

Why is China not sexy?

When Pop Culture Makes Soft Power and when it Doesn't

Ana Maria LUCA

GlobalFocus Center

Abstract:

While Korean popular culture is gaining ground and is able to influence foreign political discourses, mini-markets with Chinese noodles and dumplings do not become third places for groups of C-pop fans who put on Chinese make up, sing Chinese pop songs and eat Chinese noodles. Nor do C-pop and C-drama fans gather in “We love China” cultural associations to spread Chinese culture and language. These cultural activities have been backed by the Chinese state through its Confucius Institutes, but they have not won the hearts and minds of millions of people around the world.

I try to debunk in this research on the Romanian-based Korean and Chinese pop culture fandom the reasons why the same pop culture consumers of Chinese and Korean media products tend to favour the Korean over the Chinese. Based on two concepts, Joseph Nye Jr's soft power from international relations and Michel Foucault's biopower and biopolitics from anthropology, I analyse the reactions of Romanian fans to both currents to point out that gender targeted pop culture using women's bodies to promote political ideas cannot work if they are backed by an authoritarian non-charismatic state.

Keywords: *international relations, cultural studies, China, Korea, soft power, pop culture, biopower, biopolitics*

In spring 2018, a convenience store selling Korean and Japanese products opened in central Bucharest, behind one of the buildings of the city museum. The shop sells various foods produced in South Korea and Japan, including Japanese ramen and Korean ramyeon, nori, frozen dumplings,



spring rolls, kimchi, noodles, tofu, and even Korean ice-cream. It also sells Korean cosmetics – from lipstick and eyeliner to aloe vera based skin care from Jeju Island – and K-pop albums released by various artists as well as memorabilia.

At the entrance, before picking up a shopping basket, the customer has to go through life-size cardboard effigies of the Bang tan Boys/BTS, one of the most successful Korean boy bands. The shop is more than a minimarket, it is designed as a convenience store in Seoul, South Korea: not only can customers shop and take their products home, but the shop also has a eating area where customers can sit and enjoy a box of freshly prepared instant ramyeon or ramen (depending on the preference) while listening and singing along the most well-known K-pop songs.

By the summer of 2019, the shop had become already a meeting point, a third place for K-pop fans from Bucharest and travellers from other Romanian regions who were K-pop fans and had heard about the shop on vlogs, blogs and other social media groups dedicated to Korean popular culture.

At beginning of 2020, there were scores of Romanian language groups and pages on social media dedicated to Korean pop bands, idols, movies and movies stars, and blogs and vlogs with news on Korean music and dramas, as well as all things Korean, including food recipes, cosmetics and how they're used.

Several online shops had opened delivering Korean food and cosmetics, while other online shops specialized exclusively in Korean cosmetics and other in K-pop bands memorabilia and music albums otherwise not found in the mainstream commercial outlets.

Moreover, several crowdsourced websites with Asian, but predominantly Korean, movies and dramas, had over 200,000 followers. Community members translated drama episodes into Romanian in real time and for free to support each other's passion for Korean actors and Korean culture.

The popularity of the Korean Wave has also brought to spotlight other East Asian pop cultures, including the Chinese. Some also admired Chinese productions and movie stars, often comparing the Chinese productions to their Korean correspondents. Many times, Korean and Chinese moviemakers turn the same novels into televisions or web dramas, which prompt Romanian fans to discuss the topic of C-drama versus K-drama and C-pop versus K-pop.

C-pop, just like K-pop, means billions of dollars: China has a self-sustaining entertainment industry. Chinese internet giant Tencent's four music platforms – QQ Music, Kugou Music, Kuwo

Music and WeSing – have a combined 800 million monthly users, compared to Spotify’s 207 million at the beginning of 2019.

Moreover, Beijing has started to invest in foreign policy research and currently funds several doctoral programs at British universities that opened campuses in China in the past few years. The main focus of the programs is to determine how audiences in the countries of the Belt and Road Initiative react to Chinese cinema and television and the political ideas included in the Chinese pop culture project.

C-pop has not generated the same type of soft power as Korean pop culture. At least not yet. According to some insiders, it was because so far, Beijing has not been interested in promoting its entertainment products outside the East and South-East Asian region, where they are already a hit.

However, in the rest of the world where Korean popular culture is gaining ground and is able to influence foreign political scenes, markets with Chinese noodles and dumplings do not become third places for groups of C-pop fans who put on Chinese make up, sing Chinese pop songs and eat Chinese noodles. Nor do C-pop and C-drama fans gather in “We love China” cultural associations to spread Chinese culture and language. These cultural activities have been backed by the Chinese state through its Confucius Institutes, but they have not won the hearts and minds of millions of people around the world.

Korean pop culture is one of the most cited models of soft power in international relations in the age of global information (Nye 2011) (2004) (Lee 2009) (Valieva 2018). Meanwhile, Chinese efforts, which have so far timidly been replicating the Korean policy of investing in the creation and support of an entertainment industry, have not paid off.

Being a Chinese pop culture fan is just not as cool and being a Korean pop culture fan. So why isn’t it?

Falling in love with a distant country

The penetration of Korean pop culture, especially K-pop and K-dramas, began with the East Asian markets in the late 1990s, right after the Asian Financial Crisis when the Korean economy was in shambles and the export of popular culture seemed a resource that needed to be exploited (Iwabuchi and Beng Huat 2008).

The rise of the ‘Korean Wave’ in the new millennium happened as a result of governmental and corporate support (Doobo 2008). The wave started with government’s support for the domestic cinema production as a national strategic industry in 1994 as an effect of the liberalization of the media markets in East Asia and the success of US made cinema. Due to the tax incentive, investments of chaebols (Korean conglomerates) facilitated processes of capital accumulation in the media sector but also attracted many talented human resources. At the same time, after the 1990s financial crisis, when Korea’s economy took a big hit and it prioritized its media industry, other East Asian countries also liberalized their media markets making it easy for the Korean blockbusters to sell abroad and become a regional phenomenon.

By 2006, Korean media products – K-pop and K-drama became widely consumed in East and South-east Asia and started to spread across the world (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008), creating a mass of fans that not only share the consumption of Korean media products, but also the love for South Korea as a country. It also created a space of debate over the fact that the glocalization of the Korean wave has led to a new form of cultural imperialism by selling not only a Korean dream, but also Korean products and boosting tourism (Kuwahara 2014).

The reason for the success of the Korean Wave, some theorists says, stands not in its “exotic” flavor and the orientalist tendencies in Western societies, but in the fact that the hybridity of the culture makes them easy to digest for foreign audiences which recognize elements from their own popular cultures in them (Molen 2014).

A few years ago, I started to look into why this happens and immersed myself in an Eastern European audience, mostly made of women, who watch dramas produced in east Asian countries, including South Korea, China and Japan.

I’ve watched since then scores of both Korean and Chinese productions together with fans from cross the region, exchanged opinions with fans, watched reactions to both K-dramas and C-dramas, conducted scores of semi-structured interviews and free discussions with K-pop and K-drama fans in Romania and across the region. Most consume both Korean and Chinese dramas of all kinds – romance, detective stories, sci-fi, fantasy, wuxia (Chinese historical dramas), xienxia (Chinese fantasy dramas). But they just don’t feel the same about the Korean and the Chinese.

In the case of Korean popular culture, women across the globe are essential for its geopolitical success. If on June 21, 2020, K-pop fans managed to ruin an electoral rally for US president Donald Trump in Tulsa using their social media networks to call for mass registration

and no-show, it is because millions women and teenagers across the US and other parts of the world have fallen in love with a Korean actor or K-pop idol at a certain point in their lives.

They then researched more about Korean movies, they came to know more about media productions, but also about the country, its history and its current affairs. They have started to search for people and groups with the same passion, they became members of online networks and social media groups where they feel at home speaking about their love story with Korea. They continued to organize and their passion gave way to entrepreneurship - K-beauty and K-food shops, language schools, but also cultural associations that promote Korean culture in their societies.

K-culture fans transform in the end into experts and disseminators of social and political ideas born in South Korea, transmitted through its hybrid popular culture towards millions of consumers of Korean popular culture across the globe who become embodied carriers of ideas and cultural representations to spread in their domestic societies.

The Korean political message included in its successful popular culture is a peaceful one. A short research of the messages spread by K-culture fans across the social media during the COVID pandemic in 2020, reveal that the main message sent to the world is that Korea is a free country and a peaceful democracy, where the state is non-coercive and where society is more organized.

There was wide spread admiration that “Korea is a democracy and Korean people know how to follow safety instructions because they are well educated and know how to give their consent to the state when they need to.” Fans posting on Romanian social media also emphasized that Korea, unlike China, hasn’t imposed a lockdown on citizens and the measures takes but the state were based on people’s consent, not coercion. This was the expression of a democratic state that could be trusted.

“This is not to take for granted the fact that Koreans are submissive to the state in any way. Retired people unions would take to the streets to protests a slight decrease in their pensions. Imagine 80-year-old protesting on the streets and, with the filial piety culture that obliges one to respect their elders, imagine the attitude of the law enforcement officers towards the protesters. I think a law enforcement officer got beaten up by one of the retired protesters,” one of the respondents explained.

Moreover, one former exchange student in Korea who also writes a blog focusing on Korean drama and cinema, explained that she felt compelled to act as an expert on Korean affairs as most Romanian media during the COVID-19 lockdown ran mostly news about China, Europe and the United States.

She also posted several comments and examples of how Korea handled the crisis on her Facebook profile, comparing the measures taken by authorities in Seoul with those taken by the government in Bucharest. Among them, a video recording of a press conference held by the Korean center for Disease Control where the head of the institution, a woman, answered COVID-19 related questions asked by children. She praised the pertinent information praised by authorities and the respect Korean society has for the female head of the state agency.

“There is a palpable respect for Jung Eun-Kyeun among the people, who watch with religiosity the KCDC press conferences and closely follow the instructions. Online, (which is, trust me, shocking) users call her 선생님 (seonsaenim, Korean for professor), the highest form of respect someone can be addressed with,” she wrote.

Another K-drama fan, who spent a vacation alone in South Korea, also said that she followed closely political affairs in the region and also wanted to take a trip to North Korea, which she said she was fascinated by after watching several documentaries and reading books by defectors to South Korea. She said that she finds many similarities between Romania and South Korean society and explained that North Korea is interesting because of Romania’s communist past.

“I feel that South Korea is what we could be if we just were more organized. It shook a dictatorship practically at the same time and it developed economically much faster than Romania. North Korea is what we could have been if we did not shake the communist regime,” she explained.

Several K-drama fans I’ve spoken to also referred to the 2016 - 2017 Candlelight Demonstrations that led to the impeachment of South Korean president Park Geun-hye after

accusations of corruption¹ as a way to stress similarities with Romania and its own anti-corruption protests in 2017. They also highlighted the fact that both countries share the corruption problem.

“The difference is that South Korea’s government has made a deal with the Chaebols in the 1990s allowing them to function along the old ways in exchange for funding strategic industries at the national level to benefit economic development. It’s obviously a model, maybe a better one than dividing society over corruption,” one respondent explained.

However, beyond the content of the political ideas expressed by respondents, was a common denominator: in all cases their interest in Korea had started with watching K-drama and web-drama on various streaming platforms and it developed into an interest to learn Korean language, visit or study in Korea. Their idea of what Korea is like and how the society functions have been strongly influenced by the media products consumed, whether these are dramas, music, cinema, books or all at the same time.

In fact, according to South Korean political analyst Lee Geun (2009) this is the exact point in the process where popular culture turns into soft power: when the ideas the origin state has been trying to convey to the receiving state are no longer new or exotic, but are normalized in the recipient society.

The COVID crisis when the Korean management model has been applauded at international level because its methods were less coercive and based more on citizen cooperation and community, has sped up the normalization of the idea that South Korean is a strong emerging economy and a peaceful democracy committed to its values. This message is what the European Union has been, for instance, trying to also convey at the international level.

What is Chinese pop culture unable to do?

The answer to the question relies in the last stage of the process that transforms popular culture into soft power.

The fact that South Korea is a democracy that shares freedom of speech and transparency, two values that are globally cherished and are also shared by Romanian society. In many cases,

¹ Kim, Jack, *Thousands protest in South Korea, demand president quit over scandal*, Reuters, October 29, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-politics-idUSKCN12T08V>, retrieved on June 7, 2020.

especially women over 35, also stressed that it is the main reason they prefer Korean pop culture and media products, although they also consume Chinese pop culture – including *wuxia* (historical dramas and novels) and *xienxia* (fantasy novels).

“The fact that Korea is a democracy makes me trust the stories in the movies more and enjoy them more. The fact that I know that China is not a democracy and I know how people live in a communist country because we have lived through that before 1989 in Romania makes me distrust Chinese movies to a certain extent. Also, in comparison to Bollywood dramas, I also prefer the Korean because the culture is closer to ours, it’s more Westernized and less entrenched in old traditions,” a 70-year-old K-drama fan explained.

The question of trust was central to what several interviewees said made them prefer Korean pop culture over any other and most said that trust came from the political ideas which they felt were shared by the culture they were already used to. Young K-pop fans interviewed explained that they felt that in the Chinese bands and movies they consumed there was a certain amount of communist propaganda, conservatism and censorship which they defined as “a certain degree of fake”. Korean products they said were closer to Western culture and they could identify more with them especially because they did not feel there was any infringement of liberty outside of the limits of the usual social pressure in any society. They shared the idea that South Korean pop bands, despite the fact that they knew artists have a strict regimen that is sometimes abusive, were not submitted to censorship by an explicit political actor (government institution).

“In the Chinese dramas, however cool the topics are, you just see people acting really awkward and naïve. Koreans are simply more genuine,” a 17-year-old respondent pointed out.

Conclusions

Charm might win over weapons in international relations and soft power might be less damaging than security threats. There is just one problem with this strategy, one that cannot be seen through international relations theories and tools, simply because the field has only recently

started to take into consideration the idea of culture from a holistic perspective rather than the classic narrow view that it only means art and education.

Cultural studies as well as post-colonial thought might not see this wave of charm as legitimate, because the human body, and the woman's body in particular, becomes the object of international power relations.

A woman's most intimate emotions and sensations, her network of friends, her physical body and her environment, become the subject and instrument of international power relations. Michel Foucault spoke in 1990 of biopower as the tendency of states to control on the living (*le vivant*) through regulations and institutions, be it through coercive means or simply through charm.

But constructing of both Nye's soft power idea and Foucault biopower and biopolitics, in the 21st century world weaker states that do not possess the means to exert political influence through hard power tools, countries that don't have strong military or are located at difficult geopolitical crossroads – like South Korea – have no choice but to refer to charm in order to keep safe and have a say in regional politics.

The mechanism of turning Korean popular culture into soft power is dependent largely on instrumentalizing women across the globe, whose experience with consumption of Korean cultural products turn them into experts who can spread information on entertainment industry as well as political information and ideas. Most Korean pop culture fans tend to make an example out of Korea in their home societies and the message that they spread is that the country is a peaceful one. But these ideas would not have reached the home society unless these women were exposed to Korean pop culture, including political ideas, and instrumentalized as such.

Korean soft power through its popular culture remains a perfect example that Foucault's biopower is no longer applied by a hegemon state on a periphery state, but also by states that do not seek to dominate and control the bodies politic of other states, but seek to send out messages of peace and/or boost trade and economy. South Korea is an emerging economy that could not seek world domination, but it has proven time and again in the past years that it can influence political affairs at the highest level though pop culture, like US president Donald Trump's electoral rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma¹ on June 21, 2020.

¹ TikTok Teens and K-Pop Stans Say They Sank Trump Rally, in New York Times, June 21, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/style/tiktok-trump-rally-tulsa.html?smtyp=cur&smid=fb-nytimes&fbclid=IwAR1Brat4KHdZ8V9nuG0y_jcfQ77s8WCNw2oTMDeQ7nusTjJuhpxk7z-wpDQ&fbclid=IwAR2PE77E7y3zBYyAcp2RU7In9Q6CgsbOJkC_1HVD05PVnxg84VylAuON8Ec, seen on June 21, 2020

Foucault’s principle of biopolitics as the tendency of states to control living bodies still stands; however, the paradigm change occurs now in the means of exercising power – there is no more discipline through punishment of a state that is sovereign, and neither through imposing rules through institutions. Nye’s soft power concept comes to complete Foucault’s idea of biopolitics: the power over the living body is no longer expressed through coercion, but through charm. At a time when the security expert community speaks of malign influence and hybrid threats, South Korea stands proof that a small country can achieve much more through a different type of “nukes”: charming idols and romance dramas.

However, if one looks at the process of learning Korean popular culture, and how it changes one’s life, environment, aspirations and social relations, the strategy of producing media content to charm a foreign audience in order to boost a country’s image and spread its foreign policy ideas, is as ethical as an emotionally unavailable person seducing and keeping a lover on their toes without committing to a relationship.

K-drama and K-pop fans serve as effective agents for marketing Hallyu and how their fandom empowers them to explore new business and social opportunities. But their bodies are central and become expressions of Korean soft power: they adopt new cultural body practices influenced by Korean pop culture, internalize and recontextualize elements of the culture they consume. The result is that in the society they live in, they act as points of dissemination of ideas, they become fan entrepreneurs and cultural agents transcending different cultural and social contexts (Lyan and Otmazgin 2019).

But China has not been able to follow this model. Beijing cannot project soft power through its popular culture, not because the quality of the media productions is lower than in the case of the Korean ones. As most of the fans explained, the answer is in the political ideas that it is seeking to spread and which do not animate any relations. What the Korean popular culture can do is to create the Korean dream in the minds of women across the globe. A Chinese dream is not possible because of China’s lack of political charisma due to its perceived authoritarian government system, its approach to free speech, lack of transparency and minority rights.

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