

Is South Korea the New Quintessential Representation of Soft Power?

Written by Daniele Carminati

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DANIELE CARMINATI, SEP 18 2022

This article is the last of a three-part investigation of the capabilities of major East Asian powers, from a soft power perspective. The first covered China and its all-encompassing international ‘charm offensive,’ and the second dealt with Japan and its multifaceted global appeal. This one will cover what can be seen as the latecomer, South Korea, but the reality is more complex than it appears, and the capable country may be catching up fast, or even leapfrogging its competitors in certain domains.

Hardly a month passes without a new show of South Korea’s burgeoning cultural might, from winning the Oscar with the movie *Parasite*, to the accolade of awards and praises that ‘k-pop’ groups such as BTS and Blackpink are receiving internationally. And this seems to be just the beginning, as Korean style and fashion, TV series, cosmetics, and certainly food are all getting increasing attention across the globe. All these developments can be investigated through the lens of soft power, the power of attraction in international relations. But what does this phenomenon mean? Can South Korea be seen as the new ‘quintessential’ soft power?

To begin with, why ‘new’? To many, Japan comes to mind when thinking about a pop-culture superpower with the multi-decade long (and still present) success of its anime and manga, its food, its advanced tech products, and its overall touristic appeal. Surely, the United States (US) can also come to mind, with its global brands, Hollywood, and the (faltering) American Dream. And why ‘quintessential’? Although I do believe that soft power goes well beyond the sole cultural sphere, as it encompasses aspects of economic interactions, the concept is still often understood in a relatively narrow cultural way, which is masterfully represented by South Korea’s flourishing international appeal.

Few, if any, would deny this exceptional development. But how do South Korea’s leaders and policymakers develop, promote, and take advantage of this remarkable portfolio of attractive national features? How does it compare to its regional and global competitors? And crucially, is the country’s soft appeal—the non-coercive kind—as narrow as it seems, or there are other overlooked aspects beyond the sole cultural sphere?

To answer these questions, it is first necessary to examine what does constitute South Korea’s portfolio of attractive resources, and to do so it can be helpful to subdivide it into three categories; the sociocultural, the economic, and the political, although these may overlap and be combined when advancing strategies of attraction and influence.

First of all, it is crucial to acknowledge that this success just did not happen from one day to another, but it was a skillful and well-funded public-private partnership that started in the late 1990s aimed at ‘manufacturing’ and showcasing cultural assets. This collaboration mimicked similar strategies implemented to promote more tangible assets, such as electronics, shipbuilding, and automaking. In the coming years, several leaders embraced this policy that “prioritized cultural exports as a means of enhancing South Korea’s national image and fostering economic growth.”

The so-called ‘Korean Wave’—or Hallyu in its original language denomination—was gaining momentum, and a stream of major achievements followed. In 2012, the rapper Psy released the global hit song “Gangnam Style”, which is still one of the most watched YouTube videos ever and it was danced in clubs as much as in schools. In 2018, the boy

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band BTS not only was breaking records after records thanks to their widely appealing sound and style, but they were even appointed as special presidential envoy to the United Nations “for future generations and culture,” and their speech was watched live by over one million fans worldwide. At the 2020’s Oscars, the movie *Parasite* made history when it became the first non-English language movie to win the Best Picture award. In late 2021, the series *Squid Game* became a global phenomenon, in spite of its gruesome content and not-so-subtle criticism of Korean society and beyond.

Examples of South Korea’s sociocultural appeal abound, but what about the economic and political spheres? In the economic realm, soft power can originate from aid and the ensuing goodwill that these initiatives are expected to foster, while hoping that certain values and ideals could be embraced by the benefitting countries. In this case, soft power is not the money as the financial transaction per se, but the surrounding halo in the form of a reputational boost. Several countries provide assistance in multiple forms, such as China and the US’s competing regimes in Africa, or Japan’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) in East and Southeast Asia. The European Union does it too, through various forms of external cooperation. Although South Korea is stepping up its efforts, its assistance projects have faced some challenges, and more generally the country still “lags behind wealthy governments in the percentage of GDP that it allocates for development aid.”

Moving to the political realm, we can observe a similar situation in which South Korea’s leaders and policymakers seem still unwilling to take advantage of their cultural clout to promote democratic ideals or human rights, or more generally their own world views. In other words, South Korea may be punching above its weight from a cultural perspective, but it is taking a more cautious approach when considering advancing political principles and standards. Its neighbor, Japan, has been steadily advancing democratic assistance as part of its foreign policy. China, deliberately or not, is exporting all kinds of principles and standards through its Belt and Road Initiative, although it is still uncertain—and perhaps too early to say—to what extent these efforts have been successful. If anything, Xi Jinping’s masterplan is creating or expanding several connectivity channels from which soft power can originate, such as through physical and digital infrastructure (e.g., high-speed railways, bridges, ports, 5G networks, smart cities), or people-to-people interactions (e.g., exchange programs, traineeships, conferences, workshops). For the time being, South Korea might be unable (and unwilling) to directly compete with China, or even Japan, but the New Southern Policy—introduced in 2017—might be a step in the right direction. Thanks to it, ties with ASEAN and India could be enhanced in areas such as infrastructure and digital innovation, thus boosting its reputation as a capable and reliable international actor.

With that said, soft power is as much about developing appealing resources, as it is about promoting them to foreign audiences. The main instrument to do so is through public diplomacy. Governments can decide to forge partnerships with local or foreign private entities to devise and spread the word about their achievements and initiatives, such as when granting visa-free visits to international fans or scholarships to the developing world.

So how does South Korea do public diplomacy? It turns out, pretty well. Speaking of scholarships, the country has implemented mobility programs such as the Global Korea Scholarship. Studies show that the initiative appears to be successful since “recipients evaluate[d] Korea more positively” after their mobility programs. Another prominent example of public diplomacy is closely tied to the cultural sphere, and more specifically to the power of Korean pop music. The group BTS not only gave a speech at the UN but it is also partnering with UNICEF in what has been described as celebrity diplomacy, a tangible illustration of how cultural influence can be a force for good, beyond commercial success. More broadly, South Korea’s efforts are said to embrace the principle of “networked public diplomacy,” with a heavy focus on digital media, and to be more successful in doing so than its Japanese counterpart in spite (or perhaps because) of its more centralized network controlled by few dominant actors. Overall, South Korea may not be testing entirely novel public diplomacy strategies, but it seems capable of refining and taking advantage of existing ones.

To what extent the above statement reflects South Korea’s international standing? Is the country widely admired and respected abroad because of its achievements and conduct? How do neighboring powers as much as major ones compare when examining their national global appeal? Although measuring soft power is a contentious matter, the Global Soft Power Index is a remarkable attempt to do so through a careful selection of criteria aimed at assessing

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the power of attraction. The index ranks each country's global familiarity, reputation, and influence, paired with seven categories of attractive features (Business & Trade, Governance, International Relations, Culture & Heritage, Media & Communication, Education & Science, People & Values).

The index, first published in 2020, is now at its third edition, and it has expanded to include COVID-19 response as an additional category of analysis. In 2020, South Korea was 14th, the US ranked 1st, while neighboring Japan and China were 4th and 5th respectively. In 2021, South Korea climbed to the 11th spot, the US dropped to the 6th, China fell into the 8th, while Japan entered the podium in 2nd place. Germany was 1st. In 2022, South Korea dropped one spot to the 12th, the US regained the top spot (1st), China regained some ground and was 4th, followed by Japan (5th). When observing more closely the actual scores, South Korea climbed from 48.3 in 2020, to 51.3 in 2021, and 52.9 in 2022. Overall, this means that the country's appeal has been growing, but some other countries have performed better.

However, when closely examining last year's three main categories of analysis, South Korea's familiarity was well-above global average (7.1/10), its reputation was fair (6.5/10), but its influence was quite low (4.7/10). Both China and Japan scored considerably higher, except for China's reputation (6.4). That said, this should not come as a surprise, as this is a global index and both familiarity and reputation might be markedly higher in circumscribed areas such as Southeast Asia, but its overall influence—or perception of influence—is still inferior to its powerful neighbors and unlikely to grow substantially in the foreseeable future. This condition has also been substantiated by a survey of G-20 countries in which South Korea's soft power was still perceived as weaker than its peers, as it was still unable to convert its potential into preferred outcomes.

All considered, these may be unfair or at least premature conclusions. The country might be well-aware of what can be achieved via soft power and what cannot be, while also being aware of its diffuse nature. A prominent example of what it can achieve, supported by data, is commercial success. As reported in *Foreign Affairs*:

In 2019, South Korea exported \$12.3 billion in pop culture (up from a mere \$189 million in 1998), including computer games, musical tours, and cosmetics. By one estimate, the number of South Koreans employed in cultural fields grew to 644,847 in 2017—three percent of the entire workforce. BTS alone is an economic powerhouse. According to the Hyundai Research Institute, the band generates an estimated \$3.5 billion per year in economic activity. In 2017, around 800,000 tourists—about seven percent of all arrivals in South Korea—visited because of their interest in the group.

Conversely, what may not be achievable with the sole power of attraction, is a reunification of the Korean peninsula. However, this does not mean that North Koreans are immune to the appeal of the 'Korean Wave'—quite the contrary—but media have to be consumed underground and the risk for users is high. Cautious soft power strategies can still play a part towards a peaceful resolution, but these should be paired with more traditional diplomatic approaches.

Beyond these major concerns, other challenges as much as opportunities abound. Observers have warned South Korean leaders and policymakers about the instrumentalization of this attractive wave, which has already been criticized domestically in several instances. Others noted that the country's "push to brand itself as a multicultural nation, attract foreign migrants, and mitigate its demographic challenges has had mixed results and revealed inequities in South Korean society." This is in stark contrast with the actual message that 'k-pop' appears to advance, "a cultural mashup of languages, visual styles, and dance." On a more positive note, experts recognize the chance to make use of national appeal as a normative tool to promote values. How does this work? "By sparking an interest and a desire of emulation in foreign audiences, it [should] foster a sense of collective identity, familiarity and belonging." As compared to other major soft power promoters, South Korea is generally perceived as unthreatening in addition to being 'cool'. Hence, its middle power status could be seen as an advantage, as its conduct should be less prone to contradictions between words and actions.

To conclude, South Korea's extraordinary ascent is unlikely to be a temporary phenomenon, and it could also be seen as one more step towards a rebalance to Asia as a sociocultural influencer and trendsetter. That said, its

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leaders would be increasingly pushed to decide whether they “only want to export entertainment” (arguably the safest route) or they also want the country to punch above its weight beyond the cultural (and commercial) dimension. In other words, does the country want to be perceived as a quintessential-but-narrow soft power or as a comprehensive attractive influencer willing to fully ‘ride the (k-)wave’?

Ultimately, the one certainty is that “South Korean pop culture has grabbed global attention”, how this potential could be effectively used to advance policies for the (inter)national and greater good, remains to be determined.

About the author:

Daniele Carminati is a lecturer in International Relations and Diplomacy at the Beijing Foreign Studies University and holds a PhD in International Relations from the City University of Hong Kong. His research interest revolves around the sociocultural, economic, and political implications of globalization in East and Southeast Asia with a particular focus on soft power dynamics. Daniele is also a former commissioning editor at E-International Relations.