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South Korea's Soft Power: Cultural Diplomacy and Hallyu in Building Lasting Global Engagement

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1. Introduction

Over recent decades, South Korea has become a central case in debates on soft power. The Korean Wave (Hallyu) has expanded rapidly, with global fandoms driving visibility. Yet visibility alone does not explain how soft power endures. This thesis investigates how South Korea organises and sustains soft power over time, and through which mechanisms initial success consolidates rather than dissipates as attention cycles shift.

The analysis is guided by a triangular model of soft power in the Hallyu era. At one vertex stand state strategies and initiatives: the policies, resources and narratives that define priorities and supply diplomatic instruments. Second, industry and platforms: producers, agencies, festivals, and digital intermediaries that circulate content transnationally, standardise formats, and coordinate distribution. Third, audiences and fans: not only consumers but participants who translate, curate, and campaign, amplifying visibility and normalising cultural references. Their practices interact with industrial strategies and public policy, creating feedback loops that can stabilise soft power.

Durability is expected where these three components reinforce one another. This is when policy initiatives find effective industrial channels and when audience practices extend and anchor them in everyday routines. The thesis therefore distinguishes short-lived popularity from outcomes that are harder to reverse. Measures such as reach and virality capture immediate attention but tend to dissipate quickly. In contrast, outcomes that become embedded in recurring events and partnerships, established cultural formats and references, or the development of knowledge infrastructures are signals of a process of consolidation and suggest that influence is more likely to endure. For instance, education and language are used in the empirical analysis as one concrete way to detect such institutionalisation as they translate attraction into skills and credentials.

The central concern of this thesis is therefore to understand how South Korea's soft power travels and how it can be sustained over time. The next sections develop the research question and outline the framework through which this problem is examined.

1.1 Literature Review

Debates on soft power since Nye's formulation have clarified both scope and limits. Soft power is commonly defined as the capacity to shape preferences though attraction rather than coercion, yet scholars have questioned how attraction can be identified, measured and distinguished from material leverage or public relations. On a parallel line, cultural diplomacy

is placed within this discussion and is treated as a deliberate policy instrument that projects culture, language and values to build relationships. Recent critiques also warn a Western-centric bias that sets liberal markets as universally attractive and neglects alternative sources of legitimacy. These points shape the way this thesis approaches the concepts, which uses soft power as a theoretical frame and cultural diplomacy as a policy tool, but keeps in mind contextual interpretation.

Within this debate, South Korea has become a singular case study through the rise of Hallyu. Scholars have mapped the co-evolution of state strategy and cultural industries, from policy support to market-led expansion, and have analysed tensions between developmental legacies and neoliberal governance in cultural production. At the same time, research emphasized the role of audiences. Work on transnational fandom shows that fans help echo the success of the Korean Wave in a way that state alone cannot do. This makes them active actors in building Korea's image. The thesis builds on this literature, including Dal Yong Jin's analyses of policy-industry dynamics as well as studies that conceptualize fandoms as agents of circulation.

Despite the great range of existing work, and important gap remains around durability. Much of the literature mentions diffusion, visibility and short-term impact, while giving less importance to the conditions under which soft power consolidates over time. In particular, the link between cultural attraction and knowledge infrastructures has received limited studies, even though language learning, credentialization and recurring educational provision are strong indicators that cultural interest has been institutionalised. This thesis addresses that gap by examining how cultural diplomacy and Hallyu interact with institutions and audiences in ways that promote lasting educational and linguistic engagement.

1.2 Research Question

This study is framed around the following research question: to what extent can cultural diplomacy and Hallyu serve as effective instruments of South Korea's soft power in generating durable transnational engagement?

To answer this question, the thesis pursues two related objectives. The first is exploratory: to examine how South Korea has developed and used cultural diplomacy and the cultural industries as instruments of soft power, and to analyse the interaction between state strategies, industrial structures and audience practices. This involves retracing how priorities and narratives are articulated in policy, how cultural products are organised and circulated across borders and how audiences and fandoms amplify visibility. The second objective is to evaluate

the extent to which these combined dynamics generate durable forms of engagement. Here the focus is on signs of consolidation that are less easily reversed than temporary attention, such as recurring cultural programming, continuing institutional partnerships, stable references in public discourse, and the growth of knowledge infrastructures. The case study is used as a vantage point to observe whether and how these conditions are met in practice, thereby allowing the durability of soft power to be judged.

1.3 Theoretical Overview and Methodology

This thesis uses a set of concepts and theories that help the interpretation of evidence and the structure of the research design. Soft power provides the main frame, which assesses how attraction is organised and maintained. Cultural diplomacy on the other hand refers to the policy instruments through which it is promoted abroad. Affective affinity and transnational proximity are used to understand differences in reception of foreign media. In a related manner, the notion of transnational fandom helps understand the active role of audiences in circulating and shaping cultural products. These ideas are brought together through the triangular model introduced earlier, which links state strategies, cultural industries and platforms and audience practices. Here the model functions as the organising framework that connects theory to method.

The research design is primarily qualitative, and case based, relying on documentation and discourse analysis of policy statements, institutional reports, programme descriptions, press releases and archived pages of relevant organisations. Where possible, descriptive quantitative indicators such as the number of institutions established, exam sessions held, or programmes introduced are used to illustrate patterns and support interpretation. When examining the broader development of Hallyu and the institutionalisation of cultural policy, the analysis considers the period from the early 1990s to 2025 to trace how strategies and frameworks have evolved. In the case study, the focus narrows to 2010–2025, which allows for a closer look at recent initiatives and their effects in a single national setting. Attention is given to sequencing and to key junctures, using an event-focused comparative logic to relate policy shifts to developments in production, distribution, and audience practice. A single-country case serves as an empirical vantage point for observing these dynamics; it does not alter the object of explanation, which remains South Korea’s soft power strategies and their durability. Details on sources, selection and analytic procedures are presented in Chapter 4.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised into five chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 sets out the theoretical foundations for the study, focusing on soft power and cultural diplomacy, key debates and criticisms, and the concepts used to understand reception and audience agency. It establishes the vocabulary and assumptions that guide the analysis in the rest of the work.

Chapter 3 traces the evolution of South Korea's cultural policy and the rise of Hallyu, situating the triangular configuration of state, industry/platforms and audiences in historical context. The period covered spans from the early 1990s to 2025, describing changes in strategy, public–private dynamics and institutional development to be followed across successive phases of Hallyu.

Chapter 4 presents the empirical analysis through a single-country case used as a vantage point to observe how strategies operate in practice. It applies the lens developed in the literature chapters to the period 2010–2025, examining state initiatives, intermediary institutions and signs of uptake, and discussing what these patterns imply for the durability of South Korea's soft power.

Chapter 5 concludes by answering the research question, reflecting on implications.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

In contemporary international relations, the concept of "soft power" has gained increasing relevance. Coined by Joseph Nye in the late 20th century, soft power refers to the ability of a country to influence others not through coercion or payments, but through attraction, that is, by shaping the preferences of others through culture, political values, and foreign policies perceived as legitimate or admirable. As the international system evolved after the Cold War, this approach to power has become central within the strategies of both developed and developing countries.

Globalization, digital media, and the intensification of transnational exchanges have transformed our old concept of power. Traditional determinants such as geography, military strength and raw materials, while still much relevant, are no longer sole guarantee of international influence. Instead, modern countries increasingly seek to enhance their global standing through education, technological innovation, economic competitiveness, and particularly "cultural diplomacy": the deliberate use of cultural assets to foster international goodwill and shape global perceptions.

In this landscape, soft power is not simply a theoretical construct but a practical instrument of foreign policy. Governments now focus their investments on cultural institutions, promote language and education abroad and leverage entertainment industries as tools of global engagement. The rise of non-Western actors in this new global arena has demonstrated how soft power can be mobilized to achieve diplomatic and economic objectives.

2.1 Defining Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph S. Nye in his seminal 1990 essay "Soft Power". Nye defines it as the ability to "get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment". Unlike hard power, which relies on military force or economic coercion, soft power acts through culture, political values, and foreign policies that are perceived as legitimate or morally appealing. In his own words: "if a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow"[1]. With the development of the theory, it has evolved to emphasize hybridity: Nye later coined "smart power" to describe the strategic

[1] Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power", *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (Autumn 1990): 167

combination of hard and soft tactics[2]. Yet there are several weaknesses in his theory. Among the most cited criticism is the lack of a clear metric to assess the effectiveness of soft power. Scholars point out that attraction is inherently subjective and difficult to isolate from other forms of influence[3]. Moreover, there is often ambiguity in distinguishing authentic appeal from strategic manipulation, especially when governments invest heavily in cultural branding or public diplomacy campaigns. It is indeed arguable that what appears as soft power may rely on important economic leverage. A last criticism that is often made is the Western-centric bias in Nye's framework, which tends to universalize liberal democratic values as inherently attractive, without taking into consideration alternative value systems or regional perspectives[4]. This bias stems from three structural factors: first, the concept was born in late–Cold War U.S. debates, where liberal-democratic norms (open markets, civil liberties, pluralism) were treated as universally attractive rather than culturally situated; second, the way "attraction" is operationalized through indices and polls that privilege English-language media visibility, OECD-centric education and cultural metrics, and surveys of limited publics, thereby giving much more importance to liberal markers while considering less alternative sources of legitimacy such as performance, communitarian values, or sovereignty-first norms; and third, a broader Western propension in IR knowledge production that framed non-Western normative projects as derivative or "deficient," rather than coequal articulations of what counts as desirable order. The result is that practices like Confucian "harmony," developmentalism, or state-led cultural diplomacy are often misread or undervalued within the soft-power canon, while liberal signifiers (NGO density, press freedom, university rankings) are assumed to map directly onto attractiveness across regions.

Closely linked is "cultural diplomacy", which is defined as the "deliberate and strategic exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and other cultural elements with the aim of fostering mutual understanding"[5]. Cultural diplomacy not only forms part of soft power but also serves as one of its main tools: it involves deliberate efforts to project a nation's culture, heritage, language, and values in ways that build positive impressions and deepen relationships among

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[2] Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Soft Power: The Origins and Political Progress of a Concept", *Palgrave Communications*, February 21, 2017, 5–6.
[3] Ying Fan, "Soft Power: Power of Attraction or Confusion?" *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 4, no. 2 (2008)
[4] Janice Bially Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics", *Millennium* 33, no. 3 (2005)
[5] "Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (ICD)", Institute for Cultural Diplomacy. Accessed July 10, 2025

countries. It is also important to note the fundamental distinction between cultural diplomacy and propaganda. While propaganda often relies on distortion and manipulation to serve political goals, cultural diplomacy emphasizes dialogue and mutual exchange. Its objective is not only to persuade, but to build lasting relationships based on respect. Some examples are the British Council, Alliance Française and South Korea's Korean Cultural Centres, which exemplify how state institutionalize cultural diplomacy to enhance their image internationally. The relationship between soft power and cultural diplomacy is therefore symbiotic. While soft power is the broader theoretical framework, cultural diplomacy represents a specific policy tool through which the desired non-coercive attraction described by soft power is achieved. As Nye notes, the most persuasive forms of power often originate in non-state areas such as education, media, religion, NGOs and especially cultural industries. It is arguable though that there are strong ties between most of these and the state.

In recent years, scholars have noted that the application of soft power varies significantly across cultural political contexts. In Asia, for example, countries like India, Japan and South Korea have developed distinctive approaches to soft power that reflect their own historical trajectories, governance models and cultural assets. Unlike Western soft power, which often emphasizes liberal values and institutional legitimacy, Asian strategies tend to foreground economic development, cultural prestige, and national image-building. This has led to the emergence of what some scholars describe as an "Asian model of soft power", characterized by a strong role of the state in promoting cultural industries and coordinating global outreach. These diverse applications can be seen in phenomena such as Japan's promotion of anime and "Cool Japan" branding, or India's global projection of Bollywood and yoga diplomacy. Such cases demonstrate how soft power is not a rigid concept, but a flexible strategy adapted to local strengths and global ambitions.

2.2 Transnational cultural influence: affective affinity and transnational proximity

These dynamics can be better understood through the lens of transnational cultural influence, which refers to the ways in which cultural products, practices, and symbols travel across borders and affect audiences in distant contexts. Cultural influence is not a one-way transmission from sender to receiver; rather, it is a dynamic process shaped by how messages are received, interpreted, and adapted. The effectiveness of soft power, therefore, depends not only on the intrinsic appeal of the content, but also on the social, emotional, and cultural proximity between its source and the target audience. The two fundamental concepts in this process are "affective affinity" and "transnational proximity".

Affective affinity refers to the symbolic or emotional connections that foreign public may feel toward another country's culture or values. It can range from democratic ideals, appreciation for popular music, or fascination with fashion and cinema. This resonance is further amplified by digital intimacy: social media, livestreams, and online fan communities that generate what scholars describe as "parasocial relationships"[6], where audiences feel emotionally close to public figures or cultures they have never physically encountered. This affinity strengthens the reception of soft power by creating an environment where foreign cultural elements are not only accepted but embraced and internalized. It transforms external influence into personal meaning, making it more likely that audiences will align their preferences, behaviours, or perceptions with the influencing country, not because they are persuaded rationally, but because they feel drawn to its emotional or symbolic appeal.

Transnational proximity on the other hand describes the perceived cultural or social closeness that facilitates identification or resonance. It is based on "universal human experiences in a globalized world". Themes include youth struggles, inequality, all very relevant to disparate audiences across cultural backgrounds. In South Korea's case, the relatable themes in K-dramas or aesthetics of K-pop idols contribute to a sense of proximity even for audiences with little prior exposure to Korean culture. As Dal Yong Jin argues, transnational proximity helps explain how "certain cultural products become emotionally and socially meaningful across national borders, even in the absence of direct political or historical connections"[7].

For instance, the effectiveness of soft power lies not merely in the availability of attractive cultural products, but in the ability of those products to forge emotional and symbolic bonds across borders. Concepts such as affective affinity and transnational proximity reveal how cultural diplomacy operates through layered processes of connection, recognition, and identification.

2.3 The Role of Transnational Fandoms in the Soft Power Framework

The rise of transnational fandoms offers an interesting example of how soft power operates in today's world. Global fan communities centred on music, television, gaming and cinema do more than passively consume content; they actively participate in its global circulation translating media, organizing events and fostering cultural exchange. Often functioning

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[6] Bertha Chin e Lori Hitchcock Morimoto, "Towards a Theory of Transcultural Fandom", *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10, no. 1 (May 2013): 92

[7] Dal Yong Jin, "Transnational Proximity of the Korean Wave in the Global Cultural Sphere", *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 184–85, https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/18469/3982.

independently of state initiatives, these communities nonetheless play a crucial role in amplifying a nation's soft power by generating interest and emotional attachment. This phenomenon reflects what some scholars refer to as "bottom-up soft power": a form of influence that arises not through official policy but through the grassroots enthusiasm of international audiences. In the case of South Korea, the global reach of K-pop and K-dramas has been skyrocketed not only by the quality of the content but also by the dedication of fandoms that act as informal cultural ambassadors. These transnational communities foster a sense of belonging, connection, and identification that transforms cultural exports into meaningful personal experiences.

In conclusion, soft power should be seen as a dynamic and multidimensional process, shaped not only by the deliberate efforts of states and their cultural resources, but also by the ways in which global audiences interpret, respond to, and engage with these influences. Concepts such as cultural diplomacy, affective affinity, and transnational proximity explain how cultural influence increasingly transcends national boundaries, coming out from the interaction between producers and consumers of culture. The circulation of media through fan communities further demonstrates the participatory nature of this process. As the following chapter will explore, South Korea offers a compelling example of this evolving model, where state policy, global media flows, and transnational audience engagement come together to produce a distinctive form of soft power on the international stage.

3. South Korea's Cultural Policy and the Politics of Soft Power

In the last decades, South Korea has emerged as one of the world's most prominent soft power actors, owing largely to the international success of its cultural industries, a phenomenon collectively known as the "Korean Wave", or "Hallyu". While much attention has been on the global reception of Korean cultural products such as K-pop, dramas and cinema, less emphasis has been placed on the strategic but often fluctuating role of the South Korean state in this expansion. Far from being a spontaneous or purely market-driven trend, the Korean Wave is rooted in a carefully shaped but not always consistent set of policies and shifting public–private dynamics that reflect both deliberate planning and adaptive governance.

Since the post-democratization period, and especially after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, South Korean governments have alternated between "hands-on" and "hands-off" approaches to cultural development. At times, the state has taken an active role by investing directly in media industries, establishing cultural centres abroad, and promoting Korean culture through official diplomacy. At other times, it has adopted a more facilitative stance, allowing private companies, fandoms, and creative workers to lead the global spread of Hallyu with minimal intervention. This flexibility has allowed the government to maintain a central influence over cultural branding while still benefiting from the agility of market-led innovation.

The first section in the chapter takes a closer look at how South Korea's cultural policy has evolved over time, paying particular attention to the changing relationship between the state and the cultural industries throughout the rise of the Korean Wave. Rather than following a single, stable model, government involvement has shifted over the years, sometimes taking an active, interventionist role, and other times stepping back to let market forces and private players lead the way. To make sense of these shifts, the chapter follows a widely used framework that divides the Korean Wave into three main phases: Hallyu 1.0, Hallyu 2.0, and Hallyu 3.0. These stages not only reflect the growing global reach of Korean culture and developments in media technology but also mark changes in the way the state has engaged with and supported cultural production.

From early government support for Korean TV dramas to today's more complex system where global fandoms, tech platforms, and state branding efforts all intersect, the story of Hallyu shows how cultural influence in South Korea has been produced by a mix of public and private forces. Ultimately, what emerges is a hybrid and adaptive model, one where influence flows through both official channels and grassroots enthusiasm. This flexibility has been essential to

creating the kind of global emotional connections and cultural closeness what we previously called affective affinity and transnational proximity that lie at the heart of South Korea's soft power success.

Characteristics of the Korean Wave by Period

Classification	Korean Wave 1.0	Korean Wave 2.0	Korean Wave 3.0
Duration	From 1997 to the mid-2000s	From the mid-2000s to the early 2010s	Since the early 2010s
Characteristics	Advent of the Korean Wave Focused on visual contents	Diffusion of the Korean Wave Focused on idols	Diversity of the Korean Wave
Main Genre	Drama	K-pop	K-Culture
Genres	Drama, movie, Korean pop song	Public culture, some parts of art and culture	Traditional culture, art and culture, popular culture
Countries	Asia	Asia, some parts of Europe, Africa, Middle East, Middle and South America and the US	Whole world
Major Consumers	Manias	Teens and twenties	World citizens
Major Media	Cable TV, satellite TV, internet	Popular video website, social networking services	All media types

Table 1: Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism [2013], requoted by Ministry of Land Infrastructure and Transport, The National Atlas of Korea I, 2019, http://nationalatlas.ngii.go.kr/.

The second part of the chapter, on the other hand, shifts from a chronological account of Hallyu's evolution to an analysis of the mechanisms through which it operates as soft power today. Rather than a purely state-led project, the Korean Wave now emerges from the interaction of three key actors: the state, the cultural industry, and global fan communities; their cooperation and tensions is what shapes its global influence. This triangular model highlights how diplomacy, commercialization, and grassroots participation converge to sustain Hallyu as a political, economic, and cultural force.

3.1 Hallyu 1.0 (1990s-2007)

The earliest phase of the Korean Wave relevant to this analysis is commonly referred to as "Hallyu 1.0", which emerged in the early 1990s and extended into the mid-2000s. In the years preceding its rise, South Korea underwent a "pre-Hallyu" era, during which the government, under the pressure of the United States, adopted neoliberal reforms that reduced state intervention and prioritised private sector profit. Since then, Hallyu has been increasingly institutionalised as a government-backed cultural phenomenon, though tensions between neoliberal globalisation and state control have persisted[8]. Hallyu 1.0 on the other hand was characterized by the regional diffusion of Korean cultural products, particularly television

[8] Lee, H.K. (2019). Cultural Policy in South Korea. London, UK: Routledge

dramas and popular music, especially in East Asia. Unlike the more structured phases that followed, Hallyu 1.0 was mostly organic in origin, with limited initial involvement from the South Korean state. It did however lay the groundwork that would lead the way to a very sophisticated apparatus of soft power.

The 1990s marked a turning point for South Korea's cultural industries. Following decades of authoritarian rule, the country underwent political democratisation and economic liberalisation. President Kim Young-sam's administration (1993-1998) advanced neoliberal reforms, including a partial deregulation of media and telecommunications. This facilitated the growth of private broadcasters and production companies, which began experimenting with new cultural formats dedicated to younger audiences. One of the earliest examples of this came in 1992 with the debut of Seo Taiji and Boys, whose hybrid sound combining Western pop, hip-hop and traditional Korean elements revolutionised the local music scene and set the tone for modern K-pop[9]. Their success lay not only in their musical innovation but also in the socio-cultural themes addressed in their lyrics, including South Korea's notoriously exam-oriented education system, political liberalisation, and the emergence of consumer culture[10][11]. As early as 1994, an internal report by the Presidential Advisory Board on Science and Technology argued that the export of one blockbuster film could yield economic benefits equivalent to selling hundreds of thousands of Hyundai cars[12]. This insight laid the foundation for later shifts in policy thinking, which gained traction especially after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, when the government began to more seriously consider the cultural sector as a strategy of economic recovery.

During this period, the most influential cultural product was television drama. Korean dramas such as "What is Love?" (1997) and later "Winter Sonata" (2002) achieved immense popularity across East and Southeast Asia, in China and Taiwan especially. These dramas were a breath of fresh air as they all contrasted with the slower pacing and traditional themes dominant in domestic media from other Asian countries. The Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), along with emerging cable channels and independent studios, expanded the availability of content beyond Korea's borders. At the same time, companies such as SM Entertainment, founded in 1995, began to systematise the training, production and promotion of K-pop idols. This idol

[9] Dal Yong Jin, *Understanding the Korean Wave* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024), 17
[10] Ibid.
[11] Kim, Y. (Ed.). (2016). Routledge Handbook of Korean Culture and Society (1st ed.). Routledge.
[12] Doobo Shim, "Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia," Media, Culture & Society 28, no. 1 (2006), 32

system, though in its infancy, introduced rigorous trainee programs and visual aesthetics that would later define Korean pop culture globally[13].

3.1.1 Cultural Policy in Hallyu 1.0

The rise of Hallyu came alongside a transformation in South Korea's approach to cultural policy. From latter half of the 1990s, the government gradually shifted from viewing culture solely as an artistic domain to treating it as an economically strategic industry. Throughout the successive administrations of Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moon-hyun, the Republic of Korea progressively institutionalised support for cultural production, laying the infarctional groundwork for the cultural soft power strategies.

Kim Young-sam Administration (1993–1998)

The Kim Young-sam government, first civilian government since 1960s, pursued two major cultural policy directions: globalisation under the "Segyehwa" initiative, and the establishment of a state-led development regime for cultural industries. Segyehwa, first announced in 1994, responded to increasing external pressure (US insistence) to liberalise and internationalise Korea's economy. In the cultural domain, this translated into a shift from a closed, protectionist model toward a cultural export strategy. During the same year, the administration established the Cultural Industries Bureau within the Ministry of Culture and Sports. This marked a decisive moment in Korean cultural policy: for the first time, the state began to treat culture as a commercial sector. The bureau oversaw key areas such as broadcasting, advertising, film, video, interactive media, and cultural content promotion[14]. As noted by Hye-Kyung Lee, its primary objectives were the "industrialization culture" and the "internationalisation of Korean content"[15]. In line with this new vision, the government passed the "Motion Picture Promotion Law" in 1995, which provided enhanced financial and legal support to the domestic film industry. Rather than regulating culture from a moral or ideological perspective, as in earlier authoritarian periods, the state now sought to transform cultural production into an export-oriented, market-driven enterprise. This marked a significant institutional shift: the commodification of culture became a deliberate policy objective.

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[13] Lie, John. *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015)

[14] Dal Yong Jin, *Understanding the Korean Wave* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024)

[15] Lee, Hye-Kyung. "Cultural Policy and Korean Wave: From National Culture to Transnational Consumerism." In The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global, edited by Youna Kim, 185–98. London; New York: Routledge, 2013.

Kim Dae-jung Administration (1998-2003)

Following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the new Kim Dae-jung administration adopted a substantial IMF-backed economic reform program which embraced neoliberal principles. While primarily focused on financial stabilization, the program included measures to liberalise the cultural sector and expand Korea's export-led growth model into new industries, including media and entertainment. One of the most important acts of this administration was the allocation of approximately 1% of the national budget to the cultural sector by 2001[16]. This was not framed as an artistic subsidy, but rather as an economic investment. However, the Kim government mostly avoided direct state intervention, going instead for indirect support mechanisms, such as tax incentives, infrastructure development and promotional aid. This period saw the cultural policy implications of "Winter Sonata" (2002), the drama that pushed the Korean Wave across Asia. The drama's unexpected success in Japan and China demonstrated the diplomatic and economic potential of Korea cultural products. Soon after, Hallyu was formally adopted as a category of public policy, linked to tourism, branding, trade and regional diplomacy. As Jung notes, cultural products came to serve a dual function: commercial success and soft power influence[17].

Roh Moo-hyun Administration (2003-2008)

The Roh Moo-hyun administration continued the trend of state support for cultural industries, at least initially. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism launched the "C-Korea 2010 Vision" in 2005, which aimed to make Korea one of the world's top five cultural economies though the strategic promotion of "Creativity, Culture and Content", the so called "3Cs". However, Roh's pursuit of a Korea-US Free Trade Agreement brought controversy. As part of negotiations, the government halved the screen quota (which protected Korean cinema) from 40% to 20% in

[16] Ministry of Culture and Tourism, *White Paper on Cultural Policy*, 2001
[17] Jung, J. E., "Art Industry 3.0 Era," Arts Magazine, no. 488, Korean Arts Management Service

2006. This decision had a measurable impact: the market share of domestic films fell from 63.8% in 2006 to 42% in 2008, only returning to 50% by 2014.The impact of this policy shift can be observed in the chart below. The government also cut the cultural budget in 2007, although it maintained limited support through initiatives such as the "Public Film Fund", a move seen as a compromise with an increasingly critical cultural sector. Despite the policy reversals, this period further consolidated the integration of cultural industries into broader economic agendas. Television, film, music, and gaming were increasingly linked to Korea's international visibility and national branding.

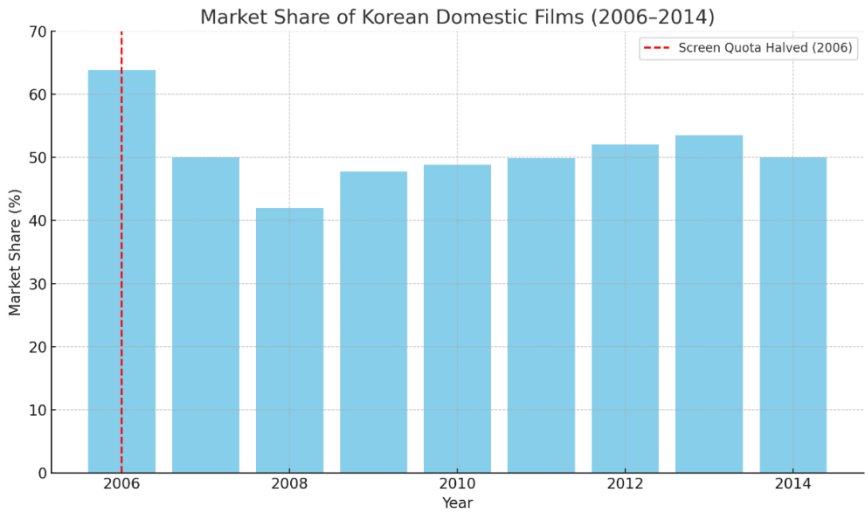

Figure 1: Graph created by the author based on data from Korean Film Council (KOFIC), Box Office Statistics (2006–2014) and analysis from Jimmyn Parc (2014)

3.2 Hallyu 2.0 (2008-2017)

The second phase of the Korean Wave started in 2008, a period recognizable with the rise of the conservative government of Lee Myuk-bak (2008-2013). Building upon the foundations laid in the first wave, this period marked a significant transition in both the scope and the infrastructure of Korean cultural exports. No longer limited to East Asia, Korean popular culture began gaining traction across broader global markets, particularly in North America, the Middle East and some part of Europe as well. This expansion was made possible by a convergence of several developments: the growing maturity of the idol system, the first rise of social media and digital platforms such as YouTube and Twitter and an increasingly strategic state commitment to branding Korea as a global cultural powerhouse. Whereas Hallyu 1.0 was characterised by a relatively organic, regional diffusion of dramas and music, Hallyu 2.0 involved institutional consolidation and technological transformation. The South Korean government, having observed the soft power potential of cultural exports, began to formalise its support through agencies like KOCCA (Korea Creative Content Agency), and through

branding campaigns like “Global Korea” and “C-Korea 2010 Vision”. These policies not only aimed to promote Korean content abroad, but also to reposition South Korea’s national image, strengthen cultural diplomacy, and attract foreign investment. At the same time, the creative industries experienced a qualitative leap. K-pop, led by groups such as BigBang, Girls’ Generation, and later EXO, adopted more sophisticated production methods and globalised aesthetics. This period also saw the early formalisation of transnational fan cultures, and the unprecedented role of digital platforms in the distribution, promotion, and feedback loop of Korean content. The Korean Wave was no longer just a cultural export: it had become an integrated system of content creation, branding, and digital engagement, underpinned by both public policy and corporate strategy

3.2.1 Cultural Policy in Hallyu 2.0

As Hallyu entered its second phase, marked by the expansion of digital platforms and the globalisation of Korean pop culture, the role of the South Korean government became increasingly purposeful. Cultural policy during this period was no longer a reactive measure responding to market success; rather, it developed into a proactive national strategy. The state moved beyond supporting the cultural industries to actively shaping and branding them as central pillars of South Korea’s economic development and diplomatic outreach. This subchapter explores how the administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye responded to the opportunities presented by Hallyu 2.0. While both governments invested heavily in the global promotion of Korean cultural content, their approaches were distinct. Lee’s presidency adopted a market-oriented logic shaped by corporate thinking while Park’s administration formalised culture within the broader policy framework of the “Creative Economy.” At the same time, this period revealed the contradictions inherent in state-led soft power strategies, especially in relation to freedom of expression and political control over the cultural sector.

Lee Myung-bak Administration (2008–2013)

Lee Myung-bak’s government embraced a market-driven, corporate approach to cultural policy. Lee, a former CEO, expanded the scope of the Korean Wave to include food, sports, fashion, and tourism, and promoted the production and export of cultural content “as if he [were] the CEO of a corporation; the Lee government was known as [a] corporate state”[18]. He viewed culture as an industry to be developed for economic gain and national branding. His

[18] Choi, Y.H. (2013b). The Korean Wave as a Corporate-State Project of Lee Government. Economy and Society 97: 252–285

administration shifted from a hands-off stance to a hands-on developmental role in the cultural sector. One of Lee's first moves was to reorganize ministries: in 2008 the Ministry of Culture, Tourism was merged with the communications ministry to create the "Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism" (MCST), reflecting the convergence of culture with digital content and signalling the government's prioritization of content industries. Under Lee, MCST explicitly promoted "content industries" as primary drivers of the national economy.

Lee's administration actively supported cultural exports and the Korean Wave as tools of soft power and public diplomacy. The government established a high-level Presidential Council on National Branding to leverage Hallyu for Korea's image abroad. In 2011, it formed the Content Industry Promotion Committee (chaired by the Prime Minister) to craft annual action plans for boosting creative industries. As an example, the committee decided that the government would spend a total of ₩452.2 billion in 2015 on promoting cultural content, thus supporting Korean film festivals and subsidizing the overseas broadcasting of K-dramas to enhance Korea's national image. Lee's policy vision was to "bring the power of our culture into full blossom"[19] globally, and to build up national power through culture as a key element of competitiveness. His government was the most aggressively neoliberal of any Korean government in cultural policy, prioritizing growth, deregulation and partnership with big media conglomerates (e.g. CJ, Lotte) to scale up cultural exports.

This pro-industry approach brought significant investments. Under Lee, the budget for cultural industry programs within the MCST rose substantially. While the previous administration (Roh Moo-hyun, 2003-2007) had reduced the share of MCST budget devoted to cultural industries (from 12.7% in 2003 to 9.0% in 2007), Lee's conservative government reversed course by increasing the share from 9.9% in 2008 to 15.6% by 2015. As mentioned, the idea was to treat pop culture as an export sector for economic growth. Lee frequently highlighted the Korean Wave in terms of national competitiveness and "improving the national brand"[20]. His administration tied Hallyu to soft power goals, viewing global fandom of K-pop and K-dramas as a way to attract foreign publics and boost Korea's influence.

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[19] Lee Myung-bak, *"Address by President Lee Myung-bak at the Inaugural Ceremony for the Seventeenth President of the Republic of Korea: 'Together We Shall Open a Road to Advancement,'"* February 25, 2008, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea (English version), accessed July 29, 2025

[20] Jin, Dal Yong. "Cultural Politics in the South Korean Cultural Industries: Confrontations between State-Developmentalism and Neoliberalism." International Journal of Cultural Policy, 2018.

Despite this strong support, not all of Lee's cultural policies were viewed positively. Some policies were criticised for favouring large corporate players and commercial content over creative diversity. Moreover, investigations revealed that political interference in culture began under Lee's tenure. There is, for example, evidence which suggests that his government started compiling a secret "artist blacklist" of cultural figures deemed critical of the government. This blacklist (later fully exposed under Park's administration) reportedly contained hundreds of names even during Lee's term, indicating a willingness to curb dissenting art despite the outward promotion of Hallyu. Such contradictions foreshadowed more serious tensions between creative freedom and state agendas in the next administration.

Park Geun-hye Administration (2013-2017)

President Park Geun-hye continued and intensified government support for Hallyu, making cultural promotion a core national strategy. Park came into office explicitly pledging to strengthen cultural policy as a main objective of her administration. Riding the global buzz of Psy's "Gagnam Style" in 2012, she saw an opportunity to elevate Korea's soft power. Park's platform included a signature "Creative Economy" initiative, in which the fusion of culture and technology was central to economic innovation. In her 2013 inaugural address she declared "in the 21st century, culture is power"[21] and vowed to support creative content industries to "ignite the engine of a creative economy"[22] and create jobs. The new administration quickly announced plans to bolster Hallyu content: in early 2013, MCST identified five major content sectors to foster as globally competitive; these were: digital games, K-pop music, animation/character content, popular music, and musical theatre. For example, Park's government planned to construct a large K-pop concert arena near Seoul and more than doubled subsidies for the animation/character industry (from ₩92 million in 2013 to ₩200 million by 2017). The administration also broadened the Korean Wave's scope by officially adding new cultural domains like fashion and webtoons as target industries for Hallyu expansion.

Under Park, state investment in culture rose significantly. The MCST budget for cultural industries kept growing, reaching 15.6% of the ministry's budget by 2015 (up from 9.9% in 2008). Park set an ambitious goal to raise overall cultural funding to 2% of the national budget by 2017. For context, in 2012 the culture budget was only 1.14% of Korea's budget, compared to an OECD country average of ~1.9%. In line with this, Park's administration increased

[21] Park Geun-hye, *"Opening a New Era of Hope: The 18th Presidential Inauguration Speech,"* February 25, 2013, Office of the President, http://18visit.president.pa.go.kr/en/president/inaugural.
[22] Ibid.

MCST's budget and launched large cultural infrastructure projects, including building a series of giant auditoriums and Korean cultural centres at home and abroad to showcase "K-culture"[23]. This heavy state backing reflected a view of Hallyu as a key growth engine and a pillar of Korea's global diplomacy. Indeed, Park's government officially touted movies, K-pop, TV and other cultural products as one of "the key priorities" for national development[24].

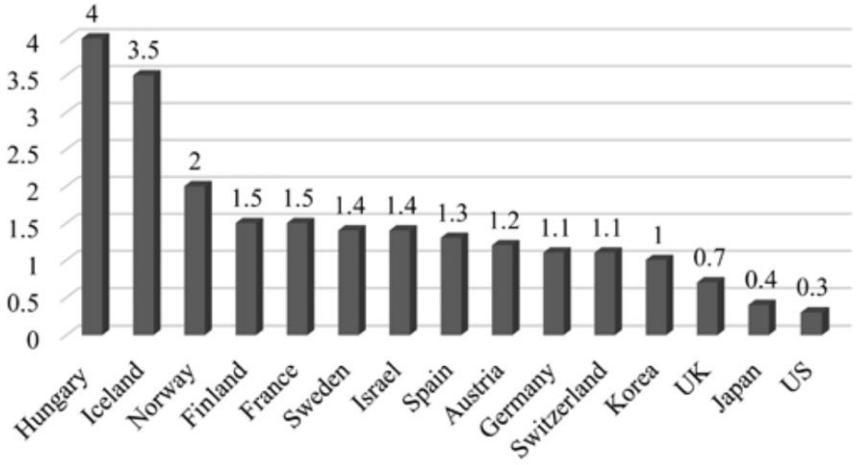

Figure 2: General Government Spending (Recreation, Culture, and Religion, 2020, %). Source: OECD (2020)

However, Park's term also demonstrated a darker side of Korean cultural policy, as political control and censorship accompanied the promotional efforts. Notably, her conservative administration undermined artistic freedom through funding pressure and blacklisting. A prime example was the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) controversy. In 2014, BIFF screened a documentary critical of the government's handling of the Sewol ferry disaster, as a matter of fact defying objections from Park's allies. In retaliation, authorities slashed the festival's funding by almost 50% the following year and even prosecuted BIFF's director on dubious charges[25]. This very harsh intervention started a boycott movement in the film industry, as many saw it as an attack on creative independence. As already mentioned, it emerged that Park's government had compiled an infamous secret blacklist of over a thousand artists, writers and entertainers who were critical of the administration. Those on the list were barred from receiving government grants or support, effectively punishing dissident voices. This covert

[23] Minsung Kim, *"The Growth of South Korean Soft Power and Its Geopolitical Implications,"* October 31, 2022, *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3212634/the-growth-of-south-korean-soft-power-and-its-geopolitical-implications/.
[24] Dal Yong Jin, *"Cultural Politics in the South Korean Cultural Industries"*.
[25] Isabella Steger, "South Korea's Busan Film Festival Is Emerging from Under a Dark Political Cloud", Quartz, October 10, 2017

censorship revived authoritarian-era tactics (indeed, Park's blacklist was likened to her father Park Chung-hee's control of culture in the 1970s). The chilling effect was felt across arts communities, even as the government publicly promoted "cultural prosperity."

During Hallyu 2.0, the administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye played part in transforming South Korea's cultural industries into instruments of national development and international influence. Both governments significantly increased public investment in the production and global circulation of cultural content, facilitating the rapid expansion of the Korean Wave beyond East Asia. Popular culture was no longer seen merely as entertainment but as a strategic asset central to economic growth, national branding, and soft power. Yet this period also exposed contradictions. While the state actively supported creative industries and celebrated their global success, it simultaneously imposed constraints on domestic cultural expression. Political interference, funding cuts tied to ideological alignment, and the suppression of critical voices undermined the very creative freedoms that had fuelled Hallyu's appeal. These tensions were particularly visible under Park Geun-hye, whose administration's cultural policy, though ambitious in scope and scale, was also marked by censorship and control.

3.3 Hallyu 3.0 (2017-present)

Hallyu 3.0 is the final and current phase in the evolution of the Korean Wave. During this period, Korean culture achieved unprecedented global reach, powered by mega-fandoms, mass digital engagement and cross-sector collaborations. Rather than relying solely on traditional exports like television dramas and music, Hallyu 3.0 encompasses a broad cultural ecosystem including BTS, Blackpink, Netflix dramas, web-novels, webtoons, gaming, beauty, fashion, tourism and even culinary exports.

This phase is shaped by the technological availability of the digital age. Platforms such as YouTube, Twitter (now X), V Live, TikTok and Weverse have enabled unprecedented levels of transnational engagement. Through these tools, Korean entertainment companies have harnessed algorithmic visibility and fan labour to build global fandoms, promote artists, and circulate Korean content across linguistic and geographic boundaries. The result is a participatory media environment in which audiences play an active role in the promotion and global diffusion of Hallyu, sometimes even anticipating the moves of entertainment agencies themselves.

Another defining feature of Hallyu 3.0 is the growing entanglement of Korean popular culture with global platform providers and content distributors. Major streaming services such as Netflix and Disney+ have invested heavily in Korean productions, with Netflix alone pledging to invest over $2.5 billion in South Korean content in April 2023[26]. This relationship has expanded the visibility and profitability of Korean series like "Squid Game", "Hellbound", and "The Glory", transforming Korea into a serious player in the global content economy.

Alongside commercial success, this period also witnessed the formal integration of Korean cultural icons into state-led soft power strategies. BTS, Blackpink, and other high-profile artists were appointed cultural ambassadors and included in diplomatic initiatives, including state visits, UN speeches, and global development campaigns. These developments reflect an evolved model of soft power, where the boundaries between entertainment, branding, and diplomacy are increasingly blurred. As recent scholarship highlights, post-pandemic Hallyu has come to be seen as one of the most agile and emotionally resonant tools in South Korea's soft power repertoire[27].

3.3.1 Cultural Policy in Hallyu 3.0

As Hallyu entered its third stage in the late 2010s, South Korea's government placed once more emphasis on cultural policy as a pillar of soft power. From 2017 onward, successive administrations, first under President Moon Jae-in (2017-2022) and then Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-2025), pursued ambitious strategies to both support and steer Korea's cultural industries. Yet, while both leaders recognized the Korean Wave as a powerful diplomatic and economic asset, their approaches differed: Moon's policies were rooted in restoration, institutional trust and direct public investment, while Yoon's strategy reflects a market-liberal, globally diversified and deregulation-oriented model.

Moon Jae-in Administration (2017-2022)

Elected in 2017 in the wake of the Park-Geun-hye impeachment scandal, Moon Jae-in came to power with a clear mandate: restore trust in South Korea's democratic institutions and repair the country's cultural environment after years of politicized control. One early priority was to reverse the notorious artist "blacklist". The administration issued a formal apology to those

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[26] Josh Smith, "Billions of dollars in deals unveiled as S. Korea's 'No. 1 salesman' to meet Biden," *Reuters*, April 25, 2023, reprinted online, https://www.reuters.com/technology/netflix-invest-25-bln-south-korea-make-tv-shows-movies-2023-04-25/

[27] Yoon, Kyong. (2023). De/Constructing the soft power discourse in Hallyu. Communication Research and Practice.

affected and pledged to ensure freedom of artistic expression and fair support for the arts[28]. Instead of allocating cultural funding through opaque political filters, Moon's policy emphasized transparent, merit-based criteria.

This shift set a new tone for the state-culture relationship. For example, the Busan International Film Festival, which had suffered governmental interference for screening the documentary in 2014, gradually regained its autonomy during Moon's term. The new administration resumed public subsidies to BIFF and other festivals without political strings, reassuring observers that the era of heavy-handed oversight was over. This restoration of trust formed the backdrop for Moon's broader cultural strategy in the 3.0 era.

Moon's cultural policy centred on positioning South Korea as a "cultural powerhouse" using the Korean Wave for both economic growth and diplomatic influence[29]; it was a declared driver of national strategy. In 2020, the government created the Hallyu Content Cooperation Division within the Contents Policy Bureau, a dedicated unit tasked within coordinating support for diverse creative sectors, from K-pop and television dramas to gaming, fashion, webtoons and literature. This approach sought to broaden Korea's cultural image abroad, countering the risk of over-reliance on a few high-profile exports. While Moon's term is widely associated with what scholars call Hallyu 3.0, Korean policymakers also began using the term Hallyu 4.0 in 2020 to describe an even broader diversification agenda. For the sake of clarity and consistency, however, this thesis follows the three-phase model while acknowledging this evolving terminology.

Financially, his presidency marked an unprecedented expansion in public cultural investment. The National Assembly approved record-high culture budgets during his tenure. Notably, for fiscal year 2020 the MCST budget was raised to ₩6.48 trillion, almost a 10% increase over 2019[30]. A striking ₩1.1 trillion was designated for virtual reality (VR) content alone, with ₩40 billion going toward a new VR exhibition hall in Seoul, signalling confidence in immersive technologies as the next frontier for Hallyu[31]. Additional targeted funds supported small and

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[28] HT Correspondent, "South Korea Ministry Apologises for Blacklisting Artists Critical of Government," *Hindustan Times*, January 23, 2017, accessed July 31, 2025, https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/south-korea-ministry-apologises-for-blacklisting-artists-critical-of-government/story-rh2KtmzwL9AmE05lOCtseP.html.

[29] Yunhee Kim, "The K-Wave: South Korea's Soft Power Bliss," *ISPI*, March 7, 2022, accessed July 31, 2025, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/k-wave-south-koreas-soft-power-bliss-33969.

[30] Anderson, A., "South Korea Gets Record-Breaking Culture Budget," International Arts Manager, December 19, 2020, accessed July 31, 2025

[31] Ibid.

mid-scale creators: ₩113 billion in creative-industry loans and grants, and ₩32.3 billion for overseas promotion of films, webtoons, and fashion. Major infrastructure projects, such as the construction of a dedicated K-pop concert venue, reinforced the government's commitment to sustaining cultural exports at scale.

These results were measurable. As *Figure 3* shows, the annual export value of Korean cultural content more than doubled over Moon's presidency: from around $5.1 billion in 2016 to over $12.4 billion in 2021. By 2021 the content sector's export revenue even exceeded that of some major manufacturing industries like electric vehicles or home appliances[32].

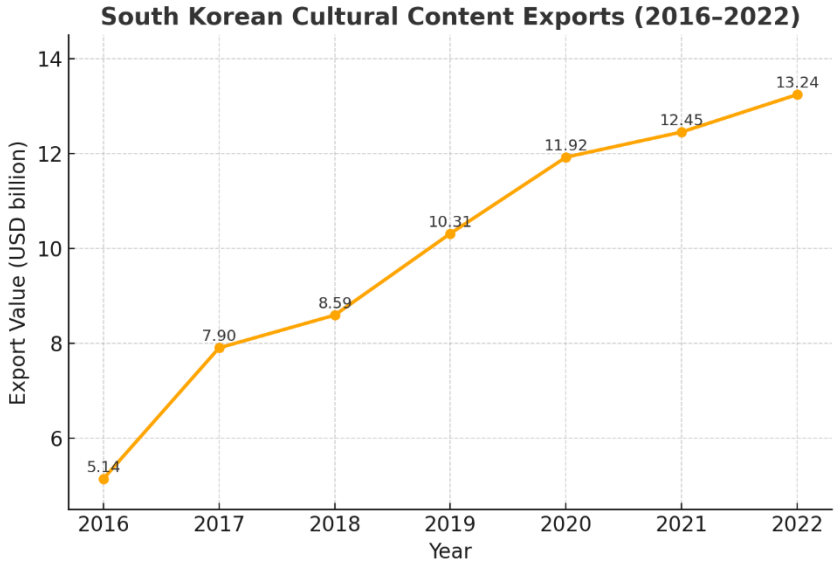

Figure 3: South Korean Cultural Content Exports, 2016-2022. Source: Author's elaboration.

Moon's support also extended to regulatory reforms. One was the liberalization of restrictive regulations that had constrained cultural sectors. For instance, in August 2021 Moon's government abolished the "Cinderella" law, a controversial curfew that had banned under-16 youth from online gaming past midnight. This decade-old restriction was lifted in recognition of gaming's maturation and its importance as an export industry. Removing the curfew (amid the surge of e-sports and global game fandom) was representative of Moon's market-friendly approach to cultural content: rather than treating gaming as a social ill, it was now seen as a flagship of Hallyu 3.0. As a matter of fact, by 2019, games accounted for more than 70% of Korea's content exports and experienced sustained growth following the relaxation of regulatory constraints.

[32] Shim Sun-ah, "S. Korea's Content Industry Exports Surge to Record High in 2022," WELCON (KOCCA), January 5, 2024, accessed July 31, 2025

Cultural diplomacy was another hallmark of Moon's presidency. His administration recognized the global visibility of Korean celebrities as diplomatic asset. Notably, in September 2021, K-pop group BTS was appointed "Presidential Special Envoys for Future Generations and Culture" and accompanied Moon to the United Nations General Assembly, where they delivered messages on youth resilience and the COVID-19 pandemic, an appearance that attracted worldwide attention and reinforced the administration's progressive, youth-oriented image.

Moon also managed to obtain other high-profile cultural achievements, hosting the Oscar-winning Parasite cast and director at the Blue House in early 2020 and framing their success as a milestone for Korean culture on the global stage. Under his leadership, Korean Cultural Centers and the Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS) expanded their overseas presence, organizing events ranging from K-pop concerts in Europe to traditional art exhibitions in Southeast Asia. By 2021, surveys revealed that 80.5% of foreign respondents held a favourable view of Korea, largely attributing it to its contemporary cultural exports, particularly pop music, cinema, and literature, signifying a measurable boost in soft power that Moon aimed to sustain[33].

Even in moments of diplomatic strain, Moon employed Hallyu as a bridge for engagement. In late 2017, amid Chinese public backlash over the deployment of the U.S. THAAD missile system, which triggered a boycott of Korean cultural products, he travelled to China with a delegation of K-pop and entertainment figures to help ease tensions and restore goodwill.

Despite its successes, Moon Jae-in's cultural policy was not without controversy. Critics argued that his administration at times instrumentalized Hallyu for political purposes. Some saw high-profile cultural events hosted by the president during the COVID-19 outbreak as poorly timed, while others viewed the close association with BTS and other cultural icons as an attempt to appropriate their global appeal for political gain. Although these criticisms did not significantly hinder policy implementation, they underscored the enduring tension between state support and cultural autonomy and raised concerns that excessive government involvement in promoting specific cultural figures risked veering toward soft propaganda.

[33] Yunhee Kim, "The K-Wave: South Korea's Soft Power Bliss," ISPI, March 7, 2022

Yoon Suk-yeol Administration (2022-2025)

When Yoon Suk-yeol took office in May 2022, he inherited a flourishing Korean Wave but sought to place it within a more overtly geopolitical and market-oriented framework. His "Global Pivotal State" (GPS) doctrine positioned South Korea as a nation actively shaping the international order by aligning its cultural influence with economic and security objectives. In this vision, Hallyu was not just a tool for image-building, but a strategic industry interlinked with diplomacy, trade, and technological leadership.

Yoon's administration distinguished itself with quantifiable ambitions. In a 2023 export strategy meeting of the MCST he set the goal to double Korea's content exports from approximately $10.4 billion in 2021 to $25 billion by 2027, positioning the country among the world's top four content exporters alongside US, China and Japan[34]. The Ministry formalized this through a "3E" K-content strategy: "Expansion" of export markets, "Extension" of content domains, and maximizing the Korean Wave "Effect" in sectors from tourism to consumer goods[35].

Breaking Korea's over-reliance on regional markets became a priority. In 2022, more than half of cultural exports went to China, Japan, and neighbouring countries, with North America (13.3%), Europe (10.9%), and the Middle East (5.8%) last. To shift this balance, Yoon's government opened new Korean Cultural Centers and KOCCA hubs in cities like New York and London, with further expansion planned in Latin America and South Asia. Major promotional campaigns, such as the Squid Game–KFC collaboration and the "Squid GameOver" fan competition in Rome, exemplified the drive to embed Korean cultural content into diverse local contexts.

On the content extension front, the Yoon administration has expanded support for webtoons, web novels, streaming (OTT) productions, and AI-enabled creative industries. This means funding and regulatory support for creators on global platforms (Kakao Webtoon, Netflix, etc.) and acknowledging that the future of Hallyu lies increasingly in internet-driven distribution. Notably, Yoon's culture ministry has encouraged partnerships between the content industry and Korea's powerful tech sector, in line with his administration's pro-business stance. In late 2022, the government announced plans to open content financing to foreign investors and venture

[34] Lao News Agency (KPL), "R. Korea Aims to Double K-Content Exports to US $25 Bln by 2027," March 2, 2023, https://kpl.gov.la/EN/detail.aspx?id=71768.
[35] Ibid.

capital[36], aiming to invest more capital into K-content production. By loosening rules that previously favoured domestic media conglomerates, Yoon hoped South Korean content companies could tap global investment and expertise, accelerating their growth. This shift reflected Yoon's broader economic philosophy: government as an enabler, not a primary funder. Deregulation and global standardization of industry rules were presented as the keys to long-term competitiveness. In fact, the administration's 2023 Investment Promotion strategy highlighted content as one sector to benefit from regulatory simplification and global standardization of rules[37].

In contrast to Moon's heavy public investment, Yoon's model relied more on private-sector dynamism and cross-border financing. Support mechanisms included tax incentives for overseas investors, joint production agreements with foreign studios, and streamlined export licensing for cultural products.

Despite the emphasis placed on cultural policy, the Yoon administration has faced a series of controversies that often mirror its conservative orientation. A particularly sensitive issue concerns the perceived degree of freedom afforded to the media and the arts under the current government. Upon taking office, Yoon positioned himself as an advocate of "fairness", sharply criticizing what he described as the politicization of institutions during the previous liberal administration. However, by late 2023, critics argued that his government was displaying tendencies reminiscent of earlier conservative regimes, particularly in its approach to media governance. Efforts to increase governmental influence over public broadcasters drew widespread concern. Notably, Yoon refused to endorse an opposition-backed bill aimed at shielding networks such as KBS and MBC from political interference, opting instead to appoint close allies to senior positions. In November 2023, the newly appointed president of KBS dismissed or reassigned several prominent journalists and producers known for their independent reporting, further intensifying the debate over press freedom[38]. Programs critical of the government were cancelled, prompting public broadcasters' unions and international observers to decry a "return of media censorship" in South Korea.

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[36] Korea Herald, "Korea Aims to Boost Content Industry to World's Top 4 by 2027," June 18, 2024, https://www.koreaherald.com/article/3418644.

[37] U.S. Department of State, 2024 Investment Climate Statements: South Korea, 2024, U.S. Department of State, accessed August 3, 2025, https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-investment-climate-statements/south-korea

[38] Philippe Mesmer, "The Return of Media Censorship in South Korea", Le Monde (English edition), December 4, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/12/04/the-return-of-media-censorship-in-south-korea_6310731_4.html.

Similarly, in the film sector, the Yoon administration's fiscally conservative orientation has resulted in significant funding reductions for the Korean Film Council, the state agency responsible for supporting domestic film production and festivals. KOFIC's budget fell from ₩110 billion in 2022 to ₩85 billion in 2023[39]. This represents an almost 40 percent cut, forcing substantial reductions in grants for independent productions, regional festivals, and arthouse projects.

Hallyu 3.0 shows how the Korean Wave has entered a new phase in which culture is inseparable from global digital platforms and transnational fandoms. Under Moon Jae-in, cultural policy was framed as a way to repair damaged institutions and restore artistic freedom, while also fuelling growth through heavy public investment and regulatory reform. His government presented Hallyu as a symbol of democratic renewal as much as an engine of exports. Yoon Suk-yeol, by contrast, has tied the Korean Wave to a market-driven vision of South Korea as a "global pivotal state," encouraging deregulation, foreign investment, and expansion into new markets.

What emerges is not simply a story of continuity but of two distinct styles of governance. Moon emphasized trust, protection of cultural rights, and state leadership in financing creative industries. Yoon instead has sought to let private capital and global partnerships set the pace, even if this has come at the cost of reduced public support for independent voices. Both approaches reveal how central Hallyu has become to South Korea's self-image and foreign policy, but they also illustrate how fragile that balance can be when culture is pulled between politics, economics, and diplomacy. Rather than offering a success story, Hallyu 3.0 demonstrates the complexity of managing a cultural wave that is at once a grassroots global fandom, a successful industry and a diplomatic instrument. The Korean Wave today is more powerful and more diverse than ever, but also more difficult to manage. Whether future administrations can protect its creativity while harnessing its soft power potential will determine how sustainable this third phase truly.

The transition of Hallyu through its phases is indeed the trajectory of Korean popular culture's success story, going from a regional success to a global phenomenon. In its early years during Hallyu 1.0, television dramas and pop music primarily expanded only throughout Asia with incentives from broadcasters and audiences. The first phase paved the possibilities of Korean

[39] Korea JoongAng Daily, "Too Many Film Festivals," October 15, 2023, Koreajoongangdaily.joins.com, https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2023-10-15/opinion/columns/Too-many-film-festivals/1890471.

culture on the global stage, although limited. Hallyu 2.0 represented a turning-point as cultural industries were included in government-led initiatives under Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. State-led investment, international promotion, and tightening connections with industry helped increase the momentum to take Korean content out of Asia. Unfortunately, political meddling and censorship created complications locally, which illustrated the concerns of narrowly state-led cultural governance. Hallyu 3.0 represents how much things have changed and progressed in the digital era. Services like YouTube, Netflix, and TikTok have greatly facilitated distribution of Korean music, drama, and gaming, while fan communities passively help. The Moon Jae-in administration wanted to help re-establish cultural trust after long a long period of political interference, and prioritized investing in new media and incorporating cultural icons into its diplomatic agenda and activities. The administration of Yoon Suk-yeol, took a broader understanding of Hallyu as part of his "global pivotal state" vision, and was more inclined to deregulation, partnerships with foreign entities, and enter new markets. Nonetheless, both administrations regard Hallyu as central to the branding of Korea's international reputation, as well as, central to their economic strategy.

What seems to emerge during these three stages is an ongoing negotiation between culture as creative expression, and culture as national strategy. Hallyu has grown phenomenally, yet it has revealed tensions around matters of autonomy, state support, and sustainability. Hallyu is not just a simple story of successful governance, but a fluid in which entertainment, politics, and diplomacy come together.

3.4 The Politics of Soft Power in Hallyu

The previous sections examined the evolution of the Korean Wave across its three phases, giving much importance to how administrations, industrial actors, and technological shifts contributed to its evolution from a regional to a global cultural force. While this chronological narrative helps trace the institutional and political roots of Hallyu, it does not fully explain the mechanisms through which Korean popular culture operates as soft power in the present. Hallyu today functions less as a top-down project and more as a dynamic ecosystem in which multiple actors interact. Unlike early forms of cultural diplomacy that where entirely almost operated by the state, present-day Hallyu is sustained through coordinated contributions from government institutions, entertainment conglomerates and global audiences. Each of these actors plays a role in different ways: the state integrates culture into diplomatic agendas and foreign policy; the industry develops strategies to monetize and globalize Korean content; fans engage in participatory practices that amplify cultural visibility beyond what official channels

can achieve. It is as a matter of fact important to understand that soft power, in the Korea case, does not derive from any one of these domains in isolation but from their interaction.

This section proposes a triangular model of analysis, positioning the state, the industry and the fans as the three pillars of Hallyu's global power. The state acts as a cultural diplomat, using popular culture to frame Korea's national identity and to strengthen political and economic partnerships abroad. The industry, represented by major entertainment companies and creative sectors, works as a global entrepreneur, adapting to new technologies and foreign markets while simultaneously serving as a conduit for Korea's cultural branding. Fans, finally, function as unofficial ambassadors: through viral promotion and collective activism, they play a decisive role in expanding Hallyu's global resonance. While each actor pursues its own objectives, their convergence has produced a cultural phenomenon that is simultaneously commercial, political and grassroots in nature. This triangular approach makes possible to examine the frictions that shape Hallyu. Government efforts to instrumentalize culture may clash with fans' desire for authenticity; industry attempts to commodify fandom labour can trigger resistance within fan communities; and reliance on foreign platforms raises questions about cultural sovereignty despite Korea's global visibility. These tensions are not anomalies but part of what sustains the vitality of the Korean Wave. By exploring both cooperation and conflict among the state, industry, and fans, the chapter highlights the negotiated character of Korean soft power.

3.4.1 The State as Cultural Diplomat

South Korea's government does not write K-pop hits or direct Netflix dramas, but it does something more strategic for soft power: it builds the institutional grounds that convert cultural popularity into attraction and long-term relationships abroad, just as Nye defined. In the triangular model, the state's contribution is not cultural production but the conversion of cultural popularity into durable international influence. Rather than directing Hallyu from above, the state build frameworks that scale attraction and stabilizes it over time.

On the public diplomacy front are the Korean Cultural Centers (KCCs) run by the Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS). KCCs function as permanent venues, hosting exhibitions, workshops, residencies and university partnerships that normalize Korean culture within local cultural circuits. KOCIS reported 33 KCCs in 28 countries with new centres

planned in Austria and Sweden (2023), while other snapshots list 37 KCCs in 30 countries by 2024, evidence of a network in continuous expansion[4041].

Language policy complements these hubs. The King Sejong Institute Foundation advances language diplomacy, creating classrooms that often become real communities. As of July 2025, MCST announced 252 King Sejong Institutes across 87 countries, a significant rise compared with early-2020s baselines[42]. Classroom learning matters for soft power because it helps deepening familiarity and cultural references, turning casual fandom into engagement prolonged in time.

Both these fronts are "bridge institutions" which, put simply, mediate between domestic culture and foreign markets. These lay the groundwork that enables the arrival of fans, making cultural hits understandable and attractive for foreign investment.

Seoul also links public diplomacy to market access. The Korea Creative Contente Agency (KOCCA) runs overseas business centres (25 across 22 countries as of 2024) that help firms with export consulting, buyer matchmaking and local market intelligence[4344]. The Korean Film Council (KOFIC) manages co-production treaties and the KoBiz portal, giving produces regulatory and financing pathways that make cross-border projects easier. At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs integrates culture into everyday diplomacy, curating art and heritage displays in embassies and using exhibitions to place Korean narratives in local contexts[45].

These institutions do not simply overlap; they each play a different role. KOCIS focuses on creating local spaces where people can experience Korean culture directly, while the Sejong Institutes concentrate on teaching the language and making Korean culture more approachable. The Korea Foundation is more about academic and literary visibility, helping Korea gain recognition in universities and cultural circles. Finally, KOCCA and KOFIC mainly work on the practical side of exporting and co-producing content. When seen together, they create a

[40] Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, "Cultivating Sales Representatives for K-culture", K-policy, Webzine KOREA, April 2023.
[41] Wikipedia, s.v. "Korean Cultural Centers", last modified May 19, 2025
[42] Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, "Eleven New King Sejong Institutes Designated in 2025", press release, July 1, 2025
[43] Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), "About KOCCA"
[44] Choi Eun-nam, "Leading the Next Wave of K-content: KOCCA Expands Global Business Centers" The Korea Post, April 18, 2025
[45] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, "Exhibitions in Diplomatic Missions of Korea"

network that makes it easier for Korean culture to keep gaining attention and remain visible abroad[46].

Compared with other countries, the ROK mixes traditional cultural diplomacy tools (like language institutes and cultural centres) with more market-oriented strategies such as KOCCA's export centres and KOFIC's film co-productions. It also takes fans into account through exchange programs run by KOFICE. This makes Korea's model more flexible and better adapted to the age of digital platforms. France's Alliance Française and Japan's Japan Foundation mostly emphasize language and high culture, while China's Confucius Institutes often focus on sending political messages, which has created credibility problems in some countries. Korea instead builds a hybrid approach where institutions are ready to support culture when it becomes popular abroad. The weakness, however, is that success depends on cooperation between the state, the industry, and fans, as well as on global platforms that Korea does not control.

3.4.2 The Industry as a Global Player

If the state builds an enabling runway, the industry is what flies the plane. Since the late 2010s, South Korea's private cultural firms have internationalized their business models in ways that seed recognition and familiarity with "koreanness", which is precisely what soft power is about.

The "big four" entertainment groups (SM, YG, JYP, HYBE) are not only labels, but they are also IP engines that plan years of training, carefully planned releases and worldwide promotion strategies. Most of their strategies are platform-native: content is designed to travel via YouTube, Netflix, Spotify, TikTok and community apps, where discovery and fandoms are algorithmically crafted. Dal Yong Jin describes this as the shift from traditional broadcast to a transnational "social mediascape", where platforms and fan practices co-produce reach. At the same time, he warns that platforms are not neutral: distribution power concentrates in a few global intermediaries ("platforms imperialism"), so Korean firms gain access but also become dependent.

We can see both sides of that bargain. One the upside, Korean series have become Netflix's most watched non-US slate, accounting for 8-9% of global Netflix viewing hours since 2023, which is second only to US content. This is an attention share that converts into soft power

[46] Jin, Dal Yong, ed. Understanding the Korean Wave. London: Routledge, 2023.

visibility far beyond Korea's size[47][48]. Netflix's 2023 pledge to invest $2.5 billion in Korean content validated the commercial logic and made Korea a premium supplier within the world's dominant streaming producers[49][50]. On the risk side, this reliance means taste cycles, policy changes or contractual modifications at a few platforms could reshape global exposure overnight.

Furthermore, Korean companies have reduced their reliance on single markets by working with Western partners. HYBE, for instance, acquired Ithaca Holdings in 2021 and later teamed with Geffen Records to form the global girl group KATSEYE. JYP partnered with Sony Music Japan on the Nizi Project, creating Japanese groups trained under the K-pop system[51]. In television, CJ ENM's Studio Dragon signed a long-term deal with Netflix to co-develop and distribute dramas worldwide[52]. These collaborations do more than expand business: by placing Korean content directly on global platforms, they make Korea part of audiences' everyday viewing choices. This routine visibility builds familiarity and attraction, exactly the kind of influence soft power depends on.

Together with K-pop and TV dramas, webtoons have quietly become a second pillar of Korea's cultural soft power. These are unique in nature as they are "born global" on mobile and have easily adapted in today's market of demand. NAVER's WEBTOON Entertainment reports around 170 million monthly active users in 150+ countries (and listed on Nasdaq in 2024), turning Korean story IP into a worldwide platform for content[53].

Games are an even bigger export machine. KOCCA data show Korean game exports reached $8.67 billion in 2021, dominating the content trade surplus and outpacing music or broadcast[54]. The U.S. government's 2023 industry guide likewise lists Korea as a top four global gaming market by size[55]. From a soft-power perspective, games embed Korean IP and aesthetics into

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[47] Ampere Analysis, "South Korean Shows Are the Most Popular Non-US Content on Netflix", April 14, 2025
[48] The Korea Times, "Korean Content Ranks Second Globally on Netflix, Surpassing UK and Japan", April 16, 2025
[49] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, "President announces Netflix's USD 2.5 B investment in Korean content", April 27, 2023
[50] Hyunsu Yim, "Netflix to Invest $2.5 Billion in South Korea to Make TV Shows, Movies", April 25, 2023
[51] Korea JoongAng Daily, "JYP, Sony Music team up in Japan", February 8, 2019
[52] Netflix, "CJ ENM/Studio Dragon-Netflix Announce a Long-Term Partnership", November 21, 2019
[53] Reuters, "Webtoon Entertainment prices US IPO at top of range to raise about $315 mln", June 26, 2024
[54] Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), "2022 White Paper on Korean Games – Summary", January 30, 2023
[55] U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, "South Korea—Entertainment and Media", December 5, 2023

long-duration play and community, which is less visible than a viral song, but stickier as an everyday cultural presence.

Unlike the formal style of diplomacy, industry-led events often serve as informal diplomatic spaces. A clear example is the CJ ENM's KCON festivals, which attract hundreds of thousands of visitors in cities like Los Angeles and Tokyo, with millions more following from home. These gatherings are not political campaigns, but they work as people-to-people exchanges: fans meet artists, try Korean food, pick up phrases of the language and build networks with each other. As Jin notes, activities such as fan translation, subtitling or online streaming parties amount to productive labour that circulates Korean culture internationally at little cost to companies. With the triangular model, this shows how the industry mobilizes global audiences to perform cultural outreach that often matches what embassies or cultural centres can achieve.

In sum, Korea's cultural industries have become the main drivers of the country's soft power. By working through global platforms, forming partnerships abroad, and diversifying into areas such as webtoons and gaming, they have managed to make Korean culture part of everyday life for audiences far from Seoul. This kind of routine exposure creates familiarity and attachment, which is what soft power ultimately depends on. Within the triangular model, the industry sits at the centre: the state provides resources and legitimacy, audiences amplify and translate content, but it is the companies that build the network connecting Korea to the world. Without their innovation and outreach, state policy and fan enthusiasm would not achieve the same global impact.

3.4.3 Fandom and Global Audiences

The third vertex of the triangular model is made up of global fandoms and audiences, whose role is fundamental in transforming South Korea's cultural exports into soft power. Government policy and industry production can project content abroad, but it is international fans who amplify its visibility, translate it into local contexts, and embed it in everyday cultural life. As Dal Yong Jin argues, overseas audiences have advanced K-pop fandom as social agents across different geo-cultural contexts, showing that fans are not passive consumers but co-producers of Korea's image abroad. This grassroots dimension matters because attraction generated from below often carries more credibility than top-down state branding.[56]. This section analyses how

[56] Jin, Dal Yong. 2024. Understanding the Korean Wave: Transnational Korean Pop Culture and Digital Technologies. New York: Routledge.

such fan-driven participation converts cultural content into real soft power, examining key fan practices, cross-sector examples, and the limits of fandom-based soft power.

Global fandoms perform form of cultural diplomacy that complements official efforts. Unlike top-down promotion, fan activities are organic and driven by passion, which often makes their impact more persuasive. For example, a study of a K-pop fan organization in the Philippines found that personal connections among local fans not only increased participation in Korean cultural activities but also fostered a favourability toward Korea in the community[57].

One of the earliest practices is translation and subtitling. Long before companies invested in localization, fans around the world formed "fandubbing communities" to subtitle K-dramas and music videos into English, Spanish, Arabic and dozens of other languages. The streaming service Viki, for example, relies on a vast network of volunteer translators who make Korean dramas available in up to 200 languages[58]. This unpaid labour increases accessibility and makes frames Korea as a generous cultural contributor whose content is available to anyone. In soft power terms, fans act as cultural mediators, converting what would otherwise be a niche export in a global conversation. A second major practice is algorithmic mobilization through streaming and social media. Fan communities coordinate global streaming parties to boost Korean artists on Spotify and YouTube, and trend hashtags on Twitter (now X) during comebacks or drama releases. In 2021, Twitter recorded 7.8 billion K-pop related Tweets worldwide, demonstrating the scale of this fan-driven amplification[59]. These coordinated campaigns ensure that Korean content dominates digital visibility and cultural metrics, which not only benefits industry profits but also enhances Korea's global image as a cultural trendsetter. Jin notes that such practices constitute a form of "digital activism", where fans deliberately manipulate algorithms to elevate Korean content into global mainstreams. The result is a sustained cultural presence that few state branding campaigns could ever achieve. Finally, fans often extend their cultural enthusiasm into activism and philanthropy, creating positive associations between Korean culture and social responsibility. BTS's fandom ARMY provides the most prominent example. In 2020, when BTS donated $1 million to the Black

[57] Wonho Jang and Jung Eun Song, "The Influences of K-pop Fandom on Increasing Cultural Contact: With the Case of Philippine K-pop Convention, Inc.," Korean Regional Sociology (publication date not specified)

[58] Woodhouse, Lisa. "Viki's Crucial Dialogue: Fansubbers, Pop Culture, and the Digital Economy." Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies 32, no. 5 (2018): 617–32

[59] X (formerly Twitter), "#KpopTwitter reaches new heights with 7.8 billion global Tweets", January 27, 2022, accessed August 25, 2025, https://blog.x.com/en_us/topics/insights/2022/-kpoptwitter-reaches-new-heights-with-7-8-billion-global-tweets.

Lives Matter movement, ARMY organized the #MatchAMillion campaign and raised another $1 million within 24 hours[60]. These actions have the unintended effect of linking Hallyu to progressive global causes, strengthening Korea's attractiveness by association. Such fandoms become civic actors whose visibility in global media reinforces the perception of Korea as aligned with youth and activism.

While global fandoms are indispensable in maximizing Korea's cultural presence in the world, the nature of this engagement raises questions about how far it translates into actual durable soft power. On one hand, as already seen, Hallyu fandom produces deep forms of cultural affinity. It was demonstrated how many K-pop or K-dramas find themselves captivated by Korean culture hence traveling to Korea or studying its history. Yet, engagement is not uniform across audiences. Many international fans remain surface-level consumers, primarily attracted to catchy songs or idols without deeper curiosity about Korea itself. Hallyu content is often produced to be "culturally odourless", which means it can be consumed without significant contextual understanding [61]. For some Korea remains an abstract background rather than a country with deep historical roots and an important political actor. This could be considered a risk for Korea's soft power strategy, which, while highly visible, can at times me broad but shallow. This divergence between "deep" and "shallow" fandom signifies the conditional nature of fandom-based soft power. Its success depends highly on how enthusiasm is translated, whether into knowledge, affinity and long-term engagement. When fans are much passioned about Korea and immerse themselves in language learning or visit Korea, the state benefits greatly in cultural diplomacy and economic gains. But when engagement remain superficial, fandom functions solely as a temporary trend: very powerful in the moment, but less reliable as a source of long-lasting influence. This is a central challenge for South Korea's soft power strategy: diplomatic value of visibility depends on whether it can be durable over time.

This chapter has shown that South Korea's cultural soft power cannot be understood as the achievement of a single actor. Its success comes instead from the convergence of three different forces: the state, the cultural industries and global fandoms. Government institutions provide the diplomatic framework and legitimacy that translate cultural popularity into durable ties; industries innovate and distribute content across borders, embedding "Koreanness" into global media flows; audiences, finally, amplify and circulate this content in ways that makes it

[60] Sangmi Cha, "K-pop Boyband BTS Fans Match Group's $1 Million Donation to Black Lives Matter," Reuters, June 8, 2020

[61] Jin, Dal Yong, ed. Understanding the Korean Wave. London: Routledge, 2023.

meaningful in diverse local contexts. This triangular model shows both the strengths and fragilities of Hallyu as a soft power tool. Its strength lies in the density of cooperation: cultural influence is reinforced when state policies, industry strategies, and fan practices align. Yet the same interdependence also exposes vulnerabilities. Over-commercialization can alienate fans, dependence on foreign platforms can weaken cultural autonomy, and state overreach can undermine the very creativity that drives attraction.

4. Evaluating Hallyu's Soft Power in Italy: Language and Education

This chapter examines the effectiveness of Korea's soft power in Italy through the triangular model developed in the previous chapter. While Chapter 3 outlined the theoretical foundations of soft power and the evolution of Korea's cultural policy, the focus here is on Italy as a concrete case study. Italy is a relevant choice because it combines a long academic tradition in Oriental studies with recent institutional investments by the Korean government, including the opening of the Korean Cultural Center in Rome (2016) and the designation of the University of Turin as a King Sejong Institute in 2025.

Building on Chapter 3's analysis of Korean cultural policy, industry strategies, and fandom/platforms, this chapter tests whether Italy converts cultural attention into durable engagement. Covering the period 2010–2025, it evaluates whether Korean initiatives in Italy were matched by the expansion of university programmes and educational offers, and whether these developments coincided with measurable signs of student participation. The analysis is organized into four sections. Section 4.1 introduces the scope of the case study and sets out how the triangular model is applied to the Italian context. Section 4.2 reviews the data and sources that underpin the analysis. Section 4.3 presents the findings, structured around the three dimensions of the model. Section 4.4 develops a broader discussion of what these findings suggest about the effectiveness of Korea's soft power in Italian education.

4.1 Scope and Indicators

The analysis wants to evaluate the effectiveness of Korea's cultural soft power in Italy within the domain of language and education. It covers the period of 2010 to 2025 and applies the triangular model to a single national context in order to observe whether policy initiatives by the Korean government are followed by an actual expansion within Italian institutions and, consequently, signs of greater consumption among Italian learners.

To ensure conceptual continuity with the previous chapter, the triangular model is maintained but reinterpreted for the Italian reception context. The model is adapted as follows. The "state" domain refers to Korean government initiatives that invest resources and capacity into the Italian context. These include the establishment of the KCC in Rome, the introduction of King Sejong Institutes in Italy, and scholarships that lower entry costs for learners. The "industry" vertex here refers to educational channels. Here, the role played elsewhere by cultural industries is performed by Italian universities and publicly accessible teaching providers, which act as intermediaries that transform state inputs into opportunities for study. University departments that integrate degree courses or minors in Korean language and culture constitute

the core, as do the course offerings delivered at the KCCs or Sejong Institutes when they operate as teachings providers to the Italian public. In this case study, the "audience" vertex is understood as learner engagement (e.g. enrolments, exam participation). While in domains such as popular music global audiences themselves act as amplifiers of soft power, in the education sector their role is primarily measured through participation rather than re-distribution. The focus here is therefore on uptake, with recognition that the same model may capture more dynamic audience agency in other cultural domains.

4.2 Data, Sources and Methods

The indicators outlined in the previous section are measured using a range of official and institutional sources. Information on state initiatives comes mainly from the website of the Korean Cultural Center in Rome, the King Sejong Institute Foundation, and announcements released by the Korean embassy and the Ministry of Culture. To trace distribution within Italy, the study draws on university course catalogues and program descriptions published by institutions such as Sapienza University of Rome, the University of Naples "L'Orientale," Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and others that have gradually incorporated Korean language and studies into their curricula. Data on student participation were collected from the Italian host institutions that organize the TOPIK, including Sapienza University, the University for Foreigners of Siena, and Ca' Foscari, as well as from information provided directly by the Cultural Center and Sejong Institutes regarding their own language classes.

The time frame considered is, again, 2010–2025, with particular attention to the years 2010, 2015, 2020, 2023, and 2025. These years serve as main points to highlight major developments, while additional information is included whenever reliable data are available. Because not all institutions publish detailed statistics (universities often do not report enrolment numbers) the analysis sometimes relies on substitutes, such as the introduction of a program or the repeated offering of courses, as indicators of demand.

The analysis is based on documentation from official and institutional sources (embassy announcements, KSIF and KCC press releases, university catalogues, course pages, exam notices). These were collected systematically to reconstruct developments between 2010 and 2025. Where quantitative enrolment data were not available, proxies were used such as the introduction of new programmes, repeated course offerings, or the presence of entry tests as indicators of demand. The study adopts an event-focused approach, comparing developments around key years (2010, 2015, 2020, 2023, 2025) and examining whether institutional growth

coincided with or followed policy initiatives. This allows the triangular model outlined above to be applied consistently without requiring uniform statistical series.

4.3 Findings

The findings are presented following the triangular model that guides this analysis, distinguishing between the role of the state, the role of educational and cultural institutions, and the responses of students. This structure makes it possible to assess how policy initiatives, institutional offerings, and patterns of uptake interact in shaping the presence of Korean language and education in Italy.

4.3.1 Government Initiatives

South Korea's investment in cultural and educational infrastructure in Italy has greatly expanded since 2010. A first key step was the opening of the KCC in Rome (October 2016), with exhibition spaces, a library, a theatre and classrooms for free Korean language courses: a state platform to lower entry costs and standardize learning[6263].

Another key instrument is the King Sejong Institute network, which expanded in Italy throughout the 2010-2025 period. The first KSI in Italy opened in Venice in December 2012 at Ca' Foscari University[64]. The institute offered six-month to one-year Korean language courses and hosted cultural workshops, often featuring students and teachers from KSIs worldwide. It is important to note that this Venice KSI was closed by the late 2010s, but it was an early prelude of Korea's soft power push in Italy. When Rome's KCC launched in 2016, it too incorporated a King Sejong Institute branch on-site[65]. The KSI at the KCC in Rome has since been fundamental in spreading Korean language. Its president (also KCC director) stresses how much learners also benefit from all the diverse cultural activities offered alongside language teachings, thus deepening the connection with the country[66]. Most recently, in 2025 a new KSI was installed in Turin, making the University of Turin one of the only three European hosts selected that year[67]. The Turin KSI, formally announced in July 2025, is the only Italian

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[62] KBS WORLD, "Korean Cultural Center Opens in Rome", October 27, 2016
[63] Antonella Fiorito, "Inaugurato a Roma il primo Istituto Culturale Coreano in Italia", Dazebaonews, October 28, 2016
[64] Academy of Korean Studies, "Toward Globalization of Korean Studies: In December 2012 the first King Sejong Institute Venice was established at Cà Foscari — the institute has been recently closed", *CEFIA Webzine*, undated.
[65] King Sejong Institute Foundation, "In 2016, the Korean Cultural Center, Italy, opened in Rome, a country with the roots of European history", September 23, 2021
[66] Ibid.
[67] Torino Cronaca, "La cultura coreana parla torinese: arriva il King Sejong Institute a UniTo", July 22, 2025

university-based KSI (the Rome KSI being in the KCC). This expansion is Turin was the result of a highly competitive process in which 94 institutions competed for 11 new KSIs worldwide; this signifies Korean government support for Korean language education in Italy entering today.

In addition to institutions, the Korean government has provided scholarship programs and exam support to stimulate Korean studies in Italy. The Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) program has been open to Italian national during this decades, funding both graduate and undergraduate studies in Korea. Calls for GKS applications are regularly announced by the Korean Embassy and KCC thus offering fully funded opportunities in Korea[68].

Similarly, the TOPIK, the official Korean language certification exam, has received state-backed expansion in Italy. Prior to the 2010s, Italian residents had limited access to TOPIK, often having to travel abroad or wait for rare sessions[69]. The Korean government, via NIIED (National Institute for International Education (Seoul)), began collaborating with Italian institutions to host TOPIK locally. Ca' Foscari University was an early site, offering the TOPIK exam on campus after the KSI was established in Venice. Later, additional exam centres have been added: the University of Naples "L'Orientale" became an authorized TOPIK center in 2023, and Sapienza University of Rome's language center joined in 2025. By 2025, Italy possesses four TOPIK sites (Rome, Naples, Siena and Venice) holding exams twice annually in total[70].

4.3.2 Educational Channels

The industry side is represented by the Italian institutions and organizations that distribute Korean language education, acting as intermediaries between the Korean state initiatives and the Italian consumers. Here, universities, cultural center and language course providers over the period of 2010-2025 are covered, studying a significant expansion in both number and capacity.

In 2010, only few Italian universities offered full Korean studies, and these were long-established hubs. The University of Naples L'Orientale was the pioneer, having introduced

[68] Ambasciata della Repubblica di Corea in Italia, "Informazioni sulle borse di studio GKS 2023", February 13, 2023
[69] Go! Go! Hanguk staff, "Guida completa sull'esame TOPIK, la certificazione di lingua coreana", Go! Go! Hanguk Blog, November 16, 2018
[70] Oenjoung Kim (Sapienza Università di Roma), "Topik – Indicazioni Esame Topik 12 aprile 2025"

Korean language and literature courses in 1960[71]. The University of Rome La Sapienza began offering Korean as a minor elective in 2001 and upgraded it to a full degree course by 2010[72]. In the same way, the University of Venice Ca' Foscari had launched Korean as an elective in 1997 and, with support from the Korea Foundation, expanded into a dedicated degree by 2001[73]. These three institutions formed the core distribution network entering the 2010s, each with bachelor's and eventually master's programs in Korean studies. During the last decade, several other universities added Korean language offers. The University of Milan (Statale) began one-year Korean language and culture courses in 2009 within its Language and Mediation department[74]. The upward trend in both the number of state-backed initiatives and the number of Italian universities offering Korean programmes is summarised in *Figure 4*, where the values represent simple counts of initiatives and institutions active in each year.

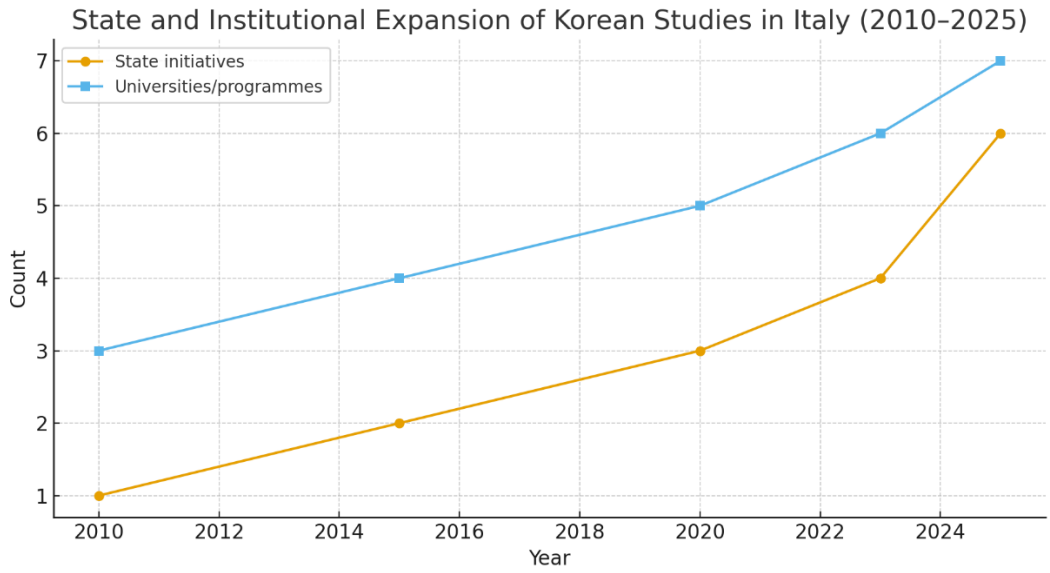

Figure 4: Expansion of state initiatives and Italian universities offering Korean programmes, 2010–2025. Values represent the count of state-backed initiatives (KCC, KSIs, TOPIK centers, scholarships) and universities or programmes offering Korean studies. Source: Author's elaboration, compiled from multiple references cited throughout the chapter.

Beyond the traditional Oriental Studies hubs, interest in Korea has also entered other sectors of Italian higher education. The University of Bologna, though not establishing a full degree, introduced Korean Studies courses in 2011 as a part of its political science curriculum. Similarly, LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome includes an "Asian Culture and Politics"

[71] Academy of Korean Studies, "Toward Globalization of Korean Studies", *CEFIA Webzine*.
[72] Kang, *Stato attuale e prospettiva degli studi coreani in Italia*, 70.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.

course that devotes particular attention to Korean society, culture and politics. While not a language programs, these reflect the diffusion of Korean studies into political science curricula

and highlights the growing relevance of Korea in Italian academic discourse. In 2017, the University of Foreigners of Siena lunched a Korean language program as part of its BA in linguistic mediation. In the last years, even the University of Turin, which previously had no Korean studies, has incorporated Korean language into its curriculum (within the Dept. of Foreign Languages), under the guidance of newly hired Korean studies faculty. The success of Turin in securing a KSI in 2025 was built on years of internal efforts to promote Korean language and culture on campus, demonstrating how Korean studies had gained a foothold there as well. Table 2 shows a clear increase in distribution channels over time. Up to around 2010, only three universities had comprehensive Korean studies. By 2017, the number doubled, and at least six Italian universities offered Korean in some form, including two new degree programs (Siena, and Sapienza's MA/PhD added to its BA).

Institution	**Korean Program Start**	**Program Type**
Naples L'Orientale University	1960	BA & MA in Korean Language and Literature (est. 1960)
Ca' Foscari University, Venice	1997 (BA in 2001)	BA in Korean Studies (course since 1997; full degree by 2001)
Sapienza University of Rome	2001 (elective); 2010 (BA)	BA, MA, PhD in Korean Studies (degree course from 2010)
University of Milan (Statale)	2009	Korean language & culture module (1-year elective course)
University of Bologna	2011	Korean Studies courses in MA program (no full degree)
Univ. for Foreigners, Siena	2017	BA program with Korean language (translation/mediation track)
University of Turin	*c.* 2020s	Korean language courses integrated in BA; host of new KSI (2025)
LUISS Guido Carli, Rome	n.d. (listed 2021)	Asian Culture and Politics course (no full degree)

Table 2: Italian universities offering Korean language and Korean studies programs

By 2025, Turin joined the ranks, building upon its new King Sejong Institute to offer courses open to students and the public. This trend aligns with, and was likely stimulated by, the state inputs: the KCC in Rome has actively partnered with universities on Korean speech contests,

cultural events, and resource support (e.g. the donation of Korean books to Sapienza's "Window on Korea" library room in 2018)[75]. Moreover, the Korea Foundation and Korean Ministry of Education have funded Korean lectureship and materials in Italy. Several of the already mentioned programs were initiated or expanded "with the help of the Korean government", again another example of how state support contributed to distribution growth[76]. For example, Ca' Foscari explicitly credits Korean government support for enabling its Korean major in 2001, or how Siena's first Korean lecturer was sponsored by the Korea Foundation[77].

Along universities, acting as secondary distribution nodes, is the KCC in Rome and affiliated KSI institutes. The KCC's language courses have run continuously since 2017, typically in semester-long courses. By 2018, dozens of Italian learners each term were studying Korean there, benefitting native-speaking instructors. The KSI in Rome and now the KSI in Turin also function as public Korean language schools. The Turin KSI for example, is expected to offer open courses to all UniTo students and residents starting in late 2025, thus increasing the supply of Korean classes in Italy.

4.3.3 Student Engagement

The final point of the triangle is student engagement. In the Italian case this dimension is observed by enrolments in Korean studies and participation in the TOPIK exam, which provide the closest indicators of demand. Enrolments and TOPIK participation are where affective affinity and transnational proximity (Ch.2) turn from curiosity into credentialed choices, i.e., durable soft power. This section examines whether the growth of state support and the introduction of new programmes corresponded to greater participation, as reflected in rising student numbers, a larger pool of exam candidates, and other signs of heightened interest between 2010 and 2025.

Data from Italian universities and language institutes indicate strong growth in student numbers learning Korea. For the older programs, enrolments have spiked in recent years. For example, the University of Naples L'Orientale reported a 40% increase in Korean language students in 2018 compared to previous years. In absolute terms, L'Orientale had 180 new first-year Korean students in the 2018-2019 academic year, bringing its total Korean-major undergraduates to roughly 280. In a similar way, Sapienza University's Korean Studies enrolment grew to 341

[75] Academy of Korean Studies, Toward Globalization of Korean Studies, section "Sapienza University of Rome - Library"
[76] Kang, *Stato attuale e prospettiva degli studi coreani in Italia*.
[77] Ibid.

students (undergrad and grad both included) by late 2010s, including more or less 80 freshmen annually in the Korean BA. Ca' Foscari program in Venice had about 260 undergraduates (100 freshmen) as of 2018, showing great interest in a program that started with only a handful of students in the 1990s. Even newer programs, such as the Siena Korean courses and the Milan one year course, showed great interest: respectively 80 students in their initial offering (2017-2018) and 50 enrolees each cycle.

University	Year	Enrolments (Korean Studies)
Naples L'Orientale University	2018	~310 BA+MA students (180 freshmen in 2018)
Sapienza University of Rome	2018	341 BA+MA students (80 freshmen)
Ca' Foscari University, Venice	2018	~260 BA students (100 freshmen)
Univ. for Foreigners, Siena	2017	~80 students (all years, elective courses)
University of Milan (Statale)	c.2019	~50 students (annual Korean course)

Table 3: Korean Studies Enrolment at Select Italian Universities (late 2010s)

While system-wide historical data are scarce, the trend is consistently upward. Nationwide, it can be deduced that there were only a few hundred Korean language learners in Italy around 2010 (mostly in Naples, Rome and Venice). By 2020, well over a thousand students were enrolled in Korean courses across Italian universities. This does not even count private institute learners or KCC course attendees, which add hundreds more (data was unavailable). *Figure 5* illustrates this trend at the national level, with estimated enrolments in Korean studies rising from a few hundred students in 2010 to an estimate of 1,500 by 2025. The increase of courses is an indication of an increase in demand: universities typically expanded Korean offerings in response to student interest. For example, Sapienza noted that "over the years, the Korean studies course has been increasing north in terms of students and faculty members" necessitating entry tests for Korean majors due to high number of applicants[78]. These are direct signals of Italian student demand responding to the availability of programs (and arguably the

[78] Academy of Korean Studies, Toward Globalization of Korean Studies.

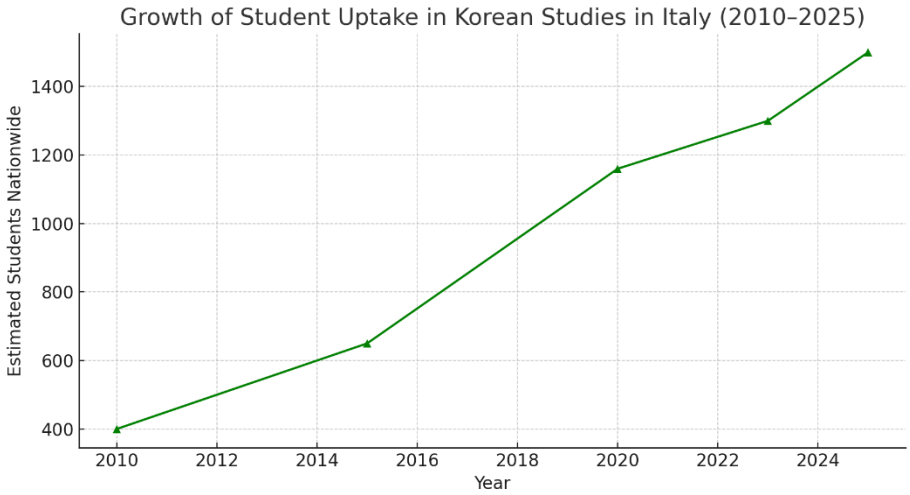

Figure 5: Growth of student enrolments in Korean studies in Italy, 2010–2025. Values are national estimates based on reported figures for Naples L'Orientale, Sapienza, Ca' Foscari, Siena, Milan and Turin, plus recurring KCC courses; overall trend rather than total

rising appeal of Korean culture). Together, these data suggest that the expansion of state and institutional provision translated into measurable increases in student participation.

Qualitative evidence supports this trend. In 2021, the Director of KCC Rome noted that Italian interest in the Korean language was "changing rapidly", attributing the shift to the global success of Korean culture, from K-pop groups such as BTS to internationally acclaimed Korean movies[79]. What began as a curiosity in the early 2000s has, by the 2020s broadened into mainstream interest among youth in K-pop and K-dramas thus widening the whole spectrum of Korean culture. The Hallyu effect has effectively translated into full classrooms.

Another measure on engagement is the participation in TOPIK exams. As mentioned already, Italy gradually developed local TOPIK centers starting 2010s. Prior to 2012, no TOPIK exams were held in Italy and interested individuals were forced to travel abroad if they wanted to get the certification. The establishment of a TOPIK site in Ca' Foscari finally changed that, and over time additional sites were added, enabling more candidates to take the test domestically. By April 2025, when Sapienza hosted its first TOPIK session, Italy had a network of four exam locations and was running examinations twice a year (spring and fall). Each session can accommodate hundreds of candidates in total (e.g., more or less 100 in Rome and similar numbers in Naples and Venice based on location capacities[80]). While exact annual totals are not published, the expansion itself is a symptom of higher demand and institutional commitment to meeting that demand.

[79] King Sejong Institute Foundation, In 2016, the Korean Cultural Center, Italy, opened in Rome.
[80] Author's estimate based on venue capacity at Sapienza

Finally, scholarships can be mentioned: each year, several Italian students win Global Korea Scholarships to study in Korea, and the application pools for these have grown. The Korean Embassy in Italy noted that for the 2022 GKS-Graduate scholarships, they received many high-quality Italian applicants (though only a few could be selected)[81]. This suggests that not only are Italians learning Korean at home, but an increasing subset are pursuing advanced study in Korea itself: the ultimate measure of soft power attraction in education.

4.4 Discussion

The findings indicate parallel growth in state initiatives, institutional provision, and student engagement. What remains to be understood is how these elements interacted in practice. The students serve as a good starting point of analysis because it explains what fuels the numbers. Earlier chapters described fans as active amplifiers of K-pop and screen media. Many Italian students first encountered Korea through dramas, music or films, and their transition from fandom to formal study shows how cultural interest is converted into academic engagement. Once enrolled, some also contribute back by running campus clubs or participating in cultural events, which helps keep Korea visible within Italian institutions. In this way, education appears downstream of Hallyu while also helping to stabilize it. The indicators used here capture the uptake phase, but the broader pattern suggests a feedback loop in which learners later help sustain the local presence of Korean culture. This keeps the “fans as engines” ideas consistent with the education case.

On the other hand, state inputs matter for different reasons. They do not create interest out of nowhere; rather, they make it easier to act on it and they give it a more definite shape. Institutions such as the Cultural Center and Sejong Institutes, together with scholarships and local access to the TOPIK exam, help transform general curiosity into concrete choices of study. They also make progress visible by giving learners recognized milestones and credentials. After all, a recognized proficiency test and a named program are easier to show parents, employers or admission committees than a self-taught playlist. Practically, policy does two things that internet-led attention cannot: it reduces cost and uncertainty for learners and standardizes credentials.

On the distribution side, what matters for durability of soft power is how opportunities are embedded. Three elements stand out: for-credit university programmes and courses (Table 3),

[81] Ambasciata della Repubblica di Corea in Italia, *Informazioni sulle borse di studio GKS 2023*.

recurring public classes at the KCC and Sejong Institutes and local TOPIK hosting. When these are present together, they strengthen one another: beginners can start outside a degree, start for-credit study, and finish with a recognised credential. That sequence is what makes engagement stick. An alternative view is that global platform and transnational fandoms alone could explain the trend. The Italian evidence points instead to complementarity. Streaming and social media create attention; KCC/KSI and universities turn that attention into visible, concrete study; TOPIK makes progress count. Without these, interest would likely fragment into short courses and fade like any other trend. With them, it becomes part of the higher education reality, thus transforming a passion into an area of study.

The evidence has some limits. Most of the growth is concentrated in hubs such as Rome, Venice, Naples, and Turin, while opportunities remain limited elsewhere. In addition, not all universities publish enrolment figures and course records are sometimes incomplete, so the analysis relied on substitutes such as the continued presence of programmes or the opening of new exam sites. For this reason, the findings should be read as showing overall patterns of expansion rather than precise measurements.

Taken together, the Italian case shows that Korea's soft power in education has been demand-led but enabled by consistent policy. Interest in Korean culture created the conditions for a growing number of learners, but it was the Cultural Center, the King Sejong Institutes, the scholarships and the local hosting of the TOPIK exam that turned this interest into formal study paths. Italian universities then consolidated these opportunities by embedding them into their curricula, giving stability to what might otherwise have remained a passing trend. The interaction of state inputs, institutional provision and student uptake explains why Korean language and studies have grown steadily in Italy between 2010 and 2025 and why this growth is likely to remain sustainable.

5. Conclusions

This thesis asked to what extent cultural diplomacy and Hallyu function as effective instruments of South Korea's soft power in generating durable transnational engagement. The evidence indicates that they do so when initial attraction becomes institutionalised. In other words, visibility and enthusiasm can become soft power that lasts where curiosity is channelled through stable programs and recognisable credentials.

As applied in this analysis, durability has been understood as the presence of routines (recurring courses and events), institutional channels (cooperation between cultural agencies and educational bodies) and knowledge infrastructures (language education, degree offerings, libraries, testing and scholarships) that lower the cost of participation and give learners progression checkpoints. Understood in this way, the Italian case over the past fifteen years shows a pattern of demand-led but policy-enabled consolidation: audience interest stimulated by Korean cultural industries found local points of entry; those points of entry were then reinforced by public cultural institutions and universities that embedded Korean language and cultural studies within their curricula; this way, learner could signal their progress through official channels.

The implication is straightforward. Soft power generated by Hallyu endures not because attention is high at a given moment, but because attention is repeatedly converted into skills, credentials and affiliations that go beyond individual products or trends.

5.1 Theoretical synthesis

This conclusion rests on the foundations laid earlier. First, it distinguishes soft power, influence achieved through attraction, from cultural diplomacy, the policy instrument that deliberately deploys culture and language to cultivate relationships. The literature also considers common critiques: soft power is difficult to measure, can blur into material leverage, and is often framed through a Western lens. These concerns motivate an emphasis on outcomes that are harder to unwind than visibility alone.

Second, reception is not passive. Chapter 2 framed affective affinity and transnational proximity as the mechanisms that turn exposure into attachment: audiences feel emotionally connected and culturally "near" to Korean content even without prior ties, which helps explain why attraction can travel and deepen across borders.

Chapter 3 then studied these ideas historically: South Korea's cultural policy and Hallyu evolved through alternating phases of government hands-on and hands-off policies, with industries and global fandoms helping distribution. The strength of this triangle is its complementarity; its fragility lies in risks such as over-commercialisation, platform dependence, and state overreach that can threaten authenticity or constrain creativity.

All things considered, this study understands durability as the moment in which attraction, with the help of proximity and affinity, and channelled through policy and market help, settles into institutions. This is why the thesis used education and language as signals of consolidation, offering a concrete way to judge whether soft power is merely visible or enduring

5.2 Empirical Synthesis

Over the past fifteen years, Italy's case shows how fan-driven attention becomes durable once it is converted into repeatable participation. Recurring public programming such as festivals, screenings and workshops, together with steady language lessons through the KCC and KSI classes paved the way for multiple new access points and lowered the costs of entry. Universities then followed, providing Korean language and cultural studies inside formal curricula as electives, minors and majors, signalling legitimacy to students and administrators. At the same time credentials now become legible with the introduction of locally hosted TOPIK sittings (previously completely absent in the country), scholarships and exchange programs, which all offered recognizable objectives for all those passionate about South Korea. These developments were not all spontaneous; partnerships between cultural agencies and educational bodies expanded capacity, while libraries and learning resources provided everyday infrastructures that sustain this engagement. Combined, these shifts produced a reproducible "ladder": from first contact to course, to TOPIK, to scholarship/exchange, and into degree programs, alumni networks, and professional affiliations; this channels affective affinity and a sense of transnational proximity into stable routines and communities that outlast individual products, platforms, or trends.

5.3 Policy implications

The Italian case suggests that durable soft power depends less on generating occasional peaks of visibility and more on embedding infrastructures that convert attention into structured participation. For policymakers, cultural institutions, and universities, the key task is therefore to create the conditions under which spontaneous interest can settle into long-term commitments.

A first implication is the importance of continuity over one-off projects. Initiatives such as cultural festivals or short-term courses may spark curiosity, but they only stabilise participation when institutions like Korean Cultural Centers and King Sejong Institutes are resourced with predictable funding and long-term planning. Consistency, not isolated initiatives, sustains engagement.

A second implication is the need to integrate cultural diplomacy into higher education. Ministries and cultural agencies can amplify impact by working with universities to establish dedicated modules, minors, or degree tracks, making sure that Korean studies recur every year and are recognised within qualifications. This gives cultural participation professional and academic weight, turning enthusiasm into skills that matter in career and institutional contexts.

A third implication could be the necessity of broadening geographic reach. Engagement in Italy has concentrated around a few urban hubs such as Rome, Venice, and Naples, leaving other regions unconsidered. Support for secondary cities and mobile programming would reduce these imbalances and expand the base of participants. Of course, this consideration only looks at Italy and is perhaps too specific. Generally speaking, Korean initiatives have already done a great job in identifying the main hubs in Italy for university studies and overextending in less frequented ones would be a probable economic loss. A more effective implication would be to apply this in countries showing an increase in interest in Korean cultural language studies, as well as in those where Hallyu is gradually gaining popularity.

Finally, soft power policy requires particular attention in preserving authenticity. The state is indispensable in providing resources and coordination, but excessive intervention risks weakening the very appeal that draws attention. The Korean government should avoid repeating even its most recent mistakes that have constrained or undermined artists' creativity. A support, light-handed role, focused on enabling infrastructures while leaving creative direction to industries is more likely to encourage credibility and thus, engagement. These observations highlight the fact that South Korea's cultural diplomacy is most effective when it builds "ladders" that the public can climb, ensuring that these are stable, inclusive and credible.

Cultural diplomacy and Hallyu appear from this study as effective instruments of South Korea's soft power only when attraction is repeatedly converted into structured participation. In the Italian case, fan-driven interest evolved into durable engagement once institutions provided accessible entry points, recurring courses, and recognised credentials that gave cultural learning continuity and weight. Broadly, this model suggests that the strength of soft power lies not in

momentary visibility but in its institutionalisation: when curiosity becomes a pathway, and that pathway leads to affiliation, qualification, and community. What endures is therefore not the popularity of individual products or platforms, but the reproducible sequence of curiosity, credentials and community that channels attraction into commitments that last.

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