

## BANGTAN BOYS (BTS) – PART OF SOUTH KOREA’S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER STRATEGY

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**Abstract.** This article (a research part of the dissertation with the same name, 2021) aims to demonstrate how a musical group, created specifically for the South Korean cultural industries, becomes a true representative of the state to which it belongs, both culturally and diplomatically, through their global popularity. South Korea benefits directly from the *attractiveness* of BTS group members (RM, Jin, Suga, J-hope, Jimin, V and Jungkook), actively recognizing their cultural and diplomatic contribution, in line with its own national public diplomacy strategy – to win the hearts and minds of the people and to make South Korea a country with reaffirmed and reliable potential. We will follow, above all, this recognition of the merits of the activities of the seven members as cultural diplomats, starting from a key moment – the group’s speech at the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2018.

**Keywords.** *Cultural Diplomacy; Soft Power; South Korea; Bangtan Boys (BTS)*

### *South Korea’s Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power Strategy*

The origins of the population of the Korean Peninsula are traced to a history and an imaginary that places them in the descendants of an ancient Mongolian civilization, although the migration of these populations was not documented until the fifth century BC. There were three kingdoms in the area called *Koguryo* (later *Koryo*) in South Manchuria and North Korea, *Paekche* around the Han River Basin and *Silla* in southern Korea along the Nagdon River. They later merged into a single kingdom – Korea. Koreans are very proud of their ancient culture, as well as the many monuments in the country that preserve their history, and this identity is best expressed in their arts, crafts, beliefs and religious practices.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Georgie D. M. Hyde, *South Korea: Education, Culture and Economy*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, London, MacMillan Press, 1988, p. 9.

The characteristics of South Korean culture have their origins even in an agricultural society – close-knit families, with two or even three generations living together on the same farm, a tradition preserved for centuries. Today, although these patterns have some continuity in rural South Korea, migration from village to city (South Korea is now 80% urban) has led to a profound cultural change: what was a Chinese-derived culture, and, to a lesser extent, Japanese, has now become more closely linked to Western society and its industrial features. Korean culture has evolved faster in the last 50 years than it has in the last five centuries.<sup>2</sup>

In language and religion, the same forces of change are identified – the Korean language is a source of pride for both South Koreans and North Koreans. When conceived in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, it minimized China's continuous and almost overwhelming influence in the Korean Peninsula. Before the development of the *Hangul* (한글) alphabet, Koreans had built their written language using Chinese characters (as did the early Japanese), but with the invention of the 24 Hangul characters in the 1400s, Koreans gained new independence. In terms of religion, today South Korea has no official religion and about 50% of the population say they have no religious preference. For the other percentage, half are Buddhists and half are Christians.<sup>3</sup>

In the recent history of the twentieth century, the Korean Peninsula experienced a violent period: Korea was colonized by Japan between 1910 and 1945, followed by the Korean War (1950-1953) which resulted in the separation of North Korea and South Korea along the 38th parallel. The tensions between the two continue to this day. In South Korea, the war was followed by three decades of dictatorship, years of poverty and then rapid economic development and urbanization (hence South Korea's "*miracle*" nickname). From an ethnic point of view, its population is relatively homogeneous, although there is a growing number of migrant workers, especially from other parts of Asia.<sup>4</sup>

The only thing South Korea still has in common with its neighbour, China, is the delicate relationship with Japan, as a result of many years of occupation. Sensitivities extend even to the cultural sector: the Tokyo National Museum has more than 1,000 artefacts from the last years of Korea's *Joseon Dynasty*, which were allegedly looted by a wealthy Japanese businessman during the occupation of Korea by Japan. However, the considerable success of Korean TV dramas, movies and *Kpop* music in Japan has helped to resolve the misunderstanding between the two countries, especially among the younger generations.<sup>5</sup>

Relations between South Korea and its two important neighbours, China and Japan, have not remained strained as evidenced by the fact that they are all cooperating in the "*Cultural Cities of East Asia*" program, which was set up on the basis of an agreement reached at a meeting of culture ministers representing

<sup>2</sup> Christopher L. Salter, *South Korea*, Modern World Nations series, Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2003, pp. 52-53.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 53-55.

<sup>4</sup> Rod Fisher, "South Korea Country Report", *ec.europa.eu*, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2014, p. 4, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/policy/international-cooperation/documents/country-reports/south-korea\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/policy/international-cooperation/documents/country-reports/south-korea_en.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

the three countries. Each year, a city from every one of the three countries is selected and hosts a variety of cultural and artistic events, aiming to deepen mutual understanding and create a sense of solidarity in the East Asian region, as well as increase their intercultural communication capacity. Moreover, the cities selected as standard centres of culture in East Asia use this opportunity for continuous development, promoting cultural features, arts, creative industries and tourism.<sup>6</sup> The program has been operating since 2014, although we will mention, by listing, the most recent:

1. 2017: *Changsha* in China, *Daegu* in South Korea and *Kyoto* in Japan;
2. 2018: *Harbin* in China, *Busan* in South Korea and *Kanazawa* in Japan;
3. 2019: *Xi'an* in China, *Incheon* in South Korea and *Toshima* in Japan;<sup>7</sup>
4. 2020: *Yangju* in China, *Suncheon* in South Korea and *Kitakyushu* in Japan.<sup>8</sup>

Against the background of geopolitical positioning, lack of diplomatic resources and of a tumultuous history, Korea has relied on a security-focused diplomacy in relation to the governments of its four major neighbouring countries. However, with the proliferation of democracy, the phenomenon of globalization, the technological revolution and the proliferation of the media, Korea has understood that the public's role of decision-making about a country's foreign policy has become more important, especially since in the last decades international politics tend to outline and favour *soft power* strategies. Thus, South Korea has begun to implement a public diplomacy, in particular to address the vulnerability of their national image and brand, despite the fact that it has become one of the most economic powerful countries. Therefore, South Korea has decided to use this type of diplomacy to communicate and to maintain cultural relations with the world, in order to promote the national image in relation to what suits Korea today. Creating a favourable international environment has become a prerequisite for South Korea's survival and national prosperity – promoting its image and maintaining relations with other states can provide the country with the security it needs and develop its economy too.<sup>9</sup>

The *soft power* strategy was enunciated by the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, outlining several objectives and defining public diplomacy, empowered to convey it, as follows: “*Korea's public diplomacy entails promoting diplomatic relations by sharing our country's history, traditions, culture, arts, values, policies, and vision through direct communication with foreign nationals. By doing so, we enhance our diplomatic relations and national image by gaining the trust of the international community and increasing our country's global influence.*”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan, “Culture City of East Asia”, *bunka.go.jp*, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <https://www.bunka.go.jp/english/policy/international/eastasia/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Kim Eun-young, Kim Minji, “Korea, China, Japan pledge to bring peace to East Asia via culture”, *korea.net*, updated on: 30.08.2019, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <http://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=174808>.

<sup>9</sup> Enna Park, Chapter 32: *Korea's Public Diplomacy*, in Nancy Snow, Nicholas J. Cull (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, second edition, New York, Oxon, Routledge, 2020, pp. 323-324.

<sup>10</sup> Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Public Diplomacy Act”, *mofa.go.kr*, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: [http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m\\_22841/contents.do](http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_22841/contents.do).

A similar definition can be found in the “*Law on Public Diplomacy*”, adopted in 2016: “*Public diplomacy means diplomatic activities through which the State promotes foreign nationals’ understanding of and enhances confidence in the Republic of Korea directly or in cooperation with local governments or the private sector based on culture, knowledge, policies, etc.*”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the strategy is subsumed in order to win people’s hearts and minds, to make Korea an attractive and a reliable country.<sup>12</sup>

In South Korea public diplomacy is led mainly by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but it collaborates with various actors, including the central government, local governments, the public sector and other ministries: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Unification, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior and of Security, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, etc., which carries out and implements various public diplomacy programs and projects.

South Korea has a branched structure of organizations and mechanisms involved in cultural diplomacy and international cultural exchange. The institutional-dedicated arrangement is partly the result of bureaucratic fragmentation and inter-departmental competition within the central government: the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism has a leading role in cultural diplomacy and facilitates both directly and indirectly, through its support, the international presence of 25 Korean cultural centres and more than 90 *Sejong* institutions, which offer Korean language lessons. The Ministry also supports the Korean Arts Management Service (which provides mobility grants, launches partnerships with international cultural organizations and associated performing arts services) and the Korea Arts Council (which funds the Korean contribution to international cultural events, as well as in the field of arts, including the field of residency opportunities). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), in addition to promoting public and cultural diplomacy initiatives, is responsible for its main instrument of academic, cultural and intellectual exchange, the *Korea Foundation*.<sup>13</sup>

The *Korea Foundation* was established in 1991 as an affiliated body of the MFA tasked with implementing various activities and programs to strengthen the national image and strengthen Korea’s reputation. It is present and conducts activities and programs through three mechanisms: support for Korean overseas studies, global networks and cultural exchange, and media support.<sup>14</sup> It is present in seven states: the United States (in Washington D.C. and Los Angeles), Japan (Tokyo), China (Beijing), Russia (Moscow), Germany (Berlin), Indonesia (Jakarta) and Vietnam (Hanoi).<sup>15</sup> The South Korean government has chosen three sectors to implement public diplomacy strategies: *culture*, *knowledge* and *politics*. The three dimensions can be found in the context of the following results:

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> Enna Park, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

<sup>13</sup> European Union, “Preparatory Action ‘Culture in EU External Relations’. Engaging the World: Towards Global Cultural Citizenship”, *ec.europa.eu*, 2014, updated: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, p. 64, URL: [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/library/publications/global-cultural-citizenship\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/library/publications/global-cultural-citizenship_en.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Enna Park, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

<sup>15</sup> Korea Foundation, “Global Offices”, *en.kf.or.kr*, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <https://en.kf.or.kr/?menuno=3779>.

Financing and organizing several projects in different countries, which consisted of personalized cultural events – concerts of traditional Korean music and *Kpop*, tastings of Korean food, performances of Korean folk costumes (*Hanbok*), Taekwondo competitions and demonstrations, etc. The MFA collaborated with the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism to organize the *World Kpop Festival* – a music and dance competition with participants from around the world. The MFA also collaborated with the World Taekwondo Peace Corps and the World Taekwondo Federation to send *Taekwondo* masters and demonstration teams abroad, efforts that have contributed to the globalization of martial arts. Another strategy was to renovate the embassies and cultural centres in order to reproduce national aesthetics, followed by the organization of traditional and contemporary Korean art exhibitions. However, the MFA has not only focused on the transmission and dissemination of Korean culture, but also on facilitating the knowledge of foreign culture by the Korean people;

Organizing projects to improve understanding of economic history, tradition and evolution – MFA worked closely with the Korean Academy of Studies to correct misinformation about Korea, especially in foreign textbooks, establishing “*Korea Corners*” in universities, libraries and local cultural centres to provide easy and immediate access to accurate and relevant information. In addition, it provided support for foreign experts in Korean studies, facilitated exchanges between Korean and foreign professors, and funded research on Korean studies through scholarships (including through the *Korea Foundation*). Another project that stimulates knowledge was to host general culture contests about Korea – “*Quiz on Korea*”;

Creating an international environment conducive to foreign policy and a network based on trust (especially in relation to its neighbours) with regard of a policy-based public diplomacy. The MFA used the opportunities offered by political dialogues, forums, interviews, etc. to explain the vision and policy of the Korean government to the leaders of these countries, with an explicit interest in achieving lasting peace in the Korean Peninsula, reunification, denuclearization and maintaining and strengthening peaceful relations with neighbours.<sup>16</sup>

Compared to other nations with a long history and tradition of public diplomacy, South Korea still has a long way to go, even though its *soft power* level is getting stronger thanks to the *Kpop*, the *Korean wave* (*Hallyu*), the leading technology in the field of information and communications (through Samsung) and due to its rapid economic development and democratization (from democratic values and institutions to a high level of education). Although South Korea is still in the first stage of developing and implementing public diplomacy, the quantification of the results obtained certifies that it has at hand a plethora of attractive resources, which it uses constantly and which seem (by reference to projects and strategies implemented) that will bring the desired results: a fascinating Korea, which resonates and communicates globally and competitively.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Enna Park, *op. cit.*, pp. 325-326.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 329.

### *Ways to Popularize South Korean Soft Power*

With a step-by-step adapted strategy, South Korea has come to be no longer defined in relation to its northern neighbour, but has even become a relevant middle power in the East Asian region and in extensive international affairs. Moreover, the attractiveness of South Korean culture (from traditions, art, crafts and gastronomy) has spread throughout the world, especially among young people from neighbouring Asian countries and the West (Europe and the United States). South Korea has all the necessary resources to produce *soft power*, this power not being limited by and to its geographical position (between China, Japan and Russia) as it was that of *hard power* throughout its history. Taking advantage of the popularity of all Korean products around the world, defined as previously stated as *Hallyu*, South Korea is beginning to develop a foreign policy that will allow it to play a more important role in international institutions and networks, essential for a good governance globally.<sup>18</sup>

Culture can serve many purposes, but one function it has always fulfilled is ideological – culture transmits information and is one of the factors that facilitates power exchanges and clarifies the relationship between three conjugated terms – autonomy, dependence and hegemony.<sup>19</sup> In 1988, South Korea hosted the Olympic Games, held in its capital, Seoul. The South Korean government has planned this event very well, with the intention, at the same time, to send a message to the international community, namely that modernity, industrialization and democratization of South Korea have reached a high level. Thus, this event was the perfect opportunity to demonstrate the South Korean “*miracle*”, revealed after an extremely fast efficiency and economic growth.<sup>20</sup> However, South Korea’s prolific economy and the fact that it already represents a significant regional cultural power did not exclude it from the list of client states in relation to the hegemonic attributes of American popular culture: American films, television programs, sports personalities, pop music can be easily identified on the streets of Seoul, as was the case after the US military occupation immediately after the liberation of the Korean peninsula from the Japanese rule in 1945.<sup>21</sup>

Today, the immediate appearance is that the United States is the “invaded”, only in this case it is a cultural invasion – the Korean wave, through its media products (*Kpop*, Kdramas and the film industry), begins to impose itself more and more inside American consumerism, to the detriment of their own entertainment products so popular around the world. *Hallyu*’s success was certified in the spring of 2018, when the New York Times published the article “*BTS becomes*

<sup>18</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “South Korea’s Growing Soft Power”, *koreatimes.co.kr*, updated on: 13.11.2009, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2009/11/160\\_55438.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2009/11/160_55438.html).

<sup>19</sup> Kyung Hyun Kim, *Introduction – Indexing Korean Popular Culture*, in Kyung Hyun Kim, Youngmin Choe (eds.), *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, Durham, London, Duke University Press, 2014, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> John Minns, Chapter 6: The South Korean ‘Miracle’ in Decline, in *The Politics of Developmentalism – The Midas States of Mexico, South Korea and Taiwan*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 150.

<sup>21</sup> Kyung Hyun Kim, *Introduction – Indexing Korean Popular Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.



*the first Kpop act to rank first on the Billboard charts*”, signalling the story of the success and entry into the US market of a South Korean boygroup. BTS was the first music group outside the United States to reach the top of the US Billboard, competing with names such as Justin Bieber and Ariana Grande, and the first group invited by the United Nations to give a speech at a session of the General Assembly. The *Kpop* music industry is not the only one to attract the American public, adding to Korean dramas and the film industry: the drama “*Descendants of the Sun*” has managed to total about 1 billion viewers in 32 countries, mostly in the United States, and the Oscar-winning film, directed by Bong Joon-Ho, *Parasite*, was the first foreign language film in the history of the Academy Awards to win the Best Picture category.<sup>22</sup>

*Hallyu* is undoubtedly an essential component of South Korea’s public diplomacy, part of a new and effective approach. Prior to 1990, South Korean cultural policies focused on building trust and supporting nationalism internally. Since the mid-2000s, they have been included in the *soft power* strategy and in the ways in which South Korea has made clear its intention to position itself as a *middle power* – a developed, post-industrial country with claims to play on the global stage both as an economic and cultural actor. The modernization of South Korea is a huge success to the detriment of historical tragedies (the Japanese domination, national division after the civil war, etc.), and its model is attractive to other states, whose desire is to imitate it.<sup>23</sup>

The development of the cultural and creative industries has been supported by the South Korean government since 1997, in the context of the Asian financial crisis, which imposed the need to explore new export markets. The support provided to these industries has materialized through tax cuts and favourable subsidies, which have allowed media companies to set an affordable and competitive price compared to the amount of spending of Japanese television dramas in markets such as Taiwan and Singapore. Moreover, the main intention of the political decision-makers was to turn the *Korean wave* into a sustainable source of income. If the government did not initially promote the export of Korean popular culture (especially *Kpop*, television dramas and movies), the so-called strategy has become today the main target of Korean public diplomacy.<sup>24</sup>

The cultural industries in South Korea have played an increasingly important role in the state’s economic planning since 2001, when the Korean Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) was established, with the occasional prerogative to oversee and support the development of the field. The administration of President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) aimed to propel Korea into the top five countries in the cultural industry in the world, while recognizing the role of culture (both popular and traditional) as a tool for formulating a *soft power* strategy to improve

<sup>22</sup> Sofia Trisni, Putiviola E. Nasir, Rika Isnarti, Ferdian, “South Korean Government’s Role in Public Diplomacy: A Case Study of the Korean Wave Boom”, *Andalas Journal of International Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, May 2019, pp. 31-32.

<sup>23</sup> Joanna Elfving-Hwang, “South Korean Cultural Diplomacy and Brokering ‘K-Culture’ outside Asia”, *Korean Histories*, no. 4-1, 2013, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

Korea's image internationally. The approach was continued by the administration of President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) who developed, based on the notion of cultural diplomacy, a national brand as a tool for implementing the strategy.<sup>25</sup>

However, the relationship between the government's national branding agenda and the economic imperatives and market forces that drive the mechanisms of Korea's cultural and creative industries is a difficult one – the government has limited control over the content of cultural exports, even if KOCCA is strongly involved in supporting them. There is great unpredictability in the use of culture as a facilitator of cultural diplomacy and *soft power* when the product itself is dependent on consumer preferences. This is because, while national-state discourses on global Korean culture usually present globalization as the export process of the uniqueness of (traditional) Korean culture abroad, the export of Korean popular culture is driven by consumers' demand, with a necessity for a constant reinvention of the product, as well as in its hybridization and customization.<sup>26</sup>

In 2008, President Lee Myung-bak launched the slogan "*Global Korea*", which can be equated with a first attempt at a national branding, with the main purpose of fixing the image of South Korea, which at the time was a poor and suffering country after a civil war. During his tenure, President Lee intended to continue South Korea's economic development by deepening the "*miracle*" especially integrated into the cultural industries: "We need to develop our competitiveness in our content industry, thus laying the groundwork to become a strong nation in terms of cultural activities. An increase in income will bring an increase in cultural standards, which in turn will improve our quality of life. Due to culture we are able to enjoy life, through culture we are able to communicate with each other and only through culture can we move forward together. The new administration will do everything possible to impose the power of our culture in this globalizing framework of the 21st century. Our traditional culture, together with our technological capabilities, will undoubtedly convey to the world an image of a much more attractive Korea."<sup>27</sup>

We can say that President Lee has successfully implemented his promise – in addition to the above-mentioned national agency, he also set up a council called the Presidential Council on Nation Branding (PCNB) to fulfil a "*Global Korea*" and which has been mandated with a ten-point action plan, one of which is the adoption of the *Hallyu* strategy and its popularization. Moreover, President Lee has stepped up efforts to get most government policies in favour of the cultural industries by finding investors and consulting experts on popular and globalizing culture, with the encouragement of several conglomerates (Samsung, Hyundai, LG) to involve the distribution of funds dedicated to these industries. Another significant funding was attracted through the Korean Development Bank (KDB), which invested 100 billion won in Korea Broadcasting Station (KBS), an amount dedicated to creative content.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> Sofia Trisni, Putiviola E. Nasir, Rika Isnarti, Ferdian, *art. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.



Perhaps the most important government action to support the cultural industries has been to invest in strengthening information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, by understanding that the main way you can reach a wide audience in a very short time is through the Internet. Video-sharing platforms (YouTube) and social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) are the main factors responsible for maintaining the success of the Korean wave, in the sense that they provided a means of rapid distribution and promotion of *Hallyu* products. The South Korean government is taking advantage of this popularity, involving musicians, actors or actresses in political activities. This type of approach can be equated with a positive mechanism – each party *wins* – the involvement of celebrities in official strategies as a form of *soft power*, legitimacy and promotion of a positive model and the cultural industry gaining from the government's efforts to strengthen Korean wave's popularity.<sup>29</sup>

The success of the Korean wave is credited as the exclusive result of an effort by non-state and private actors. However, the statement does not diminish the role played by the government in this matter, as stated by the Korean Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Kim Jongdeok, in 2016: "We, the Korean Government and the Ministry of Culture, support the work they (non-state actors) and private – we note) intend to do so, but we would not assume any role as a decision maker and we have no intention of getting involved in the actual creative process. Working people, that is, filmmakers or singers, are the ones who take the lead in promoting the Korean wave outside of South Korea. The government only puts the pebbles on the road so that they can jump and move forward. That's all we do."<sup>30</sup>

The Korean wave is therefore a cultural industry involving both state and non-state actors – (producers, actors, distributors, etc.) – who work together to maintain the popularity of this strategic project. The South Korean government is aware of the potential of this industry to meet the goals set in cultural diplomacy, by engaging in increasing the funding for the media sector.

An essential element of the so-called strategy is comparing the South Korean cultural industry to the ones of its two major rivals in the East Asian region – China and Japan. Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a key player with a vast experience in public diplomacy, with a focus on cultural strategies: international cultural exchange programs are provided by the "Agency for Cultural Affairs", which is the main tool for government support for Japan's domestic cultural sector. However, the cultural "exchange" is not a *sui generis* exchange, because it is not based on reciprocity – the Japanese focus more on providing opportunities for artists (or academics, cultural organizations) from other countries to visit Japan and for them to become familiar with their specific arts.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> European Union, "Preparatory Action 'Culture in EU External Relations. Engaging the World: Towards Global Cultural Citizenship'", *ec.europa.eu*, 2014, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, p. 62, URL: [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/library/publications/global-cultural-citizenship\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/library/publications/global-cultural-citizenship_en.pdf).

As well as South Korea, much of the Japanese government's interest and financial resources have been directed towards a country branding initiative, "*Cool Japan*", designed to promote interest for certain creative industries, cultural aspects and for the Japanese lifestyle. It is an effort meant to increase international opportunities for openness and contact. Another aim was to export Japanese cultural goods, to raise awareness of Japan's uniqueness, to increase tourism and, in the process, to stimulate the domestic economy. From a geographical point of view, this initiative was mainly intended for the Asian region and less strategically oriented towards the European continent.<sup>32</sup>

A significant part of the public diplomacy's budget is allocated to the *Japan Foundation*, created as an agency of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1972. Since 2003, it has become an independent organization tasked with "*contributing to the improvement of the international environment and the maintenance and development of harmonious external relations with Japan through the effective and comprehensive implementation of activities for international cultural exchange.*" In 2014, the Foundation had 22 offices in 21 countries, including six cities in EU Member States (Budapest, Cologne, London, Madrid, Paris and Rome). Its activity focuses on artistic and cultural exchange, Japanese language education and Japanese studies. The Foundation's art and culture programs are designed to encourage understanding of Japanese culture and values by promoting international connections in four main sectors: visual arts, performing arts, films and publications, and culture and society. Japanese literature is also promoted through translations, publications and authors' participation in international book fairs. The Foundation's annual budget for fiscal year 2013/14 was JPY 15.1 billion (113.3 million euros), of which over 82% came from government grants from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>33</sup>

Although Japanese cultural products have achieved considerable success in Asian markets and also in the United States since the 1990s, experts in the field do not consider it a unique model, but relate it to the success of the Korean wave and believe that Japan should follow the same approach to narrow the distance between it and the world. The Korean example, through the government's ability to develop a global culture, demonstrates that political intervention in the cultural industries is beneficial to both parties and that it – only if well managed – is part of what is accepted as an area of competitiveness in cultural diplomacy.<sup>34</sup>

In Joseph Nye's terms, for a *soft power* strategy to be successful, it is necessary to apply the concept of "*contextual intelligence*", meaning the ability of responsible agents to apply specific resources in particular situations. In the case of Japan, policymakers clearly recognize that *soft power* is not just a

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>33</sup> Rod Fisher, "Japan Country Report", *ec.europa.eu*, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2014, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, pp. 6-7, [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/policy/international-cooperation/documents/country-reports/japan\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/policy/international-cooperation/documents/country-reports/japan_en.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Craig Hayden, Chapter 3: *Japan: Culture, Pop Culture, and the National Brand*, in *The Rhetoric of Soft Power Public Diplomacy in Global Contexts*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK, Lexington Books, 2012, p. 87.

strategic option, but in fact a necessity, considering other constraints on Japan's ability to manage its relations with international actors. However, the Japanese interpretation of what *soft power* means hints at divergent points, with different strategic emphasis. The mechanisms suggest the existence of two significant categories of *soft power* subjects: first, the foreign public and various non-governmental actors, mostly a regional audience targeted by Chinese and South Korean strategies for capitalizing on cultural assets for profit in *soft power* manner. Second, communities that sum up international fans (for example, *otaku* – fans of *anime* media products) and part of some niche markets of Japanese popular culture and other creative forms of cultural expression. The named approach has had long-term benefits, with an increase in the enrolment in Japanese language learning programs, experience-exchange programs and fan involvement in pop culture communities.<sup>35</sup>

The popularity of the Korean wave in the Japanese space represents a success of strategic project, demonstrating – in the manner of implementing *soft power* – the ranking on a superior position of the Korean culture in relation to the Japanese one. Feelings of national assertion arise against the background of the history of Japanese colonialism in the Korean peninsula, which profoundly marked and slowed the Koreans' own cultural development (especially linguistic, as I insisted, Koreans value the *Hangul* language and alphabet). An eloquent example of this was the imposition of the Japanese language education system, which explains the ban on the import of Japanese popular culture into South Korea after World War II – the ban was lifted in 1998, but Koreans' concerns about the influx of Japanese popular culture that could weaken the Korean one have been perpetuated.<sup>36</sup> Through *Hallyu*'s popularity, Korea itself has become a cultural construct that permeates every segment of Japanese life – through Korean cuisine, celebrities, Korean music and movies consumed in Japanese society, highly marketed and consumer-oriented. South Korea is now, for many Japanese, an object of culture and consumption, not just a political and historical landmark.<sup>37</sup>

China's economic growth in recent decades has strongly influenced the world's interest in it – the Chinese government is taking advantage of this status to increase the use of culture in foreign relations as a tool to shape China's perception and image abroad and expand its international influence. Culture has therefore become an essential tool of Chinese *soft power*. The government has invested heavily in the cultural and creative industries, education, communication and information: an example of this is the establishment of *Confucius Institutes* around the world to promote the Chinese language and culture abroad (at the time of 2014 there were 456 institutions of this kind, with further expansion plans). In the media sector, the government set up a 24-hour news channel (a collaboration between

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 113-116.

<sup>36</sup> Kaori Hayashi, Eun-Jeung Lee, "The Potential of Fandom and the Limits of Soft Power: Media Representations on the Popularity of a Korean Melodrama in Japan", *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 10, no. 2, oct. 2007, pp. 208-209.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 214.

the official *Xinhua* news agency and CCTV) and an international newspaper (*China Daily*) to provide a Chinese perspective on world events.<sup>38</sup>

At the governmental level, the ministries of Culture, Foreign Affairs, Education and Trade have the role of facilitating the integration of culture in foreign relations; local governments have the right to engage directly in cultural cooperation with foreign cultural authorities and institutions and to develop their own cultural cooperation policies. In addition, major Chinese cities have adopted the European concept of “*creative cities*” and plans to improve local culture and creativity: China’s main creative cities are *Beijing, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Tianjin* and *Qingdao*. China’s stated priority is to promote its own culture in foreign relations (priorities that correspond and complement its foreign and political and economic strategies), especially in relations with the United States, the European Union and Japan. China’s interest is also manifested in other Asian neighbours, as well as in the countries of the African continent.<sup>39</sup>

Another example besides the program already mentioned, *Cultural Cities of East Asia*, another regional cooperation in the field of culture between China, Japan and South Korea (a cooperation that has made considerable progress in recent decades and is a key component of the partnership) is BESETO (an acronym for Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo), a mechanism for regular exchanges in areas such as fine arts, calligraphy and national works. Cooperation between the three is also taking place in the field of cultural heritage protection and there are plans to set up an intangible cultural heritage conservation centre.<sup>40</sup>

As for the bilateral cultural relations between China and South Korea, they were facilitated by the Korean wave, but especially the music and the *Kpop* artists – the consumption of Korean pop music in Chinese society is done mainly through the Internet, and this influence can be seen not only through the position in the music charts, but also at a deeper level – Chinese fans resonated with the image represented by South Korean singers in their daily lives, imitating their clothing, hairstyle, etc., which has greatly contributed to shaping a positive image of South Korea among Chinese society. We can say, however, that there is a reciprocal effect, and among South Korean society there is an active interest in Chinese culture and language (programs, events and courses) as well. The Chinese government was prompt and responded to this trend by setting up an agency for the promotion of culture in Seoul in 2004 and then 19 Confucius Institutes throughout South Korea since 2011, a successfully implemented strategy that favoured the shaping of a positive pro-Chinese image.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> European Union, “Preparatory Action ‘Culture in EU External Relations’. Engaging the World: Towards Global Cultural Citizenship”, *ec.europa.eu*, 2014, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, pp. 54–55, [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/library/publications/global-cultural-citizenship\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/library/publications/global-cultural-citizenship_en.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 55.

<sup>40</sup> Yolanda Smits, “China Country Report”, *ec.europa.eu*, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2014, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, p. 20, [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/policy/international-cooperation/documents/country-reports/china\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/policy/international-cooperation/documents/country-reports/china_en.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> Jong-Ho Jeong, “Ethnoscapes, Mediascapes, and Ideoscapes: Socio-Cultural Relations between South Korea and China”, *Journal of International and Area Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, December 2012, pp. 82–83.

Although there are Chinese critics who claim that Korean pop music is a cheap imitation of Western pop music and that its popularity is temporary, there are also experts who appreciate the Korean cultural industry for its creativity and ability to combine the musical peculiarities of “the West” with those with a Korean specificity. Reactions are also divided in the case of Korean television dramas: some appreciate the scenarios, the refined and detailed portrayal of the characters’ emotions, the cinematography, the performance of the actors and the chosen soundtrack, and others criticize the slow pace of the narrative, the lack of variety of subjects, stereotypes and the excessive use of clichés. However, no matter how Korean pop culture is valued by the Chinese individually, there is no denying that it has helped improve diplomatic relations between South Korea and China and foster a sense of familiarity between the two cultures: one of them is related to the past they share, to what the Chinese call “*oriental culture*” (which is based on Confucian traditions) and which is also found in Korean culture. The other is connected to the present, to everyday life – the life described in television dramas, for example, does not differ much from everyday life.<sup>42</sup>

Even if the familiarity exists, *Hallyu* is perceived in a competitive way, with all the common elements, the starting point of the strategy: the broadcasting of these Korean media products would not have been possible without Chinese television stations and without the support of other companies which actively import Korean television series, music and other cultural products. As we insisted, *Hallyu* was not originally a well-planned project of the Korean cultural industries, but rather a response to market demand (in this case, the Chinese one).<sup>43</sup> China’s foreign relations strategy seems to be set in the direction of capitalizing on cultural production to gain *soft power*, following the tactics of Korean industries. China’s image in the world requires branding based on the resources of cultural diplomacy, even with direct intervention in international media systems. For the Chinese government, the image is a purpose in itself, not a means, therefore culture forms an essential dimension for a variety of public diplomacy programs.<sup>44</sup>

*What are the valences that make Kpop a distinct strategy?* A first argument lies in the continuous success of several decades – a longer period of time than the golden years of the Hong Kong film industry (from the late 1980s to the late 1990s) or the Japanese wave *Jpop* (Japanese-pop, during the 1990s). The second is how *Kpop* has attracted a huge audience in both Japan and Southeast Asia since the early 2000s, opening up the music industry to the rest of Asia and other parts of the world. Last but not least, a significant number of *Kpop* groups have conquered the world with songs that have become hits, leading Billboard to launch a new global chart – “*Kpop* Hot 100” and to create on YouTube a specific domain for *Kpop* uploads. All these trends combined proves that *Kpop*’s popularity and success have developed the genre into a real global force.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Soo Hyun Jang, “The Korean Wave and Its Implications for the Korea-China Relationship”, *Journal of International and Area Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, December 2012, p. 101.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 104.

<sup>44</sup> Craig Hayden, Chapter 5: *China: Cultivating a Global Soft Power*, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>45</sup> Patrick A. Messerlin, Wonkyu Shin, “The Success of K-pop: How Big and Why So Fast?”, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 45, no. 4/5, 2017, p. 410.



The role of the Korean government is also required to be discussed in this context: there are explanations that range from public support through subsidies to the need to develop broader concepts of *soft power* or national brand, mentioned above. However, in the case of *Kpop*, these subsidies were extremely limited, because financing concerts in foreign countries with public money was not guaranteeing their success. This is the result, on the one hand, of the ability of *Kpop* idol groups (and their agencies in particular) to attract a wide and diverse audience, and, on the other hand, of the active presence of large fan communities. In this context, the support of the Korean government does not seem to be a convincing explanation of *Kpop*'s success, but rather, the success of *Kpop* itself has attracted the support of the Korean government. Thus, it seems more justified to say that the Korean government has "gained advantages" through *Kpop* idol groups, and not the other way around. Placing the debate in the conceptual area of *soft power* and national brand, they are rather directed towards cultural policies targeting TV dramas and the film industry. In fact, *Kpop* idol groups seem to function more as promoters of Korean clothing or food brands than as representatives of Korean popular culture or as ambassadors of national brands – as evidence, many Koreans do not recognize strong elements of *koreanness* in them.<sup>46</sup>

The only notable role of the South Korean government in the success of *Kpop* is, as we mentioned earlier, the development of the country's internet infrastructure before any other part of the world – an extremely ambitious project in terms of size and use of advanced technology. However, this program did not only consider the *Kpop* industry, but was an essential component for rapid growth of technology, in the sense that entertainment agencies quickly learned how to use its advantages. New technologies have made it possible to permanently expose *Kpop* entertainment shows through several web portals (such as *Naver*, *Daum* – specifically Korean – and YouTube), smartphones and social networks (social media).

*What makes Kpop music and style stand out?* The music of Korean idol groups is appreciated for the symbiosis of several musical genres popular in the West, without giving up specific Korean elements. Specific techniques are also used – not only to make the songs pleasing to the listener, but also to imprint them in his mind – by short and attractive choruses (hooks), which are repeated throughout the song (also called "*hook songs*"). The listener can thus easily sing, even if he does not know the lyrics or the language. The dance is also a part of the strategy, hence the emphasis placed during the apprenticeship on performance aspects. Entertainment agencies work with world-renowned choreographers from the United States and Europe to maximize the image of the groups and provide more impact. Many fans follow their example, learn the choreography and perform their own music, posting these videos later on the internet. Thus, the *Kpop* experience goes beyond the act of simple listening – by the involvement motivated by the desire to sing and dance with your favourite idols. The *Kpop* style, characterized by an impeccable appearance, also plays an important role

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 413-414.

in conquering teenage fans around the world. *Kpop* stars' advertising posters are present everywhere in Japanese, Chinese and Southeast Asian stores, and specialty magazines, which showcase new style trends in the *Kpop* world, are extremely well sold.<sup>47</sup>

*Hallyu*'s new stage is considered to be a combination of social media and music industry techniques, made possible by Korea's investment in digital technologies. Indeed, consumption patterns and demographic changes within fan groups – from middle-aged Korean drama consumers to teenagers who prefer virtual cultural products – are two distinct points that differentiate the first wave from the second. However, *Hallyu 2.0* should not be considered an updated version, a way to replace the previous version or part of an institutional government campaign. *Hallyu 2.0* is an independent cultural phenomenon, the effectiveness of which (attracting new fans and targeting increasingly diverse markets and consumers) should be examined.<sup>48</sup>

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Korean government has emphasized the importance of developing cultural content for the national economy, and the Lee Myung-bak administration has focused on intellectual property law, a key feature of the creative industries and, implicitly, the new Korean wave. In addition, the emphasis was on developing the potential for creative content with new technologies – video games, animations, etc. The success of *Kpop* now was simply unimaginable – the Korean wave had conquered Asia, but before the social media revolution, attempts by *Kpop* idols to penetrate Western markets (including the United States) had largely failed. Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram facilitate *Kpop*'s access to a wider Western audience, and fans use the same platforms to assert their devotion.<sup>49</sup>

### *The Role of the BTS in South Korea's Cultural Diplomacy Strategies*

Bangtan Boys (BTS) is considered and accepted as the largest and best-selling musical phenomenon not only in South Korea, but also globally, with peculiarities found in the complex act of performance and in the flattering level (*heartthrob*) that it involves. The approach follows the formula used in the pop music industry – the impact of the Beatles was not only musical but also cultural – with strategic specificities in South Korea, part of an approach already proven in this regard (in 1962, the song of a group of Korean girls, Kim Sisters, entered the Top 10 Billboard in the United States). However, *Kpop* in its current form was released in the 1990s, along with the Seo Taiji and Boys trio, who synthesized Korean music and style by adding impact elements from Western pop music.

<sup>47</sup> Korean Culture and Information Service, Chapter 3: *What's Korean Pop Culture Got?*, in *The Korean Wave: A New Pop Culture Phenomenon*, Republic of Korea, 2011, pp. 58-63.

<sup>48</sup> Sangjoon Lee, *Introduction – A Decade of Hallyu Scholarship: Toward a New Direction in Hallyu 2.0*, in Sangjoon Lee, Abé Mark Nornes (eds.), *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2015, pp. 14-15.

<sup>49</sup> Dal Yong Jinp, Chapter 2: *New Perspectives on the Creative Industries in the Hallyu 2.0 Era: Global-Local Dialectics in Intellectual Properties*, in Sangjoon Lee, Abé Mark Nornes (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 60.

One of the members of this trio, Yang Hyun-suk, later founded YG Entertainment in 1996, one of the three big entertainment companies (“Big Three”) in South Korea, forming and promoting their own bands, including the girlgroup popular today, Blackpink.<sup>50</sup>

In the US, in the late 1990s, boybands became the core of pop music, with the so-called “pop factory” in Florida, Backstreet Boys or NSYNC standing out through manager Lou Pearlman. Following the same strategy, the Asian music industry focused on boy groups (the Taiwanese band F4 and the Japanese group Arashi were quite successful, but outperformed by those from South Korea). The UK re-established itself in the pop market in 2010 with the band One Direction. The group formed by the British music producer, Simon Cowell, became the biggest British musical phenomenon from the Beatles, introducing elements of rock and EDM (electronic dance music). The One Direction phenomenon did not last long against the background of internal conflicts, the five members launching successful solo careers in 2016. In South Korea, *Kpop* has continued to become increasingly popular and formalized: the first South Korean bands to try to enter the Western music market were BOA and Wonder Girls, Psy’s song “*Gangnam Style*” (2012) went viral, reaching one billion views on YouTube. Although the *Kpop* industry was a multi-billion-dollar business, for many BTS’s appearance on the music (but also international) scene came as a surprise.<sup>51</sup>

BTS is individualized through a cumulative set of elements: reaching the standards of a typical *Kpop* group (stage presence, performance, complex choreography, impeccable outfits, etc.); correlating the stage image, the status of idol with a set of natural human reactions, based mainly on honesty and authenticity<sup>52</sup>; their equivalence with a cultural phenomenon, a catalyst for the recognition of Korean culture in the world, its influence far exceeding the *Kpop* music industry – a phenomenon recognized in and by what is accepted as the “*BTS wave*”.

What underpins BTS’s career is the trust displayed in the triad: *aesthetic – concept – success*. The acronym “BTS” comes from “*Bangtan Sonyeondan*” (방탄소년단 “Bulletproof Boy Scouts”), with the subsequent adaptation – “Beyond the Scene”, which their agency, Big Hit Entertainment, described as a symbol of young people interested to reach “beyond the scene” of reality and dreaming of a better condition.<sup>53</sup> The band’s name could also be an invitation to fans to join them on the “stage” (including through the video content posted almost daily on YouTube and Twitter) and to watch them behind the scenes (with reference to the acronym BTS).<sup>54</sup>

An important stage of BTS evolution consists in the period of training and teambuilding, harmonization of their different personalities and overcoming the

<sup>50</sup> Eun-Young Jeong, “BTS – Music Innovator”, *The Wall Street Journal Magazine*, November 2020, p. 79.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup> Raisa Bruner, “Entertainer of the Year: BTS – In a year when live music went quieter, they became the biggest band in the world”, *Time Magazine*, December 2020, pp. 83-84.

<sup>53</sup> Dave Holmes, “7 Men – BTS have transformed pop music and redefined fame. Who is behind this movement?”, *Esquire Magazine*, Winter 2020/2021, p. 70.

<sup>54</sup> Rebecca Davis, “At the Altar of BTS”, *Variety Magazine*, September 2020, p. 35.

difficulties of adapting to this new way of life. Their written lyrics challenge the society's conventions, question and even denounce them.

BTS has become, without a doubt, not only a cultural phenomenon, but also the most successful manifestation of the *Hallyu* phenomenon globally. Initially, the Korean wave was aimed mainly at the Asian geographical area, a success facilitated by value affinities and cultural norms, but which also retained a certain exoticism of interest to Asian consumers. The proliferation of *Hallyu* worldwide marks a new stage in the attractiveness of the Korean cultural phenomenon. The international popularity of BTS gives them an informal diplomatic status, through the smart highlights used (through the Big Hit Music agency, part of HYBE Labels) and through the proliferation of their message issued beyond cultural borders, part of a collective effort to spread and promote the *soft power* of South Korea. A first and relevant recognition of their global status was the invitation to deliver a speech at the seventy-third United Nations General Assembly in September 2018 in New York.

We reaffirm that *soft power* is the foundation of cultural diplomacy, a strategy through which states mobilize their cultural resources to build positive opinions and associations towards their culture and values on the international stage. The promotion effort is both for government actors, who through various policies and directives stimulate the production and dissemination of *Hallyu* content, and for private enterprises, which ultimately provide cultural products at the media level. HYBE Labels, the agency that manages the BTS group, has become an essential partner in formulating South Korea's *soft power* strategy, a move made possible due to the activities and messages that BTS expresses not only in music, but also in everyday life. BTS members can be considered cultural diplomats of the South Korean state and representatives of effective *Kpop diplomacy*, by encouraging intercultural communication, reducing cultural differences and generating positive feelings related to Korean culture in particular. Moreover, the dedication of ARMY fans is another key factor in the success of BTS, resonating with the universality of the themes present in the group's lyrics, which offers consolation to personal struggles, encouraging listeners to love themselves and fearlessly express their opinions ("*speak yourself*"). Communication between BTS and fans takes place mainly on social media platforms, facilitated by translator networks, that offer additional explanations in different languages of BTS' songs and videos, but also the translation of news from the Korean press about the group's activities, in an effort to eliminate all language barriers.<sup>55</sup>

Social networks function as a platform for communication and for the creation of a dedicated virtual community. To this contributes the very activity of the members on these networks through regular uploads of photos and videos, including details of their daily lives and also sharing the less happy moments,

<sup>55</sup> Wantanee Sunkul, "BTS and the Global Spread of Korean Soft Power", *thediplomat.com*, updated on: 01.03.2019, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/bts-and-the-global-spread-of-korean-soft-power/>.

thus becoming the promoters of a narrative of sincerity and openness. Both aspects provide a continuous stimulus for deepening the emotional identification of the fans with the band members and their music. All this is an integral part of Big Hit Music's strategy to promote BTS as idols and, at the same time, a process of humanizing them.<sup>56</sup>

The promotion of cultural diplomacy is meant to meet the objectives of a program of development, dialogue and education, which is meant to shape perceptions. Thus, BTS plays an extremely important role in spreading positive global associations on contemporary Korean culture, not only through the immediate impact of their shows, through their associated industry (BTS has also become a strong *trademark*), reflected by the influence and through the interest generated for the Korean language, traditions and customs, culminating in the tourist motivation to visit South Korea<sup>57</sup>, but also through diplomatic activity – their presence in the highest ranking events has become more frequent since 2018. They are representing South Korea not only artistically and culturally, but also at a higher level, through the speeches given at the prestigious forum of the United Nations, thus facilitating the South Korean government's position on the international relations scene as a *middle power*. The success of the BTS also contributes to improving bilateral relations, especially between South Korea and the United States.

BTS's diplomatic achievements date back to 2018, when, on September 24, BTS delivered their first speech at the United Nations General Assembly. They joined the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, in New York; the President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame; the President of the World Bank Group, Jim Yong Kim; The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union, Federica Mogherini; UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore, among other world leaders and business people, to launch a new partnership called "*Generation Unlimited*". It aimed to manage the global crisis of education and training, which prevents millions of young people from progressing, focusing on three key areas: primary education; developing learning skills; employment policy and access to decent work.<sup>58</sup>

The collaboration of the United Nations with the South Korean group BTS is not accidental, the partnership being the result of the "LOVE MYSELF" campaign, initiated in 2017 by the Big Hit Music agency and inspired by the "*Love Yourself*" album trilogy. The message of the lyrics is translated into the objectives of the campaign: "*love yourself and embrace people and society with the same love!*". BTS wants to be the voice of their generation and young people around the world, insisting on a future in which they will be the pillars of society

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>58</sup> UNICEF, "We have learned to love ourselves, so now I urge you to 'speak yourself.'", *unicef.org*, updated on: 24.09.2018, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/we-have-learned-love-ourselves-so-now-i-urge-you-speak-yourself>.



and in which love must dominate, in counterbalance to hatred and violence.<sup>59</sup> The UNICEF Korean Committee has become the ideal partner in this campaign, through its explicit interest in respecting human rights, the lives of children and adolescents, providing inclusive leadership expertise. BTS members thus became the first artists in South Korea to raise funds as part of a global social campaign, donating some of the proceeds from album sales and all custom commercial products – “LOVE MYSELF” – to programs aimed at preventing violence against young people and providing support for these victims of violence. The cooperation of BTS, Big Hit Music and the UNICEF Korean Committee resulted in the launch of a joint global campaign, based on a multilateral agreement and a strategic partnership, called “#ENDviolence”.<sup>60</sup> The “LOVE MYSELF” campaign was also taken over by UNICEF Japan, UNICEF USA and UNICEF Great Britain<sup>61</sup>, which demonstrates the global success of the partnership. As of March 5, 2021, BTS and Big Hit have renewed their commitment to UNICEF South Korea to continue to help young victims of violence and neglect, to promote self-esteem and the well-being of children and adolescents, especially during periods of social isolation imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The announcement was made through a video posted by HYBE Labels on the YouTube platform, along with a \$1 million donation to UNICEF and a promise to continue donations from album and commercial product sales.<sup>62</sup>

Unlike the speech delivered in 2018, the one on September 23, 2020, has a different framework – BTS were invited to offer a message of encouragement, against the background of the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, also including the message “LOVE MYSELF”. This time, all seven members communicated directly, RM being the only one who spoke English – Jimin, Jin, Jungkook, V, Suga and J-Hope were using Korean, with subtitles (the speech was not live, but recorded, context in which all members could have read the related part in English!). The video was also posted online on their YouTube channel and has so far recorded almost 8 million views.

The first speech at the United Nations General Assembly opened the channel of diplomatic recognition for BTS. South Korea is aware of the economic, tourist and cultural impact facilitated by BTS, but also their potential to improve bilateral relations with various states, especially with Japan and the United

<sup>59</sup> Love Myself Campaign, “About LOVE MYSELF”, *love-myself.org*, updated on: 11.12.2017, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <https://www.love-myself.org/post-eng/about-love-myself/>.

<sup>60</sup> Love Myself Campaign, “About #ENDviolence”, *love-myself.org*, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <https://www.love-myself.org/eng/about-endviolence/>.

<sup>61</sup> Love Myself Campaign, “From USA to UK, the global expansion of the ‘LOVE MYSELF’ campaign”, *love-myself.org*, updated on: 26.11.2018, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: [https://www.love-myself.org/post-eng/us\\_uk\\_eng/](https://www.love-myself.org/post-eng/us_uk_eng/).

<sup>62</sup> UNICEF, “BTS and Big Hit renew commitment to “LOVE MYSELF” campaign to support UNICEF in ending violence and neglect as well as promoting self-esteem and well-being”, *unicef.org*, updated on: 05.03.2021, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/press-releases/bts-and-big-hit-renew-commitment-to-love-myself-campaign-to-support-unicef-in-ending-violence>.

States. Thus, the South Korean government indirectly encourages BTS projects, using the global influence and the positive image thus gained.

The topic of the bilateral relationship between South Korea and Japan is a delicate one, due to the long-term tension both parties felt, especially targeting “women companions” during World War II (Korean women were forced to be sex slaves for the Japanese imperial army, deepening the dispute between the two countries even after the peace negotiations, the Japanese government trying to negotiate certain agreements and impose amendments to the Korean government, but without any direct implementation). South Korea’s public diplomacy has been aimed primarily at regaining a good relationship with Japan through the Korean wave – 90% of Japanese teenagers say they are following current trends in South Korea. Thus, a lot of *Kpop* groups tried to assert themselves on the Japanese music market, but none of them were as successful as BTS – at the top of the album sales on Oricon Japan and Billboard Japan (with the albums “*Face Yourself*” and “*Map of the Soul: the Journey*”), with sold-out concerts on Japan’s largest stadiums, and their Japanese singles are certified gold by the Japan Recording Industry Association (RIAJ). Therefore, through BTS and *Hallyu*, diplomatic relations between the two have been strained, being strategic and discussion partners in international fora.<sup>63</sup>

A first moment of recognition of all international and cultural efforts made by BTS was when the South Korean government awarded them the “*Hwagwan Order of Cultural Merit*” at the Korean Popular Culture and Arts Awards ceremony on October 24, 2018. The seven members of BTS, became the youngest (at that time, their ages were between 21 and 25 years) and the first medallist members of a *Kpop* group for outstanding merits in promoting Korean culture and language internationally. Two years before, BTS received praise and congratulations from the Ministry of Culture, which is quite common for many *Kpop* acts (for example, BigBang, EXO and Girls Generation). However, being distinguished with such a cultural order is not at all common for *Kpop* artists.<sup>64</sup>

Another moment of recognition of the contribution to maintaining bilateral relations and promoting cultural ties between South Korea and the United States is the annual award ceremony organized by The Korean Society, a non-profit organization dedicated exclusively to promoting greater awareness, understanding and cooperation between Americans and Koreans. The James A. Van Fleet Honorary Award (the name of the former commander of the US Army at the height of the Korean War in 1951 and the founder of the Organization in 1957) – was established in 1995 and is awarded “to one or more distinguished Koreans

<sup>63</sup> Natasha Tricia Husada, Made Aini, Nasya Ammaara, Emir R. Saleh, Yosephine Michelle R., Aurelia C. Arinka, “The Role of Bangtan Boys (BTS) in Public Diplomacy”, *International Relations*, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Parahyangan Catholic University, Bandung, 2020, pp. 8-9.

<sup>64</sup> Kang Aa-young, “BTS becomes the youngest to receive Order of Cultural Merit”, *koreatimes.co.kr*, updated on: 09.10.2018, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2020/08/398\\_256678.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2020/08/398_256678.html).

or Americans in recognition of contributions in promoting US-Korea relations.” BTS joined the US Korean War Veterans Association and the Korean Chamber of Commerce and Industry in 2020, the group being credited for music and message, which helped the strengthening of Korean-American relations.<sup>65</sup>

The BTS group has also been involved in various diplomatic activities, some even at the invitation of President Moon. A few weeks after the first speech before the UN General Assembly and in full European tour, BTS participated in the concert that celebrates relations between South Korea and France. President Moon Jae-in did not know them very well then, but he was impressed by his willingness to participate in this important event in Korean-French diplomatic relations. Two years later, on the occasion of the first celebration of the “Youth Day” in South Korea (*Korea’s First Youth Day*) on September 19, 2020, BTS were the special guests of the President to the Blue House as the most important representatives of the younger generation.<sup>66</sup>

The South Korean president was not the only one to invite BTS members to this type of events. Former President of the United States, Barack Obama, invited them in June 2020 to give a speech at the “*Dear Class of 2020*” event, dedicated to all graduates who were unable to attend a ceremony due to restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. They joined several important artists and personalities of the state or large corporations. The couple Michelle and Barack Obama also made their first appearance on a virtual stage during the event, which lasted almost four hours. The BTS speech and the performance of three songs (“*Boy with Luv*”, “*Spring Day*” and “*Mikrokosmos*”) were arranged at the end of the ceremony, for which they rented the space of the National Museum of Korea.<sup>67</sup>

### *Instead of Conclusions*

Summarizing, we will answer two relevant questions. First: *does music have the ability to connect different (even opposite) cultures?* Apparently, the answers to this question are obvious: music is a universal phenomenon and therefore relevant to all people, regardless of the culture they belong to and the language they speak. Music, being universal, can serve as a common denominator, being itself a common language which enhances communication. Moreover, throughout history, music has been used to help and heal individuals and groups from different cultures. So, second: *why shouldn’t it be used as a diplomatic means to*

<sup>65</sup> The Korea Society, “Van Fleet Awardees”, [koreasociety.org](https://www.koreasociety.org), accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <https://www.koreasociety.org/special-events/van-fleet-award>.

<sup>66</sup> JakartaPost, “K-pop juggernaut BTS talks road to success on South Korea’s Youth Day”, [thejakartapost.com](https://www.thejakartapost.com), updated on: 19.09.2020, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2020/09/19/k-pop-juggernaut-bts-talks-road-to-success-on-south-koreas-youth-day.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Variety Staff, “Watch BTS Deliver Heartfelt Messages to Fans During Dear Class of 2020”, [variety.com](https://variety.com), updated on: 07.06.2020, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/bts-messages-dear-class-of-2020-watch-video-1234627330/>.

*help societies in their malfunctioning communication relations?* However, music is used to define some and to separate others, not only socially and culturally – individuals actively define their identity through the musical choices they make. Musical styles, musical choices, and musical tastes all reflect and sometimes delineate where one social group ends and where the other begins. The musical choices of individuals are not accidental: each musical choice contains a meaning of personality, social identity and culture. The reunion of all choices forms a musical imprint, which includes the types of music we choose, which we like and which are related to our personal history, but also to our cultural background. Musical identity is not just about the music we listen to, but also the values and ideas that individuals or culture attribute to that music. Musical identity also includes what we deliberately choose not to listen to (and the values that are attached to that music).<sup>68</sup>

The relevant concept in this context is *transculturalism*, with the role of synthesizing the way in which “some individuals find ways to transcend their original culture, to explore, examine and infiltrate foreign cultures”, as a consequence of globalization. We can also highlight the cross-cultural role of the media, with cross-cultural communication representing (including music) the exchange of information and cultural flows between groups, classes, genders and ethnicities, examining the interactions and negotiations between local and global processes and flows.<sup>69</sup>

*Is BTS music a trans- and intercultural catalyst for communication?* BTS's incorporation of traditional Korean elements, both in music and visual presentation, makes the answer affirmative, individualizing within *Kpop*: BTS are an extremely popular Korean group, selling to an international audience.<sup>70</sup> Studies dedicated to the phenomenon and the group discuss the presence of the element “*Han*”, as a unique feeling of Korea, which can also define a strong sadness or resentment towards others. The concept of “*Han*” is present in several BTS songs, but BTS music is humanized, unlike other *Kpop* groups, and it represents more than a phenomenon reduced to young people, but a cultural one *par excellence*. BTS contributes decisively to South Korea's efforts to preserve and promote traditional music (*gukak*).<sup>71</sup> Among the songs that refer to Korean culture we can list “*Idol*”, “*Daechwita* – 대취타” (included in the solo album, “*D-2*” by Agust D), “*Ma City*” (where each member shows his pride in their home city) and “*Ddaeng 땡*” (a song with a specific instrument of *gukak* music and many cultural references that only Koreans can notice).

<sup>68</sup> Avi Gilboa, “Let's Talk Music – A Model for Enhancing Intercultural Communication: Trying to Understand Why and How Music Helps”, *voices.no*, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <https://voices.no/index.php/voices/article/view/2325/2080>.

<sup>69</sup> Renee Karunungan, “BTS as a transcultural phenomenon”, *reneekarunungan.com*, updated on: 11.06.2019, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <https://reneekarunungan.com/2019/06/11/bts-as-a-transcultural-phenomenon/>.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*.

BTS thus justifies its quality of a mediator and facilitator of intercultural communication, with an added respect (according to the typical and the rules of classical diplomacy) towards the culture of each nation it visits, almost like a real diplomatic corps – the most telling example is the concert in the city of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, studying the custom and peculiarities of Arab and Islamic culture, the concert not overlapping with the evening prayer. Rehearsals were postponed to make it easier for local staff to say the prayer in silence during the daytime prayers. Moreover, the women from the Big Hit staff wore the place-specific clothing (*abaya*) to respect the tradition of the place. BTS came on stage with a very subtle make-up, danced in a different way to respect their culture and did not bow to the audience at the end (as is usual in their culture), knowing that Muslims bow only to Allah.

BTS use their global popularity and iconic status to promote a cultural and humanitarian message, both publicly stated and recognized positions within the United Nations and as global ambassadors for UNICEF. The named confirmations bring prestige not only on a personal and musical level, but also enhance South Korea's cultural policy. The influence of the BTS and their diplomatic role was in response to South Korea's efforts and strategy to promote public diplomacy and facilitate cultural dialogue. *Hallyu*'s success has had a positive impact on both Korean studies and goods, services and tourism, with South Korea increasingly asserting and sustaining its role as a *middle power* in the East Asian region.

South Korea is in a much better position, compared to the beginning of the twentieth century, when it lacked power – *hard*, *soft* and *smart*. Certainly, South Korea will not be able to fully offset the weight of the geopolitics of its area, but if it seeks to capitalize on all facets of its hybrid (smart) power, it will be able to improve its future prospects. Today, Seoul presents itself to the world as an open and democratic society, providing a model for what a 21<sup>st</sup> century Asian country can look like: with an advanced economy combined with the specificities of an ancient but irrevocably democratic, innovative technologically and culturally vibrant civilization (where traditional norms, cultural heritage and *Hallyu* products coexist and encourage each other).<sup>72</sup>

The success of BTS is required to be integrated with other forms of *Hallyu*, validating South Korea's success both in terms of prestige and economy. We cannot approximate whether other *Kpop* groups will reach the same level of attractiveness as BTS, or whether they will retain their popularity, including after the period dedicated to military service. After completing this stage, BTS members can be fully invested with the prerogative of South Korean ambassadors, artistically, culturally, diplomatically and even militarily, giving additional significance to *soft power* strategies.

<sup>72</sup> Chung Min Lee, "Can Soft Power Enable South Korea to Overcome Geopolitics?", *carnegieendowment.org*, updated on: 15.12.2020, accessed on: 10<sup>th</sup> September 2021, URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/12/15/can-soft-power-enable-south-korea-to-overcome-geopolitics-pub-83407>.



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