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Bubble Pop: An Analysis of Asian Pop Culture and Soft Power Potential

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Abstract

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Nick Desideri

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INTRODUCTION

The Korean Invasion began not with a bang, but a "Bubble Pop!" In November 2011, influential indie music blog *Pitchfork* published a piece regarding South Korean popular music, or "K-pop," comparing the genre's takeover of the U.S. to the Spice Girls phenomena in the mid-1990s.¹ It is an apt comparison; mega-group SNSD performed at a sold-out Madison Square Garden concert as well as on popular talk shows like "Late Night with David Letterman" and "Live! With Regis and Kelly."² Competing girl group 2NE1's 2011 music video "I Am the Best" has more Youtube views than recent releases from pop juggernauts Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Nicki Minaj. The group also performed at a New York City concert after MTV viewers voted them 2011's "Best New International Band." 4Minute and BEAST held the first South American K-pop concert in Brazil last year; the concert garnered 3,500 attendees as well as a TV special.³

The list of K-pop acts trying to break into the West could fill pages, but as Korean artists move towards the West's lucrative markets, it is easy to forget the dominance they have already established in Asia. From fashion to television to music, South Korea has blossomed into a cultural force in the region. Young people in Thailand, China, Vietnam, Malaysia and even Japan view Korea as the new "cool" country.⁴ This "Korean Wave," more commonly called "Hallyu," has become a driving cultural power that is changing traditional relations and perceptions between the two Koreas, the peninsula's neighbors, and the West. Underneath the shiny veneer of rainbows, dancing, melodrama, pop hooks, and compulsory cuteness lies a force that could affect everything from perceptions of nationality to regional beauty standards. Though many authors have praised K-pop's soft power potential, it is important to qualify how such influence could be realized presuming it even exists. A case study of Japan, Asia's tastemaker in the 1990s, can help elucidate the complexities surrounding pop culture and soft diplomacy. An analysis of Japan's experiment with cultural soft

¹ James Brooks, "To Anyone," *Pitchfork*, November 11, 2011

² "What does the United States think of Girls' Generation?" *CNNgo*, 2 February, 2012

³ "South America experiences 'United Cube in Brazil' concert" *Allkpop.com*, 14 December, 2012

⁴ Pongvutham 2008, 42

power as it relates to the Hallyu Wave not only highlights South Korea's potential regional influence, but also demonstrates how popular culture can shape foreign policy and transnational narratives.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF SOFT POWER

Before turning to East Asia, a review of the term "soft power," as well as its connotations, is necessary. In his 1990 book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, neoliberal theorist Joseph Nye argues that the realpolitik life-or-death foreign policy of the Cold War era grew increasingly unwieldy after the fall of the Soviet Union. Hard power, or direct coercion through military force, had become more politically and economically costly. He attributes this change in power to five factors: "economic interdependence, transnational actors, nationalism in weak states, the spread of technology, and changing political issues."⁵ Direct action against other states, for example, would undermine the aggressor's own economic security as fearful uncertainty rocks the globalized economy.⁶ Technological advances not only change the nature of state security, but offer transnational terrorist organizations cheap weaponry to thwart military intervention.⁷

As world issues become less tangible, or "hard," policy solutions need to become less hard as well. Nye's soft power dismisses America's carrot and stick approach to power during the Cold War; instead of a country "...ordering others to do what it wants..." it must convince "...other countries to *want* what it wants."⁸ Country A may change its policies toward country B due to what Nye deems "...the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced."⁹

Nye's theory immediately gained attention in international relations circles. As Janice Bially Mattern points out, "...the appeal of soft power is that it is relatively cheap and it does not involve sending young citizens off to war."¹⁰ The idea gained even more traction after September 11th when U.S. policymakers realized the depth of disdain the superpower inspired across the Middle East. While the U.S. military prepared for conventional warfare between opposing states, the 9/11 aggressors were borderless and transnational; this issue, Evelyn Goh notes, represents a "second-tier threat" that has "...considerable potential to undermine the foundation of American power."¹¹

Until September 11th, Goh argues, the U.S. relied on projecting its dominance through hard power.¹² After witnessing the difficulties the U.S. military encountered in Iraq, political scientists like William C. Banks assert that soft power "...can reduce the attractiveness of terrorism to potential

⁵ Nye 1990, 182

⁶ Ibid. 183

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. 76

⁹ Nye 2004, 120

¹⁰ Mattern 2005, 589

¹¹ Goh 2002, 3

¹² Ibid.

supporters and operatives” without the economic and human cost.¹³ The soft power discussion also began to move eastward, as scholars applied the concept to China’s growing influence.¹⁴ Recognizing how negative perceptions of American foreign policy earned the superpower such enmity, China has continuously painted its economic ascendancy as a “peaceful rise” in order to placate other regional players.¹⁵ A warehouse could be filled with the deluge of works praising the miraculous effects of soft power. The opinions are not entirely revolutionary; they represent an impulsive interest and a rush to legitimize the application of an unexplored concept after the 9/11 paradigm shift. However, some authors resisted the urge and attempted to deconstruct the theoretical underpinnings of soft power instead of merely advocating its applicability.

The most significant issue regarding the concept is defining what exactly constitutes soft power. In his critique of Nye’s work, Todd Hall attacks soft power for existing simultaneously as a “category of analysis” and a “category of practice.”¹⁶ Since soft power cannot be analyzed by any measure but itself, simply deeming a policy “soft” constitutes soft power in the proper context. For example, when the European Union advocates for multilateral solutions, they are not actually utilizing soft power but merely marketing their current policies and values as universal and attractive.¹⁷ This ambiguity creates confusion among scholars about what exactly constitutes soft power. Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang argue that China has amassed soft power as countries from Africa to Latin America have shown interest in adopting the Beijing model, which implies a level of admiration.¹⁸ In contrast, Hall contends that China’s citation of the Beijing model of development does not constitute true soft power, since the imitation of an economic model does not imply the impersonator has changed its views on China.¹⁹ Turning to Nye offers little clarification. While he acknowledges how “a successful economy is an important source of attraction,” he also emphasizes the difficulty of distinguishing when countries are pushed towards an economic model by market forces or drawn by sincere attraction to a country’s “successful economic or political system.”²⁰ It is difficult to determine where emulation begins and economic self-interest ends.

With this hurdle in mind, many scholars have moved to address the cultural element of soft power. In particular, pop culture has garnered interest for its role facilitating the production of soft power. In their 2009 work *Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture–World Politics Continuum*, Kyle Grayson, Matt Damies and Simon Philpott argue that popular culture serves as a narrative-building

¹³ Banks 2009, 598

¹⁴ Lo 2012

¹⁵ Garrison 2005, 25

¹⁶ Hall 2010, 192

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 197

¹⁸ Gill and Huang 2006

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Joseph Nye, “Think Again: Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, 29 April, 2012

device which guides the way individuals perceive politics. They use the U.S. show *24* as an example; *24* influences the way American citizens visualize counterterrorism, which influences their politicians attitudes towards enhanced interrogation, which results in policies that affect the way other countries perceive the U.S.²¹ However, their analysis only focuses on how pop culture shapes domestic audiences, not foreign ones. John M. Owen bridges this gap by stressing that while culture can reap soft power for a nation, it can only do so at the highest level "...when political elites in B desire for B to adopt more of A's political and social institutions or policies."²² But Owen ignores "...language, literature, art, music, brands, cuisine, and other cultural artifacts," basically almost every integral component of popular culture!²³

Scholars have addressed popular culture as it relates to foreign perception at a domestic level but not at an international one. What remains is a giant gap that neglects the spread of popular culture in an increasingly interconnected and transnational world. Nye argues that "popular culture is often a resource for soft power, but... the effectiveness of any power resource depends on the context."²⁴

THE CASE OF JAPAN

Japan's recent experiment with soft power presents the perfect opportunity to deconstruct this unexplored context and provides guidance on how such context could apply to the South Korean example. Japan's pursuit of soft power first came to the West's attention with *Foreign Policy* contributor Douglas McGray's famous piece, "Japan's Gross National Cool." In the article, McGray illustrates how despite American corporate penetration, Japan retained a distinct cultural flair that other populations found cool.²⁵ From Indonesia to China to the U.S, Japanese products found huge popularity. Fads like Pokémon swept across the globe, and the style editor of the *New York Times* even argued that "Tokyo is the real international capital of fashion."²⁶

How did Japanese products achieve such popularity? Some attribute Japan's lost decade of the 1990s for fueling Japan's "cool" industry. When Japan's economic bubble burst, corporations were left scrambling to regain market share. With economic conditions worsening, the smaller, entrepreneur-focused industries that produced "teen-centric" products like *anime*, *manga*, and video games grew in popularity both domestically and internationally.²⁷ Through innovation, firms like Nintendo shed the stifling "corporate Japan" image and began targeting overseas markets.²⁸ Soon,

²¹ Damies, Grayson, and Philpott 2009

²² Owen 2006, 19

²³ Ibid. 20

²⁴ Nye 2004, 12

²⁵ Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy*, 1 May, 2002

²⁶ Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy*, 1 May, 2002,

²⁷ Daliot-Bul 2009, 257

²⁸ Ibid.

“Japanese global cultural export value... tripled in the 11 years between 1993 and 2003.”²⁹ Japan had captured 9.5 percent of the global cultural content market, making it the “second largest producer of culture” behind the U.S.³⁰ Despite its prolonged recession, Japan had become an international cultural powerhouse.³¹ It successfully spread its distinct culture across the globe by offering interesting new media and goods. But Japan faced a problem, one endemic with soft power brokers; though it possessed vast quantities of “soft resources,” or immaterial ways to gain and leverage favor, it did not know how to actualize this influence into “...positive outcomes for [its] foreign policy goals.”³² The spread of Japanese cultural products offered the country incredible levels of cultural influence, but it could not to translate its new cultural capital into political power.

To remedy this, Japan bravely declared pop culture an integral component of its foreign policy in 2003 with the creation of the Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters. The IPSH was tasked by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro with making Japan an “Intellectual Property Nation”³³ In 2006, Minister of Foreign Affairs Taro Aso announced that cultural exports, specifically *manga*, would form the “Japan brand.”³⁴ Eager to emulate the influence of American icons like Popeye, who to the Japanese symbolized American strength during Japanese postwar reconstruction, Aso noted that by building a positive image of Japan through cultural consumer products, “...the easier it becomes for Japan to get its views across over the long term... Japanese diplomacy is able to keep edging forward, bit by bit, and bring about better and better outcomes as a result”³⁵ As prime minister two years later, Aso allocated an 8.4 percent increase in funds between 2007 and 2008 to the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry to promote the content industry through marketing and subsidizing domestic talent.³⁶ What initially started as private cultural enterprises were soon hijacked by the public sphere, which threw money at the industry to churn out more cool. By 2009, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs implemented various pop culture programs, such as *manga* conventions, across the globe to build Japan’s cultural diplomacy.³⁷ Through government endorsement, Japan hoped to make its popular culture more than just a fad. It sought to use pop culture not only as a way to foster a positive image of Japan, but also to make Japan seem unique. As Aso stated, the country needed a brand to tie together its image and culture with its foreign policy.

²⁹ Otmazgin 2008, 79

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ McGray 2002

³² Hall 2010, 200; Lee 2012, 197

³³ Choo 2012, 89

³⁴ Aso, Speech to Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. 2012

³⁷ Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Pop-culture Diplomacy,” 2009

This desire to build a national brand is not a new one, argues Wally Olins. Instead, the need has increased due to the sheer number of countries peddling culture as a consumer good.³⁸ Not only has branding become more necessary, but poor planning can unhinge a national brand and cost untold amounts of cultural and financial capital. Olins argues that a perfect mix of private and public participation can successfully implement a national brand.³⁹ By capitalizing on growing trends and promoting domestic talent, Japan definitely made steps in the right direction to sustain its pop culture dominance and turn it into a distinctive brand. But Olins also believes that the national brand must communicate a “core idea” about its values and personality in order to truly be effective.⁴⁰

Mixed Messages

This is where Japan’s brand falls apart, and the futility of its soft power initiatives becomes apparent. Every soft power exchange involves a messenger and a receiver. The messenger codes the message it is sending with a specific meaning; in Japan’s case, the country sought to impart a positive image of Japan through cultural products. By marketing its products as embodying long-held Japanese cultural values like harmony, compassion and coexistence, Japan creates a paradox that highlights the impotence of its soft power policy.⁴¹

Even if a cartoon like Pokémon could prove a vehicle for such values, other Asian countries definitely do not see Japan as harmonious, compassionate, or cooperative. After the fall of the Soviet bloc, newly resurgent Asian nationalism caused many nations to reassess their relationship with Japan.⁴² Most notably, South Korea and China began a period of reflection on the past few decades, particularly on the horrors inflicted upon them by their island neighbor. While anti-Japanese protests in South Korea and China were often transitory, they belied an undercurrent of resentment against Japan.⁴³ China was angered by Japan’s refusal to recognize its atrocities committed against the Chinese people in World War II. A contentious historical relationship and 35 years of brutal colonial rule, from 1910-1945, embittered Koreans.

A pan-Asian poll on opinions of Japanese products revealed this simmering animosity. Residents of Hong Kong and Thailand deemed Japanese products “creative, interesting, funny, and of high quality” by an overwhelming majority, with very few respondents including Japan’s past militarism in their assessment.⁴⁴ A good majority of Seoul residents applied similar adjectives to Japanese products, but 62 percent of them also “...outlined Japan’s wartime responsibilities in their

³⁸ Olins 2005, 172

³⁹ Ibid. 175

⁴⁰ Olins 2005, 178-179

⁴¹ Daliot-Bul 2009. 253

⁴² Park 2008, 191

⁴³ Ibid. 195

⁴⁴ Otmazgin 2008, 94

descriptions.”⁴⁵ South Koreans praised Japanese cultural products, but this appreciation fails to translate to appreciation for Japan’s policies or history; “I like their fashion, music and movies, but sometimes they make me mad because of the way they treat history,” noted one young respondent.⁴⁶ Though professing the importance of Japanese pop culture, Chinese citizens expressed similar disdain. In a 2008 public survey on soft power, Chinese respondents gave Japan a 46 percent on the “positive feelings” scale, the lowest rating of all Asian nations.⁴⁷

The cultural narrative Japan hopes to sell directly conflicts with the cultural narratives that its neighbors have written, forcing them to separate the Japan-ness from the actual product they are consuming.⁴⁸ In essence, Japan’s message of harmony and coexistence fails to dispel preconceived notions of the intended audience. These feelings are reflected in the 2008 survey, where South Korea and China rank Japan the lowest in Asia on “respect for the other sovereignty of other Asian nations.”⁴⁹ Even more damning, 64 percent of Chinese do not believe that China and Japan share similar values.⁵⁰ Japan not only failed to project a peaceful, positive image to these nations, but it could not even persuade transnational consumers to covet the Japanese of life. Individuals may enjoy Japan’s modern pop culture, but this attraction fails to carry over to official Japanese government policies, signifying an inability to actualize soft power. While this does not represent a total failure of governmental policy, it illustrates how even vast amounts of soft resources cannot negate intense historical animosity.

Marketing products such as *manga* as uniquely Japanese also weakened the universal appeal of cultural products. Part of the allure of consuming another country’s cultural products is the ability to immerse oneself in the exoticism of the product while simultaneously feeling like part of a larger cultural movement. A country must balance this universal appeal while also subtly promoting its distinctive cultural flair. Japan upset this equilibrium with the introduction of the International *MANGA* Award in 2007.⁵¹ While the step to create a forum for the discussion and recognition of *manga* from around the world was a smart move, the Japanese government made a major misstep; all of the appointed judges on the *manga* competition award panel were Japanese.⁵² This raised ire among many international *manga* enthusiasts, who felt incensed by the implication that *manga* was only Japanese. One Chinese *manga* buff aptly pointed out, “The world is vast. How can an award that uses

⁴⁵ Ibid. 95

⁴⁶ Ibid. 96

⁴⁷ Whitney 2009, 19

⁴⁸ Berger 2008, 22; Mattern 2005

⁴⁹ Ibid. 2009, 30-32

⁵⁰ Ibid. 2009, 30

⁵¹ Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Pop-Culture Diplomacy,” 2009

⁵² Lo 2012, 183

the Japanese aesthetic as its sole criterion serve its multitudes?”⁵³ Suddenly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ boast that it received *manga* submissions from over thirty countries seemed far less significant, considering the lack of true objectivity offered by the judging panel.⁵⁴ By rigidly maintaining *manga*’s Japanese-ness, the MOFA indirectly alienated fans and potential contributors who saw the art form as simultaneously universal and Japanese, resulting in a net loss of soft resources.

Finally, by recognizing the coolness of Japanese products like *manga* and *anime*, the Japanese government accidentally made them uncool. Take the typical American teenager as an example. The product or fad is only cool until the general populace enjoys it, or even worse, his middle-aged parents do. The Japanese government represents the unhip authority figure that is painfully late to the bandwagon.⁵⁵ Official acknowledgement of cultural diplomacy diminishes consumer receptiveness to message as the motives of the sender seem motivated by self-interest.⁵⁶ Worse, consumers might feel discouraged from enjoying officially sanctioned products for fear of “brainwashing.”⁵⁷ While this claim is extreme, it effectively recognizes that eerie sense of foreign pressure *manga* readers may feel if aware of Japan’s official policy.

In order to achieve soft power, Mattern states that the messenger must “...narrate away some precious fundamental truth...” in the reality of the receiver.⁵⁸ Overall, the Japanese narrative has failed to override the accepted historical realities of China and South Korea, its two most important neighbors. Japanese cultural products have fostered a fondness for the country’s cultural exports and entertainment industry, but not for the country itself. Other missteps, like publicly deeming pop culture a diplomatic tool, or pushing a specific “country-ness” to the point of isolating foreign fans, offer warnings to policymakers who wish to capitalize on cultural soft resources.

RIDING THE HALLYU: THE FUTURE OF KOREAN SOFT POWER

A comparative analysis of Japan and South Korea’s potential pop culture power and policies shows that the latter is in a more advantageous position than Japan, indicating that South Korea will benefit greatly from the Korean Wave. Similar to Japan in the 1990s, South Korea disseminated cultural products across Asia in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The first Korean drama to gain international acclaim was 1997’s “Star in My Heart,” when its dubbed broadcast earned fantastic ratings in China.⁵⁹ Broadcasting companies in Thailand, Vietnam, China, Taiwan, and Indonesia

⁵³ Ibid. 183

⁵⁴ Ibid. 2009

⁵⁵ Daliot-Bul 2009, 262

⁵⁶ Kroenig, McAdam, and Weber 2010, 426

⁵⁷ Press-Baranthan 2012, 36

⁵⁸ Mattern 2005, 205

⁵⁹ Sang-Yeon 2008, 14

began airing Korean dramas to satisfy enormous demand for the slickly produced shows.⁶⁰ An even bigger coup was the popularity of Korean media in Japan. The K-drama “Winter Sonata” broke records by garnering 15 percent of Japanese audience share and 20 percent with its series finale.⁶¹

The country that started the first Asian Wave became the second largest consumer of K-dramas by 2006.⁶² The incredibly popular soundtracks for K-dramas also helped stimulate an interest in Korean pop music; soon, pop stars like Rain and BoA, as well as idol groups like SNSD and TVXQ, gained massive popularity both domestically and regionally.⁶³ In an effort to break bigger markets, groups like KARA and Orange Caramel have recorded music in Japanese and Mandarin, which helps boost K-pop’s universal appeal. This attraction is apparent when examining Hallyu’s economic impact. The Korean Wave drew 10 million tourists to South Korea in 2011, often to attend concerts or visit the sets of their favorite K-dramas, and industry experts estimate that the Hallyu market has grown to \$300 billion.⁶⁴

Like Japan, South Korea recognized the potential to turn these cultural resources into soft power. To build the Korean brand, South Korea took an all-important step by creating a public agency, the Korean Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), to aid private industry in the effective spread of Hallyu. KOCCA’s tasks include “...the exportation of cultural products, the education of content creation, the development of related technologies,” and “...providing other financial, legal, and policy support for related industries.”⁶⁵ Receiving an annual budget of 100 billion Won (US\$88 million) in 2009,⁶⁶ the South Korean government increased funding by billions of Won in 2012 to “...keep this wave surging.”⁶⁷

The main reason for this shift away from Japanese cultural products to Korean ones was the Asian economic crisis, which made Japanese products too expensive for the average consumer.⁶⁸ Even in 2000, three years after the start of the crisis, Korean dramas cost a only a quarter of what it took to produce their Japanese counterparts.⁶⁹ However, other sources suggest that while economic factors played a large role, other features of the Korean Wave put the South Korea in a more favorable position to capitalize on its cultural resources than Japan.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 13

⁶¹ Mori 2008, 130

⁶² Apron 2008, 30

⁶³ Ryou 2009, 140

⁶⁴ “Korea to expand support for 'hallyu' next year,” *Korea Times*, 29 December, 2011; “Hallyu Boom Triggers Bureaucratic Turf War,” *Korea Times*, 12 March, 2012

⁶⁵ Lee 2012, 129

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ “Korea to expand support for 'hallyu' next year,” *Korea Times*, 29 December, 2011

⁶⁸ Sang-yeon 2008, 14

⁶⁹ Sang-yeon 2008, 15

The first and most important difference between Hallyu and Cool Japan is that South Korea's lack of historical baggage facilitates easier "attraction" between messenger and receiver. The regional image South Korea must change is far less severe than Japan's. Common perceptions associated with South Korea across the region were "feudal," "violent," "poor," and "politically unstable," mostly due historical events such as the Korean War, pre-development poverty, and student protests in the 1980s.⁷⁰ However, most of these negative misconceptions can be (and have been) negated by Korean cultural products. For example, when 2,200 Japanese citizens were polled, "...26 percent of those surveyed admitted their image of Korea had changed due to the consumption of Korean drama."⁷¹ Mori finds that for many consumers in Asia, their fandom of Korean dramas "...made [them] reconsider how [they] should understand history" and visualize South Korea.⁷² Asian consumers find South Korean pop culture far more palatable than its Japanese equivalent, since the tiny peninsular nation lacks the imperialist past so many associate with Japan.⁷³ Receivers of the Korean message do not face the cognitive dissonance they experience with Japanese pop culture; they simply negate their previously held assumptions about South Korea with what they see onscreen. It is far easier to correct misconceptions of economic squalor with flashy music videos than a history of wartime atrocities with Hello Kitty.

In fact, even the imagery of the Korean Wave is more persuasive than that of its Japanese predecessor. In today's rapidly shifting pop culture landscape, Jon Simons argues that cultural capital has shifted from the "graphosphere" (print media) to the "mediasphere" (televisual mediums), despite the former's ability to more strongly convey a culture's ethos.⁷⁴ However, print media demands much attention, while visual media only requires fleeting concentration to absorb a message. Though K-pop videos and K-drama often contain very little true "Korean-ness," the receiver can quickly consume the product and still recognize its Korean "coolness." Since *manga* is print, it demands far more devotion and active participation from the reader, making it far less accessible, literally and abstractly, than web or television-based visual media. *Manga* and *anime*, which are mostly fantasy, do not sell the Japanese way of life or make the country relatable. While they are Japanese, they do not give the reader any concrete depictions of Japan. Studies of *manga* readers found that they often used the product merely as an escapist tool.⁷⁵ In contrast, Hallyu sells a different type of escapism, but one the viewer could conceptually envision attaining. In essence, this

⁷⁰ Geun 2009, 145; Ryoo 2009, 141

⁷¹ Chua 2012, 70

⁷² Mori 2008, 140; Hirata 2008, 154

⁷³ Armstrong 2008, 156

⁷⁴ Simons 2003, 174

⁷⁵ Bouissou 2012, 58

combination makes the South Korean lifestyle not only seem achievable, but also desirable and attractive.⁷⁶

East Asian consumers also view South Korea as more “Asian” than Japan, putting it in a far more advantageous position from a regional standpoint. Strong Japan-U.S. bilateral relations, fostered by post-World War II reconstruction, pulled Japan westward; despite the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea after the Korean War, the stigma did not stick to the latter as strongly as it did the former. As such, Japan was often seen as “America’s Japan,” with values more aligned with the West than the East.⁷⁷ Though Japanese dramas are well-produced, many Asian consumers complain that the dramas are too liberal and Western, especially concerning sexuality.⁷⁸ In contrast, K-dramas and other Korean Wave media successfully weave modernity with traditional Asian values. K-dramas “...set in Seoul showed a sophisticated urban lifestyle while focusing on family values and relationships,” providing an attractive ideal to a rising Chinese middle class.⁷⁹ K-pop incorporates “...all the latest musical idioms and dance moves borrowed from the United States” but tones down the sexuality to craft a perfect package of “cutting-edge styles and cultural familiarity.”⁸⁰ By melding Western style with Asian sensibilities, South Korean cultural industries have created an irresistibly attractive product. As one Chinese college student noted, “...South Korea and America have similar political systems and economies. But it is easier to accept that lifestyle from South Koreans because they are culturally closer to us. We feel we can live like them in a few years.”⁸¹ Interestingly, the respondent not only recognized South Korea’s economic strength, but its democracy as well, signifying not only an appreciation for Korea’s cultural products but its political system as well. Due to various factors like a less militaristic history, more accessible media content, and an Eastern values system, Hallyu is well-positioned to reap considerable soft power for South Korea. Brand Korea exudes modern “cool” and economic allure in the context of conservative Asian values that other East Asian nations find appealing.

NOW WHAT?

Though South Korea possesses far more soft power potential than Japan, it faces the same problem of translating cultural influence into actual political influence. As Olins noted, brand effectiveness takes a long time to materialize and is very hard to measure.⁸² However, certain trends suggest that South Korea’s cultural plateau gives it immense influence in the region, specifically with regard to North Korea and the development of regional identities and consumer taste.

⁷⁶ Lee 2009, 145

⁷⁷ Daliot-Bul 2009, 254

⁷⁸ Lin and Tong 2008, 115

⁷⁹ Armstrong 2008, 156

⁸⁰ Armstrong 2008, 156-157

⁸¹ Ryo 2009, 145

⁸² Olins 2005, 193

Arguably, the South is already exerting cultural soft power on its unruly northern brother, sparking discussion that Hallyu might even bring down Kim Jong Un's dictatorial regime.⁸³ While these claims are optimistic fantasy, Hallyu is certainly impacting relations between the two Koreas. Since the partition of the peninsula in 1950, the North has always domestically painted the South as a poor, regressive backwater. The fact that South Korea's annual GDP growth is actually larger than the North's entire economy highlights the absurdity of the claim.⁸⁴ Though official statistics do not exist, defectors say that South Korean music is widespread in the North despite an official ban.⁸⁵ The appeal is obvious considering the differences; music videos from the South depict a vibrant, lively society, while North Korean music videos usually consist of static shots of food or sequences of productive workers.⁸⁶ With lyrics like "Socialism defended by our party's red flag is ours," North Korean pop is just dreary.⁸⁷ K-pop, on the other hand, serves as escapism for an impoverished populace, while simultaneously negating ruling party propaganda. The fact that many Northern citizens envy the wealth of their Southern counterparts despite lifetimes of communist indoctrination illustrates the viability of Hallyu as a cultural and political force.

Though Hallyu might facilitate reconciliation, it could also complicate the process. Since North Korean citizens have little to no understanding of capitalism, they often believe that all South Korean citizens live glamorously with little effort. When defectors successfully arrive in Seoul, they usually face overwhelming disillusionment as their preconceived notions fall apart.⁸⁸ Even after years in the South and extensive government-funded adjustment programs, 58 percent of defectors miss life in the North.⁸⁹ The unrealistic expectations fueled by K-pop products might contribute to this feeling.

While this phenomenon remains problematic, Hallyu might also facilitate a transition to reunification. The 50-year North-South partition has already resulted in language variance and different dialects on either side. Language barriers have proven to be a huge hurdle for Northern defectors, especially in the search for employment.⁹⁰ The spread of Hallyu products across the North may help its citizens adjust to the otherwise alien dialect of their southern neighbors. Also, to many young adults in the South, North Korean citizens have already become an othered group. Perhaps the spread of a common culture across the 39th parallel will enable dialogue on pop cultural products, reducing the perceived foreignness between the two groups.

⁸³ Radio Free Asia, "North Korea 'Quietly Opening,'" 10 May, 2012

⁸⁴ Pethokoukus 2011, n.p.

⁸⁵ "South Korean pop culture 'widespread' in North Korea - defector group," *BBC*, 10 December, 2010

⁸⁶ Howard 2006, 163

⁸⁷ Fuqua 2011, 90

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 92

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 93

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 91; Radio Free Asia, "North Korean Teen Defectors Face Huge Challenges," 21 March, 2007

Hallyu could not only give South Korea unprecedented influence in the shaping of a united peninsular culture, but in the production of a pan-regional one as well. Hallyu products are mostly consumed by women across East Asia, especially in China and Japan. Though women have been politically and historically marginalized in the region, Hallyu has economically empowered some of them.⁹¹ Previously, many middle to lower class women in Asia, relegated to the home, left responsibility for major financial transactions to their husbands.⁹² However, Hallyu fandom motivated women to spend money on their own desires. For example, traveling to popular K-drama filming sites, which East Asian women have started doing en masse, represents a form of female financial independence previously unseen in the region.⁹³ By economically empowering women, Hallyu has tapped a market willing to spend money on its products. Women from Japan, China, Thailand, Taiwan, and other countries then form transnational relationships based on these shared consumer tastes.⁹⁴ Hallyu has homogenized regional consumer cultural consumption.

Hallyu also changed the way Asian women perceive the “perfect woman” on a mental and physical level. Though K-dramas still encourage women to act conservatively and put marriage or relationships first, they also display women who make independent decisions and hold jobs. This emphasis on both the modern and traditional has created a hybrid ideal where “...a happy modern woman should be career-minded while dedicated to a man/relationship at the same time.”⁹⁵ While women still see marriage as necessary, they have also begun to see personal and financial fulfillment as a worthy goal. Even more intriguing, Hallyu has the potential to nurture a universal beauty standard across Asia. Thousands of women, mostly from China and Japan, travel to Seoul to receive cosmetic facial surgery.⁹⁶ One Chinese “plastic surgery tourist” told the BBC that since “...all Korean women are beautiful,” she wanted plastic surgery to look just like them.⁹⁷ With their omnipresence across Asia, Hallyu stars have set a new universal beauty standard that transcends stereotypes and culture. A century ago, Japanese imperialists labeled Koreans inferior and ugly; now Japanese women receive plastic surgery to look Korean.⁹⁸

By making East Asians not only desire the South Korean lifestyle, but also emulate the way it looks and buy what it buys, the country has accumulated an unprecedented amount of cultural soft resources. According to the 2008 soft power survey, 79 percent of Chinese, 78 percent of Japanese, and 83 percent of Vietnamese view the spread of South Korean culture as positive, and “have a high

⁹¹ Oh 2009, 431

⁹² Lin and Tong 2008, 109

⁹³ Hirata 2008, 143

⁹⁴ Mori 2008, 141

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ “Cosmetic surgery on the rise due to Hallyu Wave?” *Her World Plus*, 23 April, 2012

⁹⁷ “A Korean nip and tuck to look like a film star,” *BBC*, 11 November, 2011

⁹⁸ Oh 2009, 447

respect for South Korean cultural power.”⁹⁹ This cultural soft power has materialized by influencing regional standards on gender norms and consumer behavior by making them more “Korean.” While this influence may seem insignificant, as Olins mentioned, the impact of branding takes time to develop.

South Korea is on a path to recognizing its soft power as a both a reputational, representational, and regional force. Hall defines a reputational power as a country that has, as Olins advocated, found its international niche. For example, “A reputation for giving aid might dispel suspicions that a state has exploitative intentions.”¹⁰⁰ With its ability to appealingly blend Western sensibilities with Asian values, South Korea could paint itself as a bridge between East and West. A representational power can “...shape beliefs about things other than reputations” by manipulating the subjectivity of target groups, as South Korea has done.¹⁰¹ China represents a good target for this representational power. While China officially supports the Northern regime now, perhaps tomorrow’s Communist Party leaders will recognize the cultural juggernaut of the South. How will their official ally, their impoverished and erratic neighbor, seem in comparison? Finally, South Korea could possibly function as the fulcrum for regional integration. Zhu Majie notes that as cultures become increasingly homogenized, states are more likely to regionalize, which may help foster a multipolar world.¹⁰² With colonial animosities possibly cooling due to cultural exchange, Michael R. Auslin sees Japan and Korea as East Asia’s potential “New Core.”¹⁰³ Bilateral cooperation between the East Asia’s second largest economy and the region’s cultural tastemaker would not only lead to a more secure, democratic East Asia, but also help form a bulwark against China’s ascendancy and foster more regional cooperation.¹⁰⁴ An increasingly homogenized popular culture could help Asia coalesce into a more discernable bloc, giving it more international influence.

Soft power is a slippery term. While the idea of leveraging influence as a negotiating tool is tempting, merely labeling a policy as “soft” does not make it so. Even more difficult than qualifying soft power is actualizing it. A large reserve of soft resources does not always translate into cultural influence. Japan encountered this problem its cultural products went global. The country’s imperial past and clumsy handling of its soft power initiative made converting its cultural influence into political power difficult. With its relatively unblemished historical record, stereotype-smashing products, and ability to blend East and West sensibilities, South Korea is in a far better place to implement soft power than Japan. By homogenizing regional consumer tastes, it already has. Many

⁹⁹ Whitney 2009, 22

¹⁰⁰ Hall 2010, 209; Olins 2005, 178

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 210

¹⁰² Majie 2002, 61

¹⁰³ Auslin 2005, 472

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 474

consumers of Hallyu products not only cite the good itself as appealing, but also the South Korean lifestyle and political system. Whether providing North Korean residents with views of a different life or changing the way Japanese girls perceive beauty, the Hallyu Wave offers South Korea the opportunity to wield a strong representational role in East Asia as a trendsetter. This will most likely lead to increased regional integration by providing a standardized, transnational pop culture supported by the spending habits of middle to upper-middle class women. While Hallyu's potential in the West remains mostly untested outside of the ubiquitous "Gangnam Style," its positive reception in Asia signifies a victory for South Korean foreign policy and a wellspring of future soft power potential.

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