

## **Korean Wave and its global Impact—An analysis from a Chinese perspective**

### **Abstract**

This essay historized the dissemination of the Korean Wave in China with reference to the changes in the Korean-China relationship and Chinese economic, political, and cultural policies and conditions. Also, it summarized how China reacted to the popularity of Korean culture and its implication for the Korean Wave's future development in China. Reviewing previous studies, the essay concluded that the dissemination of the Korean Wave in China undergoes the transition from economic dominance to political dominance and may confront more sensitive political environments.

### 1. Introduction

The Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*, refers to the immense popularity that Korean pop culture, including TV drama, K-pop, etc., enjoys in East Asia, even worldwide (Kim, 2011; Song, 2020). In 1997, the introduction of "What is Love all about?" broadcasted on Chinese Central Television (CCTV) formally signaled the beginning of the Korean Wave in China. While the Korean Wave has had multiple phases in China, few studies explore how the Korean Wave interplay with Chinese socio-economic conditions and China's diplomatic and cultural policies during the last decades. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to historize the dissemination of the Korean Wave from a Chinese perspective, studying how significant policies and diplomatic relationships changes serve as the cutting-off point for its spread, how exactly different factors influence the dissemination of the Korean Wave in each phase, and how China reacts to its popularity.

### 2. Literature on Korean Wave

The Korean Wave has gone from Asia to the world over the past two decades as a cultural phenomenon of global prominence. It is presented in a variety of formats, including TV series, films, video games, music, and distributed via multiple media such as cable TV, internet streaming, etc.

(KOFICE, 2019). Previous scholars attempted to historicize the Korean Wave though disputes exist on the exact time division (Kim,2015; Sun&Liew, 2019; Song, 2020). Song (2020) summarized the evolution of the Korean Wave into three periods

*Table 1. The evolution of the Korean Wave and corresponding features*

Stage/Features	Content and media	Region	Characteristics
1997-mid-2000s	Drama via TV broadcast, CD, DVD	Asian Countries/ Regions	One-way communication "product-oriented"
Mid-2000s-mid- 2010s	K-Pop Idol and Music via Internet (YouTube)	Asia, Europe, North America	Two-way communication "Idol-oriented"
Mid 2010s- present	Culture and style via Online-streaming (cross- media)	Globally, including less developed areas	Real-time interaction "Brand-oriented"

Also, scholars have identified the reasons for Korean Wave's popularity in China from cultural, economic, and political perspectives. In the early days, when Korean culture was prevalent primarily within Asia, scholars often used cultural affinity to explain its speedy spread (Zhan, 2007; Park et al., 2019; Yang, 2002; Pu, 2003). Both Korea and China belong to the Confucian cultural sphere in East Asia. In addition, the traditional tribute system has made Korea's way of thinking and values very familiar to those of China, making it easy for Chinese audiences to accept Korean cultural products (Zhan, 2007; Kim, 2015). Subsequently, when the Korean Wave became popular worldwide, academics began to use the concept of cultural duality, seeing Korean culture as a combination of Western and Eastern culture (Park et al., 2019). The processed and open Western culture gained a layer of buffering that made it easier to spread in East Asia, which is relatively conservative in its outlook compared to its original form (Yang, 2002; Zhan, 2007).

Economically, on the one hand, China's economic development following the reform and opening up has brought about an increase in cultural demand. On the other hand, Korean culture, as exemplified by Korean TV dramas, provides China with a model of modernization and a reference for the future standard of living of the middle class (Zhan, 2007). The relatively low prices of Korean cultural products also provide a competitive advantage for their dissemination in China (Park et al., 2019).

From a political perspective, the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea is widely considered to have laid the political foundation for the spread of the Korean Wave in China (Park, 2021). Although China's politically driven environment has loosened since reform and opening up, it nonetheless maintained strict control of foreign cultural inflow with the concern of capitalistic influence (Park et al., 2019). The development of the Korean Wave in China is closely associated with bilateral relations between China and Korea and important political events, like SHAAD, also have a significant impact on the spread of Korean culture in China (Kim, 2011; Jang, 2012).

Also, the disclosure of the Korean Wave is closely related to the concept of soft power. According to the classical definition by Nye (1990), soft power, or co-optive power, refers to the ability of one state to shape the preference of other states that is consistent with its own interests, which usually manifests in intangible resources such as ideology, culture, and institutions. As Korean Wave gained global popularity, it created a more positive national image for Korea, stimulating economic growth and enhancing diplomatic advantage (Geun, 2009). As Chen (2020) pointed out, China's response to Korean Wave is also closely related to the notion of soft power and its own soft power construction.

### 3. Method

As an exploratory study, this research will adopt an inductive-qualitative approach. A literature review paper was conducted using various Chinese primary sources, which include related newspapers, scholarly articles, and published national policies (announcements, notices, etc.). It would summarize and consolidate the related academic search from 1992 to the current day and have a detailed look at

the mechanism of how each factor (economic, political, cultural) contributes to the dissemination of the Korean Wave in each period and how China reacts to its popularity.

#### 4. Findings and Analysis

##### (1) Three-Stage Historization and detailed analysis

The spread of the Korean Wave in China has a highly phased nature. The paper will then stage the vicissitude of the Korean Wave from the Chinese perspective, and explore how economic, cultural, and political factors determined the themes of the Korean Wave during each period. The division of stages can be observed to overlap with the evolutionary process of the Korean Wave proposed by Song (2020) in the previous section.

##### (a) Early Period: 1997-2005

Korean culture becoming a social phenomenon in China and drawing the attention of scholars started with the broadcast of "What is love all about" in 1997, which achieved stunning viewing ratings compared to its contemporaries and opened the door to the Chinese cultural market for Korea (Park et al., 2019). In the first stage, TV dramas were the main medium for the Korean Wave, exported from Korea to China in one direction, but the reception in China was mainly positive.

Both political and cultural factors can contribute to understanding why Korean culture spread rapidly in China during this period. First and foremost, the establishment of the official Korean-China diplomatic relationship underpinned the foundation for the development of the Korean Wave (Sun&Liew, 2019). Despite post-Cold War political liberation, China, as a socialist state, still held substantial control over the cultural flow, cautious about the cultural product with capitalist ideology, so the direct import from other major cultural centers, the US in particular, was still strictly regulated (Park et al., 2019; Cheon, 2021). And as mentioned, notions like cultural affinity and hybridity are often used to explain the primary stage of Korean Wave dissemination. Korean culture served as a mixture of nostalgia for traditional patriarchal society and novelty for scenes of a modernized market economy (Zhan, 2007). However, neither political nor cultural factors can fundamentally explain can't

fully explain why Korean cultural products have become a phenomenon in the Chinese market. The early period of the Korean Wave was economic driven in its core sense and other factors served as its supplement.

In 1992, Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour inaugurated China's reform and opening up, the most significant economic reforms in the post-Mao era, creating the necessary market condition for Korean culture products. China's efforts to join the WTO reflect its determination to undertake market-oriented reforms in an attempt to converge with the international economic system. The economic-driven need to live up to the fundamental principles of WTO, like the principles of non-discrimination, mutual benefit, most-favored-nation treatment and national treatment, China was pressured to have various internal reforms (Fewsmith, 2001). On the one hand, China was requested to remove import quotas for foreign audiovisual products and devices, which significantly contributed to the rising ownership of media devices, providing the most elementary medium for the distribution of Korean dramas in China (Hua, 2000). The implication of joining WTO does not limit only to the economic arena. On the other hand, it indirectly pushed the gradual media liberation in China, altered the state control over the cultural flow, making the Chinese market becomes more accessible for Korean cultural products (Hua, 2000).

Besides building up the necessary background for disseminating the Korean Wave, the relatively low price of Korean cultural products is substantial to its circulation, considering the Chinese economic structure in the 1990s (Cho, 2005). Around the 2000s, even in developed areas such as Beijing or Shanghai, cultural industry only counted for 2%-3% of its GDP composition (Hua, 2000). At the beginning of the 21st century, China's economy was still not strong enough. The industrial-led economic structure of China at the time led to a relative lack of capital for the cultural industry to introduce expensive IPs from the US and Japan which are several times more expensive (Cho, 2005; Park et al., 2019; Hu, 2021). In addition, compared to other Asian countries, the Korean won received the biggest blow after the financial crisis in 1997, which in turn further reduced the cost of introducing Korean cultural products into China (Song, 2020). The cultural statehood policy established by South

Korea under economic pressure has been a dual economic reason for the spread of the Korean Wave in China. China was forced by economic development to open its market, and Korea was somewhat compelled to engage in cultural exports, which explained why the first stage Korean Wave manifests the characteristic of one-way export from the Korean side (Yang, 2002).

(b) Second Period: 2005-2012

Empirically, the second period of the Korean Wave started from the restriction of SAPPRT imposed on foreign TV content in 2005, under which any broadcasting in the golden time was explicitly prohibited and the hours Korean dramas could be shown were limited to twenty hours a year (Kang, 2006). For the first time since 1997, the amount of Korean drama exported to China declined. Besides the gradual medium change, the defining characteristic of the second state is the spontaneous intensification of collaboration and confrontation. Many factors that play significant roles in the first period no longer holds, with political factor becoming more prominent in this period. The second period of the Korean Wave is shaped by a mixture of all elements without a dominant one.

China's GDP nearly tripled in 2005 compared to 1997, and as reform and opening up entered a new phase, the Chinese government introduced a new policy of industrial upgrading, suggesting that China should shift from labour-intensive, resource-intensive industries to capital-intensive industries (State Council, 2005). More than ten years of reform and opening up have enabled China to achieve initial capital accumulation and gain a more mature market mechanism and industrial policy. In 2005, the State Council issued a document clearly stating the potential market size of the cultural industry. With the support of the Chinese government, Chinese cultural enterprises have started to invest in Korean cultural enterprises and co-produce films for theatrical release in China in order to obtain higher economic returns (Yecies, 2016). However, such orientation also posed the economic reason to restrain the Korean Wave to protect the domestic culture industry, which partially contributed to the aforementioned regulation as nearly 40% of domestic drama production was never aired (Jang, 2012).

Meanwhile, economic reasons are closely intertwined with political and cultural factors. Officially,

China-South Korea relations are generally headed in a more cordial direction. In 2008, the relationship between the two countries was enhanced to the "China-Korea Strategic Partnership," bringing the bilateral relationship to maturity (Song, 2014), which again facilitated further cooperation in cultural production. But public perceptions of Korea began to diverge. The rise of the Korean Wave has shaped a positive perception of Korea among some of the population; it also stimulated discontent among nationalists. The Chinese government has responded to this at different levels respectively. A further step in diplomatic relations was accompanied by stricter restrictions on introducing Korean cultural products (Jang, 2012). Particularly, the early-mid 2000s witnessed a burgeon of Internet nationalism that corresponded with the change of media of Korean Wave dissemination, where the 69 holy war is one of the most prominent examples.

Besides, the popularity of the Korean Wave, especially Korean historical dramas, has brought about an unprecedented sense of subversion of the pre-modern cultural order, which is featured by Sino-centrism in which other Asian countries were perceived as periphery (Zhan, 2007). Also, the popularity of Korean historical dramas has led to many disputes over historical facts and was accused of manipulate Chinese history (Hu, 2021). The traditional cultural supremacism, together with the uprising of both economic "protectionism" and nationalism, intensified the confrontation in public opinion.

(c) Third period: 2013 until now

Two important historical events in 2012 announced the beginning of the third phase of the development of the Korean Wave in China. The first was the accession of Xi to power and the second was the further restrictions placed by the SAPPRFT on the broadcasting of Korean cultural products (Lee et al., 2016; Park et al., 2019). The main factors influencing the development of the Korean Wave underwent the transition of the second phase, emerging from economic dominance to political dominance--economic and cultural factors reinforce the political narrative, changing the underlying logic of the evolution of the Korean Wave in China.

Political factor affecting the dissemination of the Korean Wave in this period is reflected mainly in two dimensions. The first is the overall transformation of the Chinese political environment and cultural policies, and the second is the specific change in the diplomatic relationship with Korea. It is widely agreed that Xi's administration is characterized by the reiteration of ideology accompanied by tightened cultural control (Klimeš et al., 2018). On the one hand, a proliferation of official nationalistic narratives could be observed from the party outlet such as People Daily; on the other hand, the propaganda empowered the uprising of Internet unofficial nationalist disclosure (Zhang et al., 2018). "Confidence" emerged as the keyword of current Chinese narrative. Meanwhile, Sino-Korean relations have gone through a turbulent phase, with the period 2012-2015 being the best since the establishment of diplomatic relations, known as the honeymoon period. However, the fisheries dispute and the SHAAD event in 2016 quickly brought the relationship to a freezing point. Since then, relations between China and South Korea have been mitigated as a result of diplomatic visits but are still fraught with conflict (Cheon, 2021). The combination of both factors has led to an unprecedented change in the identity of Korean Wave fans. Before the third stage, national identity and fan identity were generally in conflict with each other, but the honeymoon of Sino-Korean relations has allowed the two identities to begin to integrate with each other and gradually form a hierarchy manifested in the slogan "no idol in front of my country" (LV, 2021). China issued the notorious Korean Ban after the SHAAD dispute; the reaction of the public, including the consumers of the Korean Wave, is largely homogeneous with the state action, expressing a supportive attitude from a nationalist ground. Korean Wave as a popular cultural phenomenon can have a profound impact on its dissemination when the identity of its audience shifts. The hierarchy of national identity before fan identity makes Korean cultural products receive not only official scrutiny but also undergo further political scrutiny by its consumers.

Moreover, economic factors do not moderate political conflict as they once did, but rather reinforce the narrative. The slowdown in economic growth has had a certain impact on the previous performance legitimacy, and the basis for establishing legitimacy in the new situation has gradually shifted from

economic growth itself to outperformance of other countries, and the mentality has become more confrontational (Yang&Zhao, 2014). Also, economic development is no longer an objective in itself but an important means for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and economic relations are increasingly subject to the state of diplomatic relations between the two countries. This growing dependence is partly reflected in the dramatic fall of South Korean exports to China of around US\$ four thousand million after the SHAAD incident (World Bank, 2021). By the same token, the Korean Wave has essentially been affected in the same way as part of the trade between China and Korea.

Culturally, the aforementioned cultural supremacy continued to rise. Accompanied by the more self-affirming cultural policies that emphasize its domestic and foreign impact, cultural legacy is more closely intertwined with the national interest. Specifically, conflicts between Han Feng, which stands for traditional Chinese-style cultural industry and the Korean Wave intensified (Kim, 2015), creating new challenges for the dissemination of the Korean Wave.

*Table 2. The evolution of the Korean Wave and corresponding features from Chinese perspective*

	First Period 1997-2005	Second Period 2006-2012	Third Period 2012-now
Characteristics	Economic dominance	Transition	Political dominance
Economic Factor	Need to comply with international market standard—create relatively liberalized condition for Korean cultural product ; Industrial-led economic structure—High competitiveness of low-price Korean cultural product	Industrial upgrading policy—more mature market system and increasing investment in cultural industry led to a closer co-production relation; Emergence of economic protectionism in cultural industry	Economic slowdown led to the shift from performance legitimacy; Economy as a mean to achieve political agenda.
Political Factor	Establishment of Korea-China official diplomatic relationship create necessary condition for Korean	Cordial official diplomatic relationship Rise of nationalism and diverge of public sentiment towards Korea	Chinese political environment becomes increasingly ideology-oriented and Korea-China relationship

	Wave to develop in post		experienced a turbulent period
Cultural Factor	Cultural Affinity—both are rooted in Confucianism; Cultural Hybridity—Korean cultural by integrating Western cultural, creating both the sense of familiarity and novelty	Reversion of pre-modern cultural order. Cultural dispute	Emphasis on the political relevance of culture; Competition between Korean cultural (Korean Wave) and Chinese culture (Han Feng) intensified

(2) What has Chinese learned—Innovative campaign “Chinese culture going out”

Chinese cultural policies have long been characterized by the "dual emphasis" on culture's economic and political significance. The official classification of "cultural enterprise" and "cultural industry" left the latter, to which the Korean Wave belonged, more economically inclined with relatively less political relevance (Lee et al., 2022). However, in the late second stage, Hu Jintao put forward the slogan of improving the Chinese soft power, and after Xi Jinping came to power, the policy of "telling the Chinese story well" was initiated, the notion of "cultural confidence" has been widely utilized as an important aspect of "great rejuvenation of Chinese nation," strengthening both the internal control and external export of ideology that condensed in the phrase "Socialism with Chinese characteristic" (Yecies, 2016). With the Chinese cultural industry gradually converging with international standards, China also began to imitate foreign cultural production, enhanced intellectual property and copyright legislation, and the legal system gradually matured (Hua, 2000).

In October 2011, "improving the international appeal" of Chinese cultural content" was formally put forward in Party's plenum. It is then accompanied by a more mature agenda of "Chinese culture going out" and "telling Chinese story well" intertwined with Chinese soft power construction. China has set up Confucius Institutes abroad to expand its Chinese language influence, and official documentaries such as Beautiful China and China on the Tongue have been produced in an attempt

to create a good international image of China through cultural export, similar to the measures undertaken by the Korean government in the late 1990s. However, so far, Chinese culture has shown no signs of forming a trend in the world, and the growth of anti-Chinese sentiment in the world has made it a long road ahead for Chinese culture to go global.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In the nearly three decades of its development in China, the Korean Wave has sunk along with the country's political and economic environment, undergoing a progression from economic dominance to political dominance. From the early days of reform and opening up, when the open economy policy fuelled the rapid development of the Korean Wave in China, the second phase of transition was followed by a slowdown in China's economic growth and increased cultural control, which was once again dominated by political factors, particularly nationalist narratives. The spread of Korean culture in China has stimulated the Chinese government to launch a series of cultural outreach policies around the concept of cultural soft power. Still, it has not yet had a phenomenal impact.

In the foreseeable future, Korean cultural content will not only be subject to the stricter censorship of official organizations but also the examination by the increasingly sensitive public. In the time featured as New Cold War, it seems inevitable that only by avoiding politically sensitive content can Korean Wave continue its dissemination in China (Park et al., 2019).

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