

Soft Power, Korea, and the Politics of Culture

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Much of the existing literature on soft power maintains that a nation can increase its influence over others by disseminating its culture. Knowledge of that culture enhances the nation's attractiveness to others and thereby aids its government's to achieve desired ends.

The notion that cultural ideas affect power did not originate with Joseph Nye. Antonio Gramsci, western Marxists, and cultural studies theorists who followed in their wake, all maintained that culture aided class, gender, and ethnic domination by legitimizing or "naturalizing" inequalities and the mechanisms whereby such inequalities were sustained or reproduced. But unlike these previous theorists, Nye raised "soft power" and culture to the international level, presenting them as positive instruments that ought to be employed more fully by the United States.

Ascertaining the role of culture in a nation's soft power is confounded by the pliability of the terms "culture" and "soft power." Most news media accounts appear to associate culture with arts and entertainment, but both China's New Culture Movement and Korea's Culture Movement in the early part of the twentieth century sought to transform far more than arts and entertainment. Norms, ethics, values, style, policies, and institutions-- just about everything Nye saw as the bases of soft power--can be and have been referenced by the term "culture." Given that culture is largely implicit, symbolic, and continually changing, moreover, the interpretation of any nation's culture, including its attractiveness, is rarely uncontested, both domestically and internationally.

Similarly, the concept of soft power has been stretched beyond the activities of national governments to include popular participation in efforts to bolster a nation's image, principally through the Internet and other media, tourism, and alliances between various non-governmental organizations. Including this popular participation yields a more complicated view of cultural dissemination.

In our presentation, we seek to examine the reception, production, and use of soft power in South Korea, focusing on a few selected domains and attempting to assess the extent to which a nation can increase its influence over others by exporting its culture.

We begin with a brief assessment of China's attractiveness in South Korea using recent trade statistics. The first table, with data downloaded from the Korean Customs Service, shows that during 2006 China was South Korea's largest trading partner and the destination of more than 63 billion dollars of exports. The results of the first eight months of this year, given in the second table, show that China has now become South Korea's largest trading partner in both imports and exports. It was also the source of a trade surplus of over 11 billion dollars thus far this year. The significance of China's rising trade with South Korea can further be appreciated when these current statistics are compared with those of the late 1980s, when 40% of South Korea's merchandise exports went to the United States.¹ Disadvantaged in trade negotiations by such reliance on a single market during an era of rising U.S. protectionism and increasing demands to open markets more widely for U.S. agriculture and other goods, government officials and leaders of major conglomerates often voiced the need to diversify the country's export markets. A number of South Korea enterprises began moving portions of their production to China in order to gain access to its markets as well as benefit from its low-cost labor.

¹ Marcus Noland, 2003. "U.S.-Korean Trade: An Update." In the National Interest, May 28. <http://www.inthenationalinterest.com/Articles/Vol2Issue21/Vol2issue21Nolandpfv.html>.

Table 1
Korea (south)
Exports and Imports
2006

(Million U.S. \$)

	Exports		Imports		Trade	
China	63,275	21.3%	44,114	15.7%	107,389	18.6%
Japan	24,115	8.1%	47,238	16.8%	71,353	12.3%
U.S.	39,418	13.3%	30,995	11.0%	70,413	12.2%

Table 2
Korea (south)
Exports and Imports
Jan 1-Aug 31, 2007

(Million U.S. \$)

	Exports		Imports		Trade	
China	51,991	21.8%	40,310	17.6%	92,301	19.7%
U.S.	30,408	12.7%	24,899	10.9%	55,307	11.8%
Japan	17,037	7.1%	36,714	16.0%	53,751	11.5%
EU	35,779	15.0%	23,979	10.5%	59,758	12.8%

More than diversification and low-cost labor are implicated in the meaning of these trade figures. The Roh Moo Hyun administration announced as one of its goals raising GDP to 20,000 U.S. dollars per capita, and according to recent estimates published by the IMF,²

² International Monetary Fund, World Economic and Financial Surveys,

the South Korean economy will come close to that goal this year, the last full year of Roh's term. The sizable trade surplus with China takes added importance as a vital element for raising South Korea's GDP.

An oblique indicator of the importance of the Chinese economy in South Korea can perhaps be seen in the South Korean government's response to China's nomination for UNESCO's cultural heritage designation of Goguryeo tombs that now lie within China's borders. Some analysts interpreted China's nomination of these tombs as an irredentist claim to the territory of North Korea, while others viewed it as an attempt to thwart Korean irredentist claims to Northeast China. Shortly after tourism to Northeast China became possible, a number of South Korean visitors apparently expressed the view to Korean Chinese residents in that area that "this is our land." Such incidents "prompted Chinese premier Li Peng to ask the South Korean government to [have its citizens] exercise more 'self-control' when he met the visiting South Korean Prime Minister Lee Hongkoo in Beijing in 1995."³ When pressed to explain the apparent weakness of the South Korean government's response to China's Unesco nomination, an act that incensed many people in South Korea by denying much of their ancestry, a government official was quoted in the Asia Times as saying "We will act in a way that will not upset our diplomatic relationship with China."⁴ According to David Scofield, author of the report, the official's explanation was a thinly veiled code for "We will act in a way that will not upset our *economic* relationship with China." A widely publicized poll of South Korea's national assembly reported that 63% viewed China as the nation's most important diplomatic partner, but four months later, after the eruption over China's nomination of the Goguryeo tombs, that figure dropped to 6%.⁵

One might also consider that the generation of officials now in power in South Korea witnessed the near elimination of Chinese characters (as well as the reduction of many Japanese loanwords and a number of English expressions) from the Korean language. Korean-language newspapers, academic journals, and government documents seldom use Chinese characters today.⁶ The most visible expressions of China's cultural attraction nowadays in South Korea are on the websites and printed brochures of travel agencies that organize tours to various locations in China. Thus, we appreciate Joshua Kurlantzick's observation that China's attraction derives largely from its massive and rising economy. His felicitous phrase: "Beijing offers the charm of a lion, not of a mouse"⁷ nicely captures the conjunction of economic interest and soft power. In many other contexts as well, distinguishing a gift from a bribe can often rely on individual interpretation, rendering Nye's attempt to assign economic payments to "hard power" difficult to sustain. Much of the especially rich analyses of the coercive implications of gift giving at the local level, developed

World Economic Outlook Database. April 2007 Edition.

<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2007/01/data/weorept.aspx?>

³ Quansheng Zhao. 2006. "China's New Approach to Conflict Management: The Cases of North Korea and Taiwan" Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program – A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, 1619 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. May, 2006. P. 17.

http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/publications/2006/Zhao_final_complete_2006.pdf

⁴ David Scofield 2003. "Northeast Asia's intra-mural wars," Asia Times, Dec. 23.

<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/EL23Dg01.html>.

⁵ Peter Hays Gries, The Koguryo Controversy, National Identity, and Sino-Korean Relations Today. *East Asia* (22, No. 4):4.

⁶The current generation of primary and secondary students sometimes show a penchant for displaying their linguistic diversity in an Internet language that they have created, a development that has been a cause of concern to the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development.

⁷ Joshua Kurlantzick, 2007. Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 6.

by Marcel Mauss⁸ and Pierre Bourdieu,⁹ seem relevant to inter-governmental economic payments as well.

Turning to the pursuit of soft power in South Korea, one can find a multitude of government agencies, quasi-government organizations, non-governmental organizations, commercial news media, and diasporic organizations seeking to present Korea and its culture in a more positive light than they are presented in foreign, and especially Anglo-American, media. This is especially evident in websites, printed publications, and broadcasts emanating from South Korea in English, Japanese, simplified Chinese characters, Arabic, Spanish, and a variety of other languages. A major motivation for these efforts is perhaps best captured in the self-description of the English-language journal *Korea Focus*, an online and printed publication of the Korea Foundation. It provides English-language translations of current news and academic articles by Korean authors and states that it constitutes "a window to current events in Korea and related international issues as seen through the analytic eyes of the *nation's* [italics added] opinion leaders." As in many other places of the world, the domination of foreign news media, especially western news media, is often seen as demeaning the nation's international image or otherwise presenting unfairly the Korean nation. The NBC news coverage of the 1988 Seoul Olympics constituted one of the most obvious instances. Diverse views of *how* to present South Korea in a positive light are apparent, however, when comparing the English-language editions of the Hankyoreh Sinmun and the Chosun Ilbo, South Korea's major progressive and conservative dailies, respectively.

It is difficult to determine the ultimate effect of these dissemination efforts. Organizations such as the Korea Foundation have substantially supported the expansion of Korean Studies positions, museum exhibitions, research fellowships, and Korean language courses throughout the world, often with financial contributions from commercial or private foundations. These efforts have made Korea more visible in and raised its importance in the world of higher education and academic research, but the diplomatic consequences of such developments are hard to determine. Efforts to change the name of the body of water separating Korea and Japan from "The Sea of Japan" to "The East Sea" have evidently prompted some English-language textbook and mapmakers to show both names, though "East Sea" is often placed in parentheses below "Sea of Japan." And efforts to garner international support for Korea's ownership of the Dokdo Islets that are also claimed by Japan do not appear to have produced significant results.

Most other activities of cultural exporting do not appear to exhibit the same degree of consensus and similitude of action, particularly between government and commercial agencies. In an analysis of the Korea Wave, for example, Cho Hae-Joang, anthropologist and public intellectual, pointed to the difference that developed between the export promotion efforts of commercial and government agencies in the early years of this development:

The government moved quickly to increase the national culture industry's budget, to station government specialists in large cities in China and elsewhere[,] and to set up a "hall of the Korean Wave." In response, there were reports of the Chinese government's displeasure and fear that the South Korean government was acting too aggressively.... The government became aware that that it could provoke a backlash from its partner governments and

⁸ *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W.D. Halls. New York : W.W. Norton, 2000.

⁹ *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Richard Nice. trans. Cambridge ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1977.

jeopardize the penetration of Korean products into foreign markets by being too visible as promoters of the Korean Wave.¹⁰

Another area of divergence between the government and non-governmental efforts to utilize Korea's culture to attain the national goals through the use of soft power appeared in President Roh Moo Hyun's balancer proposal, whereby South Korea would serve as a mediator or arbiter between Japan and China. The text of a 2005 Blue House briefing,¹¹ from which we have selected and translated a few passages, makes specific mention of both culture and soft power:

We are a traditionally peaceful force without any instance of pursuing war in the East Asian region. As many nations recognize, in a short period of time, we have been a model of democratic development and economic growth. We are not a nation that is distrusted by its surrounding states for having caused a war of aggression. Those surrounding states do not have to worry that we are seeking supremacy.

Soft power (연성국력) [the Korean term is followed by the term written in roman alphabet] is also an important diplomatic resource for us.

The Korean peninsula is geopolitically a place thoroughly open to mutual understanding of continental culture and oceanic culture, as well as eastern and western culture.

Historically, such exchange and communication later created peace and prosperity. Our historical and moral strength to communicate with people of both the continent and the ocean is widely recognized beyond our national borders.

Roh's balancer proposal was controversial in South Korea. Most criticism focused not on the aspiration for a more assertive Korean role in international affairs but rather on the proposal's feasibility and its possible effects on the Korea-US Security alliance.

The ultimate inability of the balancer proposal to be accepted by South Korea's closest geographical neighbors, and the government's reluctance to promote the Korea wave, appear to provide support for a statement by Kazuo Ogoura, President of the Japan Foundation. In a critical but very thoughtful assessment of soft power, he noted that

sovereign nations in the international community act not on the basis of likes and dislikes but in accordance with their own interests. No matter how attractive a given country may be, other countries will not accept its attractive power if it obstructs their freedom of action or adversely affects their economic interests.¹²

Perhaps the main area in which South Korea has successfully made use of soft power has been in improving its relations with North Korea. Though the process of reconciliation is difficult, complex, and affected by multiple motivations, a number of positive developments have occurred, such as family reunion visits, limited tourism in North Korea, the Kaesong joint industrial complex, inter-Korea summits, joint participation at sports events, and more frequent cultural exchanges. The Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism, for example, lists as one of its 27 objectives "Promote cultural exchanges with North Korea."¹³

¹⁰ Cho Hae-Joang. 2005. "Reading the "Korean Wave" as a Sign of Global Shift.) *Korea Journal* (45.4): 160.

¹¹ 동북아_균형자_설명자료.pdf,

<http://www.president.go.kr/cwd/kr/common/download.php?id=a578a9d880d4ca215f411830>

¹² The Limits of Soft Power, *Japan Echo*, Vol. 33, No.5 (October, 2006).

¹³ <http://www.mct.go.kr/english/vision/vision.jsp>.

Unprecedented progress in the scale of cultural and economic exchange has occurred in recent years.

In this case as well, however, soft power was accompanied by furthering of economic and military interests on both sides. South Korea enterprises may not be deeply concerned with North Korea's market but they are interested in North Korea's low-cost labor. North Korea, faced with the collapse of the Soviet block and declining support from China for centrally planned economies, is evidently finding the wealthier South Korea an increasingly attractive partner and export destination. The annual South-North Korea trade volume in 2005 exceeded US\$1 billion for the first time, ten times more than US\$ 100 million recorded in 1991.¹⁴ Moreover, the reduction of hostilities has the potential to ultimately release government expenditures and personnel from both North Korea's one-million and South Korea's more than six hundred thousand person military forces, freeing both to engage in more economically productive activities or diverting their energies elsewhere.

In addition, South Korea has been providing North Korea with substantial economic and material relief. While contributing to a variety of international relief organizations, the South Korean government designates much of its donations for use in North Korea. According to the Global Humanitarian Database's Financial Tracking Service, South Korea has paid, committed, or pledged a total of 390 million dollars to North Korea since Kim Dae Jung's historic visit.¹⁵ Total relief payments may well be much larger, however. A recent editorial in the Chosun Ilbo claimed that [each year] more than a billion U.S. dollars of South Koreans' tax money goes to aid North Korea and help its flood victims.¹⁶

In sum, we are led to conclude that a nation can increase its influence over another by exporting its culture primarily in specific cases where the two nations find agreement mutually beneficial for economic or military reasons.¹⁷ Which brings us back to the politics of culture pursued by Gramsci and those influenced by him. Their initial objective, to explain why the working classes of European nations did not rebel against the capitalist class, seems anachronistic in today's political and intellectual world. More relevant is that these theorists did not claim that political-economic relations were sustained only by cultural hegemony. They also pointed to the state, the legal system enforced by the courts, the police, the church, the schools, and many other coercive institutions with which cultural hegemony worked in conjunction to make the plight of the disadvantaged seem inevitable, natural, or caused by their own lack of ability. Michel Foucault's analysis of the panopticon is a well-known case in point.¹⁸ Unfortunately, many of those who write about soft power often seem to have lost sight of the mutual dependence of politics, economics, and culture.

¹⁴ Min of Unification, Press Release: South-North Trade to Exceed US\$1 Billion in 2005 (Jan.23, 2006) http://www.unikorea.go.kr/en/EPA/EPA0201R.jsp?brd_cd=eng0101&main_uid=1093

¹⁵ http://ocha.unog.ch/fts2/pagelader.aspx?page=search-reporting_display&CQ=cq011007142620BYiV82307o.

¹⁶ "More 'Arirang' Lunacy From the Government."

<http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200709/200709280025.html>. "이 정권의 '북한 아리랑 집단체조' 궤변 제 2 탄" http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2007/09/27/2007092701168.html.

¹⁷ Nye often treats "soft power" as if it were effective in its own right. "If you believe my objectives are legitimate, I may be able to persuade you to do something for me without using threats or inducements." *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. 2)

¹⁸ *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Alan Sheridan, trans. New York : Vintage Books, 1995.