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The Conception of Soft Power in Korean's Popular Culture

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Abstract

The Republic of Korea plays one of the leading roles in the global economy and is a dynamically developing country. As one of the key elements of South Korea's success, many researchers in their works note the so-called concept of "soft power". The Republic of Korea has great resources of "soft power" and actively uses them. The concept of "soft power" considered in this paper was first proposed by J. Nayem and now this concept has firmly entered the lexicon of world science. The Republic of Korea turned to the concept of "soft power" about twenty years ago. The strategy of the modern concept of "soft power" of the Republic of Korea is based on the dissemination of traditional cultural values and pop culture. South Korea places a great emphasis on the "soft power" of culture, which helped it shape a positive image and create its South Korean attractive brand on the world stage. In this paper, the "soft power" of the culture of South Korea is considered using the example of cybersports and the phenomenon of "Korean wave" or "hullu" Korean pop culture plays a vital role in the global economy of Korea and is dynamically leading in the music industry around the world. The key element in this economy growth is often cited as 'soft power' by many researchers alike. The concept of soft power was first proposed by Joseph Nye in regards to the ability to achieve goals through attraction and persuasion, rather than coercion or fee. The concept of soft power in the Republic of Korea is based on the dissemination of their pop culture and cultural values. This concept paper looks at how Korea uses soft power in the phenomenon of "Korean wave" which helped shape a positive image and create its Korean attractive brand on the world stage. The discussion states that soft power is more is a more efficient and effective concept in global culture as it provides more sustainability for in terms of cultural growth.

Keywords: Culture, Korean K-POP, Pop Culture, Soft Power.

Introduction

"Bangtan Sonyeondan" or "Beyond the Scene" in English, popularly known as BTS among K-Pop (Korean Pop Culture) fans have emerged as an unprecedented international sensation since their debut in 2013 in South Korea. The 7 member boy band have two albums in Billboard Top 200 to date with an estimated revenue of $3.6 billion. From fashion to music,

South Korea has bloomed into a cultural force in the world. Young people in Thailand, China, Vietnam, Malaysia and other parts of the world now view Korea as the new 'cool' country in terms of fashion, culture and music (Desideri, 2013). In addition to sales of music, merchandise and concert tickets, this figure also reflects the added number of tourists visiting South Korea because of their interest in the band. In 2017, it was estimated that around 800,000 tourists visited South Korea because of their interest in BTS (Suntikul, 2019). Up until May 2022, South Korea has recorded a total of 173,663 number of tourists compared to 125,771 in April 2022 (CEIC Data, 2022).

This has not only boosted South Korea's economy but has also helped in creating a huge following for K Pop fans in South Korea. While the spread of BTS, Black Pink, Big Bang, SuperM to name a few, have profilirated into other Asian countries; due to their exoticness and foreign vibe, South Korea has managed to mark a new level of global success via soft power in crafting an image that resonates across culture. Armed with synchronized dance movements, the K Pop industry in South Korea has managed to push forward its pop scene to the forefront of global music making South Korea the most sought after country for pop culture using a simple means of soft power. From a country being merely a consumer of foreign products and 'dealt with a weak hand' geographically, South Korea is definitely making its mark on the world map. This paper will discuss Joseph Nye's soft power and how it has profilirated into making South Korea the land of pop culture.

Joseph Nye's Soft Power

In his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, theorist Joseph Nye coined the word 'soft power' after noticing the missing link on the ability of country leaders to attract and persuade rather than merely using coercion in gaining power (2017).

The definition of power as "the ability to impact the results you desire and, if necessary, to modify the conduct of others to make this happen" is common and practical, despite the fact that it is one of the most debatable notions in political theory (Nye, 2017). The term power in international relations is often understood in the context of military and economic might. Nye (2017) identified two types of power: hard power and soft power. He defined hard power as 'the ability to get others to act in ways that contradict their initial preferences and strategies' and soft power as 'the ability to achieve goals through attraction and persuasion, rather than coercion or fee.'

Hard power if legitimate in the eyes of other countries, will encounter less resistance while in soft power, if the culture and ideology are seen as attractive, countries will be more than willing to follow. Hard power is often generated using force, threat, exploitation, import export sanctions to name a few. This type of force is usually carried out by countries wanting to gain control in terms of economy and military using the carrot and stick approach. An example of hard power can be seen in the Gulf War in 1991 between Iraq and United States due to the United Nation's economic sanctions.

In retrospect, soft power uses positive attraction and persuasion to achieve the same objectives as hard power. The world is becoming more hyperconnected and multipolar, and money, power, and knowledge are being dispersed across a wider area. Governments must be more receptive to domestic and international public opinion because of the growth of democracy, social media, and direct action. The nature of cultural ties is evolving as mass

peer-to-peer worldwide cultural engagement increases. A bigger role for soft power, which is mainly independent of governmental control, is being created by the increased distribution of knowledge and opportunity brought about by the internet and digitalization. By refusing to inculcative fear and atrocity, soft power draws on cultural needs rather than political needs. Soft power achieves influence by bridging the communication gap and drawing on from resources which eventually puts the country known worldwide. Smart leaders know and understand that leadership is not just about asserting power and rules, but also involves leading by examples and attracting subordinates to do what you want them to do without force. Countries with policies and regulations that are sufficiently friendly and attractive can create a community that wants to help share and achieve the same objectives (Harvard University, 2004). Soft power is also synonymous with political leaders who understand that power comes from attraction- which forsakes the carrot and stick method in achieving that the leaders want (Hughes, 2021).

The crux of attraction usually leans towards an attractive personality, unique culture and unbiased political views and values. If a leader can present these qualities to the world, it will be easier to forge a friendship and will cost less to lead. The capacity of a nation to win over allies and exert influence over others—not via military force but rather through its most alluring assets, such as culture, education, language, and values—is known as soft power. In other words, it's the elements that cause people to love a nation rather than fear it; elements that are frequently the work of individuals, organisations, and brands rather than governments (Dubber, 2015).

South Korea's Pop Culture Using Soft Power

As interesting as the appeal of pop culture is, it is pertinent to make one distinction clear; the idea of being the abode to popular dramas and music groups is not what embodies soft power, rather soft power takes the role of soft resources – promoting pop culture fixations such as actor and actresses and pop icons and creating a welcoming attraction for tourism, political alliances and abroad studying environment. This idea in return creates revenues for the country in question. After all, the concept of soft power by Nye was all about getting the other party to want what you want.

This was the backbone of South Korea's popular culture and how it was used to attract more foreign investment and boost the country's economy. South Korea was literally unknown until their pop culture took off paving more ways to boost the country's economy. Korean's popular culture or K Pop as it is internationally known began in the late 1980s, since the country democratisation on the relaxation of censorship and the push to diversify the economy. South Korea's pop culture has grown to become the main driver of global culture, which is seen in everything from Korean drama's, cosmetics, clothing line to skincare regimes (Romano, 2018).

Soft power is the foundation of a country's cultural diplomacy by making use of their rich culture as an international stage to build positive opinions and garner favourable response from the world. By focusing on soft power rather than force, South Korea can focus the shift of the entire world towards them, which in return provides resources for their economy. In 2012, the Korean government declared the '3.*0 Hallayu Generation*' and promoted Korean drama's which later led to an increase in 27.3 percent which is equivalent

to 70.4 billion in the Korean economy last year. BTS is said to have contributed 58% increase in South Korean economy making the group the county's highest contributor to the economy (Jin, 2022).

This has further encouraged the mushrooming of numerous businesses including two *Hallayu* graduate schools, tourist complexes and cultural centres in Korea. South Korea's government created an environment in which television, music and movies were able to thrive and gain prominence all over the world. Zhidkov (2014) in his work "Elements of the South Korean soft power" posits that "We cannot fail to note the country's effort in exporting its culture from kimchi to K Pop." South Korea according to Srinivas (2021) has two goals-the first to generate revenue for its growing economy and second to build relations with nations across the world. For South Korea, the letter "K" in K Pop was so famous that even the then Korean president Moon Jae-in called the Covid-19 pandemic as the *K-Quarantine* which was well received by K Pop fans worldwide.

Most foreign artist go through several stages of change to be acceptable to a global audience. This can include language change, flavours, and even names are altered to suit the global audience. With Korean exports, this has not been the case. Not to mention the need to learn Korean language has risen exponentially well among graduates alike. Dr Kang, the director of Korean Language in Middlebury Language Schools vouches that the interest in the culture and Korean language has taken a drastic interest among youths in different countries thanks to the interest in Korean movies and artists alike. Unlike other foreign artist and movies, South Korea has a strong sense of national responsibility, and this can be seen in their movies in terms of dressing and cultural values. Not many changes are done in the film production, yet the movies are widely accepted thus promoting Korean culture to the rest of the world (Huang, 2022).

The Oxford Dictionary has also joined the bandwagon of the K Pop craze by introducing 26 Korean words in their dictionary such as *bulgogi, mukbang, kimbap, banchan* to name a few (BBC, 2021). This inclusion of words shows how Asian in different parts of the world exchange words within their own context allowing for the Korean wave to further ripple on the sea of English vocabulary. The phenomenal success of the Korean movies 'The Squid Game' and 'Parasite' the latter directed by Bong Joon-ho and premiered at the 2019 Cannes Film festival, won the Palme d'Or award, becoming the first Korean film to receive the award with a unanimous vote (Srinivas, 2021). South Korean filmmakers have been studying Hollywood for years, adopting and refining formulae while adding their own Korean touches. With the global success of Netflix, South Korea went from being a mere consumer of foreign cultures to becoming a cultural exporter in its own right.

Conclusion

South Korea is definitely emerging as a power backed with culture country riding on its K Pop success. As cited by Nye (2017), "South Korea has the resources to produce soft power and its soft power is not a prisoner to the geographical limitations that have constrained its hard power throughout its history" giving highlight to Korea's rich culture resources to gain soft power. Four years on, K Pop is still considered the most successful pop culture with a fan base around the globe. In another perspective, too much

involvement of the government in this K Pop culture might just lead to repulsions like the anti-Korean Wave backlash and may speed up the demise of the Korean wave.

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