

## Tsunami or Ebb Tide? Soft Power and the Limits *Hallyu*

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### Introduction

According to Joseph Nye, Asian countries have impressive potential resources for soft power, which he defines as the “power to attract”—that is, the power of getting others to do what you want them to do through emulation or inducement, rather than through force or coercion. To Nye and many other observers of world politics, soft power has become almost as important as “hard power,” which rests primarily on physical resources: military forces, population, territory, raw materials and the like. Soft power, by contrast, is based on largely intangible resources such as the attraction of one’s ideas, culture, business practices, intellectual know-how, political and social values, and so on. To Nye, exploiting the potential of these resources is crucial. Countries that do so will exercise greater influence in the world, which, in turn, will allow them to achieve greater security and prosperity for their own citizens. In South Korea, Nye’s ideas have had particularly strong resonance since the turn of the century, when interest in the country’s popular culture and entertainment suddenly swelled, first in East Asia (especially China and Japan) and later throughout the world, including Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North America. The growing appeal of Korean popular culture and entertainment has been encapsulated in the term Korean wave, or *hallyu*.

The potentially important connection between *hallyu* and soft power has not gone unnoticed. Indeed, some proponents of soft power have suggested that the emergence of the Korean wave—albeit, in combination with other factors—may finally propel South Korea to the status of a regional power.<sup>1</sup> Is this possible? That is, is it possible for the broadening international appeal of Korean popular culture and entertainment, from K-pop to *The Jewel in the Palace*, to play an instrumental role in strengthening the country’s power and influence in regional and even world affairs? My short answer question can be summed up quite bluntly: *the Korean wave, as an instrument or element of national power, is seriously limited*. This is not to say that *hallyu* is an insignificant social and economic phenomenon. This almost certainly is not the case. Nor do I mean to say that the concept of soft power is itself wrongheaded. Indeed, I believe that soft power *is* a meaningful factor in world politics, and I agree with Nye that culture (broadly defined) is an essential source of soft power. *Hallyu*, however, is problematic as a source of soft power for two reasons. First, it is a contrived and thoroughly co-opted “cultural” phenomenon; it

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<sup>1</sup> Satya Sivaraman, “South Korea Wields ‘Soft Power,’” *Inter Press Service News Agency* (6 November 2005), available at <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=31101>.

is not, moreover, primarily a reflection of *Korean* culture. Rather, it is part of a state-supported and business-oriented “culture industry” that, at its base, represents little more than an inflated (and even cynical) marketing strategy designed to reap profits for Korean-owned enterprises and for the Korean economy at large.

The second and more important issue, however, is not so much that *hallyu* is contrived, for as a significant source of (soft) power, culture is frequently manipulated and co-opted by political, economic and social leaders. Instead, the problem is that *hallyu* is grounded on commercialized cultural products—as is popular culture in general. Commercialized culture (i.e., entertainment), while it often has tremendous emotional appeal, is almost always faddish and superficial; thus, it rarely can bind disparate groups of people, still less disparate societies, together. It can engender “good feelings,” but not a singleness of purpose. It is “attractive” in a vague and very general sense, but it has little capacity to attract supporters, or to mobilize or co-opt others on a broad-scale and sustained basis. Commercialized culture, finally, may shape the preferences of outsiders in terms of their desire to consume certain products (which is not unimportant), but it doubtful that it can change preferences at more substantive political level. Thus, the assumption that the growing popularity of *hallyu* will naturally or invariably increase Korea’s soft power (as opposed, say, its economic power) reflects a fundamental misunderstanding about culture and its relationship to (soft) power in international affairs. Indeed, given the manner in which *hallyu* has been wielded—primarily as economic crowbar designed to open up and fully exploit foreign markets—it has greater (long-term) potential as a source of social and economic conflict than as a source of “attraction” and influence. This is an important point, especially from a practical and policy level perspective, and one that I will discuss in the last part of this paper. In the first part of this paper, however, it is important to look more closely at the concept of culture and its relationship to power.

### **The (Soft) Power of Culture**

To understand the significance and potential power of culture, it is crucial to know what culture is. One basic definition is offered by Marc Ross who defines culture as a “worldview that explains why and how individuals and groups behave as they do, and includes both cognitive and affective [that is, emotional] beliefs about social reality and assumptions about when, where, and how people in one’s culture and those in other cultures are likely to act in particular ways.”<sup>2</sup> To put it more simply, Ross asserts that culture marks a “distinctive way of life” that members of the culture *share* and upon which they forge a *common* and *unique identity*.<sup>3</sup> Embedded in this definition is the understanding that culture is inherently subjective or, more accurately, intersubjective. That is, culture is about what people believe and about how these beliefs—when they are widely shared—bind a people together in a meaningful and concrete way. This is what makes culture a potentially potent, yet malleable source of power. For, when people are bound together by a shared set of ideas, beliefs, and values, and when they forge a common identity based on those beliefs, they develop tremendous potential as a collective political force.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Howard Ross, “Culture and Identity in Comparative Political Analysis,” in *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure*, edited by Mark Irving Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> I discuss this in more detail in Timothy C. Lim, *Doing Comparative Politics: An Introduction to Approaches and Issues* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006), pp. 86-90.

Consider, for example, the “attraction” of radical Islam and the power of al-Qaida (and other organizations that draw on Islamic culture).

Almost assuredly, al-Qaida would not be a powerful organization—arguably, one of the most powerful non-state transnational actors today—unless it was able to attract a constant, albeit not necessarily huge, stream of extraordinarily committed followers and supporters from around the world. In other words, al-Qaida’s principal strength does not derive primarily from its coercive assets, of which it has relatively little (compared, say, to the United States or even Iraq under Saddam Hussein), but from the supposedly Islamic and vehemently anti-Western values the organization represents and promotes. The people who make up al-Qaida, for the most part, are motivated by a deep sense of honor and duty (however perverse it may be), which compels them to act and behave in certain ways, to make profound sacrifices, and even to give up their very lives for the sake of a “larger good.”<sup>5</sup> The key point, to repeat, is that such behavior is ultimately premised on a particular set of values and beliefs, i.e., culture. Osama bin Laden certainly understands this, which is one reason he immerses his organization and political goals in the language of Islam. To be clear, however, bin Laden and others who appeal to Islamic values and culture are engaged in a process of co-optation: they are interpreting and reshaping Islam to legitimize their activities, allowing them to claim a divine or sanctified role. That bin Laden has been successful in this process is unequivocally clear.

A discussion of al-Qaida, I realize, may seem very far removed from a discussion of *hallyu*, but it is nonetheless very instructive. For, it not only helps us understand that culture has power (even at the international level), but also that the power of culture—as I noted earlier—resides primarily in its ability to mobilize and unify large numbers of people and to profoundly shape their behavior and actions for the achievement of a collective goal. At the same time, we must recognize that culture is not equivalent to power. Instead, as Nye tells us, culture is a *source* of power.<sup>6</sup> But as with any resource, culture can be underused, overused, or misused. Moreover, unlike tangible resources, culture cannot be physically possessed or strictly controlled; it is inherently “public” and transnational. Everyone in the world, in other words, has access to culture, which means not only means that it can be accessed by anyone, anywhere, but also that it can be reinterpreted and redefined to suit different purposes in different environments.

All of this tells us, at the most general level, that culture—as a source of power in world affairs—is far more complex and less predictable than physical resources. Indeed, the “possession” of strong cultural resources can have a contradictory effect; that is, a culture can undermine, even destroy a state’s soft power capacity depending on how it is received in other societies. This is one reason that the widespread propagation of a certain society’s cultural or political values does not automatically lead to an increase in soft power: the more these values are diffused throughout the world, the more opportunities there will be for “cultural conflicts” to arise. It also matters how exported values or practices *interact* with local economic, political and social systems. If exported “culture,” for example, is seen as a political or economic threat, it can provoke “repulsion” (rather than attraction) and a strong backlash.

From the preceding discussion, it should be apparent that the power of culture is context-dependent—a point that Nye is careful to emphasize. Indeed, as Nye correctly points out, “the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affaris, 2004), p. 11.

effectiveness of *any* power resource depends on context” (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> The (soft) power of al-Qaida, for example, rests, in no small measure, on the particular political and economic dynamics of the Cold War and the post-Cold War environment, which have provided extremely fertile ground for radical anti-Western ideologies to bloom. It is even easier to see how hard power is affected by context: consider how the overwhelming military might of the United States is drastically diminished in the context of nation building. Thus, on the one hand, even without international cooperation, the U.S. obviously had the military and economic capacity to easily destroy the Iraqi military under Saddam Hussein, and it could just as easily wipe out the insurgency in a few weeks by (literally) killing every man, woman, and child in Iraq. On the other hand, once the nation building process began (and even before), the U.S. government simply could not kill whomever it pleased, for such wanton use of hard power superiority would have utterly destroyed American legitimacy and moral authority. In other words, in the context of nation building, legitimacy and moral authority (which Nye includes as sources of soft power) become important goals in their own right, and achieving these goals requires the judicious use of coercive resources.

So what does all of this have to do with the significance of *hallyu* as a source of soft power for South Korea? The basic answer is this: any analysis of *hallyu* as a “cultural resource” must, first, take into consideration the capacity of popular culture (upon which *hallyu* is unequivocally based) to mobilize, co-opt and shape the behavior of individuals outside of Korea. Second, any such analysis must consider the broader context in which *hallyu* is both propagated and received.

### **Assessing the Significance of *Hallyu***

Nye tells us that popular culture is often a resource that produces soft power.<sup>8</sup> This is because, as with any cultural resource, popular culture is “attractive.” One need only think of the popularity of American music or of Hollywood movies to get a sense of how appealing popular culture can become at an international level. Of course, as I just discussed, Nye understands very well that popular culture by itself does not guarantee an increase in soft power. He does suggest, though, that there is strong potential for soft power in popular culture. Indeed, in his analysis of American popular culture, Nye’s argument carries some weight. *But the United States may be an exceptional case insofar as its popular culture is often intimately associated with core American values: individualism, political freedom, opportunity, choice, and so on.* Indeed, one might argue that these values are what gave rise to the popular culture that dominates much of the world today. In the case of South Korea, on the other hand, one would be hard put to identify a particular set of uniquely Korean values embedded in its popular culture. This is partly, if not largely, true because much of (although certainly not all) Korean popular culture itself is an imitation or at least reflection of American popular culture. This is relatively easy to see in contemporary dramas and particularly in pop music.<sup>9</sup> Thus, any argument about the broader significance of *Korean* popular culture is debatable. It is debatable, to repeat, because the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> The general similarities in K-Pop are hard to miss. Recently, moreover, one of Korea’s most popular female singers, Lee Hyo-lee, was accused of plagiarizing music written and performed by Britney Spears. “Spears’ Songwriters Accuse Composer,” *ABC News* (29 March 2006). Available at <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/>.

“Korean Wave” is unambiguously diluted and tertiary: it is flowing over a (popular) cultural landscape that is already solidly built on American values and practices. Context, it is clear, is critical.

In a related vein, Nye’s argument is doubtful because it unproblematically equates culture with cultural products. Peter Murphy explains the difference this way: “... a strong distinction needs to be drawn between culture industry and culture. They overlap but they are not identical. A melodrama and a comic series are culture industry products. These products are principally entertainments. Some entertainments are local, and some can be exported across borders. Some nations, Korea being one, have the knack of exporting their entertainments. Others do not. But this should not be confused with the export of culture, which is a much more profound thing, and much more difficult to do.”<sup>10</sup> I do not completely agree that the distinction between entertainment and culture is as clear-cut or as strong as Murphy asserts: popular entertainment is certainly part of the culture of modern capitalist society; one might even say that it is profoundly associated with capitalist society. But, this underscores the point I made earlier: *hallyu*, despite its patina of Koreanness, is not only highly commercialized, but also largely generic. It is part and parcel of an increasingly homogeneous, but also increasingly global flow of entertainment. This is especially true of the most popular Korean dramas, which are generally based on banal, although emotionally gripping, themes (e.g., family, friendship, love, greed, betrayal). The stories, in other words, could be transplanted to virtually any society, which is the main reason, perhaps, that they have such broad ranging appeal outside of Korea. To be sure, these “culture industry products” can and do reflect unique elements of Korean social values, beliefs, and practices; yet, it is far from clear whether this can be transformed into soft power.

The key question, then, is whether exported and generally hackneyed or imitative entertainment, no matter how popular or “attractive,” has any capacity to affect political relations between Korea and other countries in a concrete or substantive manner. Theoretically, the problem is in specifying how exported *popular* culture—viz. entertainment—can create a basis, not only for forging a share identity, but also for developing a basis for collective or common action across societies. Empirically, there is scant evidence to show that *hallyu* has this potential. For example, in Japan, the Korean wave—or even more, tsunami—crested in 2005 after airings of *Winter Sonata* and *The Jewel in the Palace*. (*Winter Sonata* first aired in Japan in 2003, but was only available on NHK’s satellite station; a year later, however, it was rebroadcast on NHK’s flagship terrestrial station.) The impact of both programs in Japan was immense. After the broadcast of *Winter Sonata*, for example, many Japanese (and especially Japanese women) became “smitten” with all things Korean. As one Japanese college student put it, “I felt like I was struck by lightning. I was completely captivated by Korea.”<sup>11</sup> This student along with tens of thousands other Japanese also rushed out to buy Korean language books and even more made “pilgrimages” to Korea to visit filming locations—after the first broadcast of *Winter Sonata*,

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Murphy, “The Limits of Soft Power,” paper presented to International Symposium on Media and Popular Cultural Flows in East Asia, Monash University, Clayton Campus, Melbourne, August 4-5 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Kwon Weng Kim, “TV Love Tale Stirs Passion in Japan for S. Korea,” *The Straits Times* (19 April 2004).

Japanese tourism to Korea spiked 40 percent.<sup>12</sup> Appearances by *Winter Sonata*'s male lead in Japan, moreover, resulted in a Beatles-like mania at airports and other public forums.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the unquestionable and unprecedented popularity of Korean entertainment or popular culture in Japan, political relations between the two countries have hardly improved. Quite the contrary: they have worsened. Consider, on this point, an editorial in the *Hankyoreh* on the state of Korea-Japan relations in 2005:

The mood at Monday's meeting between president Roh Moo Hyun and Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi was so cold it would be hard to find a similar atmosphere in previous summits. Even if you account for the particular positions on each side, it is a reflection of the weakness of Korean-Japanese relations to have had difficulty even deciding on a date and location right up to the last moment. The two men announced that they exchanged frank views on problems relating to history, which is where the greatest differences are. It is significant just having them talk about what they really think regarding things like Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine. But unless you see a desire to correct misled perceptions of history, the significance of such meetings still gets reduced by half. The reason relations have deteriorated so much this year is because of the Dokdo issue and the problems with Japan's history textbooks, but the fundamental reason is the open turn to the right by Japan's leadership, symbolized by the worship visits to Yasukuni.<sup>14</sup>

The opinion of the editors at *Hankyoreh* is not unique: the general consensus among Korean observers is that government-to-government relations between the two countries was bad in 2005 and even worse in 2006; indeed, many asserted that 2006 was the worst year in Korea-Japan relations since normalization in 1965.<sup>15</sup> While one could point to a number of reasons for this chill in Korea-Japan relations—including Koizumi's insistence on visiting Yasukuni Shrine, the controversy over Dokdo (or Takeshima, as it is known in Japan), or differences over how to deal with North Korea—the basic point is simply that the rising popularity of *hallyu* in Japan has apparently made no difference at all. It has not, in other words, created a stronger basis for cooperation on key issues. And it certainly has not allowed Korean policy makers to co-opt the Japanese public or manipulate the political agenda between the two countries because of Japan's strong "attraction" to Korean popular culture. But this is hardly surprising: as a *source* of soft power for individual states, popular culture is severely limited. For its primary basis of attraction is its value as entertainment. And while the consumption of popular culture/entertainment can certainly encourage ordinary Japanese (or Taiwanese, Filipinos, Chinese, Mexicans, Mongolians

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Russell, "Korea-Japan Relations: A Thaw of Bad Relations Has the Two Nations Sharing Cultures," *The Hollywood Reporter* (15 February 2005). Available at <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Also, see "Japanese Fans Mob TV Star in 'Korea Fever,'" *China Daily Online* (21 November 2004). Available at [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-11/21/content\\_393440.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-11/21/content_393440.htm).

<sup>14</sup> "The Sad State of Korea-Japan Relations," *Hankyoreh* (21 June 2005). Available at <http://www.hani.co.kr/section-001100000/2005/06/001100000200506210344001.html>

<sup>15</sup> Park Cheol Hee, "Political Leaders Urged to Promote New Initiatives to Mend Damaged Ties," *Korea Herald* (22 August 2006).

and so on) to develop a positive interest in and “good feelings” about Korea generally, it seems to provide very little basis for anything beyond that.

Does this mean that *hallyu* has no political significance? Not necessarily. Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, for instance, effectively argues that the “dense traffic of popular culture throughout urban centers in East Asia serves as a powerful regionalizing engine, generating the formation of a transnational market for culture and pulling East Asian cities and their inhabitants closer together.”<sup>16</sup> Obviously, *hallyu* has become a significant part of this traffic and insofar as Otmazgin’s argument is correct, *hallyu* may play an important role in spurring a market-driven, consumer-oriented integration of East and Southeast Asia. Moreover, while this is an ostensibly economic process, it clearly has important political and social implications. Again, as Otmazgin explains it: “Popular culture products, together with the industries and networks that support them, substantially increase the regional level of cooperation and reciprocity in a shared culture market.”<sup>17</sup> To be sure, there is power in this process, but it is not necessarily the soft power of which Nye speaks. That is, it is not the power to influence or shape the behavior of others through attraction per se, but the power to dominate or control the production and distribution of culture products. This is economic power, which overlaps with soft power, but is not the same (Nye himself distinguishes between economic and soft power).

### **Hallyu as a Source of Conflict**

The relationship among economic power, soft power, and popular culture is important and brings us to the second major element of assessing the significance of *hallyu*, namely, understanding the broader context in which *hallyu* is both propagated and received. On first glance, this issue may seem moot, for, if the foregoing argument is correct—that *hallyu* has limited potential as a source of soft power—then it makes no sense to discuss the broader context in which *hallyu* is propagated and received. Yet, while it may be the case that (exported) popular culture has limited potential for generating collective or common action *across* societies, the same is not necessarily true *within* societies. The values, beliefs or practices that exported popular culture supposedly represents, for example, can be transformed into ideological, political or economic threats within specific domestic contexts. Here, too, context matters. When popular culture flows “spontaneously” across borders, it may be routinely integrated into various societies, such that it becomes part of everyday life, part of the “natural” cultural and social landscape. On the other hand, when popular culture is pushed into other societies, when it is used as an economic weapon to exploit whatever profit-making opportunity exists, this raises the possibility of a strong backlash. Increasing, *hallyu* is being used in this fashion.

To a certain extent, of course, the development of the Korean wave reflects an organic or spontaneous process. After all, interest in the most popular products of the Korean wave—e.g., contemporary and historical dramas or in K-pop—could not be forced on other societies: either international audiences embraced Korean popular culture or they did not. In fact, according to the Korean National Tourism Organization (KNTO), the very term “Korean Wave” was coined

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<sup>16</sup> Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, “Cultural Commodities and Regionalization in East Asia,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 3 (December 2005), p. 510.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 516.

by the Chinese mass media.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the propagation of *hallyu* clearly reflects a systematic and planned effort to promote a “*Han* (Korea) brand.”<sup>19</sup> In this view, *hallyu* has largely become a state-sponsored marketing campaign in which Korean culture itself has little meaning; what matters most is the ability to create global demand for Korean-made products<sup>20</sup> and to spur more tourism to Korea. There is certainly a great deal of evidence to show this. Just consider, for example, a recent press release by the Gyeonggi-do provincial government announcing plans for the construction of “Hallyu-Wood,” a massive 880 billion *won* (\$925 million) entertainment project set to be completed in 2010. The Gyeonggi government’s announcement, more importantly, is part of a series of other government-sponsored efforts at the national level to “market and maintain Hallyu fever,”<sup>21</sup> including the creation of a “Hallyu Policy Advisory Committee” and a “National Image Commission” both of which are designed to devise “new ways to support Korean culture abroad.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, strategic discussions of *hallyu* have reached the highest levels of government in Korea. In 2005, for instance, former Prime Minister Lee Hae-chan was directly involved in meeting discussing how *hallyu* could be used to improve South Korea’s image. Based on these discussions, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism announced a number of new policies, including the creation of a graduate school to provide specialized programs in culture technology (CT) and the establishment of a Cultural Industry Academy program to develop the skills and expertise necessary to maximize the “exportation of cultural contents.”<sup>23</sup>

The involvement of the Korean government in culture industry harks back to the earlier days of Korean neo-mercantilist economic policy under the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan. In those days, economic development was a national goal and nationalism imbued almost every aspect of Korean industrialization. This was even more the case with regard to international trade: imports were generally discouraged except when necessary, and every effort was made to spur exports. International trade, in short, was largely seen as a zero-sum game. Democracy and neo-liberal globalization have changed the dynamics of economic development in Korea, but old habits and especially attitudes appear to die very hard. Take this statement by a prominent Korean politician, Kim Han-gil: “... the Korean Wave, spreading like wildfire throughout Asia, especially China, is proof of the international competitiveness of Korean popular culture .... The Korean wave is not only fighting back against the monopolistic position held by American and Japanese culture in the Asian region, it is also demonstrating how a Korean culture, oppressed for over 5,000 years, can ... spread throughout the region.” Significantly, Kim is not content to let this happen spontaneously. As he put it, “we will actively support the penetration of our culture into foreign markets.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Korea National Tourism Organization (KNTTO), “Hallyu (Korea Wave) Tourist Marketing” (2002). Available at <http://www.knto.or.kr/eng/hallyu/hallyuintro.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Kim Dong-taek, “Phenomenon of ‘Hallyu’ and Korean Studies,” reprinted in *Korea Focus*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 112.

<sup>20</sup> Cho Hae-Joang, “Reading the ‘Korean Wave’ as a Sign of Global Shift,” *Korea Journal*, vol. 45, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 159.

<sup>21</sup> KNTTO, “Hallyu Tourist Marketing.”

<sup>22</sup> Soh Joon, “Keeping ‘Hallyu’ Going,” *Korea Times* (16 February 2005).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Daehan Mail* (21 July 2001); cited in “Reading the ‘Korean Wave.’” pp. 158 and 160.

The nationalistic rhetoric of Kim may seem hyperbolic, but it accurately reflects the tendency of the Korean state, Korean industry, and even Korean society more generally to see *hallyu* not simply as point of national pride, but as a critical product in the struggle for control of new international markets. In this regard, the primary purpose of *hallyu* is to increase the economic power of South Korea through market domination. There is, however, a contradiction, or at least strong inconsistency, between the zealous and *neo-mercantilist* pursuit of economic power through the sale of culture products and the pursuit of soft power through the transmission of cultural values. The former is premised on the maximization of self-interested gain, while the latter is based on developing long-term relationships of trust and cooperation. Of course, economic transactions (of culture products or anything else), as Otmazgin suggested above, can also lead to greater cooperation, trust, and reciprocity between and among countries. But, again, context is crucial. Cooperation, trust, and especially reciprocity cannot emerge and develop if a relationship is mostly or entirely one-sided. Yet, in the case of trade in culture products, South Korea has long maintained a highly selective and exclusionary policy.

South Korea's outright ban on cultural imports from Japan is well known: until 1998, Korea officially banned virtually all Japanese culture products—including movies, television programs, video and computer games, songs and albums—from being sold or consumed in Korea. (Unofficially, however, Japanese culture products could never be completely kept out of Korea.<sup>25</sup>) The ban on Japanese television programs was only lifted in 2004, and even today, some restrictions remain on the airing of Japanese animated movies and TV programs.<sup>26</sup> There are, of course, historical and emotional reasons for the original ban on culture products from Japan; the motivation for continued restrictions, however, is almost purely economic. As the Culture and Tourism Minister explained it in December 2003, “The government will not completely remove the barriers to Japanese animated movies and television programs this time to protect the fledgling domestic industry.”<sup>27</sup>

Restrictions on culture products, more importantly are not strictly limited to Japan. The South Korean movie industry has also benefited tremendously from a screen quota system, which was first introduced in 1966. Under this system, local theaters were required to show South Korean movies for 146 days a year (the original quota was for 165 days). The quota system, in this case, was primarily directed at American culture products, specifically, Hollywood-blockbusters.<sup>28</sup> The intent, again, was clear: to protect the local film industry against

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<sup>25</sup> On this point, it is fairly clear that the ban was often ignored and relatively easy to circumvent. As Lee Dong-ho, a professor at Incheon University, notes, “Japanese popular culture was already here [in South Korea] before the relaxation of the ban, so Koreans are very accustomed to Japanese culture.” Indeed, Lee continues, “[t]he young people were very fond of Japanese culture, even though it was banned. The (satellite) television already informally and (illegally) brought Japanese programs.” In Lisa Hanson, “Japanese Culture Phases In,” *Korea Times* (2 December 2004).

<sup>26</sup> O Youn-hee, “Seoul Opens Wider to Japanese Popular Culture,” *Korea Herald* (31 December 2003).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> The film quota system was one of two protectionist measures. The other measure, which required any company that wished to import a foreign film to also produce a Korean film, was dissolved in 1985. Cited in Chris Berry, “Full Service Cinema: The South Korean Cinema

American competition. Recently, the Roh Moo-hyun administration announced that the number of mandatory screening days for domestic movies would be cut from 146 days to 73 days beginning in July 2006. The decision, it is useful to point out, was made under direct pressure from the United States government, which insisted that a resolution to the screen quota issue would be a prerequisite to for talks on establishing a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA).<sup>29</sup> In other words, it was not a new found openness to culture products from other countries that spurred the Korean government to revise its policy, but political pressure from one of its most important trading partners. Significantly, the decision to revise the screen quota system has been met with a great deal of consternation, especially by Korean actors, directors, and other involved in the movie industry. Many see the decision not only as an economic threat, but also as a profound cultural threat. One Korean director put it this way: “We don’t think film should be traded like any other commodity. It’s not a car or a ship—it’s our culture.”<sup>30</sup> The irony, if not hypocrisy, here is palpable: while the Korean film industry argues that Korean “cultural sovereignty” must be strongly protected, Koreans in the country’s many culture industries (including the film industry, of course), are doing everything possible to inundate other societies with a tsunami of Korean culture products. This disconnect is all the more remarkable given the extraordinary domestic (and, to a lesser degree, international) success of the Korean film industry over the past decade. By almost any account, in fact, the Korean film industry is thriving and is more than capable of standing on its own. The box-office success of such films as *Shiri*, *Joint Security Area*, *Friend*, *Taegukki*, *Silmido*, *Marathon*, *My Sassy Girl*, and *The King and the Clown* is testament to this. Indeed, *The King and the Clown* is the highest grossing film, foreign or domestic, in Korean film history. But, this record may be short-lived as another Korean blockbuster—*The Host*—is already (as of mid-August 2006) threatening to overtake *The King and the Clown*.

The main point, however, is not to criticize Korean filmmakers and actors. Rather, it is to emphasize the neo-mercantilist context of the Korean Wave. Not surprisingly, policymakers and others outside of Korea are quite aware of and concerned about this issue. Vietnamese government officials, for example, threatened to stop broadcasting South Korean television dramas unless Korean TV networks showed a willingness to introduce Vietnamese shows on a more equal basis.<sup>31</sup> Other countries, too, have expressed similar sentiments: in Japan, China, and Taiwan, an “anti-*hallyu*” movement has been coalescing around the one-sided flow of Korean culture products. Thus far, most criticisms have focused mainly on the issue of reciprocity and arguments been couched in primarily economic terms. It is not difficult to imagine, however, how anti-*hallyu* sentiments can be transformed into broader based cultural arguments against Korea. To a limited extent, this is already happening, especially in China (which has already taken steps to decrease the number of imported Korean dramas). Fittingly, perhaps, Chinese criticisms largely mirror Korean attitudes about the “danger” of foreign culture. Zhang Guoli,

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Success Story (So Far),” no date. Available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~eall/special/berry-hms02.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> “S. Korean Movie Workers Stage Demonstration Against Screen Quota Reduction,” *People’s Daily Online* (9 February 2006). Available at [http://english.people.com.cn/200602/09/eng20060209\\_241204.html](http://english.people.com.cn/200602/09/eng20060209_241204.html).

<sup>30</sup> Barbara Demick, “South Korea Locked in a Cinema War,” *Los Angeles Times* (31 October 2005).

<sup>31</sup> “South Korea in Trade Flap with Neighbors,” *Asia Times* (12 November 2005).

one of China's top television actors, for instance, expressed his frustration by asserting that the Korean wave is a "cultural invasion" threatening to destroy the Chinese television industry.<sup>32</sup> The Chinese government, moreover, recently denied Korean production companies access to locations in China because the theme of the proposed historical dramas—which are set in the Koguryo Kingdom (37 BC to AD 668)—were deemed culturally inappropriate.<sup>33</sup>

Such rumblings are not only disquieting, but also potentially serious. At the least they tell us that *hallyu* is not an unalloyed benefit to Korea, either in terms of economic power or soft power. At worse, they portend a situation in which *hallyu* becomes a major source of conflict and tension. Indeed, an anti-*hallyu* discourse could easily become a focal point for collective action against Korea, and not just in one country but in countries throughout the region.

### **Alternatives to *Hallyu***

As I have repeatedly stressed, as a source of soft power, *hallyu* is extremely limited. This would be true even under ideal conditions, but as the preceding section shows, the conditions for Korea are far from ideal. Significantly, though, Korea is largely responsible for creating these negative conditions through its own neo-mercantilist policies and generally parochial, even chauvinistic views. Not surprisingly, this is perhaps the biggest reason South Korea currently lacks soft power. For the values embedded in Korea's chauvinistic economic and foreign policies have undoubtedly shaped the country's image around the world, and thereby seriously, if not fatally, undercut whatever positive images that *hallyu* has the potential to create. In this view, attempts by the Korean government to combat anti-*hallyu* sentiments are largely a waste of time and energy. This is because they are likely to be perceived as self-serving efforts to protect Korean interests (and profits), rather than as a genuine commitment to cultural interchange.

To combat such negative perceptions, South Korea must undertake a fundamental reorientation of its economic and foreign policies. This reorientation, quite obviously, must move from the parochial to the global. Moreover, instead of free riding or exploiting situations to the maximum advantage, the government (and Korean enterprises) must contribute more willingly to the creation and maintenance of regional and global public goods. I realize that this may all sound idealistic, if not naïve, but a key point is that such a change would not be done for strictly altruistic reasons. It would, instead, be done to increase the country's soft power. On this point, it is important to note that there are likely strict limits to South Korea's hard power capacity. This is particularly the case in the post-Cold War context in which the number of nuclear powers is essentially fixed and the dominant power—i.e., the United States—has achieved unprecedented and unrivaled military superiority (at least for the foreseeable future). In this context, the best strategy for smaller states is to rely on non-military or non-coercive means to achieve their goals. And the best way to do this is to maximize the development of soft power.

### **Conclusion**

This paper is admittedly underdeveloped both theoretically and empirically. It is, in short, an essay rather than a full-blown treatise on soft power and culture (or, more specifically, on soft power and *hallyu*). Nonetheless, I have endeavored highlight important points in the debate over

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<sup>32</sup> Evan Osnos, "Asia Rides Wave of Korean Pop Culture Invasion," *Asian Diversity Magazine* (2006). Available at <http://www.adiversity.com/magazine/article.htm?ID=645838512>.

<sup>33</sup> Park Chung-a, "Historical Dramas Strain Sino-Korean Relations," *Korea Times* (29 June 2006).

soft power and culture, especially popular culture. I have argued that “culture” does have power and that the power of culture can be and is relevant to world politics. And, while I have also argued that popular culture, and particularly *hallyu*, is at best a very weak source of power for countries that export culture products, this does not make popular culture irrelevant. Indeed, for South Korea, *hallyu* may end up having huge political implications. Unfortunately, for Korea, the effect may be exactly the opposite of what is expected. That is, instead of an increase in soft power, *hallyu* may end up undermining Korea’s political influence in the region. This is not inevitable, but if the Korean government—and Korean enterprises—continue to use *hallyu* as nothing more than another economic strategy in a still neo-mercantilist tool chest, a serious backlash is extremely likely. There is, of course, already evidence that this is happening. The problem facing Korea, however, is not how to deal with the “anti-*hallyu*” backlash per se, but how deal with a new, post-Cold War global context.