

**Hallyu as Soft Power**

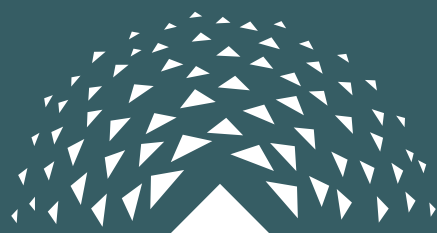
**The Success Story of the Korean Wave  
and its Use in South Korea's Foreign Policy**

Hallyu mint Soft Power

A koreai hullám sikertörténete

és felhasználása Dél-Korea külpolitikájában

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# KKI Policy Brief

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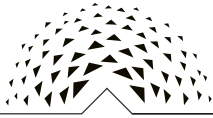
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**Abstract:** The Korean Wave is taking over the world, achieving great success in areas such as music and cinematography, and making Korean culture increasingly attractive. Culture being a crucial resource of soft power, which in turn serves as a powerful tool in international relations, the South Korean government is trying to take advantage of its improved national image and international influence. This analysis provides an overview of the relationship between the Korean government and the Korean Wave, how the perception of Korea has changed thanks to its cultural outflow, and how the government tries to use this to its advantage.

**Keywords:** Hallyu, Korean Wave, South Korea, soft power, cultural diplomacy, pop culture, K-pop, K-drama, Korean culture, South Korean government

**Összefoglalás:** Az utóbbi években a koreai hullám meghódította a világot, nagy sikereket ért el különböző területeken, például a zenében és a filmművészetben, ami egyre vonzóbbá teszi a koreai kultúrát. A kultúra a puha hatalom egyik kulcsfontosságú forrása, amely pedig hatékony eszközként szolgál a nemzetközi kapcsolatokban, így a dél-koreai kormány igyekszik kihasználni javuló nemzeti imázsát és növekvő nemzetközi befolyását. Az elemzés célja, hogy áttekintést adjon a koreai kormány és a koreai hullám közötti kapcsolatáról, arról, hogyan változott meg Korea megítélése a kulturális térnyerésének köszönhetően, és a kormány hogyan igyekszik ezt a maga javára fordítani.

**Kulcsszavak:** Hallyu, koreai hullám, Dél-Korea, puha hatalom, kulturális diplomácia, popkultúra, K-pop, D-dráma, koreai kultúra, dél-koreai kormány

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, South Korea (also referred to as Korea) has become a cultural powerhouse, with a large share of its [export being cultural products](#). The Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) is sweeping across the globe, getting the country, its culture, and language known and appreciated. With millions of fans around the world, this cultural phenomenon serves as a great resource of soft power for the country. According to different soft power indexes, such as [Brand Finance](#), there has been a significant improvement in South Korea's ratings over the years. For example, South Korea ranked second in Monocle's December 2020/January 2021 issue, only overtaken by Germany and called a [soft power superstar](#).

Located between two great powers (China and Japan) not only physically but also in terms of population and economy, soft power is especially important for South Korea to achieve its ambitions as a middle power on the international scene. With its popular culture the most dominant resource of soft power in recent years, the Korean government has actively supported the cultural sector and related

industries to promote the expansion and growth of Hallyu. After a long period of Shino-centrism followed by Japanese modern industrialism, we are witnessing a [new wave of culture emerging](#) in Asia that goes beyond the region, reaching millions of people in the Middle East, Europe, Africa, Australia, and on the American continent.

Aware of the success, the Korean government tries to take advantage of this important resource of soft power in its public diplomacy, as it can serve as a great tool in foreign affairs if used wisely. Amid today's global challenges, especially the Covid-19 pandemic, it is especially important to find ways to utilize this opportunity, although keeping the Korean Wave sustainable in the given circumstances also poses challenges.

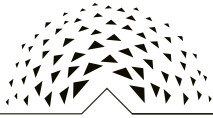
This paper defines the terms 'soft power' and 'Hallyu' or 'Korean Wave', and it presents how Hallyu serves as a soft power resource for South Korea. The next section, using previous literature as well as English and Korean language news sources, presents an overview of the government support concerning Hallyu, how the image of Korea has changed thanks to the Korean Wave, and how the government utilizes this opportunity in its diplomacy. The paper also presents the key elements in the future of using Hallyu in diplomacy and sustaining Hallyu itself, while also presenting some initiatives the government has announced in this respect.

## **HALLYU AS A SOURCE OF SOFT POWER**

### ***SOFT POWER IN SOUTH KOREA***

The concept of [soft power](#) was introduced by Joseph S. Nye in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. He defined soft power as a co-optive, non-violent way of "getting others to want what you want." This idea rests on [three pillars](#): attractiveness of culture, political values, and foreign policies. With the help of these soft power resources, states can [shape both their reputation](#) as well as their international relations. Lee Geun names [five categories](#) based on the goals of using soft power: "(1) to improve external security environment by projecting peaceful and attractive images of a country; (2) to mobilize other countries' supports for one's foreign and security policies; (3) to manipulate other countries' way of thinking and preferences; (4) to maintain unity of a community or community of countries; (5) to increase approval ratings of a leader or domestic support of a government."

In the twenty-first century, soft power has played an increasingly important role in the [determination of national competitiveness](#), with culture and media communication as key elements. Language is an essential part of spreading culture, for example, English as the current *lingua franca* makes [spreading and](#)



[universalizing many facets of American culture very easy](#). This can be seen in the US export of popular culture, such as movies and TV series, music, books, as well as the number of international students studying in the country.

The rising economic powerhouses of East Asia also consider soft power and cultural diplomacy of increasing importance to [expand their geopolitical and global influence](#). South Korea is no exception to this. Upon looking at the three pillars of soft power, specifically the political values among them, we can conclude that Korea has a positive image, as it has undergone successful democratization and modernization while also achieving great economic success within a short period of time. South Korea's [foreign policies have undergone several changes under different governments](#). The Moon administration is trying to strengthen South Korea's position as a middle power with [significant focus on non-traditional issues](#) such as climate change, global health in the light of the pandemic, culture, and people-to-people engagement. Concerning culture, the Korean Wave has been apparent since the 1990s, ascending into a worldwide phenomenon in recent years, thus serving as the dominant resource of soft power to the country.

### ***THE KOREAN WAVE (HALLYU)***

The Korean Wave, also known as *Hallyu*, refers to the Korean popular culture phenomenon [outside of Korea](#) that first gained popularity in China and Southeast Asia in the 1990s, taking the rest of the world by storm in the late 2010s. The name [hanliu](#) (韩流) was first created by the Chinese press, referring to the growing popularity of Korean dramas and music in the country. It is especially popular among young people who enjoy Korean music (K-pop), TV series (K-drama), movies, fashion (K-fashion), and beauty products (K-beauty), especially skin care, and food. [Lee defines](#) the Korean Wave as

*A highly complex and multilayered formation that is composed of real, imagined, and hybrid cultural practices, a diverse range of lived experiences, and sets of powerful discourses which exist at national, translocal, and transnational levels (Lee 2008: 175).*

Most experts tend to divide Hallyu into four stages or waves, and while they usually agree on the substance of the different waves, there are slight differences in the designated time periods: Hallyu 1.0 (K-drama) stretched from the 1990s to the mid-2000s; Hallyu 2.0 (K-pop) from the mid-2000s to the early 2010s; Hallyu 3.0 (K-culture) from the early 2010s to the present/2019, with the present state of Hallyu 4.0 (K-style, New Hallyu) having started in 2020. However, there are no sharp boundaries, as these waves wash together and coexist in the sea of pop culture.

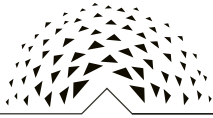
According to [Kim's 2015 study](#), Hallyu 2.0 is still going on in the present. Kim defines the timeline of Hallyu 3.0 as the foreseeable future, Hallyu 4.0 being in the distant future. A [Korean news portal](#) on the other hand, marks the

third wave from the early 2010s until 2019 and the start of the fourth wave in 2020. I would argue that Hallyu 2.0 ended in 2015, Hallyu 3.0 started in 2016, and now we are witnessing the transition into Hallyu 4.0. It is thanks to the global success of idol groups like Blackpink and [BTS, who were nominated for a Grammy Award](#), as well as hit dramas and movies such as *Descendants of the Sun* (2016), *Goblin* (2016), *Train to Busan* (2016), *Parasite* (2019), *Kingdom* (2019), and most recently *Squid Game* (2021). The movie *Parasite*, directed by Bong Joon-Ho, [won three Oscars](#) at the 2020 Academy Awards for best director, best original screenplay, and best picture. *Squid Game* is officially the [biggest show](#) in the history of the popular streaming site Netflix, becoming the number one show in over 90 countries, including the United States. At the [79<sup>th</sup> Golden Globe Awards](#) the series received three nominations, Best Supporting Actor (Television), Best Drama Series, and Best Television Actor (Drama Series), out of which Oh Young-Soo took home the award for Best Supporting Actor (Television).

[Hallyu 3.0](#) aims to take traditional Korean culture beyond music and cinematography and extend it to almost all areas of Korean culture, including the Korean language, the Korean alphabet, cuisine, and Korean-style houses. The main driving force with [Hallyu 4.0](#) is that the Hallyu stars make fans interested in different aspects of Korean culture, associating it with other related areas, such as tourism, the beauty industry, fashion, and electronics among other facets perceived to be part of culture as a whole.

With the [help of Social Network Services](#) like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, the above-mentioned phenomenon is already happening, as Korean celebrities and influencers are quite active on these platforms, many of them in possession of a large following. Many fans have started to [learn the Korean language](#) to understand dramas and song lyrics without subtitles, as well as to be able to communicate with their favourite stars. Media outlets have reported that after seeing [BTS make kimchi](#), a traditional Korean side dish, many of their fans have also tried the recipe. Also, when BTS member Jongkook was seen wearing [seungbok](#) (traditional monk clothes) at the airport, it brought over 20,000 orders in a day for the brand he wore, many from fans from abroad.

The Korean government has also realized the power of Hallyu as a [national success story](#). With the authoritarian rule over, South Korea has achieved democracy and economic growth, but it has also maintained its traditional values, even after undergoing a process of modernization. This [Korean-style development model](#) is well-represented by the Korean Wave, which some even consider a [missionary of East Asian cultural values](#). With its ever-growing popularity, contribution to the economy, tourism, and other sectors, while also creating a positive Korea-image, Hallyu has become a crucial [resource of soft power](#) for South Korea.



# HALLYU AND THE GOVERNMENT

## *GOVERNMENT SUPPORT*

The government has played a crucial role in the spread of Hallyu since the very beginning. Following the democratization of the country, the new government started to implement a series of reforms that helped create a [favourable environment](#) for Korean popular culture to thrive and spread around the world. Probably the most important government measure was the [elimination of censorship](#) in 1988, giving filmmakers more freedom, which created the first wave of Hallyu, driven by dramas. Another major driving force was the [investment into digital infrastructure](#) following the Asian financial crisis in 1997, which ensured the growth of the Korean wave. Other important government initiatives include [encouraging Korean conglomerates](#) (chaebol) to participate and invest in the cultural industry, [opening up the markets](#) to foreign competition, and [lifting the ban on foreign travel for Koreans](#), which has enabled Koreans to pursue education and career opportunities in Western countries, who can then bring back fresh new ideas and perspectives.

While this government support and investment was crucial, on its own it would not have been enough for the success that we are seeing today. According to [Hong Seok-Kyung](#), a renowned Hallyu researcher and professor at Seoul National University, popular culture does not produce results from material investments alone, and government support in itself does not export culture. What makes Hallyu a success story according to her is the [K-storytelling](#) that people all around the world can relate to when they explore a world completely different from their own. She emphasizes that Hallyu is an [acceptance phenomenon](#). When these interesting hybrid cultural products of high-quality production appear on global platforms like YouTube and Netflix, they [attract millions of fans](#) around the globe.

Reflecting this view, even though the South Korean government helped create the right environment for this cultural vogue, the first international success in the 1990s [came by surprise](#). With the government recognizing this success, culture and the further spreading of Hallyu has become an important [part of the national agenda](#). South Korea declared culture the [third pillar](#) of diplomatic power and has been supporting (but not directing) the cultural industry in different ways ever since. Concerning [material support](#), about one-third of all venture capital is distributed in the entertainment industry, and the development of high-tech internet infrastructure also receives significant funds.

In 2017, South Korean president Moon Jae-In [announced](#) that they aim to spread Korean film, TV, and music to a hundred million people within five years. With its slogan “Korea, growing with culture!” the [Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism](#) aims to boost economic growth through cultural export. In 2013 they established a [Popular Culture Industry Division](#) under the Ministry, then in 2020 they created a separate [Hallyu Support and Cooperation Division](#). In 2021 the

[Korea Federation of Content Creators](#) (KFCC) was established to support the creation and export of Hallyu content. Currently there are 33 [Cultural Centres](#) in 28 countries, nine Culture and Information Offices in eight countries, and 234 [King Sejong Institutes](#) in 82 countries, with one of the [Cultural Centres](#) and [King Sejong Institutes located in Hungary](#) since 2021. In 2003 the [Korea Foundation for Cultural Industries Exchange](#) (KOFICE) was founded to promote the Korean Wave, then in 2009 the [Korea Creative Content Agency](#) was established to support and promote Korean popular cultural content. To “spread the Hallyu with the growth of the related industries” is also explicitly part of South Korea’s [New Southern Policy Plus](#) initiative.

### ***THE IMAGE-SHAPING POWER OF HALLYU***

The success of Hallyu has shaped the image of South Korea. Not too far back in the past, when most people across the world thought of Korea, the first thought that crossed their mind seemed to be on the [negative side](#), for example North Korea’s authoritarian regime, the Kim family, nuclear threat, the Korean War, instability, violent student protests, and poverty. With the success of the Korean Wave, this image has transformed for the better, putting positive aspects and values at the forefront instead.

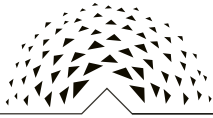
According to a 2019 [survey](#) by the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE), when people now think about Korea, the top five words that come to mind are: 1. K-pop (18.5%), 2. Korean food (12.2%), 3. K-dramas (7.8%), 4. the IT industry (7.3%), 5. Hallyu stars (5.8%). Broken down by region, people’s first association is “K-pop” in every researched region, with over 10% (in Asia, the American continent, and Europe it exceeds 19%). Beside “K-pop”, “Korean food” and “IT products and brands” compete for second and third place everywhere. In Asia, “K-dramas” and “Hallyu stars” make it to the top five, in the Middle East it is “beauty products” and “cars”, with the former also listed fourth in Europe, while in Africa “movies” and “animations” also made it to the list.

However, despite the mostly positive picture, on the American continent “North Korean nuclear threat” and “War risk area” also made it to the top three, and “North Korea” to the top five. In Africa, “North Korean nuclear threat” and “War risk area” also took third place, while in Europe “North Korea” ranked fifth.

The research also shows that 62.1% of respondents had undergone a positive change in their perception of Korea after experiencing Hallyu content. This result shows that Hallyu is helping to raise the international reputation of South Korea as an attractive and advanced country, further supporting the claim that Hallyu can serve as a powerful tool of soft power that the government can use to its advantage.

This reputation [spills over](#) into different industries, thus creating [Brand Korea](#). Hallyu fans are eager to explore more about Korean culture, learn the language, visit different filming sites in the country, try Korean dishes, and use the Korean brands





they see their favourite stars using. Hallyu tourism is an especially important spill-over effect of the popularity of Korean mainstream culture. People from all over the world visit Korea for a first-hand cultural experience, which often increases the positive feelings towards the country. After the recent success of BTS and the *Squid Game* series, experts [predict](#) a significant, approximately 25-30 million increase in the number of inbound tourists.

Some might think that the darker aspects of Korean society behind the hit movie *Parasite* and the hit series *Squid Game*, such as deep inequality, household debt, and the social pressure to succeed that starts from early childhood, might have a negative impact on Korea's image, especially after hearing how [a North Korean media outlet](#) used the latter to criticize its southern neighbour, stating that "[The show demonstrates the sad reality of the beastly South Korean society in which human beings are driven into extreme competition and their humanity is wiped out.](#)" However, this does not seem to be the case, as many of the problems portrayed are [familiar and relatable to people around the world](#). At the same time, it shows that South Korea is a democracy, where art can serve as social critique.

## ***HOW THE GOVERNMENT TAKES ADVANTAGE OF THE HALLYU PHENOMENON***

South Korea has successfully stepped onto the global stage and joined the [competition](#) in which different countries around the world are trying to utilize their cultural industries to boost their domestic economy and gain more influence in their international relations. Hallyu has played a significant role in making this happen.

The promotion of the country through Hallyu has been common since the early years of the phenomenon, but with its global success, it has become increasingly frequent. For example, the Seoul Metropolitan Government, in collaboration with the Seoul Tourism Organization, has been making a [promotional campaign with BTS every year since 2017](#), with the latest video uploaded in 2021, titled '[2021 Your Seoul Goes On](#)' or '[EoGiYeongCha](#)'. The tourism brand [Imagine Your Korea](#), under the Korea Tourism Organization, which belongs to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, has been making promotional videos featuring Hallyu stars, such as [Song Joong-Ki](#), whose drama *Descendants of the Sun* was a huge success in 2016. Another popular promotional campaign by the brand is the [Feel the Rhythm of KOREA](#) series in 2020-2021. [The last video of the series shows the popular tourist locations of Incheon](#), and it was filmed in collaboration with the popular Korean variety show *2Days&1Night*. The cast of the show includes television personality Kim Jong-Min, comedian Moon Se-Yoon, Ravi, member of the idol group VIXX and soloist, rapper DinDin, actors Yeon Jong-Hoon and Kim Seon-Ho, who all appeared in the video, and several episodes of the variety show featured the filming process of the video. [The locations of famous Korean dramas and movies](#) are also popular among tourists to visit and are also being promoted.

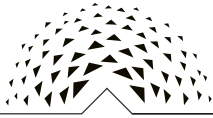
Hallyu stars are also participating in the popularization of learning the Korean language. For example, Mari Books published its [Hello Korean textbook series](#) in 2010, featuring actor Lee Joon-Gi reading the audio. Most recently, in 2020 Big Hit Edu, an independent educational corporation of Big Hit Entertainment, in cooperation with Hankook University of Foreign Studies, has created the [Learn! KOREAN with BTS](#) textbooks, which also utilize videos and audio recordings with BTS members.

South Korean popular culture has been transformed from a simple form of entertainment and a form of art into a tool that enables the government to both [enhance its national image and acquire soft power](#). Therefore, it is no surprise that the Korean Wave is utilized in diplomacy to support the country's foreign policy agenda. In 2010 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade organized the [Korean Public Diplomacy Forum](#) and published the *Cultural Diplomacy Manual*. Since then, public diplomacy has been the third pillar of diplomacy beside the political and economic pillars, as mentioned before. Cultural diplomacy is an integrated part of Korea's public diplomacy, which includes "the expansion of Hallyu" in its framework.

Using Hallyu star power at diplomatic events is a move that South Korean President Moon Jae-In has already employed a few times. One successful example with a clear foreign policy agenda was at the first summit between Moon Jae-In and Kim Jong-Un in 2018, when a group of South Korean artists, including international Hallyu superstars like Red Velvet and Baek Ji-Young, [performed at a concert](#) in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang and met the North Korean leader personally. This event grabbed the attention of fans and non-fans alike, all around the world.

The 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics also served as a great opportunity for the country to showcase its soft power. Beside the fact that [South and North Korea](#) marched under the "unified Korea" flag and participated in the Games with a joint women hockey team, the line-up of Hallyu stars appearing at the event also gathered attention. Several popular artists served as [torchbearers](#), including Suzy, Sandara Park, and Super Junior's Dong Hae. At the Olympic Committee General Assembly, Baekhyun, member of the popular boy group EXO, sang the South Korean [national anthem](#), and boy group VIXX [performed](#) their 2017 hit song [Shangri-La](#). This performance was a well-thought-out choice for the event, as the group incorporated traditional Korean elements in the sound, outfit, props and setting of their song, which later became a trend in K-pop. The closing ceremony of the Olympics also featured performances by Hallyu stars [CL](#) and the boy group [EXO](#). In the meantime, a special [K-pop World Festa](#) event was held with several concerts featuring famous artists like BoA, Super Junior, and Seventeen. As a result of the Olympics, [foreign media](#) has covered many aspects of Korean culture beside K-pop, which has served as a first-time-introduction for millions of people to the country.

Probably the most well-known name associated with Hallyu is the world's biggest boy group, BTS. In 2021, President Moon Jae-In appointed the group [special presidential envoys for future generations and culture](#), and they appeared



with him at the 76<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly in New York. They played a [video](#) of a performance of their latest hit, [Permission to Dance](#), which had been filmed at the United Nations building. The members also took to the stage and addressed the issues under discussion at the Assembly, for example, Covid-19 and climate change. The [video of their speech](#) has surpassed 3 million views on the official YouTube channel of the United Nations, which shows their ability to draw attention to the problems mentioned. This new and risky approach to utilise Hallyu star power in diplomacy to involve future generations in the discussion showcases South Korea's innovative thinking and emphasizes its focus on non-traditional issues in its middle power diplomacy.

Despite the successful examples, using Hallyu star power in international relations is still a trial-and-error process for the South Korean government. A good example for this is when former President of the United States Donald Trump and his daughter Ivanka [visited South Korea](#) on the final day of the G20 Summit in 2019. To many people's surprise, they were greeted at the Blue House not only by President Moon Jae-In but also the famous boy group EXO, who even gave them signed copies of their fifth album Love Shot. Not only were EXO fans surprised and had mixed emotions about this interaction, but the policy purpose of this meeting is also unclear.

## CONCLUSION AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

**T**he growing attractiveness of the Hallyu phenomenon is a great opportunity for the Korean government to strengthen its soft power and public diplomacy practices. For the future, the key seems to be in finding goals in foreign policy with which Hallyu stars can align themselves using their own voices, the way BTS did in the UN, so that they can successfully utilize this power.

To achieve this, however, the Korean Wave itself has to stay sustainable and remain attractive for decades to come. A [survey](#) conducted by KOFICE in 2014 and 2019 asked people how long they expect the popularity of Hallyu to last. In both periods "about 3-4 years" was the most popular answer (28% and 26.7%, respectively), which does not seem too long. Although the rate of answers stating that "it's already over" decreased from 13% to 12.1%, it is still more than those who think it will last for more than a decade: "about 10-14 years" decreased from 9% to 8.3%, "about 15-29 years" decreased from 5% to 2.7%, and "30 years or more" also decreased from 8% to 6.9%. These results do not seem promising and urge the government to find a way to keep Hallyu and the industries related to it thriving.

The continuous support of the government will be crucial for further development. Hallyu-related research and innovation is key to sustaining the attractiveness of the Korean Wave, and the government is well aware of this.

Amid the pandemic, Korea faced a big crisis in its entertainment industry, as tourism came to a halt, drama productions had to be postponed, concerts were cancelled, just to mention the more apparent side-effects of the situation.

The Korean creative industry was quick to respond with live-streaming technology of such great quality that it even piqued the interest of [Universal Music](#). Another innovative milestone was the debut of the girl group aespa (stylized as æspa), the first ever K-pop group with AI avatars, who appear both in their [music videos](#) as well as the videos of their stage [performances](#).

In September 2020, the South Korean government announced its [Digital New Deal](#) strategy to enhance innovation in the creative industry and strengthen global competitiveness. A budget of [2.7 trillion won](#) was proposed for the program, which includes digital infrastructure development, 5G, online content and untact performances, next-generation content with AI, VR and AR technologies, and improving copyright and intellectual property regulations. Beside the development of new technologies and digital infrastructure, the other important program is the revitalization of tourism, thus it is worth keeping track of the future development and implementation of the government's latest Hallyu policies.