

How past-present-future interconnect in China: CDramas as a tool of cultural governance and the possibility of a ‘Chinese wave’ in the case of GenZ

Çin’de geçmiş-şimdi-gelecek nasıl kenetlenir? Kültürel yönetim aracı olarak Çin dizileri ve GenZ dizisi örneğinden ‘Çin dalgası’nın olabilirliği

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Abstract

This article aims to identify the discursive practices of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) cultural governance through the GenZ series (2023) and examine how transnational audiences perceive the series. In this context, two different research analysis techniques are used in a coordinated manner. Thematic discourse analysis is employed to reveal the series’ discourse themes, and the netnographic research technique is applied to discuss the compatibility of audience reviews with the series’ discourse. The research questions are as follows: How do the series’ themes reproduce the Chinese government’s cultural governance? How do audiences on global streaming platforms interpret the discourses of the ‘Chinese Dream’¹ and ‘rejuvenation’ subtly embedded in *GenZ*, and do transnational audiences develop an interest and curiosity towards China? Can these two reactions be understood as the potential of Chinese television dramas (CDramas) to create a ‘China Wave?’ This study finds that the series’s discursive themes align with President Xi Jinping’s two ideological discourses and the CCP’s cultural governance goals. As can be seen, the series’ contribution to China’s cultural governance policy is evident. However, its role as a soft power tool is limited because while transnational audiences are interested in Chinese dramas, their focus differs from that of Chinese audiences, which in this series are more interested in traditional Chinese medicine as a cultural heritage. Artistic quality and idol culture are not enough for CDramas to create a ‘Chinese Wave’ among transnational audiences, the nature of the government’s cultural governance policy needs to change first.

Keywords: Xi Jinping, Chinese wave, cultural governance, GenZ, CDramas, traditional Chinese medicine

Öz

Bu makale, GenZ (2023) dizisi aracılığıyla Çin Komünist Partisi'nin (ÇKP) kültürel yönetişiminin söylemsel uygulamalarını tespit etmeyi ve ulusötesi izleyicilerin diziyi nasıl alımladığını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, iki araştırma tekniği eşgüdümlü bir şekilde kullanılmıştır. GenZ dizisindeki söylem temalarını ortaya çıkarmak için tematik söylem analizi, izleyici değerlendirmelerinin dizinin söylemiyle uyumluluğunu tartışmak için ise netnografik araştırma tekniği kullanılmıştır. Çalışma kapsamında belirlenen araştırma soruları şöyledir: Dizinin temaları Çin hükümetinin kültürel yönetişimi ne şekilde üretmektedir? Küresel yayın platformlarındaki izleyiciler GenZ'ye incelikte yerleştirilen 'Çin Rüyası' ve 'canlandırma' söylemlerini nasıl yorumluyor ve ulusötesi izleyiciler Çin'e yönelik ilgi

ve merak geliştiriyor mu? Bu ilgi ve merak, Çin dizileri bir 'Çin Dalgası' yaratma potansiyeli olarak anlaşılabilir mi? Çalışmanın bulguları, dizinin söylemsel temalarının Xi Jinping'in 'Çin rüyası' ve 'canlandırma' ideolojisi ve ÇKP'nin kültürel yönetim hedefleriyle uyumlu olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Görüleceği üzere, dizinin Çin'in kültürel yönetim politikasına katkısı aşikardır. Ancak, Çin hükümeti için bir yumuşak güç aracı olarak rolü sınırlıdır. Çin dizilerinin ulus ötesi izleyiciler arasında bir 'Çin Dalgası' yaratması için yalnızca sanatsal kalitesi ve idol kültür yeterli değildir. Öncelikle Çin hükümetinin kültürel yönetim politikasının mahiyetinin değişmesi gereklidir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Xi Jinping, Çin dalgası, kültürel yönetim, GenZ, Çin dizileri, geleneksel Çin tıbbı

Introduction

“Going forward, China will be a country that has great expectations of its younger generation. A nation will prosper only when its young people thrive. For China to develop further, our young people must step forward and take on their responsibilities. Youth is full of vigor and is a source of hope. Youngsters should keep their country in mind, cultivate keen enterprise, and live youth to the fullest with great drive, to prove worthy of the times and the splendor of youth.”

— President Xi Jinping, 31 December, 2022

The People’s Republic of China (PRC), a leading country of the Global South, has historically used the media as an essential element of governance. In particular, television, which has been controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since its establishment in 1958, has played an important role in the party’s cultural governance strategy (Zhao & Guo, 2020, p.460). Yuezhi Zhao and Zhenzi Guo (2020) provide a comprehensive analysis of Chinese television’s evolution, delineating four distinct periods marked by social, economic, technological, and political shifts: “Mao era (1958-1977), early reform era (1978-1989), market reform era (1990-2012) and Xi Jinping era (2013-present)” (p.459). The fourth period is characterized by an intensified emphasis on television’s political and ideological functions, aligning them with the nationalistic goals of the ‘Chinese Dream’ and ‘rejuvenation.’

The Governance of China (2017), a collection of President Xi’s public speeches, explains his vision of the country’s future as well as the mission and responsibilities assigned to the CCP, different segments of society, and especially the youth. His speeches on those two nationalistic goals emphasize China’s cultural continuity and the interconnectedness of past-present-future. The first goal’s narrative emphasizes “continuities with the greatness of China’s historic power and influence through a romanticization of traditional doctrines, especially Confucianism and the imperial past” (Ng & Xiaomeng, 2023, p. 616). Xi identifies the youth as this dream’s primary agents, thereby prioritizing their ideological and political education. The CCP’s concerted efforts to shape the youth’s ideology are evident in the 1994 Patriotic Education Campaign, the 2012 “Document Number 9” (warned against ‘the cultural penetration of Western hostile forces’) (Bram, 2023, para. 9), and the 2019 ‘Outline for the Implementation of Patriotic Education in the New Era.’ Furthermore, the 2022 White Paper, “Youth of China

in the New Era," commemorating the Youth League's centenary, reaffirms the emphasis on ideological awareness and national rejuvenation under Xi's governance (Svensson, 2023, p.73).

In sum, the CCP under Xi's governance has intensified its efforts to re-ideologize Chinese society, with a particular focus on cultivating a strong sense of national identity and purpose among the youth through strategic media narratives and educational initiatives. In this context, CDramas, broadcast through both traditional television and digital platforms, serve as a direct or indirect instrument of the CCP's cultural governance. While the primary target audience on digital platforms includes both domestic and international viewers (Keane, 2019, p.245), their broader function aligns with the 'Chinese Dream' discourse. The CDramas are employed to cultivate nationalism and propagate cultural values of Chineseness within the domestic population and the diaspora, while simultaneously serving as a form of 'soft power' on the transnational stage.

Robert Albro (2015) points out that China began to use soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye (2004), in the mid-2000s, and that cultural materials were seen as its soft power tool in this sense. For instance, at the 17th CCP National Congress in 2007, General Secretary Hu Jintao presented the doctrine of a 'socialist harmonious society' and emphasized developing China's cultural soft power. While constructing socialism with Chinese characteristics, Confucianism was also recirculated because of its emphasis on 'harmony.' Xi, on the other hand, sharpened the emphasis on a "harmonious society," "harmonious coexistence," and "harmonious world" initiated by Hu and positioned the virtues of China's Confucian-based national culture against the West's extreme individualistic values and materialism (Albro, 2015). Thus, the part of Confucianist values aligned with the CCP and the 'Chinese Dream' has become part of China's cultural governance.

Initially, in China, we saw the use of traditional cultural materials as a soft power tool, representations of traditional cultural materials and the dissemination of the Chinese language through Confucius Institutes. However, Xi's emphasis on 'good Chinese narratives' has made the soft power and cultural diplomacy role of cultural content circulating in the media and new media ecosystem part of the agenda. Therefore, dramas, game shows, and even travel programs produced in China have begun to circulate the country's virtues and the values of Chineseness based on the party-state's cultural policy.

In these narratives, cultural nationalism is subtly circulated differently from the propaganda techniques of the Mao era and the Cultural Revolution. Aligned with the ‘Chinese Dream’ discourse, we claim that these television dramas serve as a vehicle for propagating the nationalist sentiments and cultural values of Chineseness both domestically and within the diaspora, while simultaneously functioning as a form of ‘soft power’ on the transnational stage. In particular, China’s economic rise; the development of its military power; its independence in information technology (IT), space, and military technologies; the outbreak of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in Wuhan; and the delay of its authorities in managing the health crisis and preventing the global spread of the virus have led the world to perceive China as a threat. Negative images have begun to circulate. Human rights violations against the Uyghur Muslim population in the Uyghur Xinjiang Autonomous Region, the Buddhist clergy in Tibet, and the suppression of student protests in Hong Kong have led the world to question its record on freedom of expression and human rights. For this reason, this ‘China threat’ gradually increased in the Western media during the 2020s. In response, the CCP has started implementing a more rigorous and meticulous approach to cultural governance within media and new media content, aiming to construct a positive image through strategic cultural messaging.

There are a few examples of studies that analyse how the CCP produces the discursive practices of cultural governance and the dominant ideology through television programmes such as Chinese dramas, and competitions in the literature (Wu & Bergman, 2019; Zhong, 2010; Jiang & González, 2021; Song, 2022). However, there has been no study of the *GenZ* series in this context. The specificity of this article is that, through the series *GenZ* (2023), it aims to identify the discursive practices of the CCP’s cultural governance and examine how transnational audiences perceive the series. It will also contribute to the literature by evaluating how this series is interpreted by transnational audiences in terms of its potential to create a ‘Chinese Wave’. The literature on Chinese governance on CDramas is discussed in the following section of the article.

Cultural governance through CDramas

K. V. Mulcahy (2010) and Füsün Üstel (2022) define cultural governance as the nation-state’s adoption and shaping of cultural materials as the ideological state apparatus, from educational institutions, media content, production and performance of artworks, public space design, monuments, and museums to architecture. The more minimal or

extensive the state's arm length is, the more liberal, democratic, or authoritarian and censorious the cultural governance becomes. In authoritarian states, cultural governance can be realized through repressive regulation mechanisms, particularly censorship as an ideological state apparatus (Mulcahy, 2010; Üstel, 2022).

As mentioned above, cultural governance practices have intensified during the Xi era. At this point, the evolution of propaganda into cultural governance and the changed target audience of these practices over time are important. Wanning Sun (2015) states that the CCP has engaged in propaganda activities since its establishment. Some newspapers were published in the early 1930s for Western countries and sought to explain the party's vision of revolution to them. During the early 1940s, Xinhua began English-language broadcasting in Yan'an under CCP control. In 1949, with the founding of the PRC, the need for media-mediated propaganda to publicize the new state's ideology and legitimacy became apparent. In 1955, Chairman Mao emphasized Xinhua's duty to give China a global voice, to "take control of the earth" (Mu, 2013, cited by Sun, 2015, p. 403).

Chinese scholars such as Tang (2013) and Wang (2010) divide China's propaganda activities towards global public opinion into three periods: the development of publishing and journalism (1949-1965), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the use of extreme propaganda techniques, and from 1977 to the present, a time to develop different narrative techniques to tell its story to foreign audiences. Sun points out that in the third period, policymakers differentiated between inward and outward propaganda (Sun, 2015). For years, China's media has functioned as the "throat and tongue of the Party." (Sun, 2015, p.404). Commercializing it through economic reforms and cooperation with international TV companies required the production of more sophisticated propaganda techniques aimed at influencing foreign public opinion.

When China opened up in the 1980s under Deng Xiaoping, the aim was to change China's foreign public image from a "poor country" to a developed country (Wang, 1998, p.2, cited by Sun, 2015, p. 406). With its economic rise and middle-class empowerment under Xi's rule, the media's job has become that of informing the world about the 'Chinese Dream.' In undertaking propaganda activities for foreign public opinion, Wang Chen pointed out that foreign audiences are not homogeneous (Sun, 2015). Emphasizing the subsequent need for diversity in the cultural content for these specific target audiences is also an important development. Therefore, we observe that

the CCP's ideological discourse is disseminated through means of cultural governance other than propaganda.

At this point, let us briefly explain how the party-state's ideological discourse is constructed in media texts. The media, which heavily influences the people's social life, has remained the party's primary method of guiding the masses and engaging the public since the PRC's founding (Cao & Lang, 2021, p. 3). According to Beijing, Chineseness represented and constructed by the media texts and thus operating as the ideological state apparatus, reinforces and justifies the party-state's domination. Song contends that it constitutes a form of loyalty to the nation-state, knowledge of "traditional" Chinese culture, and transformation of Confucian moral codes (Song, 2022, p.8).

Using the entertainment industry for propaganda and education is one of the CCP's main strategies. Celebrities influence youth's lifestyles, consumption habits, and cultural values. The CCP makes sure that this influence is in line with its ideology and reaches out to the public through media content (Xu & Yang, 2021, pp.202-203). In this context, we can consider television dramas as discursive tools that Xi envisions for China's future.

In his study of popular CDrama (dianshiju), Florian Schneider (2012, p.17) finds that melodramas, idol dramas, historical costume dramas, nostalgic family dramas, family comedies, crime dramas, youth dramas, and the wuxia genre (historical dramas involving martial arts) contain conservative and didactic messages in line with the CCP's teachings. He argues that the party's discourses of cultural governance are fundamental to all narratives, regardless of genre. It has always used television broadcasting and its content as the ideological apparatus of the party-state, whether centralized, regional, or local (Song, 2022, pp. 21-24). In this context, television drama series (dianshilianxuju), the most watched genre in China, produce both a CCP-loyal public and consumers favorable to the market economy's growth. With the transition to a Chinese-style socialist market economy, the trend towards commercialization and privatization was first seen in television broadcasting. The transition to satellite broadcasting, cable TV broadcasting, and, finally, catalog broadcasting via OTTs (over-the-top) increased the need for television drama series.

The production of television content in China operates through two different production mechanisms: party-state production companies (state-owned production companies) and private companies (non-governmental production companies)

(Schneider, 2012, p.108), which need a production permit from the government. Dramas are important in forming traditional television's broadcast streaming and viewing practices across platforms in the local market. For this reason, production companies and television channels pay special attention to drama series production. Both infrastructure and service platforms, such as Alibaba, Tencent, and Baidu, have entered the media industry as investors and producers, described as a "game changer for Chinese television" (Song, 2022, p. 27).

Since Xi came to power in 2012, China's growing authoritarianism has been reflected as increased state control over the mass media and, thus, the entertainment industry (Xu & Yang, 2021, p.204). Media formats and narratives are known to change with digitalization. Online platforms have become the center of content production and consumption. The change in the platforms on which audiences consume content and content formats has changed celebrity culture in China. This change has enabled the CCP to increase its control over these platforms and introduce new regulations (Xu & Yang, 2021, p.209).

For Jian Xu and Ling Yang (2021, p.213), manipulating public opinion through celebrities in today's globalized environment constitutes an important pillar of the party's cultural governance policy, one that allows it to legitimize its political activities and maintain its hegemony. Popular movie artists and singers even produce counter-contents (ruhua) to Western contents (e.g., movies, TV series, songs, advertisements, and social campaigns) that degrade China. Geng Song (2022, p. 3), who works on producing gendered Chinese nationalism through television broadcasting in China, says that Chinese television has a new symbol and is a carrier of China's soft power in this era.

Under Xi's rule, patriotism is seen as a fundamental and eternal component of "core socialist values," (2022, p.7) and thus what Yingjie Guo calls "cultural nationalism" (2004, as cited in Song, 2022, p.7) is promoted by China's media and creative industries to be expressed as a core element. Moreover, Xi also openly promotes 'good Chinese narratives.' In his speech at a recent conference on propaganda, he stressed the importance of communication and propaganda activities in harmonizing the teachings of traditional Chinese culture with modern values. He also noted that traditional Chinese culture, one of the pillars of modern China, has the potential to produce solutions to both internal and external problems (Xi, 22 August 2018, cited by Song, 2022, p.178).

The “14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development,” prepared by the General Offices of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council in August 2022, states that under Xi’s rule, “The core socialist values and China’s excellent traditional culture have been widely promoted” (p.1), and to achieve “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation... culture is an important source of strength.” (p.2) There, the Plan emphasizes the following: “...culture is an important soft power; we must strengthen strategic determination, tell the Chinese story well, and provide lasting and profound spiritual motivation for promoting the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind” (p.2). The Plan underlines the promotion of new themes for media production combined with major national strategic themes, such as patriotism and the youth’s nationalist rejuvenation (p.7). In addition, it stresses the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture (p.8).

As seen in the Plan, Xi’s mission and emphasis on good Chinese narratives is in place. Therefore, TV dramas have played an important role in cultural governance, and their narratives mediate between the state and the individual in favor of the party’s ideology (Song, 2022, p.183). According to the producers Schneider interviewed during his fieldwork, “good” and “healthy” television dramas have three qualities: ideological quality (*sixiangxing*), artistic quality (*yishuxing*), and viewing quality (*guangshangxing*) (2012, p.129). As one can see, harmony with the party-state’s teachings comes first. The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) is a direct agent that provides the infrastructural regulation and general framework for media production and broadcasting (Schneider, 2012, p.157). This institution aligns with the CCP’s propaganda departments and the Ministry of Education (2012, p.163).

SARFT was recently renamed the National Radio and Television Administration. However, the party’s leadership has not changed (Song, 2022, p.194) and cultural governance operates subtly (Schneider, 2012). In this context, the three qualities listed above have developed in Chinese dramas in recent years, and especially the development of artistic quality has attracted the attention of transnational audiences to CDramas. In addition to the rise in artistic quality, the inclusion of idols (i.e. Wang Yibo, Lee Hong Yi, Dilruba Dilmurat, Xiao Zhan, Yang Yang, Zhao Lusi) in leading roles increases the interest of both domestic and transnational audiences in CDramas.

It is worth noting the ideological quality common to all the dramas. The adoption of Chinese values, dedication to the country’s rise, pride in its deep-rooted civilization and culture, and Confucian ethical principles (e.g., respect for elders and family harmony)

are emphasized in the dramas' narrative dialogues and visual images, whether they are costume historical dramas, career dramas, or romances set in the metropolis. Given that these images and narratives operate in conjunction with all other discursive practices produced in everyday life, an imagined China is being produced for the Chinese. From the rhetoric of the CCP and Xi on billboards in rural and metropolitan cities, from party slogans on skyscraper lighting to social media applications, ideological teaching is everywhere. For example, the globally renowned South Korean SBS series *Descendants of the Sun* (2016) is about the love and hardships of two soldiers on a peace mission abroad. The Ministry of Public Security supported the serial's remake and renamed it *You Are My Hero* (2021). This remake is designed to meet the CCP's ideological requirements and the market's as well (Yu Xian Tan, 2024, p.207).

This drama disseminated militarized masculinity; a similar trend is evident in Chinese cinema. *Ace Troops* (2021) is a drama about the Chinese army's modernization through two male and one female soldier. The narrative concludes with a display of China's military capabilities: a successful operation to neutralize pirates disrupting trade routes in the South Indian Sea, culminating in a grand military parade in Beijing. At the end of the series, Xi's speech sets the tone for the military parade. The series produces the discourse of a strong army and a strong state. Blockbusters such as *Operation Red Sea* (2018), *Wolf Warrior I* (2015) and *Wolf Warrior II* (2017), *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021), and *The Battle at Lake Changjin II* (2022) have similar discursive practices. Such productions serve the strong state discourse of the Chinese state by aiming to strengthen masculinity against the images of androgynous masculinity propagated by the Korean Wave (Binark & Karataş-Özaydın, 2020).

The 'sissyphobia' (hatred of effeminate men) produced by the CCP and the Chinese media is a product of this policy. The production of content on social media and in the news that emphasizes masculinity against effeminate or androgynous-looking stars is the result of this hatred, the result of the conflation of masculinity with Chinese nationalism and militarism. In the romances, Chinese culture, China made-productions, and the superiority of Chinese technology dominate the narratives. For instance, in the series *Rising With The Wind* (2023), the first sneakers produced in China and that factory's history are narrated with an emphasis on the China-made production's value and its role in the history of Chinese industrialization. *Our Interpreter* (2024) tells the story of a romantic relationship between a male programmer and a female translator who develop artificial intelligence (AI) in different languages, emphasizing the superiority

of Chinese technology and AI applications developed in China for the global market. The narrative states that Chinese technology no longer imitates the world, but is a pioneer. If we talk about a Chinese Wave like the Korean Wave in the consumption of global transnational media content, it should be noted that the former's content includes the roles of femininity and masculinity imagined by the party-state and the images of a strong and omnipotent China that the 'Chinese Dream' seeks to construct. Are these contents liked by the transnational audience? This question will determine whether the party's cultural governance of foreign publics succeeds. With this question in mind, we will consider the discursive analysis of the drama *GenZ* (2023) and how the transnational audience discusses these discourses.

Aim and methodology

In this section of the article, after explaining the aim and methodology of the study, the narrative and characters of the series will be introduced.

Aim

This article aims to identify the discursive practices of the CCP's cultural governance through the *GenZ* (2023) drama and to examine how transnational audiences perceive it, thereby revealing the possibility of a 'Chinese Wave' through CDramas. To achieve this, the concept of cultural governance and how it functions through the media will be presented first. The drama's themes will then be revealed via thematic discourse analysis, and the relationship between the discourse and the drama's reception will be discussed by analyzing the audience's reviews using the netnographic research technique.

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1) Are the series' discursive components coordinated with Beijing's cultural policy and Xi's 'Chinese Dream?'

RQ2) How do audiences on global streaming platforms interpret the 'Chinese Dream' and 'rejuvenation' discourses that are subtly embedded in *GenZ*, and do transnational audiences develop an interest and curiosity towards China?

RQ3) Can this interest and curiosity be understood as the potential of CDramas to create a 'China Wave'?

Methodology and discursive practices in *GenZ*

The *GenZ* (后浪) (Houlang) series, a 40-episode narrative co-produced by Dragon TV, JSTV, and *Youku*, was directed by Han Xio Xun and aired every weekday between May 14 and June 5, 2023, on *Youku*, the pioneer of online streaming platforms in China (Keane & Su, 2018, p.95). This study traced the CCP's cultural governance policies in Chinese drama techniques using two different research approaches: Analyzing the drama's discursive components and then examining its reception by a transnational audience through netnography. Firstly, the study employs thematic discourse analysis to the 40 episodes to trace the influence of the CCP's cultural governance policies and extracted themes. Then the study utilizes the netnography technique to analyze the transnational audience's reviews to uncover whether the themes explored in the series correspond with the themes emerging from the audience reviews. At the end, the differences and similarities between these two analyses were discussed.

Through thematic discourse analysis, which constitutes the study's first stage, the study traced the extent to which the issues inherent in the CCP's governance policies are reflected in the *GenZ* series and revealed the narratives that overlap with them. Discourse analysis enables social reality to be constructed through language, as well as the power and ideological narratives embedded in language, to become visible. Critical discourse analysis and ideology can be defined as intertwined concepts that shape social roles, construct and maintain power relations, and maintain or transform the status quo (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Dani Singer and Myra S. Hunter (1999) use thematic discourse analysis to identify common themes and inconsistencies within the texts being analyzed. According to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, this type of analysis is grounded in post-structuralism and focuses on uncovering recurring patterns of meaning within a narrative, keeping in mind the notion that meaning is not static and can be reshaped through language (2014, p. 1948).

Through netnographic analysis of audience reviews, which constitutes the study's second stage, researchers analyzed how the narratives in the *GenZ* series, those that are compatible with the CCP's governance policies, resonate with transnational audiences. The netnography method, developed by Robert V. Kozinets in 1995, is a qualitative analysis

method that can be briefly defined as the adaptation of the ethnographic method to the online environment. Grounded in traditional ethnographic approaches, netnography involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data within the online environment (Kozinets, 2015, p.1). Academic interest in netnography is steadily increasing, and the method is becoming a subject of research and publications in a wide range of disciplines, from geography and sociology to nursing and education (Kozinets, 2015, p.2). By adapting traditional ethnography to the online environment, netnography enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of communities, communication patterns, and cultural practices by examining digital data. Positioned between big data analysis and discourse analysis, it provides a framework for understanding human interactions in online environments, drawing from a diverse range of data, including text, visuals, and audio recordings (Kozinets, 2015, pp.3-5). Thus this method, which is based on observation in the online environment, seeks to understand the cultural worlds in which audiences are involved or from which they benefit. In the netnographic method, the collected data is interpreted by the researcher's process of thematization.

According to Keane (2019, p .245), *YouTube* is the leading platform to disseminate Chinese content outside of China. Therefore, Audience reviews of the *GenZ* found on it are analyzed by netnographic research technique in light of the research questions mentioned above. The first episode of *GenZ* was broadcast on YouHug Media's^[4] *YouTube* channel on May 14, 2023 and the last one on June 5, 2023. Audience reviews were limited to the date range of May 14, 2023 - July 1, 2023, taking into account the number of episodes and the size of the data. From May 14, all audience reviews of all episodes were manually recorded until July 1. As of the date, 9.630 audience comments were recorded manually (see Table 1). Reviews are mainly in English, but others are in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Indonesian, French, Arabic, Malay, Hindi, Russian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Turkish. Of these reviews, 4.893 can be classified as English, 923 as Chinese, and 3.814 as other languages. A total of 5.816 reviews were included in the analysis (Appendix 1).

In this study, English and Chinese reviews were included in the sample, taking into account the language competencies of both authors other than Turkish. Reviews consisting of emojis or gifs expressing appreciation and no opinions about the content were excluded from the sample. Fabrication technique was used to convey examples of audience reviews related to the themes. According to Annette Markham (2011), "For researchers working within interpretive paradigms, fabrication is an apt and ethical description for a process of interpretation," for it allows researchers to anonymize the reviewer's content.

Table 1: Review numbers per episode (14 May-1 July 2023).

	Review number		Review number		Review number		Review number
Episode 1	574	Episode 11	348	Episode 21	204	Episode 31	169
Episode 2	285	Episode 12	188	Episode 22	193	Episode 32	277
Episode 3	167	Episode 13	178	Episode 23	206	Episode 33	306
Episode 4	236	Episode 14	240	Episode 24	239	Episode 34	135
Episode 5	205	Episode 15	196	Episode 25	211	Episode 35	257
Episode 6	218	Episode 16	436	Episode 26	202	Episode 36	297
Episode 7	151	Episode 17	218	Episode 27	239	Episode 37	203
Episode 8	210	Episode 18	146	Episode 28	350	Episode 38	148
Episode 9	150	Episode 19	133	Episode 29	163	Episode 39	144
Episode 10	380	Episode 20	194	Episode 30	196	Episode 40	634

What does *GenZ* say?

The story of *GenZ*, told through three generations living under the same roof, is built on traditional Chinese medical practices and relationships within the family and between the young people. The story progresses mainly through Professor Ren Xin Zheng, who is dedicated to learning Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), and Sun Tou Tou, who grew up in an orphanage and is considered the heir to TCM. Professor Ren Xin Zheng opens a classroom to teach this knowledge through the master-apprentice relationship (viz., the father-child hierarchy). Researchers follow the students' learning journey over 40 episodes, including that of Sun Tou Tou and the professor's son Ren Tian Zhen. The aim is to train new generations to carry the wisdom of TCM forward. The translation of the Chinese title to English, 'Rising Tides,' is meaningful in this respect. As explained above, Xi's mission for China's youth is to carry the flag to achieve China's goals under the 'Chinese Dream' are 'rejuvenation' and 'modernization.'

"Realize Youthful Dreams" is the title of Xi's 2013 speech on the anniversary of the May 4th^[2] movement, in which he assigns an important role to youth as part of the "Chinese Dream" (Gullotta & Lin, 2022, p.4): "Looking ahead, we can see that our younger generation has a promising future and will accomplish much. It is a law of history that the waves of the Yangtze River from behind drive on those ahead. It is the responsibility of young people to surpass their elders" (2013, para.7). After this, Xi has also expressed that young people should have more nationalist attitudes and behaviors. For him, the 'nationalist' youth who will realize the 'Chinese Dream' will not only embrace socialism, but also unite China's past, its culture and traditions. Xi's 'China Dream' promises to give China a status and power similar to that of the Middle Kingdom.^[3] This is precisely where

cultural governance serves as a tool for the country to reintegrate its historical heritage, including Confucian values, into contemporary society. From the very beginning, the drama 'Rising Tides' emphasizes the responsibility of young people to transcend the older generations and their role in moving society forward.

In *GenZ*, two generations of the Ren family practice TCM. Tian Zhen, the only male descendant, is expected to practice this cultural heritage. However, he does not want to embrace the tradition, clashes with his father, and wastes his time practicing extreme sports. However, over time his on-and-off relationship with Tou Tou turns into a romantic relationship and throughout the narrative Tian Zhen becomes the model Chinese youth. His relationship with Tou Tou makes him realize the importance of cultural heritage, family, and obedience to one's father.

Tables 2 and 3 below identify Ren Xin Zheng's family members and those who attended his TCM class. An examination of character portrayals, based on gender, education, profession, and general features, reveals the narrative's ideological influence on both Chinese youth and international audiences. The main and secondary young characters transform throughout the narrative and embrace the CCP's mission given to Chinese youth. Therefore, it is important to recognize the characters in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: *GenZ* main characters

Name	Gender	Education	Profession	General features
Ren Xin Zheng	Male	Faculty of Medicine	Prof. and Master of TCM Heritage Class	He aims to raise generations that will keep the TCM heritage alive. A determined, yet stubborn, character.
Sun Tou Tou	Female	Faculty of Medicine	Motorcycle Courier-Student at TCM Heritage Class	An orphan, Ren Xin Zheng announced her as a TCM successor. She is brave, overhasty, talkative, headstrong, and kind hearted.
Ren Tian Zhen	Male	Faculty of Medicine	Student at TCM Heritage Class	Xin Zheng's son, a rebellious young man, doesn't want to continue his family's tradition. He also doesn't get along with his father.
Yang Xiao Hong / Rebecca	Female	Faculty of Law	Lawyer-Student at TCM Heritage Class	Former lawyer. After a bad experience while working as a lawyer, she begins to question the meaning of life. With TCM, she aims to open a new chapter in her life.
Song Ling Lan	Female	Faculty of Medicine	Doctor-Teacher TCM Heritage Class	Xin Zheng's wife, a TCM practitioner, symbolizes the position of women in the traditional and modern Chinese family structure. She supports her husband despite his mistakes.

Table 3: Supporting characters of *GenZ*

Name	Gender	Education	Profession	General features
Zhao Li Quan	Male	Faculty of Medicine	Student at TCM Class	His family lives in a rural area and expects him to save them from poverty. He graduates from school but can't find a job. He joins the TCM class. He makes wrong decisions because of his family's demands.
Zhang Ji Ru	Female	—	Doctor	Ren Xinzheng's mother-in-law. She makes sensible decisions. Supporter of her daughter.
Song Yi Ren	Male	—	TCM practitioner	Ren Xinzheng's father-in-law. Also a master of TCM. Ren Xin, Zheng's main supporter, has a good relationship with his grandson.

In this study, all episodes were watched in the original language (Chinese) with Chinese and English subtitles. The traces of the cultural governance policy produced for the youth under Xi's rule are found by conducting a thematic discourse analysis. In the case of *GenZ*, this type of analysis helps reveal how the party-state uses television dramas as a tool of cultural governance to achieve the 'Chinese Dream.' It reveals the embedding of three main themes: 'the production of Chineseness and Chinese nationalism; the meeting of traditional and modern and the importance of intergenerational communication; and the meeting of traditional and modern and the importance of family.' TCM is portrayed not only as a treatment that supports Western medicine, but also as the treatment to be used when Western medicine is helpless. It is constructed as a cultural heritage to be appropriated through intergenerational communication and knowledge transfer. *GenZ* explains its principles and implementation principles with references to Confucianism and teachings such as "goodness, good son, ceremony, loyalty, truthfulness, accuracy, knowledge, reliability, courage" (Konfüçyüs, 2021, pp.xxii-xxiv).

The series also covers the COVID-19 outbreak in the first months of 2020 in Wuhan and re-propagates the dominant narrative of how the Chinese people are united in such a major crisis. In the next part of the study, the three main discursive themes with examples will be discussed. Then, based on these themes, the transnational audience reviews will be analyzed.

Findings

In this part of the study, the themes that emerged from the thematic discourse analysis of the *GenZ* series are first explained with examples from the series. Then the themes that emerged from the netnographic analysis of the audience reviews of the *GenZ*

series are listed and explained with examples from the audience reviews. It is discussed whether the themes of the series overlap with the themes that emerged from the audience reviews.

Main discursive themes of *GenZ*

Three main themes are intertwined in the *GenZ* series. These are, as mentioned above, ‘the production of Chineseness and Chinese nationalism;’ ‘the meeting of traditional and modern and the importance of intergenerational communication;’ and ‘the meeting of traditional and modern and the importance of family.’

The production of Chineseness and Chinese nationalism

The series portrays moral, hopeful, socially harmonious, and nationalistic Chinese youth who practice TCM by combining Chinese history, traditional culture, and its core values with the values of contemporary Chinese society. Both this series and Zili Lin, Charity Lee, and Surinderpal Kaur’s study on Chinese reality TV shows that the contents of Chinese television are aligned with Xi’s “Chinese Dream” policy and that its entertainment products are filled with the party’s indoctrination cultural governance principles (2024, pp.1-21). Chinese researchers argue that China will be more successful if youth possess traditional Confucian virtues (p.8). In this respect, the advice given by TCM instructor Ren Xin Zheng, the main character, to those young people who have completed their training in the final episode is in line with Xi’s ‘Chinese Dream’ policy. In his discourse, Ren Xin Zheng emphasizes that the Chinese state has a responsibility to educate its younger citizens in the practice of TCM and to ensure its continued transmission to subsequent generations.

In *GenZ*, the plot and characters draw an example of a ‘masculine nationalism’ that supports the Chinese party-state’s current discourse. Similarly, in line with its ideology, women serve the national family (*guojia*) by reproducing the roles of loyal wife, mother, and child care provider. In the epidemic’s aftermath, Song Ling Lan, Ren Xin Zheng’s wife and a medical doctor, takes on the mission of keeping the family together and sacrifices for her husband and her country, despite having major problems with her husband. Lin, Lee, and Kaur’s research findings similarly highlight the same point: “In the socialist tradition, women are expected to embody the essence of the national tradition while actively engaging in the nation’s societal life or the ‘soul of tradition-

within-modernity' " (2024, p.12). When the pandemic strikes, Song Ling Lan gathers her husband's parents, her parents, and Sun Tou Tou, whom she learns is her husband's illegitimate daughter, under the same roof to protect them from the disease. She then travels to Wuhan to provide support to her husband.

In the series' last episode, we see Sun Tou Tou completing her TCM training. She represents the model Chinese young person who does not lose hope, remains moral, and works for her country by upholding traditional values. This episode also highlights Xi's emphasis on youth and Confucian doctrine, which views 'past, present, and future' as a unified whole, acknowledges traditional Chinese cultural history, and embraces Chinese national identity. Sun Tou Tou, now entitled to become a TCM practitioner and a member of the Ren family through her romantic relationship with its third generation, reflects on the gains she achieved from living with them and receiving TCM training as follows:

Sun Tou Tou: Confucius was heartbroken at Yan Hui's death. It's because he thought no one would inherit his legacy. But he had never seen Mencius before. But Mencius wanted to pass on his ideas. So, I was thinking about this. Is bloodline really that important for the Chinese? But I figured it out now because I saw you. Now that I saw you, I think it isn't important. I am not your biological child. But the effort you put into me is much more than your son. So, for me, bloodline isn't important. Who my biological parents are isn't important as well. No. Parents are important. Look. The reason why Chinese culture has such a long history and successors is actually not because of lineage. It's actually the cultural lineage. It's not the bloodline. It's actually the Confucian orthodoxy. In fact, the real inheritance should be the thought. It is a continuation of the spirit (Episode 40).

Confucianist morality and doctrine dominated the Chinese Empire's state administration, educational structure, and domestic relations for 2.500 years until the founding of the CCP. Especially with Mao's struggle against this doctrine, which produced the hierarchy of upper-lower, older-younger, male-female, and patriarchal social regime, the doctrine's decisive role in social life was weakened. However, with the transition to a Chinese-style socialism and a market economy, Confucianism has recently begun to be used as a tool of cultural diplomacy. This pragmatic appropriation aims to produce social harmony internally and arouse interest in Chinese civilization externally, pointing to the moral values and the unity of heart and mind that the West should learn from Chinese culture and civilization.

The importance of intergenerational communication

In *GenZ*, three generations of Chinese people live under one roof, and TCM plays a role in uniting them. With a 3.000-year history, TCM is a holistic healthcare system that encompasses the diagnosis, etiology, and treatment of diseases, with a particular emphasis on the interconnectedness of physical and psychological well-being. This medical system aims to treat the patient with natural healing resources in light of experience and knowledge gained over thousands of years. Its methods of disease detection, which proceed through the teaching of 'Yin Yang Wu Xing' (negative, positive, causes, and treatments of diseases) in treatment, are listed as 'looking examination, listening and smelling examination, asking examination, pulse taking and manual examination.' In addition to medicines obtained by processing "herbal, animal, mineral, chemical and biological substances" obtained from nature and mixing different substances in different proportions, massage and acupuncture are other treatment methods used in TCM (Tang & Yin, 2015, pp. 87-199).

We know that Beijing often uses TCM and Chinese food as a cultural heritage to create soft power, and TCM is given special attention in the 14th Plan. The Plan mentions "excellent traditional Chinese culture and revolutionary culture" as a medium of cultural governance and then stresses that TCM should be researched and developed (2022, p. 8). Martin Jacques explains its role as a soft power instrument as follows:

Every Chinese hospital has a department devoted to Chinese medicine, with doctors frequently qualified in both Western and Chinese medicine. When Western-style drugs are prescribed they are often combined with traditional Chinese treatments (which was my own experience in a Beijing hospital) [...] The contrast between Chinese and Western medicine eloquently sums up the difference between civilizational wisdom and scientific knowledge. Chinese medicine, rather like the world's cuisines, is a product of thousands of years of trial and error, of the everyday experience and resourcefulness of hundreds of millions of people and their interaction with their plant environment; Western medicine is a rigorous product of the scientific method and the invention and refining of chemicals (2009, p.701).

In the series, Ren Xin Zheng explains the difference between TCM and Western medicine and its importance for a healthy social order. From the very first episodes,

we do not see TCM as the opposite of Western medicine, but as a primary health service to prevent diseases before they occur. Balance, the body in equilibrium, is fundamental in TCM.

The CCP adapts some traditional cultural practices into discursive practices to suit its agenda: stressing the uniqueness of Chinese culture as a component of ideological doctrine. For example, the rule of virtue, the Socialist Harmonious Society, and the Mandate of Heaven (*Tianxia*), all discursive practices of the party, are incorporated into its agenda (Zeng, 2016, p.136). In 2001, President Jiang Zemin (1993-2003) officially declared that “rule by law” has been combined with “rule by virtue” as the CCP’s governing strategy (Zeng, 2016, p.136). A socialist harmonious society is defined by Jinghan Zeng (2016) as one under Heaven’s rule, with national unity and integrity, socially serene, and economically developed. The Mandate of Heaven is also embedded into the party’s propaganda. The discourse on it implies the national unity, social stability, and economic growth that the party must achieve (p. 139). The continuity of Chinese culture is seen as an asset for a socialist and harmonious society.

While the series teaches TCM, it also emphasizes that success in this field is achieved by complying with Confucianist values. The values emphasized in the series also align with Confucianism’s governing principles, listed by Nurcan Kalkır (2018, p.97), as “abiding by tradition, being virtuous and moral, being an exemplary son, behaving in a manner appropriate to one’s position, and honesty.” In *GenZ* we see all these principles put into practice in the relationship between father and son, husband and wife.

One of the diseases TCM treats in the series is COVID-19. In episode 37, we witness its rapid spread. We see Tian Zhen, son of TCM class instructor Ren Xin Zhen, respond to the outbreak in a small town and develop an appropriate prescription. Thus, the third generation has also become a TCM practitioner, embracing the role assigned to youth.

Ren Xin Zhen and his students went to Wuhan, closed due to the epidemic, for support. Where Western medicine falls short, they step in. In episode 38 Ren Xin Zhen tells his students that during the outbreak, a hospital patient he had treated with acupuncture told another doctor about its ensuing benefits. The other doctor asked Ren Xin Zhen for help in reducing their epidemic-related burden. In conclusion, *GenZ* demonstrates the utility of TCM in epidemics, underscoring the contribution of China’s

ancient civilization to the universal human heritage. TCM acts as a bridge connecting older and younger generations in China.

The meeting of traditional and modern and the importance of family

In East Asian societies, often unlike in the West, the individual's success within the group and organization to which he or she belongs is more important than his or her personal responsibility or success. The individual is part of an extended family, and the patriarchal structure remains dominant (Kang & Kim, 2012, p.132). This culture of 'familism' is also important in *GenZ*. In the family, the father assumes the role of authority. The family's place in modern or traditional society is still very important in China. Unlike Western societies, families take a stricter approach to their children's education, future, behavior, and responsibilities, and families want children to take responsibility for their parents (Jacques, 2009).

In today's context, digitalization and platforms provide dynamic means of communicating traditional Chinese culture, such as Confucianism, to diverse audiences from various cultural backgrounds. This approach warrants special attention from Chinese media professionals (Xiao & Hu, 2019, p.160). In *GenZ*, the second generation assumes responsibility for both their children and their parents. Additionally, women serve as the family's backbone in their roles as wives, mothers, and daughters. Song Ling Lan, Professor Ren Xin Zhen's wife, supports her husband both financially and morally. She offers to sell the family heirloom, its house, to pay off his debts; remains at home despite his infidelity, and does not abandon him during his illness caused by the pandemic virus. The role of women as wives is among the fundamental relationships that Confucius considers essential for maintaining societal harmony, or 'social harmony.' Even Sun Tou Tou, who has a strong and independent personality, adopts the role of a wife's caretaker and protector when she and the son of the Ren house become lovers.

Netnographic analysis: Interpretation of the *GenZ* series by transnational audiences

The *GenZ* series narrative embodies President Xi's socio-political imagination of Chinese youth through the character of Professor Ren. It is, therefore, a convenient contemporary CDrama to see how the party-state's cultural governance is produced. It should be noted that President Xi emphasized that "good Chinese narratives" revitalize the nation's cultural roots and serve the role of transmitting Chinese values to all humanity (Song,

2022, p.178). Thus, CDramas try to create a 'Chinese Wave' effect for transnational audiences.

The audience defines *GenZ* as a series with educational and informative content as well as entertaining. Its reviews reveal that the series' combination of different genres is an important factor in the audience's interest. In addition, the fact that actors admired by young people are also featured adds an idol drama feature. The actors and actresses are also famous in China. Zhao Lusi, aka Sun Tou Tou, one of the female leading characters, is very popular among the younger generation and has a huge national and transnational fan community. Audience reviews particularly praise Zhao Lusi and her acting. Also Luo Yizhou, aka Ren Tian Zhen, is among the rising male idols. Wu Gang, aka Ren Xinzhen, and Jiang Shan, aka Song Linglan, are veteran actors and actresses. In addition, this coexistence of young idols and veteran actors is an attractive aspect for the audience to watch regarding intergenerational communication and conflicts.

Audience reviews are categorized based on the thematic discourse analysis applied to the series. Its prominent themes can be listed as follows: 'TCM and its relationship with Chinese culture and values, family relations and the meeting of the traditional and the modern, intergenerational communication, and generational conflict.'

TCM and its relationship with Chinese culture and values

Audience reviews emphasize that the series' main theme is transmitting TCM, an important element of cultural heritage, to younger generations. Audience reviews perceiving TCM as a part of Chinese culture and tradition overlap with the Chinese identity, emphasized as one of the series' main discursive components. The reviews frequently emphasize its benefits and significance in promoting health and well-being. Not only is there a growing interest in TCM in Chinese reviews, but also in English reviews. In particular, including it in modern Chinese dramas, rather than just historical Chinese dramas, is encouraged. Chinese-language reviews suggest that political support for TCM will help it restore its lost value in society. These reviews align with the thematic discourse analysis, in which TCM is considered as part of the significant cultural heritage.

The reviews suggest that audiences are particularly interested in including TCM teachings in modern Chinese dramas rather than historical dramas. By melting the

traditional with the modern, the series provides information about traditional Chinese culture, enabling those unfamiliar with it to learn about it.

Praise for TCM is accompanied by praise for Chinese civilization. The reviews emphasize the history and depth of Chinese culture and civilization. For instance;

It's amazing to find traditional Chinese medicine in historical dramas as well as in modern Chinese dramas.

..It is the duty of the Chinese people to keep alive the values of Chinese civilization, such as virtue, truthfulness, justice, and benevolence.

Chinese medicine is the most important part and medium of Chinese culture.

In the reviews, such as the audience review "...Traditional Chinese Medicine, which now complements Western medicine, is an ancient practice," TCM is not seen as an alternative to Western medicine, but as a complement to it and a knowledge-enhancing practice.

Praise for TCM is accompanied by praise for Chinese civilization. Emphasis is placed on the history and depth of Chinese culture and civilization.

This drama beautifully illustrates the depth and importance of Chinese culture, encouraging its preservation for future generations. Exposure to diverse cultures fosters a deeper appreciation for China's rich heritage, which evokes immense pride and inspires unwavering belief in its enduring legacy.

From Episode 37 onwards, we see that a villager returning from Wuhan is caught in the epidemic; Ren Tian Zhen goes for help. Thus, the fight against the COVID-19 outbreak begins in the series. We witness the sacrifices of health workers and the use of TCM as a complement to Western medicine in treating patients. In the audience reviews, we see the sadness in remembering the global pandemic that caused millions of deaths. While some reviews still blame China, other reviews praise its unity and integrity. For example: 'Covid-19 is proof of the potential and what the Chinese people can achieve together. "Chinese medicine or Western medicine, it doesn't matter which one is the medium. Health workers who sacrifice themselves to save lives should be honored."

Family relations and the meeting of the traditional and the modern

The reviews draw attention to the traditional family structure; emphasize the humanitarian aspect in the dialogues among employees, spouses, and lovers; and praise the kindness and virtue of older people. But in the reviews, the traditional features of the father-son relationship (Ren Xin Zheng and his son) and the family relationship (Zhao Li Quan's family asking for money from their son) are evaluated as culture-specific. These relationships are defined as Asian-specific through a comparison of East-West values. Parents criticizing their children, pressuring and expecting too much from them, and discriminating between them are among the negative qualities specific to Asians.

...What Li Quan is going through is the reality of Asian culture. Although my parents don't directly push me to study, their frequent comparisons to others who appear more intelligent and well-mannered create significant pressure on me to excel.

Li Quan is clearly struggling under the weight of his parents' expectations and financial burdens. This precarious situation could lead to an emotional breakdown, highlighting a common challenge faced by many in Asian cultures.

The reviews also criticise the belittling of Eastern culture by Asians through the comparison of Eastern and Western values, as seen in this audience review: "This drama teaches us to embrace our own culture instead of thinking that the West is superior, which originated in the colonial period."

The series' depiction of TCM and family values as cherished parts of the cultural heritage resonate strongly with Chinese audiences. Transnational audiences become interested in Chinese society and China through TCM. However, the ideological emphasis on the father-son hierarchy and the youth's social responsibility neither resonates with them, nor does Xi's 'China Dream' discourse.

In Asian collectivist cultures, family obligations are paramount. Li Quan's actions, though seemingly harsh, reflect the immense pressure and cultural expectations he faces. The show effectively critiques the impact of such parental pressure.

These dramas often portray a common dynamic in many Asian families, particularly in China, highlighting the significant influence of familial expectations and cultural norms.

The father's biased treatment of his children, favoring his son while criticizing his daughter, exemplifies a pattern of demotivation prevalent in some Asian families.

The family has a special place and meaning in Xi's 'Chinese Dream.' Young people are expected to contribute to its realization by embracing family values. However, the audience criticizes parents who are oppressive, discriminate against their children, and expect them to find jobs and take care of themselves. Chinese critics even see that such families are positioned as too Asian compared to Western families. In this definition, the West represents modernity, while Asianness represents traditionalism in a negative sense. In addition, the definition of the ideal person in modern Chinese society with Confucian values, such as respect for family and parents, does not resonate with audience reviews.

Intergenerational communication and the conflict of generations

Another prominent theme is intergenerational communication and the conflict of generations. The fact that Sun Tou Tou, one of the main characters, does not respect her ancestors, behaves outrageously, and being a maverick is seen as a characteristic of *Generation Z* and is judged negatively.

Tou Tou's character comes across as unnecessarily irreverent. Her unwillingness to engage in the customary act of bowing to ancestors is jarring and out of place.

Tou Tou personifies the disregard for tradition often seen in *Generation Z*, reflecting a broader trend of rejecting established norms and customs.

However, scenes showing generational conflicts are sometimes praised in the reviews, which stress that younger generations will be more self-confident. These reviews echo Xi's vision of generational responsibility, suggesting that these youth are expected to build upon and surpass their ancestors' achievements. Such reviews remind us of the proverb about the Yangtze River's rising tides.

The show establishes Tou Tou's initial disregard for tradition to pave the way for her personal and spiritual evolution. Her immersion in TCM acts as a catalyst for this transformation, gradually shifting her perspective and fostering a deeper appreciation for her cultural heritage.

To sum up, this study observes that Chinese and transnational audiences discuss *GenZ* under different themes, and the narrative's potential to produce a 'Chinese Wave' in line with the goals of President Xi and the party-state is not sufficiently realized due to the limited sharing of cultural, social, and political experiences of different audiences. The dominant discourses, such as Chineseness and the nationalism attributed to Chinese youth, do not touch transnational audiences, who focus more on the idols, the love relationship between the main characters, and the generational conflict.

Discussion and conclusion

The *GenZ* series provides a convenient lens through which to examine the recent developments in youth politics as promoted by the CCP. This article employs the example of *GenZ* to examine the extent to which the reception of a drama by diasporic Chinese and transnational audiences aligns with Xi's 'Chinese Dream' and 'rejuvenation' objectives, as well as the party's cultural governance policy. To what extent do party-state policies on cultural governance and their associated implementation strategies benefit from the use of CDramas? The analysis of the discourse themes revealed that the discourses presented align with the rhetoric espoused by Xi and the CCP's cultural governance objectives. The question thus arises as to how the ideological messages embedded in the drama are received by the audience.

In terms of soft power, as Song points out, while the party-state makes efforts to create sympathy for China and the "Chinese Dream," the success and popularity of CDramas in East Asia has the chance to create a "China Wave" of its own (2022, p. 178). Beijing is investing in the opening of Confucius Institutes worldwide, sponsoring the translation of Chinese classics in the West (Song, 2022, p.178). The Belt and Road Initiative and BRICS members' co-operations are financially supported by China. However all these investments have a limited effect on creating the 'Chinese Wave,' compared to the easily accessed CDramas through streaming platforms. Reviews in Chinese language indicated that the Chinese diaspora did not demonstrate a sufficient level of interest in *GenZ*. Additionally, the majority of reviews are provided by non-Chinese individuals. This finding is significant in demonstrating the limitations of CDramas in generating a 'Chinese Wave' within the diaspora.

Transnational audiences can watch CDramas through both Chinese streaming apps and *YouTube*. Song notes that one successful outcome in the realm of cultural governance

is that foreign fans have started to learn Chinese thanks to *GenZ* (p.179), a finding confirmed by numerous reviews. This study also observes that the TV channels of *YouKu* and *WeTv* on *YouTube* broadcast CDramas with Turkish subtitles and that Turkish fans are eagerly waiting for new episodes.

Therefore, for China, as the most important actor in the Global South, to effectively reach a transnational audience with its cultural governance in contemporary narratives such as *GenZ*, it must first open up democratic issues for debate within its own domestic sphere. In addition to assigning responsibility for the future to the youth, social problems such as unemployment, fierce competition, inequality in income distribution, segregation between rural and urban settlements, excessive consumerism, gender inequality, age discrimination and psychological depression should also be covered in and by youth policies. The youth are idealized in *GenZ*. In reality, however, they are very concerned about the future (Jilin, n.d.). Against the “Rising Tides” discourse, movements such as “lying flat” (Gullotta & Lin, 2002, p. 5-8), which already exist among young people in China, need to be discussed in CDrama texts in a way that makes sense, apart from the need to tame young generations. But realistically confronting these concerns and negativity is a very difficult step, as doing so would question President Xi and the party’s hegemony.

For Chinese dramas to create a ‘Chinese Wave’ among transnational audiences, it is not sufficient to rely solely on the production’s artistic quality and the appeal of idol culture. It is first necessary to modify the nature of the Chinese government’s cultural governance policy. The potential of CDramas to create a ‘Chinese Wave’ can be enhanced by democratizing the cultural governance policy, and, of course, cultural policy, in an authoritarian regime like China. Thus, the ‘rejuvenation’ of the country produced in the narratives can find credibility.

The perception of China’s cultural governance by the transnational audience has demonstrated the limitations of the Chinese Wave in the case of this series. However, how would the audience interpret Chinese culture and Chineseness if a different narrative were taken into consideration in which the CCP’s cultural governance did not infiltrate the series’ narrative? Is there a potential for dramas or historical costume dramas to create a Chinese Wave, especially when President Xi’s cultural governance is not so crystallized? These deserve to be studied as new research questions.

ENDNOTES

1. The 'Chinese Dream' and 'national rejuvenation' are intrinsically linked concepts at the heart of China's contemporary political discourse. Introduced by Xi Jinping in 2012, these concepts represent the aspiration for China to regain its historical prominence and achieve 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. The "Chinese Dream" is the Chinese state and people reaching the highest level of civilization and living in prosperous harmony (Kırımlı, 2023).
2. Following Pankaj, "The May Fourth Movement – named for the protests of May 4, 1919. [...] Chinese students and intellectuals rallied to protest against the country's continued international subjugation – part of the Century of Humiliation – by the Western powers and, more specifically, Japan. It has been a public holiday since 1949 and remains an important symbol of nationalistic patriotism in the People's Republic of China, celebrated across China as Youth Day" (Pankaj, 2023, para. 1).
3. A brief explanation of the Middle Kingdom: Throughout the past 5.000 years of China's history, the country has been referred to by various names, but the most prominent one is Zhongguo, which translates to 'Middle Kingdom' or 'Central Kingdom'. Historically, the country was divided into several independent states until they were unified under the Qin dynasty [221-206 BC]. The term 'Middle Kingdom' was used during this period to refer to states in the central part of the region. [...] During the 19th and 20th centuries, use of the term shifted to refer to the country as a whole rather than individual states, in an attempt to show solidarity among China's population. Following the Chinese Civil War, the country's official name was changed to the People's Republic of China. However, the term 'Middle Kingdom' is still popularly used in China, particularly to highlight the country's significance to the world ("Which Country is the Middle Kingdom?", n.d., para. 3-4).
4. YouHug Media's YouTube address: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8E25Sz4q7C0>

Appendix 1: Number of viewers for each episode of *GenZ* on *YouTube* (12 November 2024)

	Number of audience		Number of audience		Number of audience		Number of audience
Episode 1	3.924.806	Episode 11	876.742	Episode 21	813.059	Episode 31	757.538
Episode 2	1.595.333	Episode 12	867.152	Episode 22	770.786	Episode 32	710.264
Episode 3	1.238.066	Episode 13	814.741	Episode 23	774.325	Episode 33	666.248
Episode 4	1.114.171	Episode 14	822.679	Episode 24	773.791	Episode 34	698.637
Episode 5	1.030.329	Episode 15	853.390	Episode 25	753.121	Episode 35	699.874
Episode 6	962.286	Episode 16	812.507	Episode 26	757.247	Episode 36	655.290
Episode 7	950.292	Episode 17	815.094	Episode 27	791.439	Episode 37	643.865
Episode 8	906.142	Episode 18	762.653	Episode 28	881.189	Episode 38	625.340
Episode 9	890.198	Episode 19	787.577	Episode 29	829.476	Episode 39	659.656
Episode 10	867.033	Episode 20	787.378	Episode 30	762.217	Episode 40	908.965

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