

# An emerging soft power

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A new wave of South Korean culture, dubbed hallyu, has transformed the country's standing

YouTube sensation Psy: the most famous exponent of Korea's 'hallyu diplomacy'

The term soft power was popularised by Harvard University academic Joseph Nye in the late 1980s as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion”. But of course, nations such as the United States, France, or Britain have been exercising soft power for at least the last century, aware of the important role that culture, in all its myriad forms, can play in making friends and influencing people around the world.

Measuring the true impact of soft power at the diplomatic or political level is not easy, but its economic benefits are certainly tangible: the creative industries generate export earnings, as well as boosting overseas visitor numbers, foreign student enrolment, and inward investment.

Anybody who underestimates the role of soft power when it comes to rebranding a nation need look no further than South Korea to correct their error. For the last decade or so, a new wave of South Korean culture, dubbed hallyu, has transformed the country's standing, first in Asia, and then around the world, to such an extent that the Foreign Ministry now openly talks of “hallyu diplomacy”. Exported television dramas such as *Jumong*, along with K-pop hits such as Gangnam Style

have done as much, if not more for the country's image internationally than any number of global marketing and branding campaigns.

A report by the British Council – which, like its counterparts around the globe contributes to the UK's international reputation and attractiveness, thus contributing to the UK's soft power – earlier this year published *Influence and Attraction: Culture and the Race for Soft Power in the 21st Century*, noting: “... the South Korean singer Psy's Gangnam Style – a YouTube phenomenon in 2012 that topped the charts in many countries, including the UK – has thrust Korea into the spotlight. ‘K-pop’ is becoming a global phenomenon: the Korean boyband Ukkiss's visit to Peru in late 2012 produced scenes reminiscent of Beatlemania.”

South Korea's former president, Lee Myung-bak, understood the importance of developing his country's soft power to match its economic weight, and set up a permanent presidential council to establish a national brand, simultaneously increasing spending on foreign aid, and hosting a series of high-profile events and international conferences including a G20 summit in 2010. Previously, the country had hosted the Olympics and jointly organised a World Cup.

A viral pop hit was not part of the ongoing nation-branding plan, but as the Foreign Ministry has admitted: it is “very useful, very important.”

Actually, Psy's hit was just the latest high point in hallyu: Girls' Generation, a nine-member “K-pop” group, has made inroads in the US, with appearances at Madison Square Garden and on David Letterman's Tonight show. Earlier this year *Pieta* became the first Korean film to win the top prize at the Venice Film Festival, while the English translation of Shin Kyung-sook's novel *Please Look After Mother* became a global bestseller this year.

Aware of the importance of



soft power, some of Korea's biggest and best-known manufacturers sit on the presidential council on nation branding, keen to lever the country's growing international appeal. Samsung is locked in a battle with Apple at the top end of the smartphone market, while carmaker Hyundai is slowly working its way up the automotive value chain and is ready to take on Audi and BMW. Amore Pacific, South Korea's biggest cosmetics producer, is enjoying double-digit growth in China, thanks to the huge Chinese following for Korean music and television stars.

Meanwhile, the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism has used Psy's success to help push Korean exports by establishing more Korean Cultural Centres around the world and working with the Federation of Korean Industries to form a Bureau of Culture Diplomacy to promote Korea.

South Korea may well have taken a leaf out of the United Kingdom's many volumes on soft power. It vies with the United States for global recognition of the standard of its government, diplomatic infrastructure, cultural output, capacity for education, and appeal to business, along with the number of cultural missions, Olympic medals, the quality of its architecture, and of course, global business brands.

The last couple of years have been a soft power dream for the United Kingdom, starting with the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in 2011, which helped pull in 29 million tourists in 2011 and re-energised the Royal Family. Last year was also a bumper year. The Queen's Diamond Jubilee continued the display of British heritage, while the hosting of the 2012 Olympic Games, complete with a spectacular opening and closing ceremony, brought worldwide attention to the country, while the country's sporting successes, including Bradley Wiggins conquering the Tour de France, Team GB winning 65 medals at the Olympics, Andy Murray taking his first Grand Slam title in New York, the export of 22 number one albums overseas, and the global franchise of James Bond have all helped Britain project a significant and positive amount of influence around the world.

More than a year on, the so-called Olympic effect continues to boost sales of British brands across Asia, with Korea's biggest department store chain Lotte registering a sustained rise in UK-firms' sales.

Douglas Barrett, the head of UK trade and investment in South Korea at the British Embassy in Seoul, says: "The Union Jack has been flying much more in Seoul. We saw a rapid increase in the number of South Korean businesses asking to partner with UK-focused branding during the Games, and the Olympic effect is still there."

Lotte used the Olympics to promote a range of top-end British brands, among them Burberry, DAKS, and

Royal Albert Homeware. More and more UK firms are opening and expanding in Seoul, says Mr Barrett: "Brand Britain is hugely successful in South Korea... It is impossible to underestimate the value of London 2012. People saw it, and came away mind-blown. The Olympics had a defining effect on how people think about the UK. It used to be about the English gentleman and heritage values, but the opening ceremony opened everyone's eyes up to modern, multicultural Britain."

The UK exported goods and services worth £4 billion to South Korea in 2012, up 15 per cent on the previous year. UKTI says traffic to the Facebook page of the British Embassy in Seoul more than doubled thanks to the Olympics, and that contact from members of the Korean public rose 20 percent.

Some of Britain's biggest exports to the country include whisky, industrial machinery, and pharmaceuticals. Tesco has 320 stores in South Korea, and Standard Chartered is the largest foreign direct investor in the Korean financial services industry. Engineers Amec, Atkins and Arup have been involved in building there.

Few people around the world may have known that portly rapper Psy's Gangnam Style was actually a satire on the horse-riding *nouveau riche* living the high life in Seoul's equivalent to Beverly Hills, and perhaps would have struggled to name any of Team GB's medal winners at last year's London Olympics. The real point is that both countries use soft power to raise awareness about their respective nations, building long-term trust, people-to-people connections and international opportunities in the process.

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