

# The Myth of Soft Power: Selling Korean Pop Music Abroad

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## Introduction

In his fascinating book on soft power, Joseph Nye argues that his concept entailed a measure of attractiveness, something that one could use to get others – by attracting and co-opting them – to provide assistance in achieving specific goals.<sup>1</sup> Nye admits that the application of soft power is complex, and that for many administrations the use or threat of hard power may be a much easier option. One issue Nye does not discuss, however, is how far one is willing to go to achieve soft power. If an administration is going to extreme lengths to acquire soft power, then isn't that in most cases tantamount to buying soft power with hard cash? And when a country or a people are uncooperative or even causing you great losses, can that not be useful too, albeit for domestic, i.e. nationalist purposes? Soft power certainly has played an important role in history – it is not my intention to deny that – but perhaps we could widen its scope and also apply it to studies of how an administration co-opts its own people. Doing so might shed more light on the scope of cultural policies as well as on their effectiveness. In recent years, the phenomenon of the Korean Wave has led South Korean policymakers, journalists and academics to argue that the success of Korea's pop culture<sup>2</sup> extends the nation's soft power. As a result, the South Korean position vis-à-vis that of other Asian nations is redefined and reinterpreted, whereby Korean culture is distinguished favorably. Many Koreans have come to think that a large number of foreigners like Korean cultural products and that this implies that they appreciate Korean values and achievements. Perhaps out of a sense of social responsibility they also believe the commercial success should lead to more than just financial profit. Since the Wave helps to increase foreigners' understanding of Korean culture and gain their recognition for Korea's many achievements, they expect the Wave to facilitate South Korea's bilateral relationships. It is a noble idea, and yet there is little to suggest that an increased understanding of Korean culture abroad was ever a major concern of Korean policymakers. It appears that whatever understanding has been generated by the Wave so far has followed commercial success, not preceded it.

Until the phenomenon of the Wave began to manifest itself in the late 1990s, South Korea had for several decades focused on promoting its traditional heritage abroad. It is unclear, however, as to whether it did so to truly increase foreigners' understanding or appreciation of Korean culture. It appears that the idea to stage Korea's cultural heritage abroad at least for many years also constituted part of a scheme to promote Korea as a tourist destination. Kim Kwang-ok argues that from the 1960s Korean cultural events were considered to have political and commercial potential. He said:

[...] the tourism industry in the 1960s was based on the political motivation of promoting Korea's image abroad and the national economic strategy for the acquisition of foreign capital; it is only recently [early 1990s] that the idea of tourism as a kind of culture industry which should be based on the production and spread of art, folklore and traditional customs has gained support.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. 2, 6-7.

2 As I adopt a definition of popular culture that entails all forms of cultural expression that originate from the majority, the people, and not from the ruling minority, I choose not to differentiate between North and South Korean popular culture as I understand that in North Korea all media and cultural industries are entirely state-run and owned. The existing popular culture of North Korea is, I surmise, hidden from the public eye, and will often belong to the realm of underground activities, be it in terms of products or language.

3 See anon., 'The Cultural Industries: Social and Economic implications'. In Korean National

Kim seems to suggest that the idea of staging of Korean culture abroad in order to generate soft power existed from the outset. That implies that tourism was at first seen as a more politically useful tool and only later as a more commercial industry. But how big a tool could it be? Korea has never been a popular tourist destination, perhaps because as potential travel destinations Japan and China have always been much better known in the West. And notwithstanding the wonderful and very successful efforts of the Korea Foundation to boost international recognition for Korea's rich history and culture, and in spite of the many noted cultural exchanges over the years, in many countries South Korea has yet to address issues detrimental to its local image.<sup>4</sup> It is implausible, therefore, that the promotion of Korean culture abroad was ever a form of commercial marketing primarily aimed at foreigners. It is more likely that tourism and cultural exchanges, now and then, also served the administration's efforts to promote nationalism domestically, as they fostered praise of Korean culture abroad. And if that's the case, then isn't it also possible that the importance of foreign praise somewhat outweighed the importance of wielding soft power in international relationships, and that even today, Korea's image abroad is of less importance than Koreans' image of themselves?

Another issue Nye brings to the fore is the fact that the consumption or enjoyment of specific cultural goods does not imply that one embraces the culture proper. He points out that those fond of American junk food may not, for example, like the United States at all, whereas those protesting against American foreign policies often do so in blue jeans and t-shirts.<sup>5</sup> While I shall not repeat the debate on the history of blue jeans, I would like to emphasize more generally the importance of analyzing how representative of a culture specific cultural items are. Unfortunately, Nye is not very specific about this issue, and yet an understanding of the possible association of specific products with their culture of origin might help us to understand the degree of soft power they may help wield and why, for example, in some instances cultural exchanges between Korea and neighboring countries are unforthcoming. Such considerations require an understanding of the cultures and histories in play, however, and are unlikely to be merely product-group specific. In this regard, the Korean Wave provides very interesting cases for further study, partly because it is a very recent phenomenon, and in part because South Korea finds itself in an area that has many recent experiences of military struggle, and greatly differing national ideologies.

The Korean Wave began in the late 1990s. It was then that Korean pop stars began to become popular with teenagers in Japan, China, and Taiwan, and later in South-east Asia and the Pacific. The blend of (often surgically enhanced) good looks and presentation, slick dance tunes, and a lack of profanity and sex as befitting Confucian morals have often been named as the primary reasons for the Korean stars' wide appeal. Among today's stars are Rain, BoA, Bada, Hyori, and Se7en. Although their repertoire, comprising hip-hop, ballads, and R&B, is proving very successful, they are also often used to advertise products. Hyori is perhaps the most successful Korean model, having recently become the first Asia-wide model for Calvin Klein jeans. Besides pop music and pop stars, South Korea has also exported many movies, TV dramas and games.<sup>6</sup> The products appear to

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Commission for UNESCO, ed., *Final Report of First Asia-Pacific Culture Forum* (Seoul: Korean National Commission for UNESCO, 2005), 50-62 (58).

4 In the case of the Netherlands, examples include the continued export of Korean children for adoption, the maltreatment of animals, and the handling of Japanese war camp prisoners by Korean guards.

5 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, pp. 12, 52. For other examples, see Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, 'Contesting Soft Power: Japanese Popular Culture in East and Southeast Asia', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (forthcoming, accepted May 2007), p. 6.

6 The wave gained true momentum when in July 2004 Korean KBS's *Kyōul yōn'ga* ('Winter Sonata') began to be aired on the terrestrial channel of Japan's NHK. The TV drama became an enormous hit, with viewer ratings reaching twenty percent. The hype helped Korean dramas become a phenomenon in many other countries in Asia, but Japan continues to be a very important export country by far for this and other forms of Korean pop culture. An important part of the enormous fan base for Korean dramas is said to consist of women of forty and older, some of whom have been reported as saying that they fell in love with *Kyōul yōn'ga*'s leading character Chunsang, played by Bae Yong-joon, because of his good looks, passion, sincerity and good manners. See Onishi Norimitsu, 'What's Korean for "Real Man"? Ask a Japanese Woman', *The New York Times* (23

have an unmistakable quality that compares favorably to those of other countries in the region, and it is safe to say that the popularity of Korean cultural products abroad has helped raise the image of South Korea. A survey carried out by the Korea Trade Center in 2005 showed, for example, that the image of South Korea in China and Japan had increased considerably, with Chinese informants even rating the country twice as high as in the previous year.<sup>7</sup> Later that year, reporter Yau Lop Poon noted that the popularity of the TV drama *Kyŏl yŏn'ga* ('Winter Sonata') in Japan could even positively affect South Korea's relationship with Japan.<sup>8</sup>

Yet one needs to be conservative in assessing the extent of the hype. Many Japanese tourists travel to Korea, for example, to visit key filming locations and sample the culture they have witnessed on screen, but they are unlikely to have developed more than a passing interest in Korea's cultural heritage. They will consider the product to stand on its own and may find it to have values uncommon among Koreans. The speed and ease with which pop culture products can be consumed today makes it unlikely that consumers develop more than a passing interest in the origin of the products. At the same time, producers will avoid making products too indigenous in fear of ostracizing foreign markets. Calvin Klein, in fact, must be hoping the possible association of jeans with the United States will not pre-empt their investment in their model. That, in other words, consumers will focus on the image of the Korean model, rather than on where the product itself originates. The speed with which pop culture is consumed can, nonetheless, raise concern over possible cultural imperialism. In East Asia, for example, a number of people have already called for a ban on the import of Korean pop culture. In 2005, Zhang Guoli, one of China's top television actors, branded the Korean wave a "cultural invasion", urging his countrymen to buy Chinese products instead.<sup>9</sup> And, in January of 2006, China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television said that the number of Korean dramas on TV were to be reduced by fifty per cent.<sup>10</sup> In Japan, meanwhile, several blogs and manga emerged that reflect considerable frustration over, among other things, Korean claims and complaints on the basis of Japan's war past.<sup>11</sup>

Another important issue that threatens the continuation of the Korean Wave is not so much the concept of cultural imperialism, or the image of a specific cultural product, however, but rather the violation of laws to protect the ownership of cultural products. With the advance of digitalized

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December 2004), p. 3; see also Yi Yŏngnok, 'Hallyu chŏjakkwŏn ch'imhae shilt'ae [Assessment of the degree to which the copyright of the Korean Wave is being violated]. Unpublished paper for an instruction workshop on copyright, held at the Censorship Academy in Seoul from 12 to 16 Dec. 2005, pp. 196-197.

7 See Yi Yŏngnok, 'Hallyu chŏjakkwŏn ch'imhae shilt'ae', p. 194.

8 He said, "The "Winter Sonata" was such a smash hit in Japan that the chilly and antagonistic feelings left over from the past began to thaw. It is a new season for Korea-Japan relations, and people are talking about the magic of the beautiful faces." See Yau Lop Poon, 'The Beautiful Behind the Beautiful', *Korea Policy Review* (Aug. 2005), p. 66.

9 Evan Osnos, 'Asia rides wave of Korean pop culture invasion', *Chicago Tribune* (23/12/05), at: <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-0512230216dec23,1,5236109,print.story?coll=chi-newsnationworld-hed&ctrack=1&cset=true>, accessed on 14/2/06.

10 In the first week of September this year, the Administration is reported to have "blacklisted" the 42-billion-won (AUD \$51.7 million) drama 'The Four Guardian Gods of the King' on the basis of it "distorting history", the main issue contended being the reign of King Gwanggaeto of the Koguryŏ Kingdom (391-413 A.D.), an era in history which Chinese scholars have recently begun claiming as part of their own. See Joel Martinsen, 'Korean history doesn't fly on Chinese TV screens', [http://www.danwei.org/media\\_regulation/peaceful\\_liberation\\_of\\_gogurye.php](http://www.danwei.org/media_regulation/peaceful_liberation_of_gogurye.php), as on 17/9/2007.

11 Prime Minister Roh Moo-hyun and actor Bae constitute primary targets, even though the latter's popularity in Japan is still largely based on the drama series first aired two years ago. BoA, on the other hand, seems not to be the focus of much criticism, which, I surmise, lies into her ability to speak Japanese and her mostly teenage following of both girls and boys (rather than frenzied women).. See Nevin Thompson, 'Inside the Japanese Blogosphere – The Anti-Korea Wave'. Harvard University's *Global Voice* blog website, 29 July 2005, at <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/globalvoices/2005/07/29/inside-the-japanese-blogosphere-the-anti-korea-wave>, as on 14/2/05; Norimitsu Onishi, 'Ugly images of Asian rivals become best sellers in Japan', *The New York Times* (19/11/05), p. 1.

media, copyright infringement has become increasingly prevalent and difficult to prevent. Despite, or perhaps due to the great sales potential that the Chinese market promises, Korean entertainment companies are faced with great difficulties. While foreign products are subjected to stringent censorship and high import tariffs, piracy is estimated to be as high as 85 per cent.<sup>12</sup> In 2005, for example, Korea's national radio and TV channels KBS and MBC cancelled their contracts with Chinese counterparts after large numbers of illegal copies were intercepted before the launch of legal copies.<sup>13</sup> The issue of Copyright is not limited to Korean products, of course, but also applies to Western and Japanese products, and – let's face it – in South Korea seems to have only been generally abided by since the 1990s.<sup>14</sup> The Chinese government often seems unwilling, however, to take serious action, and adopts legal changes rarely on the basis of international negotiations. Since the early 1990s it has in its pursuit of accession to the WTO, conceded several judicial changes that provide a reasonable legal framework for both domestic and international claims, but as Andrew Mertha has shown, the successful enforcement of jurisdiction in China is another matter.<sup>15</sup>

So given that Korea's pop culture has created many fan bases throughout East and South-east Asia, what caveats do we need to place on the soft power of Korean pop music abroad? The answer to this question may lie in the application of technology. The ease with which one is currently able to get access to a music product, without paying anything, is making any study of its origin in principle unnecessary. I do not wish to suggest that Korean pop music lacks its idiosyncrasies, but a wide audience requires compromises, and for Korean music that must mean sacrificing its local flavors. Non-Korean audiences love Korean stars, but it is on the stars they focus, rather than their origin, to which little in their sound and presentation is referring. Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin says:

In today's market economies the mechanism of creating and distributing cultural commodities is beyond the direct control of governments and is much more difficult to wield. Moreover, even if we accept the notion that cultural products contain subliminal images and messages, such as values regarding individualism, consumer choice or freedom, these do not necessarily oblige consumers to accept these ideas. The fascination and attraction derived from the exposure to cultural goods could be simply that, not power.<sup>16</sup>

With Otmazgin's words in mind, I wonder whether the unobliging, "fast-food"-like consumption of cultural products doesn't also apply to things we may not directly associate with pop culture. Isn't it possible that the increasingly fast and less personal methods of consumption or experience turn even arguably less popular-cultural related items, such as traditional rituals and socio-political concepts, into things that one enjoys for a brief period of time, before again conveniently forgetting them, without the need to commit? Isn't soft power, in fact, becoming increasingly unmanageable because of the way information and entertainment is generally obtained and shared? An overall cynicism, partly due to the world's major state ideologies having failed to truly convince over the past decennia, may be conducive to this. Sure, there are things that appear undeniably and positively local, as well as relatively unchanging, such as kangaroos and the capital per square kilometer ratio of Australia, but are those aspects truly manageable, and do they hold their own when now so easily compared to the myriad of qualities of other areas of the world?

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12 IFPI, The Recording Industry 2005 Commercial Piracy Report, at <http://www.ifpi.org/site-content/library/piracy2005.pdf>, as on 15/2/06.

13 Chi Honggu, Hallyu chöjakkwön "irök'e pohohaseyo" ["Please protect" the Korean Wave "like this"], *PD yönhap hoebo* [Producers' Association Bulletin] 447, 25/1/06, at <http://www.pdnet.or.kr/newspaper/newsprint.asp?cd=8865>, as on 1/3/06.

14 Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, 'Contesting Soft Power', pp. 12-13.

15 Andrew C. Mertha, *The Politics of Piracy: Intellectual Property in Contemporary China* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 76 and 133. For more on this issue, see Roald Maliangkay, 'When the Korean Wave Ripples', *IAS Newsletter* 42 (October 2006), p. 15.

16 Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, 'Contesting Soft Power: Japanese Popular Culture in East and Southeast Asia', p. 5.

Today, soft power still exists, though I would argue that its manipulation is becoming more difficult with time while efforts to wield it might prove counterproductive. It would in theory entail a concerted effort by artists, policymakers and industry executives, to make sure that whatever is needed to optimise the seductiveness of cultural items, or that of their country of origin as a whole, is incorporated. If, on the other hand, pop culture is that which comes from the people as opposed to from above, then such efforts would effectively push the products out of the category of pop culture. Moreover, efforts to use the popularity of the music for more political purposes might put off potential fans. The success of Korean pop music lies, in fact, in that its fans are not asked to consider too much its country of origin and be left to enjoy the music for what it is: a cool mix of good looks, powerful songs and slick dance moves.<sup>17</sup> To them, in terms of music and presentation, it holds its own or is superior to Western pop music, while representing and respecting Asian values, not just those of South Korea.

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17 Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, 'Contesting Soft Power', p. 24.