"East Asian Narratives: The Impact of Cultural Diplomacy in Shaping National Images - A Comparative Study of Japan, China, and South Korea"

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Abstract

This article explores South Korea, Japan, and China's cultural diplomacy strategies and their impact on the development of soft power in East Asia. It delves into South Korea's dynamic K-pop industry, its global appeal through social media, and the transformative Korean Wave (Hallyu) that has reshaped international perceptions. South Korea leverages pop culture to enhance its global image. In contrast, Japan's cultural diplomacy, rooted in post-World War II traditions, has evolved to include internationally acclaimed entertainment like anime and video games. China, with its unique communist regime, blends Hollywood collaborations with economic influence and infrastructure development to bolster its soft power. The article highlights these countries' diverse strategies in cultural diplomacy while recognizing its pivotal role in shaping global opinions and promoting cultural diversity. The main objective is to elucidate how these nations harness their cultural assets to enhance their global influence and soft power, shedding light on the significance of cultural diplomacy in contemporary international relations.

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy falls under public diplomacy, a relatively emerging concept. Toward the end of the Cold War, the term "public diplomacy" was coined by American diplomat Edmund Gullion in order to "allow a clearer distinction between its own (American) democratic information practices and policies pursued by the Soviet Union" (Cull, 2009). The propaganda used to reach domestic and foreign audiences had a negative connotation. By renaming the activities of the United States Information Agency to public diplomacy, a new phrase was created, offering a clean slate that could be used to build a new positive meaning. Nicholas J. Cull, professor of public diplomacy at the University of Southern

California, explains in his book Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past that one of the fundamental elements of public diplomacy differentiating from propaganda is the aspect of listening (Cull, 2009). While propaganda and public diplomacy are considered similar in the goal of sending a message about a country or policy or simply engaging with foreign viewers, public diplomacy intends to attract others by "listening" or obtaining knowledge of how other countries perceive this international actor and other information in order to gain the attention of overseas audiences. Contrary to propaganda, where the aspect of "speaking" (usually in short phrases or slogans) is essential to effectively disseminate their idea, public diplomacy at its best aims to persuade individuals, with sufficient reasoning, given the knowledge about their target audience's values and beliefs. Cultural diplomacy is an important aspect of public diplomacy as the government wants to push its own country's narrative, and understanding the target audience's culture is imperative to its effectiveness.

This attraction method is used politically as it can be practiced alongside "hard power," such as military intervention or economic sanctions, to reinforce overall power and influence (Nye, 2021). The cultural diplomacy strategy is a means of acquiring "soft power." The concept of soft power was originated by Joseph Nye, former US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs and former dean of Harvard Kennedy School of Government. An increasing number of countries have begun to practice this concept. Nye defines soft power as being "able to get the outcomes it wanted because of attraction rather than just threats of coercion or payment" and further clarifies that "hard power is push; soft power is pull" (Nye, 2021). Thus, when public audiences become interested in a particular culture, they act more conscientiously towards that country. This attention can allow for a stronger connection between the audience, the country, and its domestic population, likely garnering further awareness of other non-cultural aspects of the country. In this sense, cultural diplomacy is used as a mechanism to attract (pull) an audience, which is then used to exercise soft power and sway public opinion, respect cultural diversity, and even bring awareness to human rights.

Although soft power can be helpful, hard power can ultimately undermine it. Hard power and fixed policies cannot be changed by soft power, and since soft power is weaker, it can often be undercut by military or economic forces. When a country attempts to promote its benevolent narrative but then uses military intervention to get what it wants, the narrative that the soft power is trying to portray no longer seems legitimate. However, to improve soft and hard power, it would be to use them together to increase overall impact; this is referred to as "smart power" (Nye, 2021). Some countries may have experience in using innovative power, but the world is evolving, and advancing technology continues to tilt the playing field.

Methodology

The methodology employed for this study involves a narrative literature overview, focusing on examining soft power, cultural diplomacy, and public diplomacy in the context of East Asian countries, with a particular emphasis on Japan, China, and South Korea. This narrative literature overview approach will comprehensively analyze existing academic research, scholarly publications, government documents, policy reports, and relevant literature.

Results

Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, and Cultural Diplomacy

Soft power, a relatively recent subject in academia and politics, is a concept that has been present throughout history, as suggested by Nye (2011). Soft power accomplishes policy objectives and desired outcomes through persuasion, attraction, and framing. Culture, political values, and foreign policies constitute the primary resources of soft power. Soft power can appeal to the elites of a foreign nation directly or to its populace, thereby influencing the state's policy choices.

Public diplomacy serves as a means by which a state cultivates its soft power. Public diplomacy generates attraction, which, in turn, fosters a conducive environment for policy implementation (Nye, 2011). An important distinction is that while soft power can be wielded by various segments of civil society (including the state, sub-national governments, and non-governmental actors), public diplomacy is generally considered primarily a tool of the state.

Achieving desired outcomes through soft power is not always straightforward; it often requires considerable time to see results, and evaluating the ultimate impact of soft power can be challenging. However, one advantage is its cost-effectiveness compared to building up military power, enabling middle powers like Norway and pacifist nations like Japan to play more significant international roles than they might otherwise (Vyas, 2011). The influence of hard power, such as military strength, on soft power can be either supportive or detrimental, depending on how it is employed (Lee, 2011; Nye, 2011).

Public diplomacy definitions vary widely among authors and experts in the field. According to McDowell (2008), who quotes the Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy, the earliest definition posits that public diplomacy involves "the actions of governments to inform and influence foreign publics." McDowell (2008) further emphasizes that public diplomacy encompasses two essential elements: the state's involvement and a "clear goal or message." It is considered as public diplomacy only when both these components are present.

Lord (2005) defines public diplomacy as a form of communication between a state and a foreign public to achieve the state's foreign objectives and reduce opposition to them from abroad.

Gregory (2008) observes that public diplomacy employs different techniques than those used in public relations by the private sector and politicians, relying on "thick relationships" with civil society for success. Regardless of the definition, two crucial aspects remain constant: public diplomacy is conducted by the state and necessitates a clearly defined goal. Cultural diplomacy, on the other hand, presents some distinctions. Pigman (2010) defines cultural diplomacy as utilizing cultural exchanges to foster improved relations without requiring the distinct goal or state involvement that public diplomacy does. These two concepts, while related, are considered "distinct...if overlapping spheres".

Japanese Cultural Diplomacy

Japan has had a similar history with cultural diplomacy, as much of its campaign revolved around traditional aspects of Japanese culture, such as architecture, nature, tea ceremonies, and flower arrangements that displayed a softer, peaceful, and serene side of Japan to combat the samurai, feudal and warlike narrative after WWII (Ogoura, 2009). In the 1950s, Japan's movies became internationally critically acclaimed, considered the "golden age of cinema," which showed Japanese artistry from a new modern angle (Martín, 2018). Unlike Korea's war, Japan has had more stability and time to focus on cultural diplomacy, allowing them more experience in this field. Movies like Rashōmon (1950), The Life of Oharu (1952), Gate of Hell (1953), and other Japanese movies won recognition from the Venice Film Festival, the Cannes Film Festival, and the Academy Awards, piquing international interest and giving Japan recognition for its arts and film post-WWII (Martín, 2018). However, these films did not see the same critically acclaimed success in Japan that they did internationally. During the war, traditional Japanese culture had been promoted in conjunction with militarism, but in the post-war era, the theme of war no longer appealed to Japanese audiences (Martín, 2018). However, for Western audiences, it projected "exotic images of a distant country," which made it enjoyable because of its unfamiliarity (Martín, 2018).

These movies boosted Japan's popularity and placed them on the map culturally. However, in recent years, the start of the phenomenon of anime began when, in the 1990s, Japanese animation companies partnered with American entertainment businesses to present animated television shows to kids. Shows such as Sailor Moon, Dragon Ball Z, and Pokémon became popular among the younger generation, and Japanese games (Pokémon et al. Bros) also became mainstream. Anime shows and movies for young adults were also being produced and won Academy Awards (i.e., Spirited Away from Studio Ghibli). For many adolescents, Japan became known for its animated shows and games because children were more interested in the new and exciting entertainment provided by new technology rather than the country's architecture, nature, and other traditional aspects. Like South Korea, there was a surge of interest in modern Japanese media and further engagement in Japanese culture. More

people have learned the Japanese language and have become interested in everyday Japanese lifestyle and traditions. Given how this helped tourism in Japan, the Japanese government realized the importance of the entertainment sector for cultural diplomacy. Even though the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has promoted cultural diplomacy through pop culture, it has not interfered with or pushed strong politics within the media (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022). Movies and shows often depict an idealistic life in Japan, even portraying the war between the East and West. However, popular anime or manga usually rely on fantasy plots or romantic-comedy school-life storylines. South Korea and Japan attempt to take advantage of their sudden popularity and use cultural diplomacy to gain soft power. In contrast, China has had a different approach to cultural diplomacy.

Chinese Cultural Diplomacy

While China has realized the importance of cultural diplomacy, its political system prevents it from succeeding in the same way South Korea has. Due to China's communist regime, the Chinese government defines cultural diplomacy differently than Nicholas Cull and Joseph Nye, and their approach is also different. China sees cultural diplomacy as being so imperative to soft power (i.e., culture is inherently needed to build a responsible nation) that they use the term cultural soft power (Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019). In this holistic sense, Chinese characteristics of Marxism and socialism are intrinsically cultural values. Thus, when China presents its narrative to overseas audiences in cultural diplomacy, it also pushes what other people and nations recognize as political views. Unlike Nye and Cull, China does not separate culture and politics, making it harder for them to succeed in cultural diplomacy, similar to South Korea. While they may not have success with cultural diplomacy to the same extent, they are nevertheless known for their culture and can still gain soft power in other ways. Ultimately, they have not had the same "luck" as South Korea and Japan in their rise in pop culture (specifically in the West). However, this "luck" may be attributed to South Korea and the US being democratic capitalist societies.

Like South Korea and Japan, China's early cultural diplomacy efforts promoted traditional Chinese culture, including cuisine, nature, language, architecture, and other aspects (Cull, 2009). These campaigns had some success in events like the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai World Expo, but they did not create a lasting impact (Rawnsley, 2015). Today, China's primary methods of cultural diplomacy are through broadcasting, movies, and the Confucius Institutes (Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019).

Broadcasting is an older form of public and cultural diplomacy, as it only allows for one-way communication (Rawnsley, 2015). In contrast, modern technologies like social media allow Korean and Japanese culture to gain traction with younger audiences worldwide much faster (Rawnsley, 2015).

Social media allows people to interact with images and videos, share content with friends, and voice their opinions, which has helped these cultures gain global popularity (Rawnsley, 2015).

China's entertainment industry has also progressed, as its movies and actors have become more prevalent in recent years (Hu, 2022). In 2008, China's State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television issued a list of requirements foreign movies had to meet to be shown in Chinese theaters (Hu, 2022). Additionally, the government only allows 34 big-budget foreign movies annually, leading Hollywood to co-produce films with Chinese studios (Hu, 2022). This cooperation has allowed China to influence the content of Hollywood movies, such as Iron Man 3 (2013), Transformers: Age of Extinction (2014), and Pixels (2015), which have been altered to present China in a more positive light (Hu, 2022).

China's most prominent and lasting cultural diplomacy projects are the Confucius Institutes (CIs) (Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019). The first CI was established in Seoul, South Korea 2004 (Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019). Initially, the CIs focused on teaching Chinese culture and language and promoting multiculturalism (Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019). However, as they expanded worldwide, they also began collaborating in academic research (Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019). In April 2018, 110 CIs were operating in the United States (Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019).

Despite their success, the CIs have also faced criticism. Some countries, such as the United States, have expressed concern about the institutes' potential to spread Chinese Communist propaganda (Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019). Additionally, the CIs' holistic view of cultural diplomacy has been criticized for not adequately separating China's political system from its culture (Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019).

In conclusion, China's cultural diplomacy efforts have had mixed success. While its broadcasting and entertainment industries have made some progress, they have not achieved the same global impact as South Korea and Japan's cultural exports. The CIs have been more successful, but they have also faced criticism for their potential to spread propaganda and their lack of separation between China's political system and its culture. To achieve tremendous success, China must find ways to promote its culture without alienating Western audiences.

South Korean cultural diplomacy

South Korean cultural diplomacy has undergone significant transformation with the emergence of the "Korean Wave", or Hallyu, wherein the South Korean government leverages the popularity of its music and media to advance its diplomatic objectives (Jang & Paik, 2012). In the early years following the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, the government faced political instability in the aftermath of the Korean War, hindering its ability to focus on cultural diplomacy (Park, 2010).

Until the 1980s, the South Korean government maintained strict control over Korean media, leading to heavy censorship (Park, 2010). However, the democratization movement in the 1980s and subsequent economic growth led to the relaxation of regulations for foreign cultures, allowing Western media to influence Korean TV (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021). During this time, Seo Taiji & Boys considered the pioneers of K-pop, blended Western influences like rap and hip-hop into Korean mainstream music (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021).

The rise of K-pop marked a turning point, initially gaining popularity in Asia and later spreading globally due to its catchy melodies, synchronized choreography, and vibrant fashion (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021). Entertainment corporations such as SM Entertainment and JYP Entertainment played a pivotal role in curating "idol groups" and providing extensive training to young talents, resulting in the formation of popular groups like BTS, Stray Kids, Blackpink, and Twice (Kanozia & Ganghariya 2021). These groups have garnered massive followings worldwide, with fans actively engaging through music consumption, live concerts, and merchandise purchases. Social media has significantly contributed to K-pop's global reach and impact (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021). It is worth noting that the South Korean government initially did not actively promote K-pop. While it provided financial support to the industry and invested in infrastructure like concert auditoriums and hologram technology, the government did not initiate a campaign to advertise K-pop; entertainment corporations predominantly managed it (Chow, 2015).

Traditionally, South Korean cultural diplomacy had centered on "Han-style" culture, emphasizing elements like Korean dress (hanbok), housing (hanok), and food (hansik) (Elfving-Hwang, 2013). However, the emergence of K-pop and other modern aspects of Korean culture, including K-dramas, K-beauty, and Korean movies, has attracted a younger global audience (Elfving-Hwang, 2013). These modern elements serve as gateways for foreign audiences to explore various aspects of the Korean lifestyle, fostering an interest in the Korean language, tourism, and products (Elfving-Hwang, 2013).

The South Korean government has recognized the power and influence of K-pop groups and their potential in cultural diplomacy. Prominent groups like BTS have been invited to international events, such as the United Nations General Assembly, where they addressed global issues during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee, 2021). Additionally, South Korean cultural diplomacy has extended to humanitarian efforts, as seen in BTS's partnership with UNICEF through its "Love Myself" campaign (UNICEF, 2021). The government's support for such initiatives enhances South Korea's image as a responsible global actor (UNICEF, 2021).

In 2020, South Korea's Ministry of Culture established a dedicated department to support the Hallyu movement (Song, 2020). However, previous attempts by the government in 2012 and 2015 faced resistance from the private sector, which perceived government involvement as a threat to their

businesses (Song, 2020). Therefore, while South Korea aims to utilize cultural diplomacy through Hallyu, it must carefully navigate the intersection of entertainment and politics to ensure the phenomenon's continued success (Song, 2020).

East Asian Powerhouses in the Global Soft Power Index: Japan, China, and South Korea
The latest Global Soft Power Index has revealed a compelling narrative in international soft power, highlighting the significant presence and influence of East Asian nations, particularly Japan, China, and South Korea (Table 1). Their standings - Japan at 4th, China at 5th, and South Korea at 15th - are not just numbers; they are a testament to these countries' growing impact on the global stage.

Table 1. Global Soft Power Index 2023[1]

Rank	Country	Score
1	United States	74.8
2	United Kingdom	67.3
3	Germany	65.8
4	Japan	65.2
5	China	65.0
6	France	62.4
7	Canada	60.7
8	Switzerland	58.5
9	Italy	56.6
10	United Arab Emirates	55.2
11	Sweden	55.1
12	Spain	54.9
13	Russia	54.8
14	Australia	54.6
15	South Korea	53.9
16	Netherlands	53.7
17	Norway	52.6
18	Denmark	51.8

[1] Brand Finance. (2023). Brand Finance Soft Power Index 2023. Retrieved from https://static.brandirectory.com/reports/brand-finance-soft-power-index-2023-digital.pdf

19	Saudi Arabia	51.3
20	Belgium	51.2

Japan: A Blend of Tradition and Innovation

Japan, securing the fourth position with a score of 65.2, demonstrates an impressive amalgamation of rich cultural heritage and cutting-edge innovation. The country's influence extends far beyond its economic might. Japan's soft power is rooted in its unique ability to balance tradition with modernity. From the global appeal of its cuisine, anime, and technology to its leadership in sectors like automotive and electronics, Japan's cultural exports play a pivotal role in shaping its global image. Its commitment to global issues, like environmental sustainability, further bolsters its international reputation.

China: A Rising Soft Power

China's position at 5th with a score of 65 indicates its rapidly growing influence in global affairs. This rise can be attributed to its expanding economic footprint, significant investments in global infrastructure through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, and its increasing presence in international organizations. China's cultural influence, through media, education, and Confucius Institutes, is also a vital component of its soft power strategy. However, China's approach is multifaceted, and its rise in the soft power rankings is as much about its economic prowess as it is about its cultural outreach.

South Korea: The Cultural Vanguard

South Korea, ranked 15th with a score of 53.9, has made remarkable strides in asserting its soft power, primarily through its cultural output. The global popularity of K-pop, Korean drama, and cinema, epitomized by phenomena like BTS and the movie 'Parasite,' has catapulted South Korean culture onto the world stage. This 'Korean Wave' or 'Hallyu' has been instrumental in shaping perceptions and increasing the country's global influence. South Korea's technological advancements and dynamic democracy contribute significantly to its soft power.

The standings of Japan, China, and South Korea in the Global Soft Power Index indicate soft power's dynamic and multifaceted nature in the 21st century. These countries, each with unique strengths and strategies, are redefining the landscape of global influence. Their cultural, economic, and diplomatic endeavors are enhancing their global standing and profoundly shaping the international

order. As they continue to rise in the soft power rankings, the world watches keenly to see how their influence will shape the future of global politics, culture, and economics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the dynamics of cultural diplomacy in East Asia are fascinating, with South Korea, Japan, and China each pursuing unique strategies and facing distinct challenges. South Korea's success, driven by its vibrant K-pop industry and social media engagement, has reshaped its global image and captivated audiences worldwide. Japan's cultural diplomacy, rooted in tradition but adapted to modern interests like anime and video games, has garnered international recognition. Meanwhile, China's approach, influenced by its communist regime and holistic view of culture and politics, presents both opportunities and obstacles.

While South Korea and Japan excel in using modern technology and interactive platforms like social media to connect with global audiences rapidly, China's reliance on traditional broadcasting hampers its ability to match its reach. China's success in the entertainment industry, driven by economic interests, showcases its influence but lacks the artistic freedom seen in South Korea and Japan.

Despite successes in some regions, China's Confucius Institutes face skepticism and concerns about political influence and censorship in the West. China must navigate the divide between its political system and cultural promotion to expand its cultural diplomacy's reach in Western audiences.

In this ever-evolving landscape of cultural diplomacy, each East Asian country recognizes the importance of soft power in promoting cultural diversity and shaping global opinions. South Korea, Japan, and China continue to adapt their strategies to influence international perceptions, highlighting the significance of culture in shaping a nation's global image and influence.

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