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Chinese Variety Television Show Keep Running Used for Soft Power and Propaganda

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Chinese Variety Television Show, *Keep Running* Used for Soft Power and Propaganda

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1. Introduction

Joseph Nye, an American academic and government official, introduced the concept of "soft power" in 1990, during the closing stages of the Cold War and just prior to the Soviet Union's collapse. He defined soft power as the ability of a nation to influence others to align with its goals through attraction and persuasion, distinguishing it from hard or command power, which involves compelling others through directives and force. The Chinese government became familiar with the term "soft power" when Hu Jintao first used it in a speech in 2007, a concept later reiterated by Xi Jinping in his first speech as General Secretary of CCP. In the Clingendael report, China's soft power is defined as the ability of the Chinese government to influence the preferences and behavior of foreign actors through attraction or persuasion, rather than through direct interventions involving coercion or payment. The three broad tools used for this purpose are: 1) promoting Chinese culture and fostering exchanges in education and research, 2) leveraging soft power aspects of economic cooperation, and 3) utilizing social media and political messaging. As media's role in people's life become increasingly more important, using media for soft power is a good approach, most people consume social and entertainment media daily.

While other East Asian countries have achieved significant success in their soft power efforts, e.g. Japan's pop culture influence abroad and the rising global popularity of Korean pop culture and cuisine, China is still refining its strategy to promote its ideologies, culture, and politics on a global scale. However, China's soft power influence in the EU has recently been declining. This trend is attributed to the fallout from COVID-19 and related global discourse, domestic developments in China (such as in Xinjiang and Hong Kong), and the escalating US-China rivalry.¹

State-owned media such as CCTV, CGTN, Xinhua News, and China Daily are well-known as primary sources for political messaging. In addition to these outlets, China's two highest-grossing films: *The Battle at Lake Changjin* and *Wolf Warrior 2*, are government propaganda films that, like other state-owned media, have been extensively studied by scholars in the field. However, variety shows (*zongyi jiemu* 综艺节目) are rarely the focus of such research. While the main audience for these shows consists of Chinese viewers both within China and

¹ Clingendael. "China's Soft Power in Europe: Falling on Hard Times | Clingendael," n.d. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/chinas-soft-power-europe-falling-hard-times>.

abroad, they also attract non-Chinese audiences, thanks to their casts featuring popular idols and actors.

Other examples of China's efforts to promote soft power are for example the establishment of Confucius Institutes worldwide and the increasing popularity of exchange programs, both are effective tools for promoting the Chinese language and culture. Additionally, the Belt and Road Initiative aims to expand China's influence by investing in infrastructure projects to enhance trade and connectivity between nations.

As a sinologist who has followed the variety show *Keep Running* (*benpao ba* 奔跑吧) since its debut in 2014, I have become increasingly aware of the content it portrays and the messages it conveys. This inspired my research, as the role of state-owned media in spreading political ideologies and promoting social harmony is well-documented, yet variety shows remain underexplored. Often perceived as lighthearted, semi-scripted, and entertaining game shows, these programs provide valuable insights into how soft power and political messaging might be subtly disseminated.

Current scholarships on soft power in media, includes studies on popular television series, propaganda films, and state-owned media such as CCTV, CGTN, Xinhua News content, therefore my study will make a great addition to the research on media for soft power. Additionally, I hope to bring awareness to this, and hope for people to have a critical mindset when approaching all kinds of entertainment media content.

Currently, discourse surrounding China is predominantly negative, stemming from issues related to COVID-19, domestic developments (e.g., Xinjiang and Hong Kong), the US-China rivalry, and concerns about censorship and espionage. Despite this, the Chinese government has continuously invested in media to promote its culture and ideologies, attract interest in the country, and generate international goodwill. Whether these efforts have been successful remains an open question. However, this thesis, seeks to address a specific query: *To what extent is the Chinese variety television show, Keep Running (bēnpǎo ba 奔跑吧), used as a tool to promote soft power both internationally and domestically?*

1.1 Overview of the Thesis

In the first chapter, I will explore the concept of soft power in the Chinese context. Joseph Nye, who first coined the term “soft power,” defined it as the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, with the U.S. initially employing it after the Cold War to restore its global image. Scholars such as Maria Repnikova (2022) and David Shambaugh have noted how the Chinese government adopted the term, with Hu Jintao introducing it and Xi Jinping continuing to incorporate it into official speeches and propaganda agendas aimed at making China more attractive.

The second chapter will focus on key concepts in Chinese propaganda, including “positive energy,” “telling China’s story well,” and “rural revitalization.” These ideas play a significant role in shaping the content of Chinese media.

The third chapter will outline the methodology used for this study. Where I will first review existing literature on methodologies applied in similar research and justify my approach, which includes analyzing the content of *Keep Running* through a mixed-method approach. This analysis will identify recurring themes and explore how the show reflects key concepts from the literature, such as soft power, positive energy, and rural revitalization.

The fourth chapter will present the analysis, analyzing specific examples from the show to understand how it conveys political messages and promotes soft power domestically and internationally. This discussion will also explore the intersection of soft power and propaganda, illustrating how media serves as a subtle yet effective tool for promoting ideologies. Unlike “hard” propaganda, which is often poorly received, soft propaganda embedded in entertainment can be more acceptable and subtle, especially for audiences unfamiliar with the underlying political context.

In the discussion chapter, I will discuss things that stood out to me in the analysis chapter. But also things that came to mind after doing this study. For instance, how American media frequently include concepts like the “American Dream”, despite the reality of homelessness and other social problems in the country. This analysis highlights how subtle propaganda operates across cultures to shape perceptions.

Finally, I will conclude that Chinese variety shows like *Keep Running* are used as a tool for soft power in a more understated manner than overt propaganda, such as propagandic

films. These shows provide a platform to showcase an alternative, often positive, side of China that is not typically highlighted in news media. By subtly conveying cultural and political narratives, they invite audiences to interpret China's story on their own terms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power and defines it as the ability of a country to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion or payment. Soft power derives from the attractiveness of a nation's culture, political values, and foreign policies. In contrast, hard power involves coercion through military force or economic pressure (Nye, 1990).

The term 'soft power' first emerged in Chinese leadership discourse in 2007, when Hu Jintao mentioned its importance of strengthening China's cultural soft power (wenhua ruanshili 文化软实力) at the 17th Party Congress. And Xi Jinping has elevated its importance by frequently incorporating it into his addresses since becoming General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (Repnikova, 2022).

China has observed the soft power success of other East Asian countries, such as Japan, with its global influence in anime, J-pop, and fashion, and South Korea, with its worldwide impact in K-pop, food, skincare, and fashion culture. Similarly, China aims to make itself more attractive to the West. However, in recent years, Western perceptions of China have grown less favorable due to the COVID-19 pandemic, human rights concerns in Xinjiang, protests in Hong Kong,² and fears of China's advancements in electric vehicle and battery technology³, among other factors. Therefore, China tries to use soft power to enhance people's view on the country, its culture, political values, and foreign policies. Given the growing importance of media in people's lives, it serves as a powerful tool of soft power. And historically, China's propaganda system has recognized media, particularly television as a powerful tool for

² Clingendael. "China's Soft Power in Europe: Falling on Hard Times | Clingendael," n.d. <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/chinas-soft-power-europe-falling-hard-times>.

³ Hawkins, Amy. "CATL, the Little-known Chinese Battery Maker That Has the US Worried." *The Guardian*, March 18, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/18/catl-chinese-battery-maker-evs-electric-vehicles>.

shaping public opinion and promoting correct Chinese ideologies, alongside education.

2.2 Literature Review- Soft Power in the Chinese Context

According to Maria Repnikova (2022), Joseph Nye (2005), and David Shambaugh (2015) the Chinese government has adopted the concept of 'soft power' but localized this concept. Repnikova also highlights the fact that China's soft power strategies often blend with characteristics of hard power and are aimed at both international and domestic audiences to ensure political stability and cultural confidence. This literature review will be defining what soft power is in the Chinese context.

2.2.1. Cultural Soft Power

Cultural soft power (wenhua ruanshili 文化软实力) is a concept that includes Chinese traditional culture, moral principles, and political ideology. It centers on the idea that a nation's culture, when attractive and influential, can inspire admiration and alignment from other countries. Joseph Nye highlights cultural products such as literature, music, film, and fashion as pivotal tools of soft power. For example, the global appeal of Hollywood films projects American values and shapes international perceptions of the United States as a land of freedom and opportunity, creating the "American Dream". Similarly, Japanese anime, South Korean K-pop, have contributed to these nations' international influence, making their cultures appealing worldwide.

Chinese soft power is characterized by the establishment of Confucius Institutes, media, educational exchanges, and large-scale diplomatic events (Repnikova, 2022). Confucian values such as harmony, filial piety, and community solidarity are central to China's soft power efforts. The Chinese government promotes its 5,000-year cultural history as an integral part of its global identity. Initiatives like the Confucius Institutes are a direct application of this concept. These institutes, established in partnership with educational institutions worldwide, aim to spread the Chinese language and Chinese culture globally.⁴

China also emphasizes cultural diplomacy, using festivals, performances, and media to showcase its heritage. For example, events like the Chinese New Year celebrations shown on

⁴ Repnikova, Maria. Chapter 2: The Controversies of Confucius Institutes," in *Chinese Soft Power*. Edited by Ching Kwan Lee. Cambridge University Press, 2022: 11-20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108874700>.

CCTV, the Spring Festival Gala, promote positive perceptions of the country. However, critics argue that the state-led nature of China's cultural initiatives can sometimes undermine their authenticity and reduce their appeal.

In summary, cultural soft power is about utilizing a nation's heritage and cultural products to create a positive image of the country. For China, the challenge lies in balancing traditional values with modern expressions of culture that resonate globally.⁵

2.2.2. Political Soft Power

Political values and systems are another key part of soft power. A nation that successfully models political ideals such as democracy, rule of law, or good governance attracts others to emulate its system or align with its policies. Nye emphasizes that political soft power is most effective when a nation practices what it preaches, as inconsistencies between rhetoric and action can erode credibility.

China's political ideology, "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," offers an alternative to Western models of governance. By showcasing its rapid economic development and poverty alleviation under one-party rule, China projects itself as an example model for developing nations. This developmental success is particularly appealing to countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where democratic experiments have often faltered.

Additionally, China's political soft power extends to its narrative of "win-win cooperation" and peaceful coexistence, particularly through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This massive infrastructure and investment project is framed as a mutually beneficial partnership, fostering goodwill and enhancing China's influence. However, China's governance model and policies face significant criticism for their authoritarian nature, human rights abuses, and lack of political freedoms, which undermine its soft power appeal in the West.^{6 7}

⁵ Shambaugh, David. "China's Soft-Power Push: The Search for Respect." *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 4 (2015): 104-105. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483821>.

⁶ Shambaugh, David. "China's Soft-Power Push: The Search for Respect." *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 4 (2015): 99-100. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483821>.

⁷ Repnikova, Maria. Chapter 1: Rethinking Soft Power: The Views from China," in *Chinese Soft Power*. Edited by Ching Kwan Lee. Cambridge University Press, 2022: 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108874700>.

2.2.3. Economic and Developmental Appeal

Economic success is a critical component of soft power, particularly when it is tied to developmental achievements that can inspire or support other nations. Joseph Nye's original framework doesn't explicitly include economics as a soft power tool, but the idea is implicit in how economic influence can enhance cultural and political appeal.

China has integrated its economic power into its soft power strategy by promoting what is known as the "China Model." This developmental model emphasizes state-led growth, infrastructure investment, and technological innovation. Many developing countries, or often referred to as the Global South view this model as an attractive alternative, particularly because it demonstrates how economic progress can be achieved without adopting Western-style democracy.⁸

China also uses foreign aid, investments, and trade partnerships as tools to boost its image. Infrastructure projects funded by China, such as roads, ports, and energy plants, create great benefits for recipient countries, often enhancing China's reputation as a reliable partner. However, critics argue that such investments sometimes come with hidden costs, including debt dependency and geopolitical leverage, which can tarnish the appeal of China's economic soft power.^{9 10}

2.2.4. Media and Communication as Soft Power

Media plays a vital role in shaping perceptions and narratives, making it a powerful soft power tool. Joseph Nye highlights how media outlets can disseminate values, project cultural appeal, and influence international discourse. The BBC, CNN, and other Western media outlets are prime examples of how nations use media to amplify their soft power.

China has invested heavily in global media to promote its image and counter negative perceptions. State-run outlets like CGTN (China Global Television Network), Xinhua News Agency, and China Daily serve as platforms to share China's perspective on global issues. By

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Repnikova, Maria. Chapter 6: "Conclusions and Future Directions," in *Chinese Soft Power*. Edited by Ching Kwan Lee. Cambridge University Press, 2022: 11-20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108874700>.

¹⁰ Shambaugh, David. "China's Soft-Power Push: The Search for Respect." *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 4 (2015): 100-101. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483821>.

broadcasting in multiple languages and targeting international audiences, these outlets aim to present China as a responsible global leader and counter narratives that portray it negatively.

China's "telling the China story well" strategy, as articulated by President Xi Jinping, underscores the role of media in its soft power campaign. However, state control over media and the perception of propaganda diminish its effectiveness in some regions. While Chinese media finds receptive audiences in parts of the Global South, it struggles to compete with Western media in democratic societies, where press freedom is highly valued.^{11 12}

2.2.4.1 Positive Energy in Media

Besides the "telling China's story well" strategy, the concept of "positive energy" (zheng nengliang 正能量) has also evolved from a term used in popular culture to a central element in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ideological strategies. Its rise to prominence in Chinese public discourse can be traced back to 2012, coinciding with President Xi Jinping's administration. Initially adopted from wellness and spiritual practices, "positive energy" has become a key tool for state-sponsored media, promoting optimism, nationalism, and moral values while advancing the Party's political agenda.

The term "positive energy" first gained traction in China as part of the broader self-help and wellness movement, which included practices such as meditation, yoga, and alternative therapies. These practices were associated with the idea of absorbing positive forces from the universe, promoting emotional healing and mental well-being. In the early 2000s, "positive energy" was predominantly used in online spaces, particularly on platforms like Weibo and Baidu, where users shared inspirational quotes, motivational stories, and personal anecdotes.¹³

By 2012, the concept had been appropriated by the Chinese state under Xi Jinping, who began to use the phrase in his public speeches. This marked a shift from the term's origins in

¹¹ Shambaugh, David. "China's Soft-Power Push: The Search for Respect." *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 4 (2015): 101-103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483821>.

¹² Repnikova, Maria. Chapter 3: "China's Quest for Global Media Power," in *Chinese Soft Power*. Edited by Ching Kwan Lee. Cambridge University Press, 2022: 21-30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108874700>.

¹³ Yang, Peidong, and Lijun Tang. "'Positive Energy': Hegemonic Intervention and Online Media Discourse in China's Xi Jinping Era." *China (National University of Singapore. East Asian Institute)* 16, no. 1 (2018): 1-22. doi:10.1353/chn.2018.0000.

spiritual discourse to a tool of political propaganda. Scholars have noted that the CCP's use of the term represents a strategic effort to steer national discourse in a positive direction, focusing on national unity, development, and the promotion of socialist values (Yang & Tang, 2018).

The emergence of "positive energy" as a central feature of Chinese media is a prime example of how cultural governance has adapted to the digital age. According to Yang and Tang (2018), the Chinese state appropriated the term as a hegemonic tool to assert control over public sentiment, particularly in response to the challenges posed by the internet and the growth of social media platforms. Prior to Xi Jinping's use of the phrase, earlier slogans, such as the narrative of suffering, had attempted to manage public emotions by framing hardships as necessary sacrifices for national progress. These strategies, however, were often met with public cynicism (Shambaugh, 2019).

In contrast, "positive energy" promotes an image of a hopeful, forward-looking China, one that emphasizes the nation's accomplishments and downplays its challenges. This emotional manipulation aims to guide citizens toward nationalistic and morally upright behaviors while aligning them with the government's vision of a harmonious society. The concept of "positive energy" is part of a broader strategy of emotional governance, where the state seeks to control not only the actions of individuals but also their feelings and perceptions of reality.

A critical contribution to the understanding of "positive energy" is the framework developed by Yang and Tang (2018), which breaks down the concept into three distinct levels: individual-personal, societal-cultural, and political-national/global.

1. Individual-Personal Level: At this level, "positive energy" aligns closely with self-help content, including motivational texts and videos designed to uplift and encourage personal growth. These "chicken soup" (鸡汤, jītāng) narratives, which have been popularized in Chinese media, promote messages of resilience, optimism, and the power of positive thinking. The widespread consumption of such content, especially in the form of viral videos or online articles, reinforces the idea that personal success and happiness are achievable through positive thinking and action (Yang & Tang, 2018).

2. Societal-Cultural Level: On the societal level, "positive energy" manifests in the promotion of civic virtues, moral conduct, and acts of charity. This form of positive energy is often conveyed through warm stories (温情故事, wēnqíng gùshì) in media, which celebrate acts of kindness, social responsibility, and moral heroism. These stories aim to foster social harmony by promoting collective well-being and encouraging individuals to contribute positively to society. The state, through its media channels, positions such stories as ideals for citizens to emulate in order to create a morally upright and harmonious society.
3. Political-National/Global Level: On a political level, "positive energy" serves as a vehicle for nationalism and patriotism, reinforcing the legitimacy of the CCP and its governance model. At this level, the phrase is tied to "socialism with Chinese characteristics", promoting the image of China as a rising global power and an example of successful national development. Here, "positive energy" is not just about uplifting individuals but also about framing China's role in the world in a positive light, counteracting external criticism and reinforcing national pride.

The use of "positive energy" can also be understood through the lens of Foucault's theory of discourse and the regulation of power. Foucault argued that discourse is not just a way of communicating ideas but a mechanism of power that shapes individuals' behaviors and perceptions. By promoting "positive energy," the state does not merely disseminate optimistic messages but subtly regulates citizens' emotional and cognitive responses to the world around them. This approach aligns with the CCP's broader strategy of cultural governance, where the state seeks to mold public opinion not just through overt propaganda but through more dispersive and immersive techniques, such as the emotional appeal of "positive energy" (Yang & Tang, 2018).

The concept of "positive energy" thus extends beyond traditional propaganda to include forms of emotional control. By embedding the phrase in daily discourse, through media, entertainment, or even social interactions, the state can encourage individuals to adopt certain emotional responses and adopt behaviors that align with state interests, creating a populace that internalizes the state's ideologies as their own (Schneider, 2012).

The media plays a central role in disseminating "positive energy," particularly through television dramas and film. The state believes that media has a profound influence on its audience, especially the masses, who are considered highly susceptible to media's emotional and ideological messages. As discussed by Schneider (2012), Chinese authorities argue that media should serve as a moral compass, guiding the population toward the right values and behaviors. This is reflected in official directives, such as those from the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), which mandate that media content should be "healthy", "positive", and "close-to-life".

In practice, this means that television and film content is expected to promote nationalist themes, emotional upliftment, and positive portrayals of Chinese society. For instance, dramas often feature heroic characters who embody the ideal virtues of Chinese socialism, while films emphasize themes of national pride, self-sacrifice, and social harmony (Schneider, 2012). The state also encourages content that appeals to both aesthetic and entertainment needs, ensuring that "positive energy" is delivered in a manner that resonates with viewers on an emotional level.

In conclusion, the concept of "positive energy" in Chinese discourse represents a multifaceted tool of state control that blends emotional, cultural, and political strategies. From its roots in self-help culture to its institutionalization in state media, "positive energy" has become a central element in the CCP's ideological apparatus, used to guide individual behavior, promote social harmony, and reinforce nationalistic sentiment. This literature review has shown that the promotion of "positive energy" is not only about emotional upliftment but also serves as a subtle mechanism of ideological control, using discourse, media, and popular culture to shape public perceptions and align them with the Party's values.

Future research could explore the effectiveness of this discourse in achieving its goals, particularly in the digital age, where social media platforms and online communities may resist or reinterpret official narratives. Additionally, the tension between the state's ideological ambitions and the everyday experiences of citizens presents an intriguing area for investigation, particularly in terms of how "positive energy" interacts with individual agency and public skepticism toward state narratives.

2.2.5. Public Diplomacy and Educational Exchanges

Public diplomacy is a key mechanism of soft power, focusing on building relationships and trust with foreign publics. This includes educational exchanges, cultural performances, and high-profile events that create goodwill and enhance mutual understanding.

China's public diplomacy initiatives include hosting major international events like the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo, which showcase its modernity and organizational capabilities. Educational exchanges, such as scholarships for foreign students to study in China, also contribute to its soft power. By investing in the next generation of global leaders, China aims to build long-term relationships and influence.

However, public diplomacy efforts are not without challenges. Concerns about political motives, censorship, and lack of reciprocity can hinder their effectiveness. For example, while China funds Confucius Institutes abroad, foreign cultural organizations in China often face restrictions.^{14 15}

2.3 Literature review- Chinese Propaganda System

It is a known fact that state-owned media is used for propaganda purposes. Scholars usually analyze commonly known state-owned media outlets such as Xinhua News, CCTV. Movies such as *Wolf Warrior*, *The Wandering Earth*, and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* are heavily sponsored by the Chinese government to serve propaganda purposes. These films are overt propaganda tools, as it is widely known that their goal is to stir nationalistic emotions in viewers. As the highest-grossing films in China, they performed well domestically. However, their performance internationally was less successful. The Chinese Propaganda system and methods are described in Shambaugh's article to be traditional form of propaganda, however Mattingly and Yao (2022) makes a difference between "hard" propaganda and "soft" propaganda in their study.

2.3.1. Hard Propaganda

¹⁴ Repnikova, Maria. Chapter 5: "Performing Public Diplomacy Spectacles," in *Chinese Soft Power*. Edited by Ching Kwan Lee. Cambridge University Press, 2022: 11-20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108874700>.

¹⁵ Shambaugh, David. "China's Soft-Power Push: The Search for Respect." *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 4 (2015): 105-107. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483821>.

This is the CCP's traditional form of propaganda emphasizes authoritarian control through state-run media and institutions. It uses heavy-handed, didactic messaging to signal regime power, with the goal of maintaining political control and preventing dissent by creating an environment of compliance.

The Central Propaganda Department (CCPPD) oversees these efforts, which include strict censorship of media and control over educational content. This "hard" propaganda is seen in more formal and wooden messaging in state news and official reports, where excessive praise for the regime and rigid ideological conformity are promoted.¹⁶

2.3.2. Soft Propaganda

Soft propaganda employs emotional appeals through entertainment media such as television dramas, social media, movies, and other viral content to subtly convey CCP-approved messages. Rather than enforcing compliance through fear or overwhelming power, soft propaganda is designed to persuade by engaging emotions, particularly anger and nationalism.

According to Mattingly and Yao (2022), this type of propaganda has proven to be effective in manipulating nationalist sentiments and stoking anti-foreign attitudes, particularly when framed around issues like territorial disputes and foreign interference. While it does not necessarily boost direct support for the regime, it fosters a nationalist fervor that serves to unify the public under shared grievances.¹⁷

2.3.3 Cultural and Nationalist Messaging

Both forms of propaganda (hard and soft) heavily rely on nationalist themes, especially focused on historical events like the Century of Humiliation and Japanese occupation of China. These themes serve to reinforce national unity and pride, positioning the CCP as the defender of China's sovereignty and the leader of its national rejuvenation.

¹⁶ Shambaugh, David. "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy." *The China Journal*. Vol. No. 57. The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, 2007. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20066240>.

¹⁷ Mattingly, Daniel C., Elaine Yao, and The Author(s). "How Soft Propaganda Persuades." Journal-article. *Comparative Political Studies*, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140211047403>.

Anti-foreign sentiment is a key element, often fueled by dramatizations of historical injustices, particularly in media campaigns and nationalist television dramas. The goal is to tie Chinese national identity closely with the success and leadership of the CCP.^{18 19}

After conducting this literature review, I have been able to reach the conclusion that the concept of soft power in China has slowly evolved into a “soft” propaganda system, where social media, movies, television series, and other forms of entertainment are adopted as tools to subtly persuade and shape the audience’s perceptions and values. As social media becomes increasingly more important in our lives, the use of media as a tool for propaganda and soft power seems to be a great way to convey these political and ideological messages. However the lines between soft power and propaganda in China are somewhat blurred. This lowers the credibility of Chinese soft power efforts, as soft power should be subtle, not overt. This thesis aims to study how the show is used for soft power and propaganda, through the analysis of *Keep Running* a variety show, that is consumed by domestic and international audience. however, this should also be a way to raise awareness on critical thinking and to consume social media and entertainment media, critically.

2.4 Contextual Review

The phenomenon of Korean adaptations in Chinese television has been a key component in the evolution of the Chinese entertainment industry, blending political oversight with international influences. Zeng and Sparks' article explores how all Chinese television productions are politically supervised and shaped by the central government’s directives. They discuss the role of producers who, while making decisions for their shows, must navigate instructions from the central government, local government negotiations, and the complex conditions behind the scenes of production. Their analysis highlights the power dynamics at play within Chinese media, where shows are deemed successful based on three primary criteria: political alignment with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda

¹⁸ Shambaugh, David. “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy.” *The China Journal*. Vol. No. 57. The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, 2007. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20066240>. And Mattingly, Daniel C., Elaine Yao, and The Author(s). “How Soft Propaganda Persuades.” Journal-article. *Comparative Political Studies*, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140211047403>.

¹⁹ Mattingly, Daniel C., 1, Elaine Yao 2, and The Author(s). “How Soft Propaganda Persuades.” Journal-article. *Comparative Political Studies*, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140211047403>.

objectives, commercial success through advertisement revenues and audience demographics, and the emphasis on creating content that is "created in China" rather than "made in China." This nationalistic focus is intended to avoid the homogenization of the entertainment market, promoting Chinese creativity over foreign influences.²⁰

Despite these constraints, Chinese television producers have long turned to foreign content, particularly Korean television, for inspiration. The importation and adaptation of Korean formats have been central to the development of the Chinese entertainment landscape, even as these adaptations are carefully localized to align with Chinese cultural and political expectations. A prime example of this is the show *Hurry Up, Brother* (奔跑吧, 兄弟), which is a Chinese adaptation of the popular Korean show *Running Man* (Seoul Broadcasting System, SBS). Premiering in 2014, *Hurry Up, Brother* quickly became a massive hit, drawing large audiences and contributing significantly to the Chinese television market. However, with the implementation of the "one format policy" by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), which restricts each channel to importing only one foreign format per year, Chinese broadcasters faced increasing challenges in maintaining the success of such adaptations. In 2016, further restrictions were imposed on the import of Korean content, most notably in response to rising political tensions between China and South Korea. In line with these policies, ZJSTV, the network behind *Hurry Up, Brother*, distanced itself from its Korean origins, rebranding the show as *Keep Running* and making changes to its format to avoid conflicts with SARFT's stricter guidelines.

Tian Li's article adds another layer of analysis, examining the cultural and ideological impacts of these Korean adaptations through the lens of "screen-capitalism." Li investigates how *Running Man* and its Chinese counterpart *Hurry Up, Brother/Keep Running* reflect the broader cultural exchange between Korea and China despite political tensions. Using the concept of 'transplantation,' Li discusses how Chinese producers incorporate local elements into Korean formats to better suit the tastes and expectations of Chinese audiences, making these shows distinctly Chinese while preserving the essence of their Korean counterparts. She introduces the term "screen-capitalism" to describe how these remakes foster a visual connection between audiences, facilitating cultural exchange and access to different life

²⁰ Zeng, W., & Sparks, C. (2017). Localization as negotiation: Producing a Korean format in contemporary China. *International Journal of Digital Television*, 8(1), 59.

experiences. Li also highlights that a significant portion of Chinese entertainment shows—nearly half—are either adaptations of Korean shows or collaborations between Korea and China. Shows like *I Am a Singer*, *Dad! Where Are We Going?*, and *Produce 101* exemplify the success of this cultural exchange. In the case of *Hurry Up, Brother*, the use of Chinese celebrities and the integration of Chinese cultural elements, such as filming in domestic tourist attractions, ensured the show’s local appeal and made it one of the most successful remakes of a Korean television program.²¹

Both Zeng and Sparks’ article and Li’s article agree on the central role of localization in these Korean adaptations. By incorporating Chinese cultural and political values into the format of Korean programs, Chinese producers have successfully adapted and transformed foreign content to fit the needs and expectations of the Chinese market. These adaptations not only highlight the influence of Korean media in China but also reflect the complex interplay of culture, politics, and economics in the Chinese entertainment industry. Ultimately, *Hurry Up, Brother* serves as a case study of how global media content is transformed and redefined within the context of Chinese political and cultural frameworks, while also demonstrating the resilience of Chinese television producers in navigating state policies and the demands of the public.²²

The variety television show, *Keep Running* is a localized and adapted, Chinese version of the popular Korean variety show, *Running Man*. Zhejiang Satellite Television (ZJSTV) bought the rights to localize and bring the show to China.²³ The show has been extremely successful and has been airing for 10 years. To accommodate the ‘one format policy’ in 2016, ZJSTV distanced themselves from SBS and rebranded the show’s name to *Keep Running*, while it first started with the name: *Hurry Up, Brother* (benpao ba, xiongdi 奔跑吧, 兄弟) which is a product of localization where the production team made it typically Chinese, to fit in the Chinese culture and ideologies, which led to it becoming one of the most successful remakes

²¹ Li, Tian. “Rhizome in the Shadows: Transplantation of Korean Running Man in the Rise of Screen-Capitalism.” *Continuum (Mount Lawley, W.A.)* 34, no. 1 (2020): 73–87.

²² Zeng, W., & Sparks, C. (2017). Localization as negotiation: Producing a Korean format in contemporary China. *International Journal of Digital Television*, 8(1), 59-66. And Li, Tian. “Rhizome in the Shadows: Transplantation of Korean Running Man in the Rise of Screen-Capitalism.” *Continuum (Mount Lawley, W.A.)* 34, no. 1 (2020): 73–87.

²³ Li, Tian. “Rhizome in the Shadows: Transplantation of Korean Running Man in the Rise of Screen-Capitalism.” *Continuum (Mount Lawley, W.A.)* 34, no. 1 (2020): 73–87.
doi:10.1080/10304312.2019.1694139.

of a Korean television program. Producers had to make changes in the details of the show to avoid conflicts with the SARFT.²⁴

3. Methodology

This study aims to answer the following research question: *To what extent does Keep Running serve as a tool to promote soft power and convey political messages domestically and internationally?* This chapter outlines the methodology used to explore this question, starting with a review of existing literature on methodologies applied in similar research. A multi-method approach was chosen, combining discourse analysis (as outlined by Gillian Rose, 2013), content analysis, and a cultural studies approach (as described in *The Handbook of Visual Analysis* by Van Leeuwen and Jewitt). Together, these methods enable a nuanced examination of the show's content, focusing on recurring themes and the ways in which *Keep Running* reflects key concepts from the literature, such as soft power, positive energy, and rural revitalization.

3.1 Multi-Method Approach

A multi-method approach was employed to address the various dimensions of the research question. By using these methods, the content of the show could be interpreted through different layers and aspects to reach a thorough conclusion for the research question.

3.1.1 Discourse Analysis

The term "discourse," as defined by Foucault, refers to groups of statements that shape how a subject is thought about and influence subsequent actions based on that thinking.

Discourse encompasses various forms of visual and verbal images and texts, making it a suitable method for analyzing a multimedia show like *Keep Running*. Foucault's work informed two distinct approaches, which Rose labels as Discourse Analysis I and II.²⁵

Discourse Analysis I focuses on visual and verbal texts, emphasizing how they construct specific perspectives of the world. This approach examines the production of images and views discourse as a social construct, rather than an individually produced one. It

²⁴ Zeng, Wenna, and Colin Sparks. "Production and Politics in Chinese Television." *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 1 (2019): 54–69. doi:10.1177/0163443718764785.

²⁵ Rose, Gillian. "Visual Methodologies." In *Research Methods for English Studies*, NED-New edition, 2., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. doi:10.1515/9780748683444-006, p 80-85.

investigates how particular narratives or views are constructed as real, truthful, or natural through "regimes of truth," a concept introduced by Foucault. As Gill (1996:143) argues, "All discourse is organized to make itself persuasive," and this analysis uncovers the strategies employed to achieve persuasion.

Additionally, this method examines the socially constructed dimensions of discursive power, such as the social definition of authority and difference. It also analyzes how discourses are produced and the effects they generate within society. Discourse Analysis I relies heavily on intertextuality, beginning with the collection of texts relevant to the research question. These texts are reviewed repeatedly to develop interpretations and assumptions about what is presented as true, real, or natural. Following a Foucauldian perspective, the position and authority of the speaker are also analyzed to understand the context and basis of their statements.²⁶

3.1.2 Content Analysis

Content analysis identifies recurring themes and patterns across episodes of *Keep Running*. This method begins with coding episodes based on key concepts of soft power and propaganda identified in the literature review. By categorizing the show's content into specific themes, content analysis reveals common trends that align with the promotion of soft power or convey other political messages.

This method is particularly valuable in identifying how cultural and political narratives are embedded, subtly or overtly, in the show's episodes. For example, themes such as rural revitalization, common prosperity, and nationalism, reflecting common political messages and themes. The systematic approach of content analysis ensures that these recurring themes are identified and linked to the study's central concepts.²⁷

3.1.3 Cultural Studies Approach

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Van Leeuwen, Theo, and Carey Jewitt, Chapter 2: Content Analysis of Visual Images in *The Handbook of Visual Analysis*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857020062>.

The cultural studies approach examines the interplay between cultural production, consumption, beliefs, and social institutions. Unlike methods that view media solely as a reflection of societal values, cultural studies emphasize the active role of cultural products in shaping identities, ideologies, and power dynamics.

In the context of *Keep Running*, this method investigates how the show constructs and reinforces narratives related to soft power, modernization, and cultural identity. It explores how the program functions as a tool for shaping public perceptions of China's culture, values, and social dynamics. For instance, cultural studies shed light on how the show portrays gender roles, national pride, and collective identity, situating these portrayals within broader socio-political frameworks.

Furthermore, cultural studies highlight the role of entertainment media, such as variety television shows, in influencing domestic and international audiences. By analyzing the content of *Keep Running*, the study uncovers how the program engages viewers not only as passive recipients but as active participants in constructing cultural meaning.²⁸

As noted by Shambaugh, further research is needed to uncover the processes and trends of Chinese propaganda. Various forms of popular entertainment, including documentaries, drama series, and variety shows (*zongyi jiemu*), serve as tools to promote soft power domestically and internationally. Scholars often analyze state-owned media such as CCTV broadcasts, CGTN programs, Xinhua News content, People's Daily publications, and blockbuster films like *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* to examine propaganda and soft power. For this study, the combined methodologies will help identify how political messages and promotion of Chinese cities and culture are portrayed in a non-'pushy' manner across multiple episodes of the show.²⁹

I began by researching similar studies through internet searches and the university library's catalog to identify common themes and methodologies. I found that many scholars focused

²⁸ Van Leeuwen, Theo, and Carey Jewitt, Chapter 4: Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies as an Approach to Analysing the Visual in *The Handbook of Visual Analysis*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857020062>.

²⁹ Shambaugh, David. "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy." *The China Journal*. Vol. No. 57. The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, 2007. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20066240>.

on widely recognized state-owned media, such as CCTV content, propaganda films, and popular Chinese television drama series, using methods like interviews, surveys, and discourse analysis. Among these, the methods used in Florian Schneider's *Visual Political Communication in Popular Chinese Television Series* (2012) stood out to me. Schneider applied discourse analysis to examine how political themes and ideologies are both subtly and overtly conveyed in three series: *The Great Han Emperor Wu*, *The Commissioner*, and *Talented Man, Beautiful Woman*. He also employed visual analysis to analyze the sets and framing, which I chose not to adopt for my study, as the content I am analyzing features a variety of costumes, sportswear, and themed set designs. Schneider also used an intertextuality approach, studying how the series interacts with other cultural and political events to convey political messages, as well as integrating elements of cultural studies to analyze how the series tries to shape cultural identities, political values, and Chinese ideologies. (Schneider, 2012) However, I will focus on the content analysis of themes and political messaging rather than visual details. Yet other scholars chose to take surveys with anonymous viewers and interviews with production teams (Zeng and Sparks, 2018, Schneider, 2012, Mattingly and Yao, 2022). I did not use this method, for different reasons. Firstly, because it is not feasible for me to interview the production team members and ask about the Chinese government's involvement in the show's production for example. Since I do not have access to these sources nor plan to go to China to conduct these interviews. For Surveys, while it is a useful method to capture audience reception and understand how these shows can impact people, I aim to focus my study on the content and not on the audience reception.

3.2.1 Selection of the Show

As previously mentioned, I chose to analyze the variety television show *Keep Running* because, alongside drama series, it is one of the most popular forms of entertainment widely consumed by people of all ages and social statuses. Additionally, the show is highly accessible both domestically and internationally. Domestically, it airs on Zhejiang Satellite TV, and it is also available on popular streaming platforms such as WeTV (Tencent Video), Youku, iQIYI, and YouTube. Therefore this show has a great reach for domestic and international audiences, being a great tool to promote Chinese culture and ideologies and increase Chinese soft power domestically and internationally.

3.2.2 Selection of Episodes

For the episodes selected for my research, the show has been airing for over ten years, which presented a great range of content to choose from. To select the episodes for analysis, I reviewed the past five years of the show, encompassing ten seasons, as the program typically airs during the late spring and early summer period. Since 2020, a special season has also been introduced, airing later in the year, every year since. I documented the main themes and locations featured in these episodes. Episodes were selected based on their alignment with key concepts of soft power, and propaganda themes, such as positive energy, common prosperity, and rural revitalization. This can be seen in Appendix 1.

3.2.3 Frames and Segments

This study focuses on different elements of the show:

1. Content and themes: recurring themes and messages in the episodes
2. Settings of the show will be analyzed using a combination of methods, focusing on the 3. Voice-over Narration: the content of this voice over
4. Conversations: the people chosen to deliver a message in the episodes
5. Subtitles and On-Screen Texts: The use of captions and text to emphasize certain ideas, or to inform the audience on certain ideas. Also noting that the subtitles are available in English, Vietnamese and Thai, which reflects the show's international reach.

Finally, it is known that provincial TV stations like Zhejiang Satellite TV are partially state-funded and primarily rely on commercial sponsors. For example, *Keep Running* has a long-standing collaboration with the milk/yogurt brand Ambrosial.

3.3 Limitations of the Methodology

One limitation of this study is the potential for subjective interpretation inherent in discourse and content analysis. While I tried to ensure consistency and base observations on established concepts from the literature, the analysis may reflect my perspective as a Sinologist and a long-time viewer of the show. Another limitation is the exclusion of audience reception and production team insights, as other scholars have done research on as well, to have a more well rounded view of the whole show and its impact and intention. This could be included in future studies.

In conclusion, this study will take a multi-method approach to analyze the variety show, *Keep Running* as a tool for promoting soft power and conveying political messages both domestically and internationally. The methods combined are discourse analysis (Rose 2013: 80), content analysis and a cultural studies approach to offer a comprehensive examination of the show's content.

Discourse analysis, drawing on the work of Foucault and Gillian Rose, is used to explore how visual and verbal texts construct and shape specific perspectives of the world, focusing on the social power dynamics that influence public perception. Content analysis identifies recurring themes and patterns in the show, such as soft power, common prosperity, and rural revitalization, revealing how these themes are embedded in the narrative. The cultural studies approach contextualizes the show as an active participant in shaping cultural identities and power relations, investigating how *Keep Running* engages with national pride, modernization, and Chinese ideologies.

Together, these methods provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how *Keep Running* functions as both a form of entertainment and a subtle tool of political communication.

4. Analysis

The analysis chapter will build upon the methodologies outlined in the previous chapter and apply them to analyze the content of *Keep Running* across multiple episodes. The three methods: discourse analysis, content analysis, and the cultural studies approach will be integrated to identify recurring themes and patterns, demonstrating how the show shapes both domestic and international perceptions of Chinese culture and ideologies, whether subtly or overtly. These aspects of the chosen episodes will be analyzed on: 1) content and themes and/or 2) the settings of the show, 3) the voice-over narration, 4) the conversations, and 5) the subtitles and on-screen texts.

The episodes I selected were, Season 7 Episode 1 and 2, Season 12 Episode 1, 3, 4, Yellow River Season 1 Episode 1 and 3, Common Prosperity Season Episode

4.1 Soft Power

Using discourse analysis, the theme of the first episode of Season 7, waste classification,

shows the cast being informed on how to sort their household trash (from their hotel room trashcan), through the new waste classification regulations in Shanghai. They walked through the whole process of waste sorting together, from sorting their own hotel trash to going to the recycling/waste sorting center, and seeing where it ends up, or how it gets processed. This episode aired at the same time Shanghai introduced the concept of waste classification and its rules. I would interpret this episode as an informative and instructive episode mainly for Chinese people domestically, because this video not only informs them on how to do this right, by walking them through the whole process, but also influence them through the cast members, mostly very well-known actors and singers whom the audience looks up to, that were learning about this on site and instructing the viewers at the same time through the show. This episode shows how the show's content reflects political ideologies or policy changes, to inform the people about these policies in a less authoritative manner. This observation reflects the concept that the show functions as a tool for promoting domestic soft power. Additionally, when looking at the discourse when looking at the way the cast was used to instruct how-to sort their household trash properly, this could construct a narrative of responsibility and modernization, showing how they do it, and the audience should do so too.

Through a content analysis of Episode 2, Season 7, which highlights father-son relationships, Chinese traditional value, also known as Confucian values, such as respect for elders and filial piety are emphasized. In this episode, guest viewers shared emotional stories about how their fathers expressed love, the sacrifices their fathers made for them, and their own desire to repay their fathers for these sacrifices. Some participants spoke about their personal experiences and how they look up to their fathers. This episode reflects the concept of "positive energy" as a tool for soft power by leveraging emotional topics. It can be interpreted as an attempt to influence viewers at home to express love and appreciation for their parents, even if they struggle to do so or if such expressions are uncommon in their family dynamic.

When taking the cultural studies approach, we can see that different Chinese cities were used as the setting for the show. In these episodes the cast members visited different touristic spots, at some they talk about the historical background of the places, and some

are just used as the location for the games on the day. Therefore, as mentioned in the literature review, the show highlights Chinese heritage, has a full Chinese cast, making it a “Chinese” show, clearly moving away from its roots. And these episodes promote these Chinese cities and attract not only the international audience to these sites, but also the domestic audiences might get intrigued and interested to visit these cities, boosting the economy and tourism in these places. Again, showing how the show is a good soft power tool.

Similarly, in the special season *Yellow River*, Season 1, Episode 3, filmed in Shaanxi, the same concepts and themes are evident. The episode begins with an introduction to the location and is used to showcase the region’s Chinese history and culture. This reflects the use of the show to promote cultural soft power, a concept emphasized by Nye and Repnikova as central to soft power in the Chinese context.

Season 12 was airing while I was gathering data for this research. The first episode started with different reasons why the number “12” of Season 12, is so important and meaningful, by creating a story around number “12”.

Timestamp: 00:00-02:35

The story first gets related to a classical Chinese story, the Story of Mulan (*Mulan* 木兰辞). And follows with the meanings of the number “12” in traditional Chinese culture, which often means a complete cycle and repetition, the twelve-celestial stem, the twelve Chinese zodiacs, twelve months in a year, twelve two-hour periods (*shichen* 时辰) in a day, and as time goes by *Keep Running* has finally reached its twelfth season. And *Keep Running* has even warmer meanings for the number “12”. In the next section I will continue the segment that explained their definitions for the number “12”.

Translation:

“The word: 家人 (*jiaren*, family member(s)) has ‘12’ (twelve) brushstrokes, the word means company, watching over each other, and the warmth of waiting for each other amidst the myriad lights. The word: 兄弟 (*xiongdi*, brother) has twelve brushstrokes, *xiongdi* is about

support, lending a hand, trusting someone with your back at a crucial moment. The word: 朋友 (pengyou, friend) has twelve brushstrokes, it is about sharing, joy, and the waves of the sea singing praises for you during your journey. The word: 永远 (yongyuan, forever) has twelve brushstrokes, forever is not the largest unit of time, but the genuine face by your side at this very moment. The word: 未来 (weilai, future) has twelve strokes, it is not an illusion, but the steps you take forward every time. The word: 快乐 (kuai le, happiness) has twelve brushstrokes, happiness is not the loneliness after turning around but being determined, and finally becoming your true self. The word: 我们 (women, we) has twelve strokes, 'we' are about family, brothers, friends, being happy because of you, and wanting you to be happy too. The word: 开始 (kaishi, beginning) has twelve brushstrokes, the beginning is about indispensability, our never-ending journey, and our readiness to embark on a new adventure. The word: 跑 (pao, run) has twelve brushstrokes, running in the perseverance of twelve seasons, making the twelfth revolution, gathering all our strength. Running past yesterday, winning today, and running towards tomorrow! That is the true essence of 'Keep Running'. We will continue to travel all over the country, showing our audience the past glories and present vitality of each place."

With this episode, the show successfully created and told a story around its 12th season, relating it to Chinese traditional culture. By starting with the significance of the number twelve at the beginning of the episode and connecting it to the story of Mulan, the show incorporated elements of Chinese history and culture into the theme of its twelfth season. Both domestic and international audiences were able to learn from these stories while being emotionally engaged. In a subtle way, this episode effectively promoted Chinese culture and storytelling.

The season continues with the second episode set in Nanning, Guangxi, a location that serves as a hub for China-ASEAN relations. Nanning is a key point for the entry of ASEAN products into China and the export of Chinese products and technologies to ASEAN countries. This can be seen as a way to promote mutual trade between China and ASEAN, using the show to reflect the country's public diplomacy efforts and emphasize this important relationship. China and ASEAN first established diplomatic relations in 1991, and

their partnership has been strengthened through agreements and ongoing bilateral cooperation. To achieve the goals of the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), China prioritizes maintaining strong relations with ASEAN, laying the foundation for a shared future.³⁰ This approach aligns with the concept of public diplomacy within the framework of soft power. This episode successfully highlights China’s relationship with ASEAN countries.

Another example of this is the final two episodes of Season 11, filmed in Thailand. These episodes highlighted the relationship between the two countries and featured a special guest, Minnie, a Thai K-pop idol from the Korean girl group (G)I-DLE, who interacted with the Chinese cast while speaking Chinese. Despite being heavily promoted on social media as highly anticipated episodes, their release was delayed due to a scandal involving cast member Cai Xukun. Rather than scrapping the episodes, the post-production team used AI to edit him out and released the episodes at a later date. This demonstrates the significance of these episodes for the show.

4.2 Propaganda

After thorough research on the special seasons: *Yellow River* Seasons 1 and 2, the *Common Prosperity* Season, and the *Ecology* Season, it has been confirmed that these productions were sponsored by the government through the SARFT. This was explicitly mentioned in the final episode of Season 8. In the closing segment of Episode 12, the production team announced the special season and highlighted the significant resources invested in its creation. In the left bottom corner of the frame for the special seasons we can see golden letters stating: “国家广电总局重点节目” which translates to “Key Program of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television” and “恢宏新时代

邃纱向未来”, which translates to: “A New Era of Magnificence, Deep Yarn to the Future”.

This is a good example for ‘soft’ propaganda as it is openly said to be state sponsored, but the content does not take a top-down approach, however the messages are integrated into a

³⁰ Bi, Shihong. “Cooperation between China and ASEAN under the Building of ASEAN Economic Community.” *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 10, no. 1 (2021): 83–107. doi:10.1080/24761028.2021.1888410.

variety show, to showcase the Chinese government's achievements and China's infrastructure and rural area's development. For example, in Yellow River Season 1 Episode 1, Qinghai is a city that ranked well in ecology scoring and this was showcased.



Timestamp: 00:01:18-00:01:48

The voice-over text that was said over these frames:

“近年来，在‘黄河流域生态保护和高质量发展’的政策指引下。黄河岁岁安澜，沿岸日新月异。’经过六十多年的治理，植被的覆盖率从不足百分之一，现在提升到了百分之四十二点五。’每个中华儿女的血管里都流淌着一条黄河。”

Translation: “Recently, under the direction of the policy ‘The Yellow River Basin Ecological and High-quality Development,’ the Yellow River has remained peaceful for years, and the coastal areas are developing quickly. Another perspective states, ‘After sixty years of management, vegetation coverage has increased from less than 1% to 42.5% as of today.’ The Yellow River flows through the blood vessels of every Chinese person.”

This text is a way to highlight and emphasize the achievements of the government in the infrastructure development in this area. That achieved an increase in vegetation coverage in this area. And could be interpreted as political soft power, a way to show to promote the Party-state's achievements since its establishment, if one calculates 2021-60 years equals 1921, which is the year the CCP was established, domestically and internationally. Since the show is broadcasted in China and internationally through different platforms. This aims to tell China's story well a soft power concept to promote the Chinese government through media, but also as part of the Chinese propaganda campaign.³¹ With this one can understand again that soft power and propaganda are intertwined when it comes to media

³¹ Jian Xu and Qian Gong, 'Telling China's Story Well' as propaganda campaign slogan: International, domestic and the pandemic', in Media, Culture & Society, 2024, vol. 46(5) 1064-1074.

as the tool, because the content not only succeeds in promoting the Chinese government's achievements domestically but also internationally, viewers may see this and be influenced and have some positive views on China, in contrary to what is portrayed in Western media.

Timestamp: 00:02:32-00:02:59

A local citizen describes how the Longyang Gorge Project changed the lives of many living along the coast, followed by local citizens describing how this development has increased their quality of life: "we have never used electricity, before this I have never watched TV", "if it does not rain we may face the situation of water shortage."

This quote again showcases how Chinese citizens lives got better thanks to the government's efforts.

Timestamp: 00:03:04-00:03:17

It then cuts to frames with the following words on it: *“国家广电总局宣传司指导，浙江卫视制作，延续历史文脉，鉴定文化自信，助力脱贫攻坚。”*

Translated to:

Under the guidance of the Public Department of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (the SARFT), produced by Zhejiang Satellite Television, Continuing history lineage, Identifying cultural confidence, helping to fight poverty"

These phrases are propaganda slogans frequently used by the General Secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping, in his official speeches. This is unsurprising, given that this "special" season is largely government-funded to promote development in the areas surrounding the Yellow River.

One notable observation in the translation is that these sentences were not included in the subtitles. This could be explained by the possibility that the person responsible for the subtitles did not consider them essential for translation or simply chose to omit them. This omission could also suggest that foreign viewers might not recognize these phrases as propaganda. Instead, they may focus on the country's appeal and be impressed by the

government's achievements, thereby turning this into soft propaganda aimed at promoting soft power.

Yellow River Season 1 episode 3, took place in Shaanxi, the episode starts with an introduction of the place. However, the episode is not used to only promote the historical side of the location, but it also highlighted how the construction of the highway, has facilitated the transportation between Shaanxi and Shanxi and helped the people in this area to rise out of poverty (tuopin 脱贫).

Timestamp: 51:10-51:27

Text said: “要想富，先修路”

Translation: “if you want to get rich, you must first build roads”.

This finding shows again how the show is highlighting the development of the country, which could be defined as political soft power, making Chinese people proud of their country, but also their government's achievements. And allow people to gain confidence in the government, because they will help the people rise out of poverty.

Besides this the results from the games throughout the day dictates how many trees the cast will have to plant on the mountain. And it then continues with conversations from locals talking about how the vegetation in this ecological environment has increased from 46% to 81.3 % in the last twenty years. This may be a coincidence but could also be scripted, to highlight the achievements in the development in this area.

Timestamp: 1:29:35-1:30:04

Local says: “生态好了，环境也好了，老百姓也富起来。延安所有的县，全部推出了贫困县。…保护黄河也是关中华民族伟大复兴和永续发展千秋大计。”

Translation: “(When) the ecology gets better, the environment gets better, and the people get wealthier. All the counties in Yan'an, all launched the poverty-stricken counties...Protecting the Yellow River is also about the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and sustainable development.”

Followed by these sentences on screen:

“生态改善农产品优化，让百姓收入增加 2019 年延安实现整体脱贫。”

Translation: “Ecological improvement of agricultural products got optimized, so that people's income increased and in 2019 Yan'an achieved overall poverty alleviation.”

It shows how Chinese television shows, non-official media is also being used to promote the country and the Party-state's efforts over the years, the development of the country, and how it has made people's lives better. Showing how much better the quality of life has gotten since the establishment of the CCP. Allowing the viewers to gain confidence in the government. Matching the concepts of soft power but also soft propaganda.

The propaganda aspect of it could be explained by how the sentences and title of this special Yellow River season matches quotes in Xi Jinping's speech at the 100 years anniversary of the establishment of CCP.

5. Discussion: Connecting Soft Power, Propaganda and Entertainment Media

This discussion expands on the analysis to explore broader implications of *Keep Running* as a tool for soft power and “soft” propaganda. The findings indicate that the show balances entertainment with political messaging, effectively integrating cultural promotion with subtle ideological reinforcement. While this strategy has its strengths, it also presents challenges of using media for dual purposes. This may not only be the case in China. After conducting this research, it came to my attention that other countries may also do this, people may not be aware of this. Therefore, this could be great topic for future research.

5.1 Soft Power Through Entertainment

The use of *Keep Running* for cultural diplomacy aligns with Nye's (1990) framework, where soft power relies on attraction rather than coercion. Episodes featuring themes such as traditional values (filial piety in Episode 2, Season 7) or ecological development (Yellow River Season 1) demonstrate how the show subtly communicates Chinese cultural heritage and

modern achievements. By presenting these narratives in an engaging format, *Keep Running* appeals to both domestic and international audiences, as emphasized by Repnikova (2022).

The show's emphasis on cultural heritage resonates with Confucian ideals, showcasing values like family bonds and harmony. For example, the localization of the number twelve in Season 12 connects to Chinese zodiac symbols and the story of Mulan, fostering a sense of pride among viewers. This illustrates Nye's concept of soft power by promoting China's cultural depth and continuity, creating a compelling narrative that counters negative global perceptions of China.

5.3 Propaganda or Soft Power?

The distinction between soft power and propaganda, as debated by Mattingly and Yao (2022), is particularly relevant to *Keep Running*. While soft power operates through attraction, propaganda often carries political overtones. Government-sponsored special seasons, such as Yellow River and Common Prosperity, reflect this duality. For example, ecological restoration in Qinghai was presented as a testament to CCP policies, blending achievements with entertainment to influence perceptions. The inclusion of state-sponsored slogans and historical references, such as "A New Era of Magnificence," reinforces CCP narratives while appealing to viewers' emotions.

5.4 Cultural Studies: A Lens for Adaptation and Localization

The cultural studies approach, as proposed by Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2004), reveals how *Keep Running* integrates Korean entertainment formats while embedding distinct Chinese elements. The adaptation of *Running Man* into a localized product aligns with Tian Li's (2020) concept of "screen-capitalism," demonstrating how foreign formats are reshaped to align with domestic ideologies and cultural values. This transformation highlights China's ability to innovate within external frameworks, creating media that appeals to diverse audiences.

5.5 Public Diplomacy and Global Impact

Episodes set in Thailand and ASEAN-related locations emphasize China's public diplomacy objectives. By showcasing cooperative trade relations and cross-cultural exchanges, these episodes align with Bi's (2021) emphasis on economic cooperation as a soft power strategy.

However, the delay and editing of Thai episodes due to a cast member scandal reflect the challenges of maintaining authenticity and coherence in state-sponsored narratives.

5.6 Challenges

While *Keep Running* effectively blends entertainment with messaging, its overt alignment with state narratives raises questions about authenticity. Scholars like Shambaugh (2007) have noted that the perception of propaganda can undermine soft power efforts, particularly among international audiences. The omission of propagandistic phrases in subtitles, as observed in Yellow River episodes, suggests an awareness of how overt messaging may not be so relevant for foreign viewers. However, this strategy risks diluting the cultural authenticity of effective soft power.

6. Conclusion: Findings and Future Directions

This thesis has explored the dual roles of *Keep Running* as a tool for soft power and soft propaganda. By analyzing its themes, settings, and narratives, this study has illuminated how Chinese variety shows integrate entertainment with cultural and political messaging to influence perceptions domestically and internationally.

6.1 A Summary of the Findings

To summarize, the episodes such as the ones showcasing father-son relationships or cultural landmarks reflect China's emphasis on "positive energy" and national pride, aligning with Confucian ideals. Additionally, the localization of the *Running Man* format demonstrates how Chinese producers transform foreign concepts into tools for cultural soft power.

Secondly, state-sponsored content, such as the special season, the Yellow River series, highlights the CCP's achievements in ecological and infrastructural development. These episodes demonstrate the overlap between soft power and propaganda, where narratives of progress and harmony reinforce state legitimacy.

The balance between entertainment and propaganda is delicate. While subtle messaging enhances soft power, overt state involvement risks alienating international audiences, particularly in democratic societies.

The findings underscore the potential of entertainment media to serve as both a cultural bridge and a political tool. As nations increasingly leverage media for public diplomacy, understanding the dynamics of soft power and propaganda becomes crucial. For China, *Keep Running* serves as a great example of a modern approach to ideological communication, where narratives are embedded within accessible and engaging formats.

Domestically, the show fosters national pride and confidence in government policies, aligning with Xi Jinping's emphasis on "telling China's story well." Internationally, it presents

a curated image of China, showcasing its cultural richness and developmental achievements. However, the effectiveness of this strategy depends on audience perceptions, which are shaped by geopolitical contexts and media literacy.

In this section I would like to highlight several aspects for future research: 1) audience reception, future research could explore the audience reception, on how international viewers perceive *Keep Running* and whether they recognize its ideological undertones; 2) a comparative analysis, could be used for future research to study whether other nations, such as South Korea, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United States of America use entertainment media for soft power and or propaganda, and in what way; 3) digital media influence: to examine how online platforms amplify or dilute the impact of variety shows as tools for soft power.

Finally, *Keep Running* serves as a prime example of China's evolving media strategy, blending cultural promotion with state objectives, as media becomes increasingly more important in everyone's daily life. As China refines its soft power initiatives, the findings from this study underscore the importance of balancing authenticity with strategic messaging. While *Keep Running* effectively promotes China's cultural and ideological narratives, its success as a soft power tool ultimately depends on its ability to resonate with diverse audiences without compromising its entertainment value.

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Appendix 1

Year, Season, Number of Episodes	Main Theme(s) and/location visited	Premiere	Finale
2019 S7, 12	Environmental Protection (ep 1), Father and Son Relationship (ep 2), Healthy Lifestyle Routines (ep 3), Chinese Historical Characters in Foshan (ep 4-5), Sports Competition (ep 6), Office Workers (social group) (ep 7), Celebration of Worldwide Premiere (ep 8), Learning about Petroleum (ep 9), Choir Night (ep 10), Macau (ep 11-12)	26-04-2019	12-07-2019
2020 S8, 12	Chinese Zodiac Animals in Hangzhou (ep 1), Idol Baggage (ep 2), Kaifeng (ep 3), Fashion Show (ep 4), Guangxi, Guilin (ep 5-6), Time and Space Cycle (ep 7), Hangzhou, Keep Running Film Festival (ep 8), Jili, Changchun, Equestrianism (ep 9), Changchun (ep 10), Qingdao Harbour (ep 11), Olympic Sailing Center (ep 12)	29-05-2020	14-08-2020
2020 Special Season, 5	Yellow River S1 黄河篇第一季: Qinghai, Increased Vegetation Around the Yellow River (ep	5-12-2020	8-01-2021

	1-2), Hancheng, rural revitalization (ep 3), Performance in Shaanxi, Yan'an (ep 4), Xihaigu, Tibet (ep 5)		
2021 S9, 13	Zhuhai (ep 1-2), Cultural Relic Auction in Zhuhai (ep 3) Three Kingdoms Literature (ep 4) Carbon Dioxide Emission, in Shandong (ep 5), Jinan 9 (ep 6), Huzhou, Zhejiang (ep 7), Village Development in Huzhou (ep 8), Wuxi (ep 9), Rice Plantations in Sanya (ep 10), Tourism and Corals in Sanya (ep 11), Student (ep 12), Hangzhou Cast vs Production Team (ep 13)	23-04-2021	16-07-2021
2021 Special Season, 5	Yellow River S2 黄河篇第二季: Vegetable Trade in Shouguang, Shandong (ep 1), Vocational Education in Jinan (ep 2), Zhongshan Bridge in Lanzhou, Gansu (ep 3), Lanzhou, Gansu (ep 4), Online Course of Different Enterprises in Zhengzhou (ep 5)	22-10-2021	26-11-2021
2022 S10, 12	Parental love, in Leshan, Sichuan (ep 1), 520, Flowers, Deqing, Zhejiang (ep 2), Virtual Property (ep 3), Martial Art	13-05-2022	29-07-2022

	Lovers in Mount Emei (ep 4), She ethnic group in Jingning, Zhejiang (ep 5), No Music Association (Fiction) (ep 6), Local Snacks in Jinhua Tower, Zhejiang (ep 7), Film and TV Industry Talent Job Fair Election, Jinhua (ep 8), Trade Mock Business Competition in Xinjiang (ep 9), Changji Stadium in Xinjiang (ep 10), Tourism in Turpan Xinjiang (ep 11-12)		
2022 Special Season, 8	Common Prosperity 共同富裕篇: High-quality development in Jiande, Zhejiang (ep 1), Villages in Jiande (ep 2), Jiu Fishing Village in Jiande, Zhejiang (ep 3), Qiandao Lake, Chun'an County, Hangzhou (ep 4), Sanming City, Fujian Province (ep 5), Snack Industry Class, Shaxian County, Sanming, Fujian (ep 6), Ecological protection and construction in Sanming City, "Green Capital of China" (ep 7), Taining, Sanming, Fujian (ep 8)	4-11-2022 modernization,	30-12-2022
2023 S11, 12	"The Golden Crow Who Carries the	14-04-2023	21-07-2023

	<p>Sun", Chengdu (ep 1), Poker Players (ep 2), Opera House, Chengdu (ep 3), Guizhou University Stadium (ep 4), Qianling Mountain Park in Guiyang (ep 5), Guizhou (ep 6), The 19th Asian Games in Hangzhou, Shaoxing, Zhejiang (ep 7), folklore stories in the history of Chinese culture (ep 8), Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture (ep 9-10), Durian Family Heir Story, in Thailand (ep 11), Thailand (ep 12)</p>		
2023 Special Season, 7	<p>Ecology 生态篇: Kunming (ep 1), Biodiversity in Kunming (ep 2), Mushrooms in Kunming (ep 3), Fishing Village (ep 4), Green and low-carbon lifestyle, Hangzhou, Zhejiang (ep 5), Werewolf game in Hangzhou (ep 6-7)</p>	18-11-2023	30-12-2023
2024 S12, 12	<p>Nanning, Guangxi, China ASEAN Expo (ep 1), Mystery Solving (ep 2), taxis in Chongqing (ep 3), Chongqing Hotpot and Cupping Therapy (ep 4), Twin Flower Mystery (ep 5), Treasure Hunt, Shenyang Imperial Palace (ep 6), Art</p>	19-04-2024	12-07-2024

	and wisdom in Shenyang (ep 7), Music Competition (ep 8), Sport Championship Zhejiang Hangzhou (ep 9), Hangzhou Digital and Smart City Microtrip Destination, Wensan Digital Life Block (ep 10), Hungary, Budapest (ep 11-12)		
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