What is Behind the “Persecution of K-pop” in China?

According to South Korean media reports of January 6, the Chinese Hunan TV and Mango TV streaming platforms began airing a South Korean drama Saimdang, Memoir of Colors, on January 4, 2022.

The National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) approved the series six years ago. On the other hand, Beijing was displeased with South Korea’s deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), an American anti-ballistic missile defense system. As a result, the South Korean series has not been broadcast on Chinese television or video platforms since the second half of 2016. For the first time in six years, a South Korean film, Oh! Moonhee (Oh! My Gran in English), was released in China last month. As a result, experts were cautious in discussing the possible removal of covert restrictions on South Korean content. And the author would like to recall how it was in 2021 when the South Korean media focused heavily on the crackdown in this area.

Let’s begin with a brief description of China’s youth policy in general, which has two objectives. The first is a fight against corruption and foreign influence. The second is a way to try to make the country better for all of its people, as, on the one hand, the new generation of young people is spoiled and selfish because of the one-child policy, while on the other hand, they are tired of being pushed and coerced.

A so-called “double reduction” policy was put into place in July 2021, and it was meant to make it less stressful for
kids outside of school, especially for private tutoring businesses. In addition, according to the decision of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), minors under the age of sixteen are prohibited from participating in live broadcasts. ... It is forbidden to encourage minors to receive remuneration, demonstrate wealth and worshipping money, extravagant pleasures, and exploiting misery and abnormities.

The authorities imposed a blackout on producing stars out of children under 16. Internet services are liable to remove inappropriate content promptly and clean up user comments containing insults and obscene suggestions. Particular attention should be paid to cleaning videos with nude characters and vulgar storylines, horror, as well as risky behavior that children may imitate, including an inclination to suicide.

As regards the misadventures of the Korean cultural industry in China, in the early 2010s, China was considered an untapped market for the K-pop industry. Many singers have made staggering profits from their fanbases, with stars like EXO. Initially composed of four Chinese members, they performed concerts in many cities and appeared on popular TV shows alongside famous local celebrities.

However, all of this quickly faded into history in 2016, after Seoul deployed an American anti-ballistic missile defense system (THAAD) on its soil, despite Beijing’s objections. Since then, Korean singers have been virtually banned from performing, and major K-pop labels have lost a market that accounted for up to 20% of total sales in 2016.

However, a blanket ban has never been applied. On March 24, 2021, JYP Entertainment Corporation, a K-pop agency, announced a strategic partnership with Tencent, a Chinese multinational entertainment conglomerate. According to the company, as part of a deal, JYP will provide music for TME platforms such as QQ Music, Kugou Music, Kuwo Music, and WeSing. The two companies will also collaborate on joint marketing and promotional activities.


The case of Kris Wu, who was arrested in August 2021, played an essential role in the events that followed. The 30-year-old Chinese-Canadian singer, who rose to fame as a member of the popular South Korean-Chinese boy band EXO, was detained by the Beijing police for suspicion of rape.

In addition, several local stars have also been caught for tax evasion. Earlier that year, in May, some Chinese K-pop fans came under public condemnation for throwing away 270,000 bottles of milk after using QR codes on the bottles to vote for their favorite contenders on the audition program.

On August 27, the CAC issued a notice calling to fix the chaos in fan clubs to prevent irrational idol worship. Drastic measures have been announced to curb celebrity worship and fan club culture. Such efforts include regulating the fan base, banning minors from spending money to support their idols, strictly controlling relevant disputes and fan community wars, and countering the practice of giving out VIP fan titles for donations. Weibo, Tencent and other Chinese social media platforms have joined this campaign.

On September 6, 2021, the social media platform Weibo suspended 21 accounts of K-pop fan clubs for 30 days to combat irrational star-chasing behavior. Also, K-pop sensation BTS, a fan account of the famous BTS member Jimin, was suspended for 60 days after his fans raised about 490 million won ($350,000) to celebrate his upcoming birthday on October 13 by paying for a plane to be covered with his images. After the photos of the plane went viral, Weibo accused the account of illegal fundraising and irrational star-chasing behavior. Moreover, by this time, K-pop band BTS had already suffered attacks from Chinese netizens for their remarks about the Korean War of 1950-53, when China fought against South Korea and its allies.

Subsequently, South Korea’s media frequently stated that the ban on posting fan club accounts can be seen as another step against the K-pop industry and is clearly aimed at South Korean K-pop bands and artists. This move “appears to be part of President Xi Jinping’s efforts to national rejuvenation, as the Communist Party consolidates its control over culture, religion, education, and business. Critics point out that such a campaign is related mainly to Xi’s attempt to tighten control over the government to prolong his rule.”

Lim Dae-geun, a professor of Chinese Cinema Studies at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (HUFS) in South
Korea, told The Korea Times that such restrictions are likely part of the CPC’s efforts to strengthen its political system: “Beijing, which seeks to redeem its forfeited fame, considers K-pop an unwelcome guest.” Professor Gyu Tag Lee from George Mason University in Incheon, South Korea, went even further: K-pop is essentially a product of capitalism and values ideas such as freedom of thought and expression that counter the CPC’s socialist values, forcing the country to impose restrictions on the genre. Some even talked themselves into the idea that banning minors from spending money on stars was reminiscent of the ghost of the Cultural Revolution: “China, which aspires to become a cultural power, should not try to limit the right of its people to enjoy diverse cultures and participate in fan clubs. Chinese politicians should remember that guaranteeing individuals’ freedom of choice is a fundamental human right.”

On September 9, the Chinese Embassy in Seoul denied speculation that Beijing’s campaign targeted South Korean artists, saying it would not disrupt normal cultural exchanges. “The campaign is aimed at words and deeds that are contrary to public policy and good manners, as well as violate laws and regulations,” a Chinese Embassy spokesperson said in a statement.

On September 15, the 2021-22 year of cultural exchange between South Korea and China started marking the upcoming 30th anniversary of the diplomatic relations between the two countries in August 2022. The event’s opening, which was supposed to give a chance to expand bilateral cultural cooperation, took place eight months after South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Xi Jinping, President of the People’s Republic of China, entered into a respective agreement.

On October 7, 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of South Korea sent an official letter to China expressing concern about the illegal distribution of Korean cultural content. According to Choi Young-sam, the ministry’s spokesman, Squid Game, a South Korean television series for Netflix, has been targeted by online piracy. Many Chinese have reportedly watched the popular nine-episode thriller through illegal streaming and download sites as Netflix is not available in China.

So, on the one hand, there is no real persecution of K-Pop. On the other hand, the persecution that is there hits the wallet of the owners of the cultural industry. The statements about the political background do not seem to be made up. Fighters against Pyongyang were quite open that pop culture should crush socialism in North Korea, which Beijing clearly took notice of. The semi-official struggle against Chinese culture in South Korea is also taken into account there.

**Konstantin Asmolov, PhD in History, leading research fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of the Far East at the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”**.