

# A Soft Power Approach to the “Korean Wave”<sup>1</sup>

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This paper investigates the soft power potential of the Korean wave. For that purpose, this paper combines a theoretical discussion of soft power with a descriptive analysis of the Korean wave. The theoretical discussion of soft power, however, differs from that of Joseph Nye's in that this paper broadens the category of soft power into five categories in accordance with the specific goals which are achievable with soft power. The author also develops various soft power strategies to achieve those specific goals. The conceptual framework is followed by a discussion of the Korean wave and also of how Korea can make use of the Korean wave to achieve certain foreign political and economic goals. The paper concludes that even if Korea can not depend solely upon soft power for its diplomacy, the Korean wave can contribute to its soft power by providing opportunities for the manipulation of Korea's images, extending a network effect of Korean popular culture, and also producing internationally influential heroes and celebrities.

Keywords: soft power, soft power strategy, Korean wave

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This paper investigates the soft power potential of the Korean wave (*Hallyu* in Korean), which is commonly understood as an enthusiasm toward Korean popular culture. When a country does not possess enough hard power and hard power resources such as military and economic capabilities, the country may or should consider soft power and soft power resources as an alternative means to achieve certain domestic and foreign political and economic goals. Even if soft power alone can not achieve many of the political and economic goals (as in the case of the Vatican and the Islamic religion which exert enormous influence around the

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world mostly with soft power resources), soft power has more potential than we normally expect. Particularly for countries that have already climbed the hierarchical ladder of the international power structure, soft power can be a very important tool for diplomacy. In the case of Korea, though it is the 13<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world and possesses a world-class military, it can not comfortably compete with other advanced industrialized countries in the area of hard power. For example, Korea using war or economic sanctions as diplomatic tools is far more dangerous and risky than using cultural assets or other knowledge resources when competing with advanced industrialized countries such as the U.S., Japan, Germany, and even with China. Yet given its high-quality human resources and the recent blossoming of its cultural potential, Korea can and needs to develop its soft power and soft power resources as political and economic instruments of high significance.

Joseph Nye's concept and discourse of soft power, which was developed within the context of U.S. hegemony, however, does not give the lesser powers practical insights in terms of its soft power and soft power strategies.<sup>2</sup> Nye's concept of soft power is concentrated on a single political goal of making other countries follow the leadership of the U.S. voluntarily by using its soft resources such as culture, education, and ideology. For lesser powers, leadership-oriented soft power, particularly hegemonic leadership-oriented soft power, is of little value in achieving their political and economic goals; therefore, they need to develop an alternative framework for soft power and soft power strategies. For that specific purpose, I will introduce my alternative categories and strategies of soft power in the first section of this paper, and then I will analyze the soft power potential of the Korean wave in the second and third sections.

## I. Alternative Conceptual Framework of Soft Power<sup>3</sup>

In order to introduce my alternative theory of soft power, I will first categorize

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2. The concept of soft power was first introduced by Joseph Nye in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990), and developed further in *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics* (2004b). The concept was defined as "getting others to want what you want" (Nye 1990:188).

3. This part is mainly derived from my forthcoming article "A Theory of Soft Power and Korea's Soft Power Strategies."

the different types of soft power in international relations, then make a distinction between Nye’s conception of soft power and mine by differentiating between soft resources from hard resources, and finally introduce my conceptual models of soft power conversion from soft resources.

## 1. Different Categories of Soft Power

Being loosely defined as co-optive power or non-coercive power, the usage of soft power can be roughly categorized into five categories based on what policy goals are to be achieved. Therefore, the criteria of this categorization are twofold: (1) whether or not co-optive power or voluntary support by others is observed, and (2) the presence of different goals that actors want to achieve through such co-optive powers. The five categories are: (1) soft power to improve an external security environment by projecting peaceful and attractive images of a country; (2) soft power to mobilize other countries’ support for one’s foreign and security policies; (3) soft power to manipulate other countries’ way of thinking and preferences; (4) soft power to maintain unity of a community or community of countries; and (5) soft power to increase approval ratings of a leader or domestic support of a government.

The soft power strategy of the first category usually employs such soft resources as national slogans, policy proposals, and public diplomacies to minimize threatening images while projecting a peace-loving image of a country. Such a strategy is necessary when a country is either entering international society as a new or transformed member, or is rapidly getting stronger in terms of its hard power. China’s recent emphasis on “peaceful rising or development” and “harmonious society” is a good example (Cho and Jeong 2008:466-69). As is well known, China has been rising extremely fast in terms of its hard power capabilities while it tries to enter the international society as a normal responsible country, leaving behind its past history of communist legacy. China has been concerned that unless its rising hard power is balanced with its soft power, former enemies like the U.S. will form an antagonistic security coalition with other like-minded countries to encircle China. The debate on the rise of China shows the threat perception in the U.S. and like-minded countries with regard to China’s rapidly rising hard power (Saunders 2001). Japan’s post-war emphasis on the Peace Constitution, Three Non-Nuclear Principles, self-restraint of its Self-Defense Forces, and a 1% GDP limit on defense spending is another good example (Pharr 1993). Japan tried to improve its security environment after the

forced dissolution of its Asian empire in 1945 by projecting a peaceful image of itself to former colonies and international society through such policies.

The second category of soft power pertains to an effective leadership in mobilizing collective actions among countries. For a leading country to form an effective coalition of countries for collective actions, the actions of the leading country need to be justified by reasonable rationales or causes. Such a justification is a soft power to create the leadership of a leading country. Recent criticisms against the lack of U.S. soft power in its global war on terrorism and war in Iraq center on this second category of soft power (Nye 2004a). General examples of the second category are justification of economic sanctions or foreign invasions through UN procedures such as General Assembly resolutions or Security Council resolutions. Theories of just war or a manipulation of images of the enemy by news media are also good examples. This category of soft power is important in saving costs in terms of hard power because burden-sharing can be done among coalition partners.

The third category of soft power corresponds more directly to Nye's original definition of soft power. It aims at a more direct consequence of changing the preferences and behaviors of others by using ideational resources. For example, specific countries or actors can spread theories, concepts, or discourses to other countries so that they adopt a specific way of thinking. Washington Consensus, neoliberalism, and globalization discourses are some examples of theories and discourses developed and spread by Anglo-American powers to change the preferences and behaviors of other countries (Harvey 2006; Chang 2002; Faux 2006). Japan also tried to do similar things in the past when it developed and spread "the flying geese model," "Toyotaism," "a just-in-time system," and "soft authoritarianism" (Johnson 1987; Yamamura and Yasukichi 1987; Dore 1986; Friedman 1988). International celebrities can play important roles in spreading theories and discourses. Nobel laureates, famous CEOs like Bill Gates, and star politicians can exercise soft power by publishing books, giving lectures, and making comments at renowned forums. Internationally famous celebrities are great soft power assets.

It is almost impossible to maintain a large political economic entity such as an empire, nation, or community only with hard power because coercive, violent suppression of defectors is too costly and too short-term. Therefore, maintenance of a large political economic unit requires soft power as well as hard power. Natural identification and loyalty by the members of such entities pertain to the fourth category of soft power. Imperial practices such as an imperial museum,

imperial rituals, common languages, invention of traditions, and common lifestyles are all soft power strategies that effectively and efficiently maintain a large empire.<sup>4</sup> The EU’s efforts to establish a common European constitution and other institutions as well as symbols can be understood as its attempt to create the fourth category of soft power over its member countries.

The fifth category of soft power includes both internal and external dimensions. In most cases, this category of soft power is geared toward a domestic audience rather than an international one. Examples are creating national heroes, invoking nationalism and patriotism by international sports competition, or showing a leader’s outstanding performance at an international summit or conference so as to increase the domestic popularity of the leader or the government. Without an international dimension, this category could not exist.

## 2. Soft Power Strategies

The five categories of soft power noted above give us several clues on how to develop soft power strategies. Disseminating global or regional standards, conveying certain messages through attractive international celebrities, making peaceful or attractive national slogans, creating a sense of urgency, or increasing the people’s perception of threat are a few examples. However, all these strategies need to be goal-oriented because changing people’s preferences, behaviors, or way of thinking without specific goals in mind is extremely impractical. Clear goals, such as improving the security environment, mobilizing support for collective actions, or increasing one’s domestic approval rating, need to be set before exercising soft power.

Among the many soft power strategies, some practical ones that have been proven feasible are as follows:<sup>5</sup>

- (1) Manipulation or creation of self-images to improve security environments: A typical example of this strategy is Japan’s post-World War II efforts to repent for their imperial atrocities and the resulting institutionalization and repeated rituals relating to the repentance. As noted above, Japan’s Peace Constitution and self-restraint on defense spending and

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4. On the relationship between the Roman Empire and its soft power, see Kim 2005. On the theoretical insights relating to this category of soft power, see McNeill 1995.

5. For a more detailed discussion on soft power strategies, see Lee 2004.

remilitarization, complemented by the presence of a U.S.-Japan alliance, improved Japan's security environment by helping to prevent hostile coalitions against Japan from forming in Asia. In Europe, Germany has also applied similar soft power strategies. Germany's peaceful coexistence with surrounding countries would not have been possible without sincere repentance and an attitude by German leaders and politicians regarding the behavior of the Nazis. On the other hand, the individual security (human security) level of foreign residents in a country improves when images of their home country improve because they will face less discrimination. It would be very difficult to openly discriminate against a person when their country is internationally respected.

(2) Manipulation of images of others to mobilize support for collective actions: Here, negative manipulation of the images of others works better than a positive one because it is easier to mobilize collective actions to prevent something rather than to promote something. The U.S. has been particularly adroit in this respect. Identifying the Soviet Union as an evil empire or pinpointing Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an axis of evil are typical examples. On the other hand, the UN has been disseminating an image or theories of global warming that create a sense of fear and urgency so that nations can collectively act under UN leadership to reduce greenhouse gases.<sup>6</sup> Even if the effectiveness of soft power tends to be less than negative manipulation of images, one can frequently mobilize support for collective actions by invoking universal values such as liberty, freedom, democracy, and the eradication of poverty.

(3) Network Effect Strategy: The goal of this strategy is to create a network or an environment within which the actors tend to perceive that the maintenance and expansion of the existing network continuously benefit them (Lee 2006). Disseminating certain standards, behavioral codes, and common perspectives is the central element of this strategy. The spread of global standards, Washington Consensus, English as the international language, and certain development models such as neoliberalism or the Japanese models previously mentioned all create certain networks that give structural advantage to particular countries, companies, and other actors over the recipient countries.

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6. On the agenda setting power of international organizations, see Barnett and Finnemore 1999.

(4) Accelerating Situational Change: One can apply this strategy only under the condition that the target country is going through a crisis or an unstable transition. At the same time, this strategy becomes effective when the soft resource-applying country has a reputable credibility and hard power capability. The verbal intervention by the chair of the U.S. Federal Reserve Board regarding the appreciation or depreciation of certain currencies when those currencies are already depreciating rapidly is a good example.<sup>7</sup> Withdrawing support for a country when the country is being defeated in a war is another example, since such an action will accelerate the defeat of the country.

(5) Heroes and Celebrities: Heroes and celebrities can exert soft power by becoming role models and making comments or creating charities for certain universal values. In so doing, they can set an international agenda to achieve certain national or international goals. They can also exercise soft power by manufacturing a sense of pride within their own country. Heroes and celebrities can provoke nationalistic cohesion or wide support for their government. Here, heroes and celebrities can act independently or in cooperation (cooptation) with their government. However, when a government openly tries to take advantage of celebrities' fame for political purposes, such efforts can produce negative results.

## II. The Korean Wave and Its Soft Power Potential

### 1. Definition and Origin of the Korean Wave

The term *Hallyu*, or the Korean wave, was coined on the Beijing Youth Report (北京青年報) in November 1999. In Korea, *Hallyu* became a national buzzword with the phenomenal success of the singing group H.O.T's first concert in China in February 2002. In China, *Hallyu* (韓流) is also a homonym for “cold stream” (寒流), connoting a somewhat intimidating cultural penetration from Korea (Ko, Kang, Lee, and Ha 2005).

Some definitions of the Korean wave are an “enthusiastic preference for

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7. For a detailed analysis of the U.S. verbal intervention and currency manipulation against the depreciating Japanese yen during the Asian financial crisis, see Lee 2000.

Korean popular culture” (Ko, Kang, Lee, and Ha 2005); “a phenomenon of popularity of Korean culture in East Asia including pop music, dramas, cinema, plays, fashion, cuisine, games, and animation” (Sin 2002); and “love of Korean celebrities by the youngsters of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, and Mongolia” (Chun 2002). Recently, the Korean wave came to include “planned and marketized” enthusiasm for Korean culture mainly led by the Korean cultural industry. As a result, the audience of *Hallyu* has expanded from young consumers to the general public.

The enthusiasm for Korea’s popular culture produced by the Korean wave naturally led to a mass consumption of symbols and ideas relating to Korea, thereby leading to the formation of specific images, perceptions, and opinions about Korea by the people in the countries where the Korean wave exists. For that reason, the Korean wave can turn into a very crucial soft resource that can potentially develop Korea’s soft power.

## 2. Success of Korea’s Popular Culture Abroad: Reasons and Cases

The factors behind the success of Korea’s popular culture, especially in East Asia, can be categorized into internal and external factors. As for internal/domestic factors, an increased economic capability and living standard functioned as a booster to support the blossoming of Korean popular culture. Since the 1990s, the popularity of Korean songs in Korea gradually surpassed the popularity of foreign pop songs, and radio stations quickly expanded their broadcasting portions (Shim 2006:35-38). At the same time, participation by Korean Americans in the Korean pop music market began to produce a creative fusion of American and Korean music. An example of this fusion is rap and dance music, and in fact, such dynamic popular Korean music initially led the Korean wave abroad.

Another internal/domestic factor behind the success of the Korean wave is Korean companies’, particularly chaebol, huge investment in the cultural and entertainment industries as they anticipated huge profits in Korea’s rapidly expanding cultural market (Shim 2006:31-35; Shim 2009:15-18). The existence of a mass demand for and consumption of Korea’s popular culture indeed developed the competitiveness of Korea’s cultural industry. In addition, the Korean government’s firm policy to protect intellectual property rights was a catalyst in producing the Korean wave. Korea’s stronger intellectual property rights policy made the illegal circulation of foreign pop music extremely difficult



and rolled-back the dominance of foreign pop music in Korea. Multinational music companies began to coproduce music with Korean companies, and since the Kim Dae-jung administration, the Ministry of Culture has consistently increased its budget to promote the Korean cultural industry domestically (Ko, Kang, Lee, and Ha 2005).

As for external factors, unique and idiosyncratic factors of the recipient countries, combined with Korea's domestic factors, created the success of the Korean wave in those countries. In the case of China, its cultural policy to balance the previous capitalistic cultural influences of Hong Kong and Macao upon the Chinese people by importing Korean pop culture opened the Chinese cultural market to Korean pop artists. That led to the success of the Korean TV dramas *What is Love All About* (*Sarangi moegilae*, 1997) and *Stars in My Heart* (*Byuleun nae gasueme*, 1999), and also H.O.T.'s concert in 2000. China's increased wealth and growing incomes created a mass demand for popular culture, particularly among the younger generations, and Korea's pop culture happened to capture the enthusiasm of Chinese youngsters in the absence of a competitive alternative pop culture (Sin 2002; Chun 2002).

In Japan, Korean pop artists have been quite active since the 1980s with the success of Jo Yong Pil, Kim Yon Ja, and Gye Eun Sook. However, the Korean wave began to form suddenly with the televising of the TV drama *Winter Sonata* in 2003 (Sin 2005). It was aired on the Japanese national TV channel NHK in April of that year, and also in April 2004, recording a 9.3% popularity rating, which is twice the average rating. Even though it is said that the success of the Korean wave in Japan can be attributed to Japanese women's reminiscence of pure love, which is reflected in Korean TV dramas, it may not be the only reason. As new successes like *Daejanggeum* (A Jewel in the Palace) and the singer RAIN indicate, the competitiveness of the Korean wave in Japan seems to be derived from more than just a reminiscence of Japan's past culture and memory of pure love on the part of Japanese women.

As for Hong Kong, the Korean wave gradually replaced the Japanese wave, while the competitiveness of Hong Kong's own cultural content faded. The massive emigration of Hong Kong movie stars to the U.S. also struck a huge blow to its cultural industry. The Korean wave in Hong Kong started with Korean cinema, but the scope of the Korean wave expanded when the Korean TV drama *Daejanggeum* became a hit. The popularity rating of its final episode, which aired on May 1, 2005, was 47%, which was a record high (Ko, Kang, Lee, and Ha 2005).

Vietnam's case is quite different from the countries mentioned above. Vietnam began importing Korean culture with the opening of its market economy. The first Korean TV drama was introduced in 1999, and stars like Jang Dong Gun and Kim Nam Joo became celebrities with the huge success of their dramas, *Medical Brothers* (*Euiga hyeongje*) and *Model*, respectively. Vietnamese youngsters began imitating their fashion and make-up styles. Though it has yet to be proven empirically, it has been said that the similar historical and cultural backgrounds between the two countries, such as a Confucian culture, colonialism and divided nation, contributed to the emergence of the Korean wave in Vietnam (Lee 2002).

Even though the Korean wave has not turned out to be a major cultural phenomenon in Mexico, fan clubs for Jang Dong Gun and Ahn Jae Wook have emerged. The pop music used in the Korean-made dance game "Pump it Up" also became quite popular in Mexico. In the Islamic country of Malaysia, the TV drama *Autumn in My Heart* (*Ga-eul donghwa*) was a hit, and the popularity of this drama spread to another Islamic country, Egypt. One can also observe the Korean wave in Russia, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia (Ko, Kang, Lee, and Ha 2005).

### 3. Characteristics of the Korean Wave

In contemplating the usage of the Korean wave for the purpose of Korea's soft power, one can point out a few outstanding characteristics. First and foremost, the geographical and cultural scope of the Korean wave is not just limited to Confucian East Asia. The Korean wave has successfully penetrated non-Confucian areas like Malaysia, Egypt, Latin America, central Asia, and Russia. Recently, the Korean drama *My Name is Kim Sam Soon* was sold to markets in China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam, and was exported to Japan at the highest price to date. In 2008, the drama was broadcast in Mexico, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Peru, Puerto Rico, and El Salvador. The drama was also a hit in the United Arab Emirates, and NBC in the United States announced that it had acquired the remake rights to the drama (Chung 2009: Appendix, p. 1). This shows that the Korean wave may be gradually gaining universal appeal beyond Confucian cultural areas. From the perspective of Korea's soft power, the expansion of Korea's cultural appeal to a wider area produces new potential for Korea to project its soft power to diverse regions such as East Asia, central Asia, Latin America, and even to some parts of Europe and North America.

Second, the TV dramas and the Korean wave stars are not entirely identical across the countries mentioned above. In China, it was the 1997 hit *What is Love All About* that began the Korean wave, while in Japan it was *Winter Sonata*. The Korean wave in Vietnam started with *Medical Brothers*, and in Taiwan and Hong Kong, the Korean wave emerged with the dramas *Autumn in My Heart* and *Daejanggeum*. At the same time, different stars are conspicuous in different countries. For example, Ahn Jae Wook and Kim Hee Sun are represented in China, while Bae Yong Jun, Park Yong Ha, and Choi Ji Woo are the top three Korean stars in Japan. As mentioned before, it is Jang Dong Gun and Kim Nam Joo that have captured the love of the Vietnamese people. This widespread popularity of Korean dramas and stars indicates that Korea possesses quite a wide base of soft resources derived from the Korean wave.

Third, recently there has been a convergence of diverse trends of the Korean wave across countries. For instance, *Daejanggeum*'s appeal is not just limited to Hong Kong, but widely embraced by Japan and China. The same is true with the popularity of *My Name is Kim Sam-Soon*. That means the Korean wave may be slowly constructing cultural networks around the Asian region, enabling an easier injection of additional Korean cultural content to the region. Therefore, the natural market barriers against Korean movies, music, and other genres may decrease further in the future. This is a very positive signal for the long-term persistence of the Korean wave in the region.

Fourth, in response to the rapid spread of the Korean wave, there have been serious blowbacks in the form of an “anti-Korean wave” movement and slogans. In a sense, the emergence of anti-Korean wave slogans is evidence of the success of the Korean wave in the countries where the slogans are appearing. But at the same time, the anti-Korean wave slogans are also the outcome of a unidirectional penetration of Korean culture to the recipient countries. The appearance of anti-Korean wave slogans in Japan, China, and Taiwan support the view that the cultural exchanges between Korea and these countries have not been really reciprocal. This is a good lesson for Korea's soft power thinkers because the cases show that a country's soft resources can easily become a double-edged sword.

Fifth, the Korean wave may not be a transitory, ephemeral phenomenon. Korea's economic capacity is 13<sup>th</sup> in the world, and if one excludes Western countries from the list of the top ten to fifteen richest countries, China, Japan, Korea, and India are the only non-Western countries. Since the advance of modern popular culture cannot proceed without a massive consumption base, GDP per capita as well as the size of the economy and population is a good

indicator of a country's cultural potential. Therefore, in this regard, Korea and Japan may still be leading the non-Western cultural trends in Asia.

### III. Implications of the Korean Wave to Korea's Soft Power

The Korean wave is not soft power, but is one of Korea's many soft resources. Possessing soft resources does not guarantee automatic conversion of the soft resources into soft power. Therefore, one needs to come up with very refined and sophisticated strategies on how to mobilize one's soft resources to achieve certain political and economic goals and national interests. When such efforts are realized and positively influence the achievement of the goals, then one can say that soft resources are being translated into soft power.

Against the backdrop of my theoretical framework elaborated in the first section, some of the soft power implications of the Korea wave can be summarized as follows.

(1) Manipulation and creation of favorable images of Korea that will lead to the improvement of its national and human security environments: The popularity of Korea's popular culture and stars creates a favorable, or at least less intimidating, image of Korea. This means that the possibility of countries where the Korean wave is present to form antagonistic security and military policies or coalitions is not very high, other things being equal. Particularly when public opinion plays a major role in the politics of the modern world, cultural affections such as the Korean wave may hinder the formation of aggressive or offensive military policies toward the country of cultural attractiveness. However, one caveat is that the cultural attractiveness should always compete with other forms of loyalty such as nationalism or material economic interests. One can hardly predict when nationalism and material economic interests will overshadow cultural attractiveness. Another soft power implication can be found in the area of human security. With the improvement of Koreans' image in other parts of the world, Korean nationals will increasingly face less discrimination in the countries where the Korean wave is present. This is particularly true in Japan where the images and reputations of Koreans and Korean Japanese dramatically improved due to the Korean wave.<sup>8</sup>

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8. Interview (June 9, 2008) with a Korean Japanese who is publishing a magazine on the Korean wave in Japan.

(2) Network Effect Strategies: The spread of the Korean wave is usually accompanied by the spread of Korean standards, behavioral codes, consumer preferences, fashion, cuisine, the Korean language, and other common reference points. If it is possible that Korea’s way of thinking and behavior is naturally accepted and embraced by the recipient countries as positive to the political, social, and economic developments of the recipient countries, Koreans and Korean companies may have a favorable environment within which to work, do business, and interact with the local people. This will create long-term ideational and invisible influence of Korea upon other countries as the U.S. did through Hollywood movies and various educational and training programs.

(3) Heroes and Celebrities: Korean wave stars are better able to attract the attention of the general public than most politicians. The way they behave, the messages that they convey, and the stages where they appear have a huge impact upon a large number of people. If the messages that the Korean wave stars convey contain universal values such as helping the poor or saving children, the stars can improve their status while changing people’s behaviors and ideas in a very positive way. Richard Gere, Angelina Jolie, and Audrey Hepburn are examples. At the same time, the stars can market Korea’s culture and other commodities by their fashion, performances, and commercials.

The Korean wave may not be very relevant to other soft power strategies introduced in the first section of the paper; yet, Korea’s valuable soft resources such as the Korean wave can still be creatively mobilized and utilized to achieve many political and economic goals. However, too deliberate an attempt to use cultural assets for political and economic purposes will provoke backlashes as in the case of the anti-Korean wave movements and slogans. Therefore, a very balanced, liberal (pluralistic), and sophisticated approach is a must to wisely use the Korean wave as a source of soft power for Korea.

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