Cultural Exports and Soft Power Diplomacy in East Asia

Countries can raise their international status by exporting food, fashion, entertainment, and other cultural consumables to the masses. This article examines the efforts of China, Japan, and South Korea to use cultural exports as soft power.

As the pace of globalization increased during the late 20th century, the cultural exports of China, Japan, and South Korea were generally pushed toward Western audiences with most elements unchanged. However, in the early 21st century, there was a marked shift as cultural exports, particularly in entertainment and media, became more of an exchange between Western and Eastern influences. Not all East Asian countries have been equally successful in exporting their culture. While South Korean media breaks record after record, and Japanese art and cuisine are internationally renowned, Chinese media has had little impact on mainstream Western culture. Why have Japan and South Korea been so successful in exporting their culture while China has had relatively little success?

This question can be examined through specific examples of cultural exports (e.g., ByteDance, K-pop, and anime) across the three countries, along with the subsequent impact on their effectiveness as soft power diplomacy tools. While a strong alignment between public and private programs is necessary to promote Asian cultural exports, it is not sufficient without Western trust in the relevant Asian government. Ultimately, it is not a lack of effort from Chinese government that has caused the failure of China’s ability to export its culture, but a lack of trust in the Chinese government itself.

Government Involvement in Japan, South Korea, and China

East Asian governments have had mixed results in their attempts to build soft power through popular culture. Initiatives by China, Korea, and Japan have resulted in differing levels of perception of each country’s cultural exports.

Japan introduced the Cool Japan movement and the Cool Japan Fund in order to lead its cultural exports. Although overseas consumers had already been familiar with Japanese food, art, and pop culture, the island country built systematic initiatives to further enhance domestic growth, connect Japan with other countries, and strengthen Japan’s offshore presence. Cool Japan was first conceived in 2012 as a national movement encouraging the Japanese people to exercise their creativity in the international community. Specifically, Cool Japan encompassed a wide range of cultural products including games, animation, food, and industrial technologies.

By showcasing the “cool” parts of Japan, the government hoped to create an image that attracted tourists, visitors, and talent into Japan across all industries and businesses as a public-private partnership platform. As an offshoot of this movement, the Cool Japan Fund was created in November 2013 to invest in companies that align with the Cool Japan mission. These efforts coincided with the launch of “Abenomics” in 2012. Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s concerted economic and cultural efforts to promote Japan to the world, the total number of foreign visitors to Japan tripled from 2013 to 2018 to reach 31 million.

Similarly, South Korea’s cultural exports have shined a spotlight on what was once a minnow tucked in between two major Asian powers, dramatically transforming the
country’s perception and its place in the world since the 1990s. From BTS to kimchi, “Parasite” to Samsung, hallyu or "the Korean wave," has achieved so much in so little time.

Behind South Korea’s cultural popularity lies a highly organized and sophisticated state-sponsored effort led by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, and private-sector actors. In an interview, Junghoon Kim, who is director of the Korean Cultural Center, an agency within the ministry, suggested there are three key reasons behind the growing prominence of South Korean culture: the spirit of creativity and resilience in the private sector, ongoing government support for the arts and culture industry, and the development of international communications technology.

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In particular, the ministry has been able to leverage the early popularity of K-pop and K-dramas to introduce the world to more traditional aspects of South Korean culture such as food, tradition, and history. For example, through programs such as the English Program in Korea (EPIK) and most recently Teach and Learn in Korea (TALK), the Ministry has targeted students and young professionals from English-speaking countries and sponsored them to teach in South Korea. The Korea Tourism Organization, a government agency that helps facilitate tourism along with many private enterprises, now works with K-pop artists to highlight destinations of particular interest. For example, Gyeongbokgung Palace located in Seoul, where K-pop phenomenon BTS filmed one of their music videos, and Namiseom Island, where the hit K-drama “Winter Sonata” was filmed, have become major tourist attractions for global fans of South Korean culture. The results are obvious: According to a survey of Americans conducted by the Korean Cultural Center in Washington DC, 73.9% of respondents said they wanted to have Korean friends and 74.6% wanted to visit South Korea.

In terms of China’s state-led cultural exports, a different story emerges. The Confucius Institute, particularly its rise and subsequent fall in the United States, serves as a prime illustration. Founded in 2004, Confucius Institutes are Chinese government-funded centers that teach and promote the language and culture around the globe. As one of the biggest diplomacy programs in the world, the Confucius Institute boasts over 1,000 locations in 120 countries and is one of the foremost examples of Chinese soft power in the 21st century. Several of the facilities were located on the campuses of major American universities. In 2019, many of these universities very publicly cut ties with the Confucius Institute due to accusations of propaganda, free speech interference, and even espionage. In 2020, the U.S. government designated the Confucius Institute as a foreign propaganda mission.

As seen through the case of the Confucius Institute, China has long promoted Chinese culture from a Chinese perspective. Back on Chinese soil, the government also frequently offers state-sponsored tours of geographic sites that highlight traditional Chinese culture. The Chinese government invites foreigners on these tours in the hopes that the foreigners will spread the merits of Chinese culture back home. However, this method of promoting traditional culture has not been effective in raising the awareness or attitude towards Chinese culture. Japan and South Korea take different approaches when it comes to sharing their culture. Japan and South Korea will borrow elements from Western culture and blend it with domestic culture before sharing it abroad again.

Cultural Export Efforts in the Private Sector

Across Japan, South Korea, and China, these public-sector efforts have also impacted the private sector. Many attempts at using cultural exports to bolster private-sector profits have arisen over the years. In fact, the global perceptions of these three countries come directly from private-sector efforts to export cultural mediums: anime for Japan, K-pop for Korea, and ByteDance for China are examples.

Japan was one of the first countries to start soft-power branding. In the 1920s, Japan started exporting Japanese culture to the West after entering the “Big Five" as the singular Asian nation at the Paris Peace Conference. Jooyeon Hahm, a historian of modern East Asia at Brandeis University, notes that around this time, the Japanese believed that a healthy relationship with the U.S. and the rest of the Western world was critical.
Outreach efforts that originated from the state eventually trickled down to businesses and individuals as overseas consumers started interacting with Japanese cultural artifacts. In fact, Western corporations are now eager not only to distribute but also to create their own Japanese content. In February 2021, Netflix announced plans to partner with WIT Studio to launch an Animator Academy in an effort to foster future animation creators. The Japanese government proactively allows artists to export their talent and exchange ideas with foreign content. Mediums such as manga, anime, and J-pop, help promote Japanese culture and offer ample amount of space to cover broad cultural topics. There are many examples across television and film, such as “Pokémon,” “Dragon Ball Z,” and Studio Ghibli. In fact, Hayao Miyazaki’s film “Spirited Away” grossed $150 million in Japan alone, which is more than what James Cameron’s blockbuster “Titanic” grossed in the country.

Japanese food has also become a huge attractor of foreign interest in recent years, particularly sushi as one of the staples of Japanese cuisine. About 31 million tourists visit Japan annually, and indulging in authentic sushi is high on their list of activities. A recent Netflix documentary titled "Jiro Dreams of Sushi" is a prime example of this cultural export. The film follows the lifestyle of an 85-year-old sushi master and restaurateur named Sukibayashi Jiro and his lifelong dedication to sushi. Following the documentary, the reservation waitlist for Jiro’s restaurant today spans two to three months. Back in the Western world, omakase has been widely accepted in countries like the U.S. and the U.K. Many fusion-style sushi, such as California rolls and Philadelphia rolls, have also become staple purchases in neighborhood grocery stores.

In South Korea, the entertainment industry has recently found mainstream success abroad and cultivated a global following, thanks in part to the support of domestic government investment. However, some experts have expressed doubt over whether South Korea’s private sector undermines government-led efforts. For example, recent South Korean media such as “Parasite” and “Squid Game” have been critically acclaimed around the world. Not only have these productions revealed the depth of South Korean entertainment talent, but they have also placed a bright spotlight on the appeal of South Korean entertainment. More crucially, however, “Parasite” and “Squid Game” have drawn attention to fundamental social problems in South Korea, which undermine the government’s efforts to build soft power. In fact, it was reported that the social inequality presented in “Squid Game” was used by North Korean propaganda as a representation of life in South Korea.

This view appears to also be shared, at least in some part, by South Korean government officials. As a counterpoint to the idea that cultural exports serve a political agenda, Kim of the Korean Cultural Center asserted that the measure of cultural exports should not be by the “profits” it produces, but instead as a “shared experience based on diversity and respect.” This raises a fundamental question: How effectively is South Korea translating its newfound popularity into soft power? Seung-Youn Oh, a Bryn Mawr College political science professor specializing in East Asia international relations and comparative politics, appears to support this view. In an interview, she suggested that South Korea, compared with China, was not leveraging and perhaps does not have the capability to leverage its cultural products into political capital. According to Oh, South Korea is ultimately a middle power, and no amount of cultural popularity would enable it to supersede the influence of China or the United States.

The attitudes toward private-led cultural exports from China are vastly different from the positive perceptions of private-led Japanese and Korean cultural exports. For example, TikTok, a social media app specializing in short-form videos, surged in popularity in 2020 due in part to the political controversy surrounding its Chinese ownership. This is only the latest incident in a series of institutional confrontations, set against the backdrop of escalating tensions between the U.S. and China.

TikTok, owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, is one of the more compelling and recent cases of both private-led Chinese cultural export and soft power diplomacy. There are three factors that affect China’s cultural exports and soft power: state-driven and state-sponsored activities, private activities driven by businesses, and the movement of Chinese people. However, China’s cultural exports have largely succeeded in spite of—rather than because of—state-driven support. One of the reasons may be the sheer size of the Chinese diaspora, currently estimated at nearly 50 million overseas Chinese.
Other Factors Contributing to the Spread of Culture

Other than private-sector or state-led promotion, what else contributes to the spread of Asian culture? Especially in the case of China, where neither state-driven nor non-state-driven cultural exports are effective, how has Chinese culture still managed to spread to the West? According to Andrew Methven, chief executive officer of Hampton Group Holdings and co-chair of the Chinese Speakers Association, the answer is simply that a lot of Chinese people live abroad. Chinese pop culture has been brought to the West by more of a pull effect rather than a push. This analysis can be applied to explain cultural import into the West by Japanese and Korean immigrants as well. Korean communities have established their offshore footing through restaurants, retail shops, and entertainment in Korea towns in city centers. Many Japanese immigrants moved to the American West Coast around in the early 1900s (e.g., California, Oregon, and Washington). For example, a paper written by Robert Hegwood discusses how a common Japanese home-cooked dish called sukiyaki, which consists of beef and tofu hot pot, was popularized in the 1930s by Japanese community in the East Coast.

China, unlike Korea or Japan, had to rely primarily on the diaspora of its people as a way of penetrating its culture into the West. Chinese state-driven cultural exports have failed because of political differences between Western countries and China. For example, China, South Korea, and Japan are all equally exotic to the United States. Yet, the United States is generally more receptive to government-backed cultural export programs from South Korea and Japan because both countries are more politically similar and considered U.S. allies. According to Oh, the stark contrast among the three countries’ receptions comes down to values. Returning to the Confucius Institute example, it was never about the existence of cultural centers, as Germany and France have similar cultural centers in America. “U.S. politicians are worried about public values being affected,” explained Oh, “Many universities severed ties with the Confucius Institute because scholars saw it as China meddling with the spirit of the American education system.”

Looking Ahead

Asia’s cultural exports have been driven by their states, private sectors, and other factors. These efforts have borne fruit, and the breadth of East Asian influence in the West is poised to expand further. To effectively take advantage of this trend, firms must understand the drivers behind each country’s soft power diplomacy ambitions. With the ongoing demand growth for East Asian culture, companies should take note of success cases of soft power diplomacy and formulate distinct strategies to benefit from the trend. When interacting with Korea and Japan, companies should take advantage of programs and ministries within those countries that are actively trying to export Korean and Japanese culture. When considering the Chinese market, perhaps it makes more sense to focus on the Chinese diaspora. It is important to understand that these countries cannot be treated as a monolith. Japan, South Korea, and China’s ambitions to export their culture provide huge opportunities for companies that know how to uniquely operate in or engage with each of these countries.

This article was written by Hunter Dong, Angela Huang, George Iwaoka, Yoon Kim, and Joseph Shin, members of the Lauder Class of 2023.
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