

**Thumbnail Image:**



Image not found or type unknown



# Public Diplomacy and Digital Emotions <sup>[1]</sup>

Emotion plays a central role in the rise of “cancel culture” in China, posing unique challenges for cultural diplomacy and notably affecting Korean celebrities and the broader Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*. The Chinese popular reaction to *Hallyu* exhibits distinct characteristics compared to other regional anti-Hallyu movements, demonstrating how digitally amplified emotional currents are increasingly shaping international tensions. In this context, public sentiment has in effect become a form of cultural sanction in its own right.

Beyond official censorship or ideological enforcement, understanding the dynamics of cancel culture, particularly who gets canceled and why, requires careful consideration of its emotional underpinnings. Chinese civic-led cancel campaigns are propelled by deeply resonant feelings, including wounded pride over perceived unequal treatment, moral outrage linked to nationalist sentiments, and performative expressions of heartbreak.

As China and South Korea cautiously attempt to mend cultural ties strained by past tensions, policymakers must reckon with an unpredictable new diplomatic actor: the emotionally mobilized fan. The collective fervor of digitally connected fan communities has effectively become a volatile factor in cultural exchanges, complicating conventional diplomatic efforts.

## **Desire for deference when respect isn't reciprocated**

In the golden era of *Hallyu*, spanning the 2000s and early 2010s, a significant international fan base coalesced around Korean popular culture. Within this burgeoning global fandom, early instances of emotional backlash against Korean celebrities by Chinese fans were often rooted in a perceived lack of reciprocal respect.

One prominent early manifestation of this sentiment occurred in 2009, when Korean singer-actress Jang Na-ra, who had even been invited to sing the theme song at the 2008 Beijing Olympic, provoked a public outcry by remarking that she would work in China “whenever she needed money.” This comment was perceived as demeaning and triggered widespread anger, effectively leading to her cancellation by Chinese fans. Jang’s subsequent apology did little to assuage the sense of affront, as many supporters resented the implication that they were regarded as mere cash cows.

This expectation of mutual respect has remained central in subsequent controversies. Chinese fans take great pride in their outsized contributions to idols’ success, whether through organized fundraising drives, online voting campaigns to boost popularity rankings, or mass merchandise purchases, and that pride, in turn, heightens their insistence on equitable treatment.

A telling example emerged in 2016, when BIGBANG's T.O.P. faced criticism after explicitly urging Chinese fans not to visit his private residence. This request was interpreted as a slight aimed solely at Chinese supporters, prompting pointed questions about whether Western fans would have received similar instructions.

---

## **"Cancel culture became a digital rite of passage, where nationalist credentials were authenticated through visible acts of renunciation."**

More recently, BLACKPINK's Jennie encountered backlash after a performance in Hong Kong that fans deemed lacklustre compared to her concerts in the United States and Europe. Such episodes reinforce a broader pattern: Chinese fans increasingly assert that they deserve the same level of respect and acknowledgment as any other fan community worldwide, reflecting a sense of wounded pride when their substantial contributions appear inadequately reciprocated.

### **Nationalist-moral obligation when pop culture becomes political**

Cancel culture in China frequently exhibits pronounced patriotic sentiments, shifting emotional engagement from the personal and communal fandom spheres into broader nationalistic expressions. This dynamic became notably evident in 2016, following South Korea's decision to deploy the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile defence system.

In response, Chinese fans swiftly withdrew their support from Korean celebrities, rallying around the viral hashtag #NoldolsBeforeNation#. Public declarations of "???" ("stopping being a fan") transformed personal fandom into collective performances of national allegiance. Chinese media interpreted these fan-led campaigns as emblematic of a broader cultural stance wherein citizens prioritise patriotic duty above their affinity for foreign entertainment icons.

Within this context, cancellation evolved into a moral-nationalist ritual. Fans felt compelled not only to renounce their idols but also to explicitly affirm loyalty to the nation. Abstention from these performative gestures risked public censure, accusations of moral failing, and social ostracism. This pattern recurred notably during controversies involving prominent Korean groups, such as BTS, Super Junior, whose actions were perceived as politically sensitive. Thus, cancel culture became a digital rite of passage, where nationalist credentials were authenticated through visible acts of renunciation.

Both anger and guilt operated as "feeling rules" within these digitally mediated cancel movements. Participants genuinely experienced these emotions, yet also recognized them as contextually prescribed and socially appropriate responses. Consequently, these digitally articulated emotional expressions were deeply embedded within a collective sense of moral righteousness, intimately tied to broader notions of national identity.

### **Sensual celebration when canceling becomes content**

More recently, cancel culture in China has expanded beyond reactive anger or nationalist

fervor to embrace performative and even aesthetically oriented forms of expression.

Younger generations, often less personally invested in geopolitical tensions, engage in cancel culture as a mode of self-expression designed to garner attention and affirm personal identity. Since 2020, a proliferation of smaller-scale cancel campaigns has emerged, often documented in short-form videos on social media platforms such as Douyin (China's TikTok), Tiktok itself, and Bilibili (China's Youtube equivalent). These productions, self-described as "immersive experiences of stopping being a fan," have captured significant viewership.

In this context, cancellation mirrors romantic or emotional breakups, becoming intense, dramatic, and publicly staged performances. Fans record emotionally charged videos involving the deliberate destruction of idols' merchandise such as concert tickets, posters, and albums, often set to evocative music and reflective narration. These visual narratives captivate millions of viewers, many of whom have no direct association with the specific fandom, attracted instead by the compelling aesthetics and emotive spectacle.

This phenomenon challenges the conventional assumption that a positive national image naturally aligns with increased consumption of cultural products. Instead, emotionally amplified negative reactions paradoxically boost engagement, albeit through distorted modes of consumption. This helps explain the apparent contradiction between highly visible anti-*Hallyu* movements and the enduringly strong levels of *Hallyu* engagement recorded in China's digital and physical fan communities, as captured by the *Hallyu Tracker*.

### **Towards emotionally literate cultural diplomacy**

These emotional dynamics transcend mere digital spectacle, carrying tangible implications for cultural diplomacy. As China and South Korea strive to restore cultural exchanges disrupted by informal restrictions, policymakers must now recognize emotionally mobilized fans as influential actors shaping diplomatic outcomes.

The enduring digital footprint left by cancel culture reshapes collective memory, affecting cross-cultural perceptions and embedding celebrities within broader geopolitical narratives. Consequently, entertainment industries are increasingly compelled to navigate fan-imposed cultural sanctions, reflecting an emotionally charged dimension of contemporary public diplomacy.

Central to this transformation is the evolution of fandom itself. Fans are no longer passive consumers but emotionally engaged publics, actively negotiating identity, belonging, and cultural values through digital expressions. This evolution raises a critical question for diplomatic practice: How can diplomacy effectively engage not only with governments but also with the complex emotional landscapes inhabited by these publics?

To address this challenge, diplomacy must cultivate emotional literacy, strategically engaging with the emotional forces that significantly shape public perceptions and international narratives. Diplomatic strategies, therefore, must become not only culturally informed but also emotionally intelligent.

---