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KPOP DIPLOMACY-SOUTH KOREA'S SOFT POWER

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The Korean or Hallyu wave is a phenomenon, which promotes South Korea internationally and is creating many economic benefits, especially as a consequence of creating an image of the country, which appeals to foreigners (Lee v Bae, Chang, Eung in Dae, 2017). The term is used in correlation to many things, such as cultural practices, tourism, politics, food, fashion, language, movies, etc. (Kim, 2007). It is an ambiguous umbrella term that has since focused on the expansion of South Korean pop culture, specifically the Kpop music genre, all over the world. Because of the worldwide expansion and impact it represents a soft power moment for South Korea: "The Korean wave can contribute to its soft power by "/.../ extending a network effect of Korean popular culture, and also producing internationally influential heroes and celebrities." (Lee, 2009, p. 123).

However, Kpop diplomacy is a double-edged sword. While it benefits the country's image and popularity, unqualified carriers of diplomacy can cause even greater damage because of the scale of their popularity. The aim of this analysis is to explain what the Hallyu wave, and specifically Kpop diplomacy, mean for South Korea's soft power; from the beginning in China to the present in which Kpop addresses the whole international community on one hand, and being banned in China on the other.

The beginnings of the Hallyu and Kpop

After the Second World War and the Korean war, South Korea began establishing a new identity. The country had to rebrand or create a new personality, which would move on from the hardships of the wars.¹ Its economic and social status was doing well in the 1980s, but then the 1997 IMF crisis happened. This was a large blow to the morale of South Koreans. However, after the crisis, the investment and consumption of Korean products expanded all over Asia, Europe, and America (Jang and Paik, 2012, str. 200). Nevertheless, it had the most political, economic, and cultural impact on Japan and China.

¹ Similarly, Japan's pop culture has been a part of the countries' rebrand after the second world war. Its international reputation was tarnished, therefore soft diplomacy was a promising strategy to improve it (Kato, 2014.).

The term Hallyu wave was first used in China and it deepened the diplomatic relations the two countries had (Bae, Chang, Park, and Kim, 2017). South Korean cultural characteristics appealed to East Asian nations because they presented a blend of a culture similar to theirs and the modern Western culture. This is how South Korea gained influence in countries with which it had diplomatic, political, and economic relations (Ayhan, 2016). We can say here that the new identity gave incentive to the domestic situation, which spilled into the international community.

The Kpop music genre is South Korean pop music and as part of the Hallyu wave it gained power and influence, not only in the sphere of foreigners adopting Korea's cultural characteristics but also in political terms. Boy and girl bands perform pop music with synchronised dancing while representing everything beautiful and creating standards, which fans wish to follow (Sobur, Darmawan, Kusumalestari, Listiani, Ahmadi and Albana, 2018). However, South Korea has used the rising popularity of Kpop as a sort of unofficial diplomacy. In recent years many Kpop artists (also idols) perform soft diplomacy by attending diplomatic events, or even just by being in the public eye and popular. It has largely benefited Korea's relations with China, and Japan, where the Hallyu wave started (Oh, 2016).

From the 1990s onwards, Kpop has changed the essence and image of Korea in the international community. Idols like BoA, Psy, and more have contributed to the industry now worth billions and are conquering the world (How did K-Pop conquer the world, n. d.). Conquering the world in a sense where it affects specifically young people through which the industry is gaining even more influence. Fans immerse themselves into Korean culture by watching and listening to Kpop. They form parasocial relationships with the idols and begin to subconsciously adopt certain Korean cultural characteristics; a process of internalising certain beliefs. To live or look like Kpop artists one must buy Korean products, and services, adopt Korean cultural practices, etc. "Korean stars are used as marketing points to gain the image and high reputation of leading the latest trends" (ibidem). Even the term idol insinuates that they are someone whom others look up to and these idols represent diplomats in the industry. They must behave well and keep a clean image; a sort of facade (Tai, 2020). But specifically, they present an ideal of beauty and behaviour, which influences their fans, who then buy Korean products in motivation to become like their idols.

Global recognition and social media perception

The expansion of Kpop has benefited Korea's economic growth and global recognition. It brings in foreign investments, promotes tourism, improves intra-Asian relations, and more. Since 1989 the number of foreigners visiting Korea has increased fourfold (Eun et al, 2017). Foreigners visit as regular tourists, medical/cosmetic tourists, international students, as well as social media content creators. Specifically, the latter, with the new age and Generation Z (Gen Z), presents an important part of the expansion of the Hallyu wave.

Social media content creators make content for platforms such as Tiktok, Youtube, and Instagram where they inform and influence the viewers, which seem to be, besides Kpop culture or just Korean culture in general, interested in political and social affairs as well. For example, through the end of February and the beginning of March 2022, South Korea held its presidential elections. We saw many creators speak about it, and on TikTok, videos on the topic hold thousands of views. There was a downhearted response to the end of Moon Jae-in's mandate, the reason being his amicable relationship with the band BTS and other idols. He brought them with him to diplomatic functions. Many fans, without previous knowledge of his policies or specific views, were sad to see his political party's candidate come second. They liked his incorporation of Kpop idols into serious diplomatic functions.

Everything that is connected to idols is important to fans, thinking about how it would affect them and in general the political state of the country they idolise. Gen Z is aware of social issues because they are exposed to them through different social media platforms. User-specific content combines their interests, with awareness raising on specific issues with these interests (Carnegie, 2022). In our case, this means that followers of the Hallyu wave are not only following pop culture content but are also aware of political and social issues concerning South Korea, like presidential elections, diplomatic negotiations, etc. It is likely that they also pay attention to diplomatic relations between South Korea and their country, because of the specific social media algorithms.

Pop culture diplomacy

South Korea is following the steps of Japan, which has used many different interesting pop culture characteristics which appeal to the world as part of its diplomacy. Brands like manga

and anime are a part of a major rebrand after the Second World War. “To gain its interest, Japan uses its culture as a tool of diplomacy”. (Safafa, 2017, p. 4). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan has introduced terms like “Anime Ambassador” as part of its primary tools of cultural diplomacy. South Korea is coming close to that. There are many examples of Kpop groups executing certain diplomatic tasks.

Amid the 2018-2019 Korean peace process, which ended in the Panmunjom agreement to formally end the Korean War, many diplomatic exchanges took place. Events like the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games and the inter-Korean summit meeting lead to the announcement of the Joint Panmunjom declaration (Shin, 2022). The declaration promised “/.../peace, prosperity and reunification” (Panmunjom Declaration on Peace, Prosperity and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula, preamble)². In 2018 there was a concert organised in Pyongyang, North Korea. Amongst other South Korean Acts, a Kpop group called Red Velvet performed, having been the first to do so since the beginning of the 21st century. North Korean president, Kim Jong-un, attended the performance saying: “We should hold culture and art performances frequently /.../.” (Red Velvet Perform for North Korean Leader Kim Jong-Un in Rare Pyongyang Concert, 2018). This signifies that soft diplomacy through cultural diplomacy is a step in the right direction even in the tensest relations.

In 2018, at the 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), BTS became the first Kpop group to speak in front of the UN. However, even more prominent was their speech and performance at the 76th UNGA in 2021, where the group highlighted the power of the new generation, warned about climate change, and the importance of vaccines amid the Covid-19 pandemic (Nakamura, 2021). Their performance has millions of views on Youtube. Many people who are not necessarily interested in discussing problems of the international community, watched BTS deliver their speech. Watching your favourite band highlight certain issues most likely impacts your awareness of them and their promotion (Hermanto and Salindeho, 2021).

This event means that the international community is aware of the influence South Korean idols have. Their intentions and ambitions mean something, and this is the soft power they give to

² *Panmunjom Declaration on Peace, Prosperity and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula*, signed 27th April, 2018 in Kaesong.

South Korea. We can tell that in recent years more Kpop bands include non-Korean idols, which represent a link in relations between their home country and South Korea.

The Hallyu as a potential threat

This has created some controversies in the Kpop community, which would rather than improve amicable relations with other countries, bring disputes. For example, in 2016, a 16-year-old Taiwanese idol waved Taiwan's flag on a television show. This stirred not only the fan community but also political significance and commentary. Chinese nationalists insisted the idol should be punished, while Taiwanese people supported her (Buckley and Ramzy, 2016). In 2021, two Chinese idols congratulated the Chinese Communist Party, which received a lot of backlash from Koreans, since idols represent South Korea to the international community. They disagreed with the so-called 'communist praising' since it supposedly does not support the values of South Korea (Istad, Gibson and Curran, 2022).

If the South Korean government would make idols official carriers of their foreign policy, these incidents could cause irreparable damage to their relations with other countries. Through this, we see that idols, intentionally or unintentionally, have a big impact on diplomatic affairs. They affect relations by just being themselves, because of the scale of their popularity. Nevertheless, it is easier to solve these disputes if idols are not officially appointed by the government.

It is also worth mentioning that certain anti-Hallyu movements have started in China and Japan, where ".../ the popularity of Korean cultural media products became too large an influential force to be perceived as a threat" (Oh, 2016, p. 1). The Hallyu wave first started in China and it is reaching an end there as well, even if it is spreading elsewhere. The Chinese government has recently initiated measures to restrict Kpop fan culture since it supposedly manipulates minors and ".../endangers social governance." (Valeriano and Nissen, 2022). This could possibly indicate that others will follow in banning fan culture and limiting the influence pop culture has on people.

Concluding remarks

The Kpop industry produces South Korean pop culture diplomats - idols. Idols are unofficial carriers of South Korea's soft diplomacy, which because of the scale of their popularity,

influence the international community. The Hallyu wave, which traces its beginnings in China and Japan, has invaded the global society. It has benefited the country's economic state and created a spillover into other industries, such as tourism, cosmetics, etc. South Korea uses this soft power moment to create a specific image in the world, which benefits diplomatic exchanges, like the Korean peace process. The love for Korean culture, movies, language, history, etc., is something the South Korean government uses to its advantage, to promote the country. Idols influence trends among young people, which can range from positive to negative from promoting better mental health to promoting unattainable beauty standards. They also affect the bias followers of the Hallyu have for the country, for example in following the dispute with North Korea. Soon the Kpop industry could become part of the official Foreign policy instruments of South Korea. However, it can represent a risk. From idol 'slip-ups' of bilateral importance to the ban of Kpop fandom culture in China, it can quickly lead to a downfall of the industry, which would make the efforts of improving international reputation and relations futile.

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