global democratic order over which both the impact of and reactions to wolf warrior diplomacy with regards to China’s soft power prospects can be examined and understood. The socio-cultural space in question, which I will be focusing on as part of this paper, is that of K-Pop, which could not only – as I shall discuss – act as a microcosm for the global democratic order but also is an alternative for a Chinese soft power socio-cultural space as well, since the Chinese are part of it both in its production as artists and in its consumption as a large market. Thus, in a sense, the socio-cultural space around K-Pop is a hybrid that would allow for us to examine the different pulls and impacts of different actors, and most importantly those of China and the CCP, and the global democratic order.

As such, this paper will aim to use the socio-cultural space of K-Pop as a microcosm for the global democratic order and discuss the apparent and possible effects of wolf warrior diplomacy on Chinese soft power prospects, through the insights gained from an examination of Chinese participation in the socio-cultural space around K-Pop. To this end, I will be asking the question of how can the effects of wolf warrior diplomacy be on Chinese soft power be understood through an analysis of Chinese reactions to and participation in the global and democratic socio-cultural space of K-Pop. I will be arguing, that the adoption of the wolf warrior diplomacy, both by the Chinese state which reacts to K-Pop socio-cultural space and the Chinese K-Pop idols – who are performing in an increasingly global and democratic socio-cultural space – will result in the decline of both Chinese participation in this socio-cultural space and damage Chinese soft power prospects at large. By pursuing such a point, this paper will begin laying down the groundwork for discussion about wolf warrior diplomacy and soft power dynamics in the Chinese context, opening the way for more in-depth and sophisticated discussion on the state of Chinese soft power under and as managed by wolf warrior diplomats.
The paper will be divided into three sections, geared towards exploring the key elements and topics with an eye for connections and impacts on one another. The first section will begin by exploring the state of Chinese soft power today, especially focusing on its sources and its current state of success, aiming to better understand the position of the CCP on the question of soft power and provide the contextual grounds for the ensuing discussion. The second section focuses on the wolf warrior diplomacy itself, with an eye for both what this new diplomatic style espoused by Beijing is and what its implications are with regards to the generation and maintenance of soft power. The third section will then turn towards a brief discussion of K-Pop in terms of the socio-cultural space it provides for the Chinese to react to and act within, keeping a particular focus on what aspects of this space might become problematic when met with wolf warrior diplomacy. After providing an overview, this section will then deal with brief case studies of three incidents where a clash between the Chinese and K-Pop’s socio-cultural space can be understood in the context of wolf warrior diplomacy.

**Chinese Soft Power in the 21st Century**

The CCP’s quest to build soft power has been an ongoing process – which one can stretch all the way back to 1949 by classifying propaganda pieces as an attempt to build up soft power – that has been especially pointed and accelerated with the turn of the twenty first century. The need to build up China’s prestige and soft power was recognized by Hu Jintao, who bemoaned the poor state of China’s soft power bases and called for the building up and expansion of the country’s soft power capabilities and structures.¹ Thus, the leadership circles of the CCP have long been aware of the weakness of Chinese soft power and the – strategic – need to build it up

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to a level that could compete with other powers, among which the US is a particularly strong benchmark to match and overtake. Furthermore, the CCP and the Chinese intellectuals who are working on the concept of soft power have come to formulate for themselves a specific conceptualization of soft power, which guides China’s policy choices and actions. In this view, soft power is conceptualized in terms of culture, which leaves other considerations such as political systems and policy choices as a minority opinion, and brings about a reframing of actions and policy so as to promote Chinese culture and then evaluate progress in terms of success of such promotion. This in itself brings forwards certain differences in which the CCP’s quest for a soft power is constructed different than that of its foreign counterparts.

From the outset, this cultural approach presents for the CCP the challenge of defining what the Chinese culture and values it will officially sanction, cultivate, and promote across the globe for an international audience to consume. Thus, it allows for the creation of a “Chinese culture” which is hand-crafted to serve the prestige and soft power needs of the state. Such a purposefully constructed culture, might not only appear artificial when observed by a foreign audience but can also be full of loopholes and contradictions, as such selectively picked components across a nation’s history and culture might not sit well together. In the case of China, it can be observed that – in the absence of a contemporary and ideological foundation, as compared to an abundance of traditional sources – the construction of this soft power oriented Chinese culture borrows heavily from the traditions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Mozi among others. More specifically, this constructed culture is based on the ideas of “Harmony, “The

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3 Inkster, “Chinese Culture”, p. 67
Golden Mean”, and “Propriety” which are placed on a pedestal as the timeless essence of Chinese culture, which would now earn China its deserved soft power.⁵

What is being stressed here is not necessarily unpalatable to the outside observer, however, the context from which they spring and the manner in which they are pushed is problematic. This constructed Chinese culture, at the hands of the CCP which wields it, becomes a tool of justifying the form of authoritarianism and oppression with which the party has maintained its grip over China. Thus, it lands anathema to many outside who are supposed to be charmed by it as a culture, whose values are rather shaped by the US-led democratic global order and becomes an unwieldy tool to build up soft power. Furthermore, the inability of the consumer to level criticisms and ask questions about the culture they are asked to consume is also another problematic point.⁶ In effect, this constructed Chinese culture ceases to be a vibrant forum for people to engage China, its culture, and its values but ends up being a dogmatic structure that demands obedience and unthinking acceptance. Herein lies one of the problems that Chinese soft power faces, in that it is under strict control of the party and its consumers are entirely unable to question its contents so as to be able to engage it in their own way. Thus, Chinese soft power becomes unappealing to the very people who are meant to consume it, because to consume it and to engage with it is not an act of free engagement and curious exploration of Chinese culture but a tightly controlled political affair.

Another aspect of the CCP’s approach to soft power is that there is an overwhelming focus on the production and marketing of cultural goods across the world. As a result, the focus of Chinese soft power shifts heavily towards the building up of the Chinese cultural industries and brand power, and is largely measured by their performance especially as compared to their

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competitors. However, for the Chinese this reliance on cultural goods and brand value is an uphill battle and positive results are not necessarily being seen. On the one hand, these industries suffer from party control, both because their productive processes are closely monitored and directed by the existing political orthodoxy of the day and because foreign audiences adopt highly critical views because of the political control over these products. On the other hand, these products lack competitiveness vis-à-vis their major market competitors and in fact China still suffers a greater “cultural deficit” with more foreign cultural products and associated values flooding the Chinese market and have an impact on the Chinese.\footnote{You, “The rise of China”, pp. 765, 774-775} Taken together, this constitutes another way in which the CCP’s attempts at building up China’s soft power runs into a wall and shows poorer results than expected. This is because as the scepter of the authoritarian giant both hangs as a cloud over the cultural products restricting their creativity and possible appeal for foreign audiences, whilst its shadow casts doubt and distaste towards the products themselves who become tainted as “propaganda”. Furthermore, the reverse flow of cultural products and the “non-Chinese” values which are contained within, allow for the spread of soft power for other global actors in China whilst China itself constantly struggles to make a showing abroad.

A final source of Chinese soft power can be seen in the form of institutions, ranging from mass media organizations such as the CCTV and the CGTN to the academic and cultural institutions in the form of the Confucius Institutes (CIs). First, the emergence of Chinese mass media organizations, especially in the form global of news networks shows that the importance of such mediums as soft power tools is being recognized and actively engaged by China, with the funds to back such ventures readily available.\footnote{You, “The rise of China”, p. 768; Shambaugh, “China’s Soft Power Push”, pp. 100, 102; deLisle, “Foreign Policy through Other Means”, p. 185} The creation and maintenance of Chinese mass media outlets allows for China’s voice and views to be heard by audiences on a global scale,
especially so given their controlled position under party and government organs. Furthermore, these outlets can also become sources for the audiences to become closer to and learn more about China itself with dedicated news and documentary programs turning China into a television spectacle to behold. Second, the CIs allow for the Chinese to forge direct connections with colleges and college students on a global scale, similarly bringing both China’s culture and language, as well as occasional academic opportunities to these scholarly audiences. Thus, it can be seen that the Chinese are working towards the creation of soft power on a comprehensive format, not leaving any sector – especially those that can be seen as strategically crucial – untouched in an effort to create a network of soft power whose center lies in Beijing.

Yet this institutional drive is also fraught with difficulties of its own. As we have seen before, these institutions also suffer from the control of the CCP and the implications of having the party as their benefactors. The CGTN is legally classified in the US as a “an agent of a foreign government” and is afforded all the special measures and restrictions that such categorization brings. Furthermore, the reliability and trustworthiness of the reports of such political controlled and biased mass media outlets and news networks raise eyebrows and their political connections nurture skepticism towards their broadcasts. Thus, they face the problem of broadcasting to a self-contained audience of China’s allies and skeptic observers, which means that the possible gains for soft power is marginal, if not non-existent. In the case of the CIs, the control of the government becomes problematic to the degree that they are seen as detrimental to free academic discussion regarding China – essentially functioning as overseas censorship offices – and a number of them are facing closure. Furthermore, in specific instances the

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10 deLisle, “Foreign Policy through Other Means”, p. 196
overbearing power of the CCP over CIs can be seen as stifling independent action by these agencies as the fear of official criticism and punishment outweighs the incentives to act independently to reach out to audiences. Thus, the CIs face constraints on their ability to promote Chinese soft power both from internal and external sources, which put a damper on their potential and actual abilities to create soft power.

Apart from the sources and issues of Chinese soft power above, two more problems can be discussed as being detrimental to the successful building up of Chinese soft power. On the one hand, as Servaes points out. Chinese soft power suffers because “(1) China continues to be viewed as ‘still a relatively poor developing country’, (2) ‘the absence of multi-party democracy’, (3) and at least until recently, China could not enjoy the ‘appeal’ that Western nations, especially the United States, had in the rest of the world”.12 We have already discussed the impact of an image of undemocratic and party controlled cultural approach, and the impact that a lack of cultural appeal and brand value had on the creation of Chinese soft power whilst discussing the sources themselves. What stands out here is that China is still perceived as being poor and backwards by many, which is detrimental to the image and soft power prospects of China as it bars the country from being seen on par with the West or the US as an equal in terms of cultural products. One can expect this to persist, even as China builds metropolis after metropolis, as long as “Made in China” remains a byword for “cheap low quality, and undependable” products across the globe. Furthermore, the inability to provide to global audiences attractive and non-politically tainted high quality cultural products is bound to add to this situation, as this situation will feed into the perception that the Chinese are unable to provide quality cultural products.

On the other hand, as Shambaugh notes that “the Chinese government approaches public diplomacy the same way it constructs high-speed rail or builds infrastructure—by investing

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12 Servaes, “The Chinese dream shattered”, p. 441
money and expecting to see development” and that “[s]oft power cannot be bought. It must be earned”. As can be seen, the Chinese are seeking to create soft power by establishing institutions and mass media outlets, promoting their own cultural products, and setting up an officially sanctioned Chinese culture, and then thrusting them onto global audiences in a bid to quickly entice them. This is as opposed to the careful and long-term promotion and maintenance of these sources, in a bid to cultivate soft power by bringing foreign audiences freely into contact with China and Chinese culture so as to earn prestige and soft power. In essence, the Chinese approach to soft power ends up demanding quick responses to its advances, ignoring both the truth that haste tends to makes waste when it comes to soft power and that the people are able to see the authoritarian shadow of the CCP lurking beneath the surface. Thus, what emerges is that the Chinese are throwing their economic weight around in backing a number of different policy approaches towards soft power, with very little positive results and a steady stream of negative results to show for it. Raw economic power fails to transform into soft power and one can expect the same pattern to hold in the future, as long as the heavy investment fast return mindset coupled with the specter of political authoritarianism hangs over the Chinese approach towards gaining soft power continues to guide Chinese policy.

In sum, what emerges is a Chinese soft power project which is already in troubled waters. Chinese brands and cultural products lack the necessary competitive edge to outdo their competitors whilst also being outdone at home, with a cultural deficit being a persistent motif of China’s soft power woes. The persistent and visible control of the party over all aspects of this soft power drive, and its demand for simple acceptance and obedience which does not leave room for free and critical engagement becomes off-putting. The already low levels of China’s

13 Shambaugh, “China’s Soft Power Push”, p. 107
14 Shambaugh, “China's Soft Power Push”, pp. 100, 107
international image as a poor, backwards, and undemocratic country persists in blocking China from raising its own image and prestige by spreading its own soft power abroad. Lastly, the Chinese are approaching the question of soft power from a perspective that is unconducive to the achievement of their own soft power goals. As we shall now see, the introduction of wolf warrior diplomacy into such a mix is bound to produce more problems and negative developments, which will only worsen the current state of China’s project to achieve soft power.

**Wolf Warrior Diplomacy and Chinese Soft Power**

Similar to the developmental process of soft power, the rise of wolf warrior diplomacy can be traced back to the turn of the 20th century, but has definitely taken root and shape under Xi Jinping.\(^1\) Xi’s position in the emergence of wolf warrior diplomacy has been noted by some as “leading the wolf pack”, pointing to this role in bringing about a new assertive and aggressive style of diplomacy to define China’s foreign policy in this new era.\(^2\) Furthermore, observers have noted that wolf warrior diplomacy finds approval in Beijing, which only incentivizes it further for Chinese diplomats to engage in it and take “wolfish” actions that tend to be antagonistic and bellicose.\(^3\) As such, it can be seen that – unless a reassessment of the situation triggers a U-turn in Beijing – the wolf warrior approach to diplomacy and foreign policy is set to become the new diplomatic orthodoxy that China will be using to manage its foreign relations.

To understand the broad impact of the rise of wolf warrior diplomacy on China’s soft power prospects, a number of factors should be better understood for their own worth and for their

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negative impacts on the Chinese drive on achieving soft power. These factors include part of the foundations on which wolf warrior diplomacy stands, as well as the actors involved, the forums they operate in and the actions they undertake in capacity as wolf warriors in defense of China.

The most important aspect of wolf warrior diplomacy’s foundations, which can have a significant bearing on the soft power prospects of China is the generational shift that divides these “wolf warriors” from the predecessors and superiors. These new brand of diplomats have been born and raised in a China which has been rising, with their lives largely free from the turbulences of the civil war, the Great Leap Forward, or the Cultural Revolution, and their China is one which has achieved the position of a great power and must now gain global recognition and clout as such a power. Thus, these wolf warriors are a new breed of diplomatic corps, who have much in the way of nationalistic pride in the achievements and greatness of their own country, an eagerness to prove their own mettle and their nation’s worth, and hold grievances because their country is not being recognized being looked down upon. This is a dangerous mix when given free rein to conduct foreign policy in an aggressive and bellicose manner, which could quickly escalate tensions and deteriorate relations turning the Chinese drive towards recognition into a diplomatic quagmire.

The underlying problem here, in terms of soft power, is that such unbridled pride can end up becoming overbearing and distasteful for foreign audiences and governments, eliciting negative reactions towards China beyond the sphere of politics and diplomacy. This could in turn lead to people turning away from and even pushing back against Beijing’s soft power overtures, which might end up being the death knell of Chinese soft power. As such, pride-based diplomacy is a dangerous way to conduct foreign policy, which could especially end up damaging one’s soft

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19 Cheng, “Challenging China’s “Wolf Warrior” Diplomats”, p. 6
power prospects. Furthermore, for soft power policy, this pride could work to solidify the consumer’s inability to question the Chinese culture and cultural products which they are receiving, exacerbating this problem with the Chinese search for soft power. On another note, such pride could contribute to “imperial high-handedness” as observed by Cheng, which would add another dimension of problems for Chinese soft power prospects.\textsuperscript{20} Audiences which find themselves being lorded over and condescended towards by the Chinese would become much less likely to then become consumers of Chinese culture and mass media, and participants in Chinese soft power institutions, depriving of the Chinese of their much-needed audience. Without an audience to consume and take seriously Chinese culture, it would become impossible for China to achieve its soft power goals and in fact a move towards the loss of what power there is will become much more possible if already existing audiences begin fleeing as well.

Continuing on this strand about actors, it is possible to take note of two types of wolf warriors, which can be divided into two groups of “official” and “unofficial” wolf warriors. The “official” group is composed of the diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (MFA), who are being backed by Beijing at an unprecedented level to adopt wolf warrior diplomacy and are serving as part of a much stronger and more prominent MFA than in the past.\textsuperscript{21} Furthermore, CCP backed media outlets can also be seen as wolf warriors. For the most part, the actions of these wolf warriors can be seen as being officially sanctioned unless otherwise repudiated by the authorities in Beijing and are the primary drivers of wolf warrior diplomacy at large, with backing from Beijing as discussed before. Such official sanction can become a sword which cuts two ways when it comes to diplomacy and soft power.

\textsuperscript{20} Cheng, “Challenging China’s “Wolf Warrior” Diplomats”, p. 5
\textsuperscript{21} Cheng, “Challenging China’s “Wolf Warrior” Diplomats”, pp. 4, 5-6
On the one side, such official sanction for wolf warrior diplomacy will make it easier for foreign audiences to make the connections between the wolf warriors and their sponsors, associating the negative feedback with not just a few “wolf warriors” but with the rest of the Chinese state and the CCP. Thus, the fallout from wolf warrior diplomacy will not remain limited with just the diplomats who are carrying it out and move out to cover the centers of power in China, unless these centers choose to distance themselves – which is not forthcoming under current conditions. On the other side, such official sanction can, embolden the wolf warriors to become much more aggressive, and insensitive in how they conduct themselves and counter foreign criticism of China. In turn, this risks the rapid escalation of tensions and the emergence of a series of diplomatic crises for China, as foreign audiences and governments will decide on pushing back against such actions by the wolf warriors. It is foreseeable that such pushback will translate into skepticism of and attitudes against Chinese policy and actions on the global scale, as it antagonizes foreign governments and audiences indiscriminately.

In both instances, the build-up of grievances and skepticism towards the Chinese state can easily translate into a rejection of the export of Chinese cultural products and the expansion of the Chinese soft power institutions. It can be reasonably expected that no foreign audience, that has suffered from and feeling wronged by the actions of wolf warriors, would seek Chinese cultural products to consume or choose to engage with Chinese news media. Furthermore, such a reversal of foreign public opinion against China could very well feed into the erosion of existing progress made to create Chinese soft power, as pre-existing audiences may decide to turn away feeling themselves and their country wronged or find themselves cut off from China by punitive actions that seek to stop Chinese cultural flows abroad. As such, the antagonisms created by the actions of the wolf warriors as agents of the Chinese state, by virtue of their association with and
visible backing from Beijing, can end up being what does the Chinese soft power project in to the ground by striking at its base, not only cutting off future progress but also by wiping of what progress has been made so far.

The “unofficial” group of wolf warriors can be seen emerging from amongst the Chinese netizens, although it should be recognized that heavy censorship of the internet means that many of these “unofficial” wolf warriors are still sanctioned by the authorities who allow for their voices to be heard globally. It can be seen that there is a dynamic in which the “official” and “unofficial” wolf warriors can be seen working in an echo-room fashion, amplifying and reinforcing each other’s ideas – which is in line with Xi’s emphasis on “united front work”. On the part of the “official” wolf warriors and the centers of power behind them such as the CCP and the MFA, one can see a pattern which can be termed as “encourage and embrace”, in which Beijing’s support for “official” wolf warriors is seen as tacit approval for the existence of “unofficial” wolf warriors and provides the means for their actions, and embraces their actions once they have taken place. Thus, it can be seen that the wolf warriors can become a mass group, whose membership extends beyond the lines of state, party, and government.

However, such an approach may lead to an overreach that would end up harming China’s soft power goals on two accounts. First, the existence of such “unofficial” wolf warriors could not only allow for wolf warrior diplomacy to become unhinged as it would become hard to control the rhetoric employed by non-state agents or their rhetoric might be seen as having Beijing’s approval. Second, the recognition that the wolf warriors are more than just state agents may change the source with which the grievances of foreign states and audiences have from the Chinese state or the CCP to the whole of China, with the nation itself seen as complicit in wolf warrior diplomacy. The rise of such perceptions regarding wolf warrior diplomacy would extend

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22 deLisle, “Foreign Policy through Other Means”, pp. 192-193
the scope of foreign antagonism and skepticism towards China, whilst also bringing its darker side into sharper focus as conflict escalation and the deterioration of relations would take place faster. The rise of negative attitudes towards China as a whole would in turn undermine the process of creating soft power for China, as foreign audiences will become unresponsive to Chinese advances in these fields, rejecting Chinese cultural products and soft power institutions.

The final aspect of wolf warrior diplomacy whose possible impact on Chinese soft power, which should be analyzed here are the forums used by wolf warriors to react to foreign criticism and how they push their own rhetoric. In terms of forums, wolf warriors have taken to social media with their presence in all digital platforms, but are especially active on Twitter – which banned in China and can only be accessed by proxy. Furthermore, these wolf warriors are active not only in Western countries but also in places such as India and Venezuela, taking to the social media – as well as to traditional media – where possible to defend China and her interests from those that they feel have wronged it or trumpets China’s achievements. As Yang and Chen note, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic the discourse being used has been reconfigured, with globalist and nationalist discourses becoming mutually reinforcing as wolf warriors trumpet China’s successes and the failure of other states in response to the pandemic.

The problem itself – for China’s soft power project – emerges right at this junction, as the wolf warriors emerge as foreign agents bent on scoring victories for themselves by making use of others’ suffering from the pandemic and are doing so in front of a global online audience. In doing so, they are not only antagonizing and alienating specific domestic audiences who are the

primary recipients of their actions, but also a larger global audience which reacts with indignation and repulsion as well. As such, there emerges a reaction against all Chinese actions and institutions – including those aimed at winning soft power – that chops away at their power by making them undesirable, unaccepted, and suspect. Furthermore, it can once again be seen that an audience which finds itself repulsed by the actions of the Chinese on such a large scale, cannot reasonably be expected to become or remain supporters of the Chinese soft power project by engaging its institutions and initiatives and by consuming Chinese cultural products.

On the balance, it can be seen that wolf warrior diplomacy would end up being disastrous for China’s soft power prospects before it even engages with socio-cultural spaces. However, the continuation of the wolf warrior rhetoric and approach towards the cultural spheres and industries, as the following section demonstrates, will yield similar results of indignation and pushback against the wolf warriors. As we shall discuss in the next section, the socio-cultural space of K-Pop – which can act as a microcosm of the global democratic order – can yield answers as to what is to be expected when wolf warrior diplomacy meets the cultural field and what the possible impact of such actions might be.

When Wolves Meet Idols

K-Pop’s Nature and the China Connection

It is important here to understand how K-Pop can act as a microcosm for the global democratic order and also as a substitute for a Chinese soft power project. On the first of these points, of the socio-cultural space around K-Pop being a microcosm for the global democratic order, it is important to recognize that this socio-cultural space – as well as its inhabitants – are global and democratic. The former point of being global can be easily demonstrated. Today, K-Pop is a genre of music which is listened to across the world with artists such as BTS and
Blackpink becoming international sensations in the truest sense of the world, holding international concerts, appearing in foreign television programs, collaborating with other global artists, and being awarded in international award shows. As such, it can be seen that K-Pop has truly gone global and the socio-cultural space around it is populated by people from across the globe, mirroring in a sense the global human community on a smaller scale.

The latter point of being democratic needs more to back it up. The socio-cultural space around K-Pop can be seen as being democratic on account of a few components that constitute it, as well as through its track record on the matter. On the side of its constituting components, the socio-cultural space of K-Pop is meant to be highly participative and inclusive towards its inhabitants.26 This is important for the creation of a democratic space, as the socio-cultural space around K-Pop is designed to and geared towards eliciting responses and discussion by the inhabitants of the said space, and it can be found that the community itself is quite vibrant in engaging in discussions regarding a range of fully or marginally related topics. Fans freely engage in discussions on topics such as cultural appropriation, racism, and sexism in a manner that is reflective of the openness and democratic nature of the socio-cultural space of K-Pop which allows for such discussions to take place and do so on a global scale. Furthermore, this socio-cultural space allows for its inhabitants to freely engage with the products of K-Pop, engaging freely, remaking the original product, and making their contents along the way.27 Thus, there is great freedom for a consumer to engage with and shape according to their tastes and views both their experiences and their engagement with the socio-cultural space of K-Pop. Taken together, it can be seen that the socio-cultural space of K-Pop is built and functions in a way


which provides its inhabitants with a great amount of expressive and discursive freedom, and these inhabitants are making full use of these freedoms, creating a highly democratic socio-cultural space for themselves.

On the side of its track record, especially in 2020 the socio-cultural space of K-Pop and its inhabitants have become voices in republican and democratic protests across the Pacific, both during the George Floyd Protests in the US and during the protests in Thailand. Over the course of the protests in the US over the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police, K-Pop fans and idols alike have raised funds to support organizations such as Black Lives Matter, have flooded the Dallas Police Department’s iWatch Dallas application for citizen watch crime reporting with fancams, causing it to collapse and hijacked racist hashtags on Twitter. During the anti-government democratic protests in Thailand, the K-Pop fanbase in the country and outside rallied to show support, again through fund raising campaigns, actively participated in the protests where possible, and had the ability to freely discuss the situation in their country within the socio-cultural space of K-Pop. As it can be seen, the socio-cultural space around K-Pop, both through the actions of the idols (artists in K-Pop) and fans, has accrued a track record of being supportive of movements for social justice, democratic governance, and civil rights.

However, it can clearly be seen with the addition of this final point, that the socio-cultural space around K-Pop can be used as a microcosm for the global democratic order, continuing the strands of problems and flashpoints for wolf warrior diplomacy explored in the previous section.

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28 A fancam, is a performance video focused on a single artist over the course of a single act usually taken in a vertical format and showcases the work and talent of the individual artist being focused upon.
Turning to the question of how K-Pop and the socio-cultural space around it can be used as a substitute for a Chinese soft power space, a number of elements can be discussed – which are integral to K-Pop – that brings about the participation of the Chinese at multiple levels. On the one hand, China is a major market for K-Pop just as it is for any other globalizing market and company, which gives Chinese netizens significant clout as consumers and fans within the socio-cultural space of K-Pop. They are buyers and recipients of K-Pop, as well as inhabitants of its socio-cultural space with the freedom to voice their ideas and feelings, reacting to the products and news that reach them from these channels. Thus, it can be seen that China and the Chinese are readily engaged with K-Pop and its socio-cultural space.

On the other hand, there are Chinese idols – which should be understood here as Chinese in the ethnic sense, as on a nationality basis one can talk about mainland Chinese, Hong Kongese, and Taiwanese idols – who are integral to the production and dissemination of K-Pop as artists. These Chinese idols have their own global follower groups – or fanbases – that open them, and their reputations and work to factors that goes beyond the immediate control of any person or entity, within the socio-cultural space of K-Pop where the fans become the adjudicators. Furthermore, Chinese idols can also be seen as masters of the form, who are not only agents of K-Pop in China but could also be counted on in the future as experts in soft power creation through cultural products and industry.

However, working in a geographic milieu, where it has been noted that artists are increasingly pressed to lose their apolitical stances and act as national representatives, the position of these Chinese idols both as artists within the socio-cultural space of K-Pop and as soft

power experts could be jeopardized.\textsuperscript{32} If these Chinese idols were to become “wolf warriors” – adopting political position which might turn out to be extreme for their followers, besides being authoritarian and oppressive – they may be ostracized by inhabitants of the socio-cultural space of K-Pop. Moreover, fans could come the see these Chinese idols as hypocritical once they begin using the platforms they achieved in the global democratic socio-cultural space around K-Pop to act as wolf warriors for an authoritarian state. This situation might escalate so far, that these idols may end up being ousted from the sector for being “unsafe” or “bad” choices to work with given the negativity surrounding them, if outside pressures emerge strong enough to counter the allure of the Chinese market for entertainment companies. Such developments would serve to leave China out of an important socio-cultural circuit, without a replacement of their own in terms of soft power, as well as without the human capital whose expertise and talents would be essential for China to build up its own soft power mechanisms. Moreover, China would also be left without the people whose participation in the socio-cultural space of K-Pop as “idols” readily serves as a tool of soft power.

Before moving on to a discussion of the case studies, attention must be paid to a factor, emerging from the anti-Hallyu movement in China which might taint the interaction of – non-K-Pop consuming – wolf warriors with K-Pop and its socio-cultural space. As Lu describes it, the Chinese have revived the vision of a regional hierarchy in which “Chinese culture is equal to (if not superior to) Western culture and is regarded as the origin of all East Asian cultures” and “invoke[ed] the tributary history of Korea as a tributary and its purportedly derivative culture”.\textsuperscript{33} Although it is unsure whether such sentiments may merge with the wolf warriors’ interaction with K-Pop and its socio-cultural space, if they do so they will add another source and dimension


to the tensions which are bound to emerge. The adoption of such an attitude by wolf warriors could invite criticisms framed in terms of racism and imperial condescension against the Koreans, which would escalate tensions further and damage Chinese interaction with and soft power derived from K-Pop. As can be seen, the wolf warrior approach to K-Pop and its socio-cultural space is bound to be fraught with problems, however, the brief case studies which follow will be better illustrators of this point.

**Case 1: Tzuyu Flag Incident**

As the rise of wolf warrior diplomacy being a process, which can be dated back to the earlier days of Xi’s tenure, the first evident case of Chinese “wolfish” attitudes towards China can be found in an incident earlier in the decade. What is since called the “Tzuyu flag incident” occurred between November 2015 and January 2016, and was sparked when Chou Tzuyu – 16 at the time – of the girl group Twice waved the flag of the Republic of China (Taiwan) on an online broadcast show and was compounded by other instances in which she identified as Taiwanese, which were picked up by Chinese netizens and media.\(^{34}\) With pressures from China mounting, Tzuyu was forced to deliver an online apology, showing her dedication to the one China principle and professing her feelings as a Chinese, in a video which has been received as shot under duress and emphasizing Tzuyu’s political innocence and naivete.\(^{35}\) The proto-wolf warriors at this time were both official and unofficial, encompassing both Chinese netizens reacting to nationalist symbolism, as well as Chinese media seizing on the movement.

However, this event quickly turned into a flashpoint between China and Taiwan, with the Taiwanese politicians from the then President Ma Ying-jeou to Presidential-hopeful/-elect Tsai

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Ing-wen – whose election victory was even credited to Tzuyu in the media – weighing in on the matter in support of Tzuyu.\(^{36}\) Tzuyu herself went from being a promising Taiwanese youth to the symbol of a nation in its pride and its desire to stand up to those that would seek to push it down.\(^{37}\) In sum, what can be identified as a geographically contained precursor to wolf warrior approaches in the cultural space rapidly triggered a nationalist backlash of its own, and caused cross-strait relations to tense up during this period. What emerged might have been a diplomatic coup for China, as it extracted an apology but more importantly it was the deterioration of relations – especially with Taiwan – as such a reaction towards a teenager and against Taiwan’s national pride and imagery was met with anger and disgust.

**Case 2: Chinese Idols Under Fire over Hong Kong**

Moving forward to the present, in 2019 one of the earliest signs of wolf warriors emerging in the socio-cultural space around K-Pop came with the Hong Kong protests and the show of support to the Chinese government by Chinese K-Pop idols. These Chinese idols posted a number of highly nationalistic propaganda pieces openly on their platforms, in support of Beijing as it moved to initiate a takeover of Hong Kong.\(^{38}\) This was the first time that Chinese idols were behaving in such a way, making statements which carried such political weight signaling their emergence as their nation’s agents and as a group of wolf warriors embedded into the socio-cultural space of K-Pop.

Many reacted with disappointment and criticism at the idols, for sharing Beijing’s propaganda and some have even come under fire for supporting such moved despite being from


\(^{37}\) Josh Horwitz. “A 16-year-old pop star was forced to apologize to China for waving Taiwan’s flag”. *Quartz*. (16 Jan 2016).


Nicole Einbinder. “Some of China’s biggest pop stars have sided with the government in its fight against Hong Kong’s pro-democracy protesters”. *Insider*. (19 Aug 2019).

Neha Banka. “Explained: Why Chinese celebrities are promoting China’s stance on Hong Kong protests”. *The Indian Express*. (1 Sep 2019).
Hong Kong or Taiwan. Although the public reaction was not necessarily visceral, which mirrors much of the global reaction to the events in Hong Kong as being more mild rhetoric than solid action, it does point to the discomfort which emerges when propagandist and authoritarian political attitudes and actions seep into such socio-cultural spaces. The discomfort here is directed primarily against the artists-cum-wolf warriors, whose actions as national representatives are being called into question but the reaction also has a path towards the political center which is forcing such a role on the artists. The reaction could in turn become one which pushed against the CCP and China itself, and translate into a rejection of Chinese artists and the cultural products which they provide, damaging Chinese soft power as a result.

Case 3: BTS Korean War Statement

A final case to be studies is the Chinese reaction both by official and unofficial wolf warriors to an acceptance speech by BTS – for the James A. Van Fleet Award – which recognized the common history of pain and suffering between the two nations during the Korean War.

Chinese netizens and media – especially the Global Times – reacted to this statement for being historically insensitive and as erasure of Chinese suffering during the Korean War by BTS, with the group lambasted for making money in China but ignoring Chinese feelings for their own sacrifices. As can be seen, the wolf warriors seized upon a piece of nationally sensitive rhetoric that has come out within the context of the socio-cultural space of K-Pop and pressed on with an attack to have their point of view recognized and endorsed, and the wrongdoers chastised.


However, the pushback that the wolf warriors suffered can only be described as a crushing defeat, where both Chinese and Korean inhabitants of K-Pop’s socio-cultural space reacted with incredulity at what was being demanded from people who have been enemies during the Korean War.\textsuperscript{42} The Global Times, which falls under the category of official wolf warrior, quietly retracted some of its most bellicose pieces on the issue whilst Chinese idols-cum-wolf warriors were once again lambasted for sharing posts which commemorated the Chinese participation in the Korean War.\textsuperscript{43} As can be seen, the wolf warriors were met with much resistance and failed to even make a dent in the stance taken by BTS in its statement, which had been called out for violating Chinese historical sensibilities. An attack by the wolf warriors towards a group of artists was met with greater force by fans and observers, only serving to raise questions about the sanity of such actions and leaving a bad taste in people’s mouths towards China. Had the wolf warriors persisted, they might have gone on to create lasting damage, turning China into an unreasonable actor with unreasonable demands and alienating foreign audiences from it. This in turn, could have further drove Chinese soft power to the ground by lowering peoples’ receptiveness towards Chinese culture and cultural products.

**Conclusion**

Before entertaining my concluding remarks, I would like to briefly mention some future concerns which should be brought under closer attention, in analyzing the impact of wolf warrior diplomacy on China’s soft power prospects. One point which invites a study of its own is whether or not there is a gender dynamic in who is the wolf warrior that is reacting or who is being reacted to as a wolf warrior, in order to see if the wolf warriors of different genders react

\textsuperscript{42} May and Chien, “BTS Honored Korean War Sacrifices”

\textsuperscript{43} S. Nathan Park, “China Backs Off From Fight With K-Pop Fans”, *Foreign Policy*, (20 Oct 2020); Koreaboo, “Chinese K-Pop Idols Face Massive Criticism From Korean Netizens For “Supporting China’s Involvement In The Korean War””, *Koreaboo*, (24 Oct 2020); APK Staff, “Chinese netizens are angry”.

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differently or elicit different responses to their actions. A second point which merits discussion of its own is the “unofficial” wolf warriors and how they are supported and co-opted by the “official” wolf warriors in presenting a united front when dealing with the outside world. This phenomenon, I believe, is still quite new and understudied and may end up enlightening us more on how wolf warrior diplomacy is perceived and is meant to function. Finally, the Blackpink panda holding incident and the Global Times’ claiming credit for BTS’ 2021 Grammys nominations whilst threatening them to think twice before speaking could form the basis of another study, seeking to find what the wolf warriors react to in these socio-cultural spaces. The study of these topics could further own knowledge of the nature and possible impact of wolf warrior diplomacy on Chinese soft power and foreign policy.

As it can be seen, China’s path towards achieving soft power is already fraught with problems. Wolf warrior diplomacy, is most likely going to make these problems even worse by increasing the sources and levels of tension between China and the world, and by turning people away from China and her cultural products which are key to its soft power drive. Furthermore, as an analysis of three cases in time of “wolfish” Chinese interaction of the microcosmic socio-cultural space of K-Pop also reveals that such aggressive and assertive approaches in such fields and spaces will rapidly politicize these fields and generate a pushback against China and possibly against the Chinese artists in these fields. On the macrocosmic scale, the repetition of such events will actively turn people away from China and its soft power overtures, driving the entire project to generate soft power commensurate to China’s international position to the ground. In the grand plan, it can be seen that wolf warrior diplomacy can very easily spell the end of China’s soft power for the foreseeable future as it antagonizes foreign audiences and governments and makes an enemy out of China.
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