



THE CULTURAL DIPLOMACY OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, competition between states is carried out not only through economic and military power but also through "soft power". This power is primarily exercised through culture, language, art, mass media, and education. From this perspective, the cultural diplomacy policy pursued by the Republic of Korea in recent decades has been attracting global attention. On the international stage, Korea has created a unique "soft power" sphere through its rich cultural heritage, contemporary pop culture (K-pop), cinema, TV dramas (K-drama), gastronomy, and dance arts.

The Korean government has made the promotion of the "Korean Wave" (Hallyu) phenomenon a crucial part of its state policy on a global scale. Through this phenomenon, South Korea is not only exporting its culture but also expanding its economic interests, international prestige, and geopolitical influence. As a result of this approach, the Republic of Korea is recognized as a successful example of the implementation of the "soft power" strategy on the global stage.

This article systematically analyzes the process of shaping Korean cultural diplomacy, its main instruments, government policies, the components of the Hallyu wave, and their impact on international relations.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, Korean Wave (Hallyu), K-pop, K-drama, Cultural Export, Global Influence, Geopolitical Diplomacy, Pop Culture, Korean Art.

Although South Korea is considered a newly emerging state in the classification of soft power, its growing cultural influence in the East Asian region demonstrates that it is becoming one of the most promising regional powers from a soft power perspective. Compared to countries such as the United States, China, and Japan, South Korea may not be as strong in terms of military or economic power, but it possesses a vibrant culture capable of producing significant soft power. This is largely due to the unique geographical location of the Korean Peninsula, situated between China in the west and Japan in the east, which has provided it with a distinct cultural foundation.

Historically, Korean culture has been deeply influenced by China and played a key role in transmitting Chinese culture to Japan. For over a thousand years, the people of these three countries have exchanged food, goods, and vital knowledge. This deeply rooted cultural heritage now provides opportunities to extend influence globally. Even without strong military or economic hard power, South Korea aspires to be a leading actor in international relations. As a country recognized as a "middle power," South Korea considers achieving fundamental objectives through its cultural assets a strategic priority.

Korean popular culture forms the core of its soft power. From this perspective, the Korean Wave — known as Hallyu — is seen by the government as a political instrument used to promote economic, cultural, and national interests, and it is supported

under any circumstances. In order to gain economic benefits and develop the cultural sector, the government supports chaebol conglomerates, providing them with the opportunity to become globally competitive. In the 1990s, Seoul began to utilize the cultural industry as a means to stimulate economic growth and implemented an active cultural policy. A well-known episode illustrates this shift: the Presidential Advisory Council on Science and Technology delivered a presentation to President Kim Young-sam on the potential of exporting cultural products. In that presentation, the council emphasized that the Hollywood film Jurassic Park generated as much revenue as the export of 1.5 million Hyundai cars. This comparison highlighted the immense economic potential of the cultural industry and played a key role in shaping South Korea's long-term strategy to promote cultural exports.[1] Following this, South Korean governments began introducing various policies to support the cultural industry, focusing primarily on export-oriented economic strategies. For example, the administration of Kim Dae-jung, which began in 1998, announced a plan to promote and develop the Hallyu (Korean Wave) industry in order to enhance the value of South Korea's cultural sector. During this period, the Kim administration increased the cultural industry budget from 14 million USD in 1998 to 84 million USD in 2001. Additionally, the administration of Roh Moo-hyun expanded subsidies for cultural startups, further encouraging innovation and global competitiveness in the creative sector.[2] The existing governments in South Korea invested in initiatives to improve the



environment for the cultural industry and passed a series of laws to protect local cultural markets. For instance, in 1999, the "Framework Act on the Promotion of the Cultural Industry" was enacted, followed by the establishment of the Culture and Content Agency in 2001, and the "Law for the Development of the Online Digital Content Industry" in 2002. Additionally, the "Film Promotion Act" passed in 1995 aimed to protect South Korea's national film industry by ensuring screen quotas, which mandated a certain number of domestic films to be shown in cinemas, effectively safeguarding the local film sector. These efforts were crucial in shaping South Korea's cultural landscape and in bolstering its cultural exports globally.[3]

However, during the Lee Myung-bak administration, cultural policy shifted from an economy-focused strategy to one centered around national branding and competitiveness. Specifically, during Lee's tenure, the "**Global Korea**" concept was introduced. This concept aimed to shape South Korea's national identity as "forward-looking, multicultural, and visionary," incorporating economic, political, ideological, and cultural initiatives. The focus was not only on promoting South Korea's cultural exports but also on enhancing its global image and positioning as a dynamic and modern nation on the world stage.[4] Over the past decade, Korean pop culture has gained significant popularity among young people, particularly in many East Asian countries such as Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mongolia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the People's Republic of China. Since the 1997 economic crisis, the government has invested millions of dollars in developing the pop culture sector, primarily focusing on television dramas, music groups, and video games.

The **Korean Wave** (or *Hallyu*) is a term used since the 2000s to describe the global rise in popularity of South Korean culture. Thanks to the Korean Wave, South Korea achieved total revenue of \$500 million in 2002 and \$1 billion in 2005, becoming the leading exporter of music, film, and television programs to Asian countries.[5]

This transnational phenomenon has had numerous positive effects, such as attracting many customers to Korean restaurants and increasing the consumption of Korean products. However, the role of the Korean language is even more significant in the widespread popularity of Korean culture among foreign audiences. It can be argued that when the language of a country becomes widely popular among other nations, the culture of that country is perceived as more attractive, as language is a crucial and inseparable part of a nation's culture. In this regard, South Korea has taken successful steps. The Korean Wave has been the main driving force in expanding the country's appeal by increasing the popularity of the Korean language.

For example, Korean-language educational institutions have increased in Japan, and the demand for learning Korean has sharply risen in Singapore. In many countries around the world, Korean cultural centers and Sejong Institutes, dedicated to promoting the Korean language and culture, have been

established and are actively operating. Although Korean is not a global language, education in Korean is offered at many universities and schools around the world. The King Sejong Institutes, established to teach the Korean language and culture, now number more than 90 globally.[6]

This Korean pop culture surge has become a symbol of growth, particularly having a significant impact on foreign audiences. One of the most successful and initial projects of the Korean Wave, Winter Sonata, which reflects pure love, gained immense popularity, especially among Asian countries, particularly the Japanese. The most beautiful scenes from the drama were filmed on Nami Island, located 60 kilometers from Seoul. In 2001, before the drama aired, the island received 270,000 tourists annually, but by 2002, this number rose to 650,000. Previously, the Japanese, who saw South Korea as geographically close but psychologically distant, began to closely watch Winter Sonata and started to learn about their customs and daily life.[7] NHK, the Japanese broadcasting company, made a profit of over 3.5 million dollars from the sale of products related to the series. Japanese girls became ardent fans of the actor who portrayed the character Jun Sang. At that time, the Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi remarked, "In Japan, Bae Yong-joon is more famous than I am." During Bae Yong-joon's visit to Japan, nearly 3,000 fans gathered at the airport to welcome him. To maintain order, 350 police officers were mobilized, but due to the crowding, several people were taken to the hospital.[8] From this perspective, the success of Korean dramas led to the emergence of an industry known as "K-Drama." The impact of this sector was so significant that it spread to other industries as well. For example, the chicken and beer consumed by the lead actor of the drama My Love From the Star quickly led to the opening of Korean restaurants in many parts of Southeast Asia. The government is allocating a large amount of funds from the national budget to make Korean cuisine one of the top five cuisines in the world, while simultaneously supporting the food sector. To this end, the Korea Food Foundation and the Committee for the Development of Korean Cuisine were established. English lyrics, well-composed songs, easily imitable choreography, and mixed rhythms have been attracting more and more crowds every day. Super Junior, BTS, and Girls' Generation are some of the popular Korean music groups. In fact, the most influential name in introducing K-pop to the world was PSY, famous for his song and music video Gangnam Style. According to a 2012 survey by the Monocle media network, PSY brought more popularity to South Korea's image than LG plasma televisions or Hyundai cars.[9] Today, South Korea's BTS group significantly contributes to South Korea's economy, holding concerts in many countries around the world, especially in the United States and Europe. They participate in television shows, give speeches on large platforms, and even collaborate with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Furthermore, South Korean artists are actively working to attract artists from various Asian countries to the Korean music industry. Singers from the United States, Canada, China, and Thailand are trained in South



Korea and sent to other countries as representatives of K-pop. Television shows are also implementing similar strategies.

The Squid Game series played a crucial role in strengthening South Korea's soft power on a global scale. Released on Netflix in 2021, the show quickly became a global sensation, attracting attention with its unique storyline, acting performances, and its focus on social inequalities within society. Millions of people watched the show, and it became the most-watched series on Netflix in several countries. The film showcased South Korea's contemporary culture, traditions, and social issues. As a result, global interest in Korean culture and art grew. The series highlighted themes such as the socio-economic disparities within Korean society, and the test of human morals and values, offering the international audience a new perspective on these issues.[10] The power of soft power is evident in how Squid Game has enhanced Korea's cultural influence, further solidifying South Korea's position in the global film and television industry. The series increased demand for Korean cultural products, strengthened interest in learning the Korean language, and boosted global curiosity about Korean music and fashion. As a result, South Korea has successfully expanded its soft power, which, in turn, contributes to economic gains and an increase in international prestige.

As a form of cultural exchange, Hallyu (the Korean Wave) has had a significant impact not only in international relations but also in trade and the private sector. Hallyu is a joint project between state and non-state actors that, alongside generating economic profit abroad, also promotes Korean national interests. Hallyu projects are consistently included in the South Korean government's agenda, although the handling of cultural policy may vary depending on the administration. One of the most important positive effects created by the Korean Wave is the change or improvement of other countries' perceptions of South Korea. The Korean Wave has led to the acceptance of Korean culture by foreigners, integrating it into their daily lives. South Korea's cuisine, music, social traditions, fashion, and beauty standards have contributed to the development of a more positive image of the country. The spread of the country's cultural values is also one of the key elements of South Korea's economic development.[11]

Additionally, the Korean Wave is promoted worldwide through various media outlets such as Yonhap News Agency, Arirang TV, and the Korea Broadcasting System (KBS). Yonhap is a prominent news agency with at least 49 offices worldwide. Arirang broadcasts essential news, cultural programs, and promotes contemporary Korean culture, offering its programs through television, mobile applications, and online platforms. Arirang focuses primarily on spreading the Korean Wave globally. South Korean television channels are supported by major *chaebols* (conglomerates) such as Samsung, LG, Kia Motors, and Daewoo, which help amplify the reach and impact of the Korean Wave across the world.[12]

Moreover, due to the growing interest in the Korean Wave, South Korea has become one of the most popular tourist destinations in the region. People visit South Korea to experience traditional houses, monuments, and also to visit filming locations from cities, movies, and dramas that they have seen through the internet or television. Additionally, the Korean Wave has contributed to shaping positive perceptions of Koreans abroad and has created a positive image of Koreans in foreign countries, especially for those planning to travel abroad. This has helped prevent them from encountering various discriminatory situations. In countries where the Korean Wave is popular, the public appearances of Korean stars have become symbolic of Korea itself. As a result, Korean Wave stars have become crucial "soft resources" for Korea, and they are expected to play more active yet subtle political roles that represent Korea's regional and universal interests.[13]

As a result of the Korean Wave, the country's economic growth rate has accelerated. Companies like Samsung and LG have internationally sponsored Hallyu activities, encouraging fans of the Korean Wave across many regions of the world to purchase their products. With the development of the Hallyu industry, growth has been observed in other sectors of the economy, including food exports, cosmetics, and plastic surgery.

In South Korea, the perception of beauty, fashion, and wealth, particularly due to the influence of Western media, especially Hollywood, and Western tourists visiting South Korea, has significantly changed. However, the country is striving to create its own distinct image under Western dominance and to attract international power to its sphere of influence. This goal has played a significant role in the development of the beauty industry today, commonly known as K-Beauty. Another sector that has seen growth is the gaming market. Particularly since the 2000s, South Korea has become a hub for online games and Olympic games, with the total value of game exports steadily rising. By 2013, game exports accounted for 6.3% of the international market share, generating \$2.6 billion in revenue for the country.[14] Hattoki Olimpiya stadioni ham mavjud bo'lib, u yerda hozirda onlayn sport o'yinlari o'tkaziladi.

In conclusion, the K-pop industry is producing South Korea's pop culture diplomats, namely the superstars who are influential globally. These mega-stars have become unofficial carriers of South Korea's soft power diplomacy, making a significant impact on the international community due to their scale of popularity. The Hallyu wave, which began in China and Japan, is now sweeping the global community. Along with benefiting the country's economy, it has also played a crucial role in the development of tourism and the global spread of cosmetics and other products.

South Korea is using this soft power tool to create a unique global image, which in turn helps strengthen diplomatic exchanges and ensure peace on the Korean Peninsula. The global interest in Korean culture, movies, language, and history is also being



leveraged by the South Korean government to promote the country and further its national interests. K-pop idols have a strong influence on youth relationships, both positively and negatively. This influence is reflected in the changing mental states of young people, where some compare unattainable beauty standards to real life, leading to feelings of depression. In a short period of time, the K-pop industry has become an integral part of South Korea's official foreign policy, and this process continues to evolve.

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