

South Korea's Soft Power to China: Taking K-pop as an Example

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Abstract. With the deepening of globalisation and the rapid development of information technology, the competition for soft power among countries has become more intense. Against this background, South Korea, as an Asian country, has rapidly risen over the past few decades, becoming one of the models of possessing strong soft power. The origin and development of South Korea's soft power success as well as its influence and inspiration on China is undoubtedly a subject of great interest. This paper employs literature research method and data analysis to explore the impact of South Korean soft power on China. By doing so, it aims to provide valuable insights for China's cultural export, international image building, and global interactions, enabling China to effectively play its role on the international stage. South Korea's journey in harnessing its soft power, particularly in the domains of K-pop, cinema, and technology, has propelled it to the forefront of global cultural influence. Understanding how it has achieved this and how China can draw lessons from this success story is essential in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: South Korea; Soft power; Cultural output; Cultural strategy; China.

1. Introduction

Soft power, as an important part of a country's comprehensive strength, refers to a country's ability to shape its international image through non-military means, such as culture, values and policy appeal, so as to enhance its influence on international affairs. Unlike hard power, soft power pays more attention to cultural exchanges, international cooperation, and positive international image shaping. In the era of globalisation, the importance of soft power has become more and more prominent, and South Korea's successful experience in this regard is an important source of inspiration for other countries, especially China.

Korea's rise to soft power can be traced back to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Its achievements in the fields of music, film, fashion, and beauty have led to its gradual emergence on the international stage. The following aspects are important factors in the development of Korea's soft power. Firstly, the communication strength of Korean culture is strong. Korean music, films, TV dramas and other cultural products have been given the name "Hallyu" (Korean Wave) and have spread rapidly in Asia and around the world [1]. These cultural products have successfully attracted young audiences with their unique emotional expression and production standards, thus opening up the international market. Second is the rise of creative industries in Korea. Korea has actively promoted the development of creative industries and nurtured many excellent designers, artists and entrepreneurs. This has injected new vitality into Korea's cultural industry and provided a solid foundation for the enhancement of soft power. The last is government support and diplomatic efforts. The Korean government's support and investment in the cultural industry, as well as the diplomatic department's active promotion of cultural exchanges, provide a strong guarantee for the rise of soft power.

Studying the impact of Korea's soft power in the global arena can provide insights into Korea's successes in the fields of culture, entertainment, and science and technology, and can help understand the cultural, economic, and social interactions between the two countries [2]. This paper bases on literature research method and data analysis to explore the impact of Korea's soft power on China. It

aims to provide valuable insights for China's cultural export, international image building, and global interactions so that it can better play its role in the international arena.

2. Successful Cases of Cultural Export

Korean cultural works such as music, films, and TV dramas have achieved remarkable success worldwide. Korean pop music (K-pop), for example, has risen to prominence in the international music market, attracting many fans and attention [2]. When it comes to the international success of K-pop groups, some of the key factors include a unique musical style, a well-crafted image, active social media engagement, and an international marketing strategy [3]. For example, groups such as BTS have built strong connections with their global fan base through multilingual lyrics and interactions on social media [4]. Their stellar performances on international tours, television programmes and award nights also help spread their music and image to a wider audience. Other groups such as BLACKPINK also utilise fashion, elaborate music videos and collaborations with international brands to attract global attention [4]. In addition to their music, they are actively involved in charitable activities and social issues, which strengthens their emotional connection with their fans.

Behind the success of these groups in the international market, there is a constant effort and strategy to support them. They have invested in global tours, participated in international festivals, utilised social media to engage with their fans, and collaborated with international partners for promotion. In these ways, they have successfully crossed over into markets with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and attracted a diverse fan base.

In short, the keys to international success for K-pop groups are creative music, compelling images, positive social media interactions, and cross-cultural marketing strategies. These factors intertwine to help them break the boundaries of national boundaries globally and win the recognition and affection of the international market.

3. The Impact and Inspiration of Korea's Soft Power Development on China

The rise of South Korea's soft power has not only influenced the international community, but also provided valuable experience and inspiration for other countries, especially China as a country with a long history and rich cultural tradition. The following aspects are the influence and inspiration of Korea's soft power development on China.

3.1. Emphasis on Cultural Exchange and International Cooperation

Korean K-pop groups organise global tours to bring their music and performances around the world [5]. These performances not only allow fans around the world to experience their idols up close and personal, but also attract more interest in Korean music and culture, creating a stylish, youthful and energetic image for Korea.

BLACKPINK, consisting of Jisoo, Jennie, Rosé, and Lisa, is a four-member girl group under South Korea's YG Entertainment. Since their debut, they have quickly amassed a large global fan base and have successfully toured the world several times. During their global tours, BLACKPINK places great importance on communicating with their fans, often interacting with them in the local language: when BLACKPINK toured Japan, they not only sang Japanese versions of their songs, but also tried to interact with their fans in Japanese to express their thanks and greetings; during their tour in Thailand, Lisa, as a member of Thai nationality, would often take the initiative to communicate with fans in Thai language, eliciting enthusiastic reactions from fans at the venue; during the US and Canadian tours, the members often used English to interact with fans, especially Rosé and Jennie, both of whom are very fluent in English; and during the tours of several countries in Europe, BLACKPINK also tried to greet or express their gratitude to their fans in simple local languages.

In addition, their songs and music videos have billions of views on YouTube, attracting fans from all over the globe. Fans around the globe imitate their costumes, makeup and dances, and some fans have even organised cover dance troupes for this purpose. Their songs have performed well on music charts in multiple countries, proving that their music appeals to fans around the globe.

All in all, BLACKPINK has a huge influence not only in Korea but globally, and they are very focused on communicating and interacting with their fans, which is a major factor in their success.

Through these programmes, Korea actively participates in international cultural exchanges, conveying an image of openness, innovation and diversity, while providing more opportunities for people around the world to learn about and experience Korean culture. These activities not only promote humanistic exchanges, but also help to shape Korea's image in the international arena.

Korean pop music (often referred to as K-pop) has been a huge global success, and the Chinese music market and industry have been profoundly affected by it. Firstly, the success of K-pop has provided new creative inspiration for Chinese music producers and artists to experiment with distinctive musical styles and production techniques. Second, Korea's idol training system is so efficient that some Chinese music companies have begun to imitate the model, from selection to training to debut. South Korea's music competition programmes and idol selection programmes, such as "Produce 101", have similar versions in China, such as "Create 101" [6]. Then, Korean artists and music companies have been cooperating more and more with China, not only in music, but also in advertisement endorsement and participation in variety shows. Next, South Korean entertainment companies have their own unique methods of packaging and promoting their artists, which provides a reference for the Chinese market and prompts local companies to innovate in their marketing strategies. Finally, the popularity of Korean pop music has promoted cultural exchanges between China and South Korea, enabling the people of the two countries to have a deeper understanding of each other's culture.

In conclusion, K-pop has had a significant impact on China's music market and music industry, driving the development of the market and bringing new opportunities and challenges to China's music industry [6].

3.2. Implications of Korea's K-pop Strategy for China in Regional Cooperation and Diplomacy

South Korea has successfully demonstrated its national soft power through the performance of K-pop on important national occasions. The popularity of K-pop not only demonstrates the glamour of Korean music, dance and fashion, but also highlights the country's ability to master and interpret modern pop culture. Implications of this strategy for other countries include the fact that cultural export can enhance a country's international influence. When culture is embraced by other countries, it can deepen people's goodwill and understanding of that country; the Korean government actively supports and promotes the development of the cultural industry, which plays a key role in improving the country's soft power; and investment and support from the government and private sector has played a key role in the success of the Korean music industry. Other countries could consider how to invest in and support their own cultural industries. K-pop is not just about music, but also about fashion, beauty, dramas, and many other areas, forming a complete cultural ecosystem. This diversified strategy offers more possibilities for cultural export.

A unique cultural tradition in South Korea is that famous singers or groups are invited to perform at military camps as a consolation show to bring a touch of joy to the soldiers who are serving in the military. At the peak of AOA's career, the girls had the honour of being part of this tradition.

Firstly, to understand why the show of sympathy for the military is so important, we need to take a deeper look at the Korean military service system. Almost every Korean male is required to perform military service for nearly two years at a specific age. During this time, they are separated from family and friends and face many physical and psychological challenges. As a result, things that brought them joy and comfort became especially precious, and AOA, one of the top girl groups of the time,

was invited several times to perform for the soldiers at various military camps. For one particular visit, AOA chose to perform their hit songs, including “Miniskirt” and “Heart Attack”. The barracks erupted as these familiar tunes were played. The soldiers chanted and danced with the AOA members as if the barracks had been transformed into a huge stage.

We can see how music and dance connects hearts and minds and brings a moment of comfort and joy to soldiers who spend time in military camps far from home. This is why AOA and many other K-pop groups and artistes are willing to participate in military camp consolations, knowing that their music and dance are not just for entertainment, but also for touching hearts.

This Korean strategy illustrates that culture and the arts are an effective means of enhancing a country’s soft power. Each country has its own unique culture and history; the key is how to effectively promote it globally and connect with a global audience.

4. The Influence of K-pop on Young People

The influence of K-pop (Korean pop music) on young people around the world has been profound, with boy and girl groups playing a crucial role in this trend.

Firstly, the dressing style of K-pop stars is an object of imitation for young people. Their clothes, accessories and hairstyles have become trend icons, driving consumption in related industries. Korean skincare and cosmetics enjoy a high global reputation. Secondly, the skin and make-up styles of K-pop stars largely reinforce this phenomenon and drive sales of cosmetics and skincare products [7]. Then, in addition to music and music videos, the influence of K-pop teams extends to films, TV dramas, reality TV shows, and internet programmes, which boosts the consumption of related products. Then, Korean cuisine, such as kimchi, fried chicken and kimchi, was driven by K-pop culture, which was gradually accepted by young people around the world and stimulated the sales of related food products [8]. Moreover, the popularity of K-pop has led many young people to become interested in Korean culture and attractions, prompting them to travel to Korea and driving a boom in tourism [9]. Also, from mobile phone cases to school bags, from celebrity portraits to official peripherals, young fans have purchased a large number of related goods in order to support and imitate their favourite artists. Finally, the popularity of K-pop has also prompted many young people to learn Korean and better promote Korean culture [10].

With the development of social media and the Internet, Chinese celebrities and Internet celebrities have influenced the consumer behaviour of a large number of young people through various platforms. Live streaming sales have become very popular in China in recent years. Celebrities and net stars such as Weiya and Li Jiaqi introduce and sell a variety of goods on live streaming, from cosmetics to food, clothes to household goods, attracting the attention and purchases of a large number of young consumers. On short-video platforms such as Jittery and Shutterfly, many net stars and celebrities post content about fashion, beauty and lifestyle, influencing young people’s consumption choices.

Many brands collaborate with celebrities or net stars to launch limited edition products, such as Wang Yibo’s collaboration with Estée Lauder and Diligaba’s collaboration with MAC, which are usually snapped up within a short period of time. On Weibo, WeChat, *Xiaohongshu* and other platforms, celebrities and netroots often post collaborative content with brands, such as dressing, travelling, eating, etc., to attract fans’ attention and generate purchasing behaviour. Certain celebrities’ or netroots’ specific behaviours or language are often imitated, such as Mao Yanyou’s “little clip”, and these behaviours or products soon become part of pop culture, driving sales of related products. On some social media platforms, fans can buy virtual goods such as “gifts” to support their favourite celebrities or online stars, which has also become a new mode of consumption.

5. Summary

This paper takes K-pop as an example and delves into the impact of Korean soft power on a global scale. It demonstrates the richness of cultural output, cultural exchanges, cultural strategies, geopolitical impact of soft power, and the influence of K-Pop on young people. Korea's success in the cultural field stems not only from its high-quality cultural products and cultural strategies, but also from its deep understanding of young people's interests and emotional needs. Through various media and activities, Korea has successfully attracted the attention of young people around the world and shaped its national image as a positive, fashionable and innovative country. This provides China with some valuable insights, such as how to use cultural diplomacy, use culture to promote national culture, and use popular culture to guide consumption.

To sum up, South Korea's soft power success has not only influenced China, but also demonstrated how a country can show its unique charm on the global stage through popular culture. This provides useful reference and inspiration for China in enhancing its international influence, strengthening international exchanges and promoting regional peace and stability.

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