

HALLYU IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY IN SOUTH KOREA'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY

Authors Details

Phung Thanh Tuyen^{1*}

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam.

Corresponding Author: *Phung Thanh Tuyen*

ABSTRACT: The Korean Wave (Hallyu) has become one of South Korea's most influential soft power assets, significantly enhancing the country's cultural presence and diplomatic engagement across Southeast Asia. While previous studies have primarily examined the popularity and socio-cultural impacts of Hallyu, limited attention has been devoted to the strategic mechanisms through which the South Korean government has institutionalized Hallyu as an instrument of cultural diplomacy in the region. This study aims to analyze the key strategies underlying the implementation of Hallyu within South Korea's cultural diplomacy toward Southeast Asia during the early twenty-first century.

Employing a qualitative research approach, the study draws upon document analysis of government reports, policy documents, statistical data, and existing academic literature on Hallyu, cultural diplomacy, and soft power. The analysis identifies four interrelated strategic dimensions: (1) comprehensive government support through policy and institutional frameworks; (2) the utilization of digital media and communication technologies to expand transnational cultural dissemination; (3) the integration of cultural diplomacy with economic and educational cooperation; and (4) the hybridization of traditional Korean cultural values with contemporary popular culture to enhance global appeal.

The findings demonstrate that Hallyu is not merely a market-driven cultural phenomenon but a state-supported diplomatic strategy that integrates public institutions, cultural

industries, digital platforms, and international partnerships. These coordinated strategies have strengthened South Korea's soft power, improved its national image, expanded cultural and educational exchanges, and deepened economic cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. The study contributes to the literature on cultural diplomacy by providing a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding how popular culture can be strategically institutionalized as a foreign policy instrument and offers insights into the evolving role of soft power in regional diplomacy.

Keywords: *Hallyu; cultural diplomacy; soft power; South Korea; Southeast Asia; digital media; public diplomacy; cultural policy.*

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, culture has increasingly become an important instrument of international relations and foreign policy. Beyond traditional forms of political and economic influence, states have sought to employ cultural resources to enhance their national image, strengthen international relations, and increase their attractiveness to foreign audiences. Cultural diplomacy has consequently emerged as an important means through which countries promote mutual understanding and advance their broader diplomatic objectives. The rapid development of mass media, the Internet, and digital communication has further facilitated the cross-border circulation of cultural products, creating new opportunities for countries to project their cultural influence internationally.

South Korea provides a notable example of the strategic use of culture in international affairs. Since the late 1990s, the rapid spread of Korean popular culture, commonly known as the Korean Wave (Hallyu), has attracted growing attention across Asia and beyond. Initially driven by Korean television dramas and popular music, Hallyu gradually expanded into a wider range of cultural products and industries, including K-pop, film, television entertainment, fashion, beauty, food, and tourism. The growing international popularity of Hallyu not only generated significant economic opportunities but also contributed to the formation of a more visible and attractive image of South Korea among foreign audiences.

Southeast Asia has been one of the key regions in the early international expansion of Hallyu. Countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore witnessed increasing consumption of Korean cultural products during the early

twenty-first century. The popularity of Korean dramas, music, and entertainment programs also stimulated interest in Korean language, lifestyle, food, tourism, and consumer products. As a result, Hallyu became more than a form of cultural consumption; it increasingly functioned as a channel for promoting South Korea's cultural presence and strengthening people-to-people connections with Southeast Asian societies.

The growing influence of Hallyu raises an important question concerning the relationship between popular culture and cultural diplomacy: to what extent was the international expansion of Hallyu connected to South Korea's broader diplomatic strategy? Although the success of Hallyu was largely driven by the competitiveness and appeal of Korean cultural industries, the South Korean government increasingly recognized their strategic value and introduced policies and institutional mechanisms to support the internationalization of Korean culture. Government agencies, cultural organizations, and private-sector actors consequently participated in promoting Korean cultural content and facilitating cultural exchanges abroad. Hallyu can therefore be examined not only as a popular cultural phenomenon but also as a cultural resource contributing to South Korea's soft power and diplomatic engagement.

Despite extensive scholarship on Hallyu, previous studies have often focused on its cultural industries, audience reception, globalization, economic effects, or contribution to South Korea's soft power. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the specific strategies through which Hallyu was deployed as an instrument of cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia during the early twenty-first century. This study addresses this gap by examining the major strategies, actors, and mechanisms involved in the deployment of Hallyu in South Korea's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia. By connecting Hallyu with cultural diplomacy and soft power, the study seeks to clarify how popular culture was transformed into a strategic resource for enhancing South Korea's international image and strengthening its relations with Southeast Asian countries.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Cultural diplomacy has become an increasingly important instrument in contemporary international relations, enabling states to enhance their international influence through attraction rather than coercion. According to Joseph Nye (2004), soft power derives from a

country's culture, political values, and foreign policy, allowing it to shape the preferences of others without relying on military or economic pressure. Within this framework, cultural diplomacy functions as one of the principal mechanisms through which soft power is exercised.

Scholars have defined cultural diplomacy from different perspectives. Cummings (2003) considers it an exchange of ideas, information, art, and cultural values that promotes mutual understanding among nations. Similarly, Mark (2009) argues that cultural diplomacy serves foreign policy objectives by strengthening international trust and improving national reputation. Cull (2008) further emphasizes that cultural diplomacy extends beyond cultural exchange to include long-term relationship building through communication, education, and public engagement.

In East Asia, cultural diplomacy has become an essential strategy for middle powers seeking to increase their international influence. Rather than relying solely on traditional diplomacy, governments increasingly cooperate with cultural industries, educational institutions, and private organizations to enhance national attractiveness. This shift reflects the growing importance of public diplomacy in an interconnected digital environment.

2.2. Hallyu as an Instrument of Cultural Diplomacy

Since the late 1990s, Hallyu (the Korean Wave) has evolved from a regional cultural phenomenon into a global soft power resource. Initially driven by Korean television dramas, Hallyu has expanded to include K-pop, films, online content, fashion, beauty products, food, and digital media.

Many scholars have examined Hallyu from various disciplinary perspectives. Shim (2006) attributes its popularity to cultural hybridity, while Kim (2013) argues that Hallyu contributes significantly to South Korea's national branding strategy. Jin (2016, 2020, 2023) emphasizes the interaction between digital platforms, government support, and global media networks in sustaining the Korean Wave. Lee (2015) also highlights the role of entertainment companies and celebrities as unofficial cultural ambassadors representing South Korea abroad.

Recent studies increasingly view Hallyu as a strategic component of South Korea's public diplomacy rather than merely a commercial cultural export. Government agencies such as

the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, KOCCA, KOFICE, and Korean Cultural Centers have actively supported the international dissemination of Korean popular culture through coordinated cultural policies and overseas promotional activities.

2.3. Hallyu in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia represents one of the most receptive regions to Hallyu due to its young population, rapid digitalization, expanding middle class, and extensive use of social media. Korean popular culture has significantly influenced consumer behavior, tourism, education, language learning, cosmetics, and entertainment across ASEAN countries.

Previous studies have examined Hallyu in individual countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Otmazgin (2013) argues that Hallyu has reshaped regional cultural consumption patterns through transnational media circulation. Pramadya and Oktaviani (2016) further demonstrate that Hallyu has strengthened bilateral cultural relations while stimulating economic cooperation.

In Vietnam, researchers have mainly investigated Hallyu from perspectives of media influence, youth culture, consumer behavior, and soft power. However, most domestic studies remain country-specific and focus primarily on cultural reception rather than examining Hallyu within South Korea's broader diplomatic strategy.

2.4. Research Gap

Although previous studies have generated substantial knowledge regarding Hallyu, three major gaps remain.

First, most studies emphasize entertainment industries and cultural consumption while paying limited attention to Hallyu as a strategic instrument of cultural diplomacy.

Second, existing research frequently focuses on individual ASEAN countries instead of analyzing Southeast Asia as an integrated geopolitical and cultural region within South Korea's foreign policy.

Third, relatively few studies investigate how government institutions, private cultural industries, and digital media jointly construct South Korea's cultural diplomacy framework.

To address these gaps, this study examines Hallyu as a comprehensive cultural diplomacy strategy implemented by South Korea in Southeast Asia during the early twenty-first century. Integrating soft power theory, cultural diplomacy, and nation branding perspectives, the study analyzes the implementation mechanisms, regional impacts, and strategic limitations of Hallyu in strengthening South Korea's influence throughout ASEAN.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the strategies through which Hallyu was deployed as an instrument of South Korea's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia during the early twenty-first century. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on understanding policy orientations, institutional mechanisms, cultural initiatives, and the roles of different actors rather than measuring the effects of Hallyu through quantitative indicators alone.

The study primarily uses secondary data collected through document analysis. Relevant materials include academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, policy documents, institutional reports, and statistical data related to Hallyu and South Korea's cultural diplomacy. Particular attention is given to materials published by South Korean government agencies and cultural institutions, including the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST), the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), and the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE). International organizations, academic databases, and relevant studies on Hallyu, soft power, and cultural diplomacy are also consulted to provide broader analytical perspectives and to cross-check information.

The geographical scope of the study focuses on Southeast Asia, with particular reference to countries where Hallyu demonstrated significant early diffusion, including Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. The temporal scope concentrates on the early twenty-first century, particularly the period from the late 1990s to approximately the 2010s, when Hallyu expanded rapidly across Asian markets and became increasingly associated with South Korea's cultural diplomacy. This period is important because it represents the formative stage in which Hallyu developed from a regional

popular-cultural phenomenon into a broader instrument of international cultural engagement.

For data analysis, the study applies qualitative content analysis to identify major patterns in South Korea's deployment of Hallyu. Documents and relevant materials are examined according to several analytical dimensions, including: (1) government policies and institutional support for Hallyu; (2) major cultural diplomacy programs and initiatives; (3) the roles of state and non-state actors; (4) the major cultural industries and products involved; and (5) the relationship between Hallyu promotion, national image, and South Korea's diplomatic objectives. The analysis also considers the interaction between government-led initiatives and market-driven activities in order to distinguish between spontaneous cultural diffusion and strategically supported cultural expansion.

To enhance the reliability of the findings, information is cross-checked across multiple sources rather than relying on a single institution or type of document. Academic studies are compared with government reports, institutional publications, and available statistical evidence to identify consistent patterns and reduce potential source bias. The study does not attempt to establish a direct causal relationship between Hallyu and specific diplomatic outcomes. Instead, it seeks to explain the strategies and mechanisms through which Hallyu was incorporated into South Korea's broader cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

Through this methodological framework, the study provides a systematic examination of Hallyu as both a popular-cultural phenomenon and a strategic cultural resource. The approach enables the research to connect cultural production and dissemination with broader questions of soft power, cultural diplomacy, national image, and international engagement, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of South Korea's cultural diplomacy strategy in Southeast Asia during the early twenty-first century.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Support from the South Korean Government

Hallyu is not a random phenomenon but the result of a deliberate political strategy, strongly supported and funded by the South Korean government. Since the 1990s, the government has recognized the potential of the cultural industry as a new growth engine, and has since set the goal of developing the domestic popular culture industry. After the 1997 Asian financial crisis, in the context of the South Korean economy's over-reliance on

manufacturing industries, the state directed a shift towards higher value-added industries, with culture becoming a breakthrough area. This policy facilitated the entry of South Korean cultural products into the Asian market and their circulation as regular export goods.

In this process, the South Korean government acts as a “popular culture promoter,” transforming Hallyu into a national campaign – a project combining state and enterprise. Hallyu is strategically built and restructured, operating as a comprehensive administrative program from pre-production to marketing. The goal is not only to create a new export industry, but also to accumulate “symbolic capital,” contributing to enhancing the nation's standing in the global competitive environment (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021, pp.21–22).

The bar chart below shows ASEAN as South Korea's second-largest trading partner, demonstrating growth over the years, affirming the importance of Southeast Asia in the overall economic and cultural diplomacy strategy.

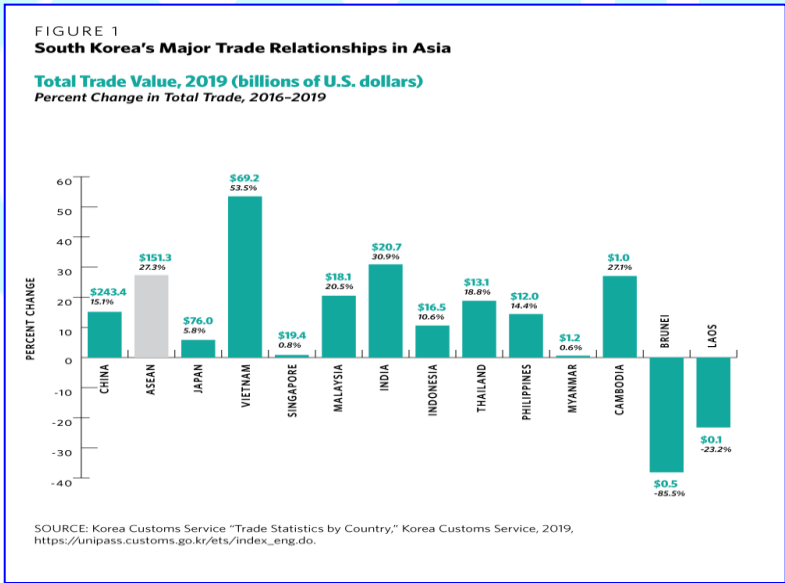


Chart 1: Cultural Diplomacy Strategy – Value Export Overview (2016–2019)
Source: Korea Customs Service, “Trade Statistics by Country”, 2019

The central role of the government in coordinating and promoting Hallyu is evident through its cultural and diplomatic policies. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST) and the Korea Foundation for Cultural Exchange (KOCIS) are key agencies implementing promotional programs in Southeast Asia. According to KOCIS (2015), by 2015, South Korea had established more than 20 cultural centers in countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, organizing cultural

promotion events such as Hanbok exhibitions, cooking classes, and free film screenings. These efforts demonstrate that Hallyu is not merely a spontaneous market phenomenon but a product of public policy (Hallyu-hwa), aimed at optimizing the synergistic impact of cultural industries.

Country	Number of Embassies & Consulates
Indonesia	120
Malaysia	108
Thai Lan	107
Philippines	96
Viet Nam	94

Table 2: Statistical table showing the number of South Korean embassies and consulates in Southeast Asian countries, illustrating the level of South Korea's diplomatic presence in the region.

Source: Global Diplomatic Map 2024 (Seasia Stats)

The South Korean government has implemented a series of measures to institutionalize and expand Hallyu. First, in terms of support structure, agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), MCST, the Korea Foundation, and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) play a core role in public diplomacy (Melissen & Sohn, 2016, p.125). Second, Hallyu is integrated into the nation's comprehensive foreign policy strategy. 2010 was designated by the MOFA as the "first year of public diplomacy," and the agency created the position of Public Diplomacy Ambassador and issued a "Cultural Diplomacy Handbook" to formalize the policy. Third, Hallyu is incorporated into national strategies such as "globalization", "nation branding," and "Global Korea." These strategies, particularly under Presidents Kim Young-sam and Lee Myung-bak, utilized soft power to enhance the nation's image internationally (Lee, 2016, p.5). Fourth, the government also invested significantly financially and legally, enacting supportive laws such as the Film Promotion Act (1995) and the Cultural Industry Promotion Act (1999), along with large budget packages for cultural development. Fifth, South Korea implemented a public-private partnership mechanism between ministries and major businesses to promote Hallyu, exemplified by its collaboration with the Federation of Korean Industries and major entertainment corporations. A prime example is the annual "Korea Festival" in

ASEAN countries, which combines K-pop music performances, film screenings, presentations of traditional festivals (such as Chuseok), calligraphy art, and folk games. The government also collaborates closely with entertainment companies such as SM, YG, and JYP Entertainment to organize K-pop tours in Southeast Asia (Shim, 2006).

Below is a table compiled by the author outlining events demonstrating the South Korean government's proactive support for cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia—from institutions, cooperation funds, and policies to linguistic-cultural infrastructure and specialized agencies.

Source	Year of Implementation	Supporting Content	Data	Highlights Expected Impact
ASEAN Culture House (Busan) – Ministry of Foreign Affairs of South Korea & Korea Foundation	2017	Establish an ASEAN cultural center in Busan; organize exhibitions, film screenings, educational programs, and cultural exchanges.	A permanent facility, running dozens of programs per year.	Creating a platform for bilateral exchanges and enhancing ASEAN-Korea understanding.
ASEAN-ROK Cooperation Fund (AKCF)	1990–present	Intergovernmental cooperation fund finances cultural, arts, and education projects. New Southern Policy considers ASEAN as a pillar; promoting economic, social,	>400 projects implemented; program support KCONNECT ASEAN	Strengthening long-term cultural cooperation and increasing South Korea's presence in the ASEAN space.

		and cultural exchanges.		
New Southern Policy (NSP) – Moon Jae-in's government	2017–2022	The New Southern Policy views ASEAN as a cornerstone; promoting economic, social, and cultural exchanges.	President Moon visited all 10 ASEAN countries in just two years.	Placing ASEAN at the center of foreign policy; expanding the platform for Hallyu in the region
Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) – Yoon Suk-yeol's government	2022	Commitment to increasing funding for three ASEAN cooperation funds; linking cultural diplomacy with the Indo-Pacific strategy.	Significantly increase funding and expand areas of exchange.	Maintaining South Korea's soft power in ASEAN and ensuring policy continuity.
King Sejong Institute (KSI)	2007–present	Official Korean language teaching center in ASEAN countries.	2024: 256 campuses in 88 countries, >210,000 learners; numerous branches in Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines.	Enhancing the dissemination of language and culture, creating a community of Korean language learners.
Korean Cultural Centers (KCC) – MCST	2009–present	Establish Korean cultural centers in Hanoi, Jakarta, Bangkok, and other locations.	Many annual cultural festivals (for example, Korean Culture Day 2025 in Ho Chi Minh City)	Promoting Korean culture directly to the ASEAN public.

KOCCA (Korea Creative Content Agency)	2009–present	Government agencies promote the content industry; open offices in Vietnam.	KOCCA offices in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City support Hallyu businesses.	Directly support K-pop, K-drama, games, and webtoons in the ASEAN market.
KOFICE (Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange)	2003–present	Public funds implement international cultural exchange projects.	Annual program in Singapore, Vietnam...	Enhancing South Korea's image as a friendly and dynamic cultural partner.

The identification of Hallyu as a national policy initiative reflects the institutional scale of this phenomenon. Accordingly, Hallyu is no longer a natural expression of market exchange, but a process coordinated by the state. The concept of “Hallyu-hwa”—meaning “Hallyu-ization”—refers to the deliberate effort to expand the sphere of influence of Hallyu, including non-cultural fields such as tourism, cosmetics, healthcare, education, and traditional crafts. Hallyu-hwa represents Hallyu's role as a kind of “meta-capital” in the global market, bringing symbolic and substantive benefits in diplomacy, economics, and politics. This is a politically driven process, propelled by the strong development of Korean popular culture in the context of new liberal globalization, and reflects the strategic will of the nation (Lee, 2015, p.50).

Agencies such as MCST and MOFA continue to play a pivotal role in public diplomacy. MCST established the Hallyu Support and Cooperation Division to effectively leverage the value brought about by the Korean Wave, while MOFA integrated public diplomacy into its overall foreign policy, renaming the Culture Division to the Public Diplomacy Division and implementing comprehensive programs through the Korea Foundation. MOFA's activities primarily aim to enhance international recognition of Korean cultural assets and achievements, while MCST focuses on teaching the Korean language and promoting traditional and popular culture. In the current context, public diplomacy in Korea is seen as

a tool of mediating power, operating through cultural connections and perceived values from the cultural industry (Melissen & Sohn, 2016, p.214).

In addition, South Korea also invests in cultural product development funds such as the Korea Film Foundation (KOFIC) and the Korea Music Foundation (KMF), aiming to produce content targeting the international market, especially Southeast Asia. According to Lee (2017), the budget for cultural promotion in this region increased from US\$50 million in 2005 to over US\$200 million in 2015, demonstrating the government's high priority for the Hallyu strategy.

4.2 Utilizing Digital Media and Technology

The rapid development of digital technology, especially social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and social networking services (SNS), has become a new driving force for the global spread of Hallyu. These platforms play a vital role in supporting the dissemination of Korean popular culture to many countries, far exceeding the traditional scope of Hallyu 1.0 – which primarily focused on exporting cultural products to East Asia. In the context of Hallyu 2.0, digital media has brought about fundamental changes in the Korean creative industry, contributing to the formation of a highly interactive global cultural ecosystem.

Social media has largely replaced the role of traditional media such as television, print, and radio in disseminating cultural information. Unlike traditional media, which is limited by commercial factors and content control, social media reflects diverse personal interests and concerns, thus being more effective in spreading Hallyu (Yang, 2012, p.138). Platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram are not just communication channels, but also essential tools for building fan communities, interacting directly, and strengthening cultural ties. A prime example is Psy's "Gangnam Style" phenomenon on YouTube, which became an icon of a global cultural wave (Jeong, 2022, p.126).

Online media has become a crucial bridge helping the Hallyu wave reach and spread to the global public. Online articles, videos, and social media content have contributed to the rapid dissemination of Korean images, music, and films beyond national borders. According to Park and Kim (2019), online news played a key role in expanding Hallyu's influence from East Asia to other regions such as North America and Europe, thanks to the convenience, accessibility, and strong dissemination capabilities of digital platforms.

A clear example is the case of the K-pop group BTS. Online media has strongly impacted the process of making BTS a global cultural phenomenon. Online articles on major platforms like Billboard and Naver not only helped BTS solidify their name in Korea but also built a large fan base in many other countries. Lee (2020) asserts that the interaction between online news sites and readers through articles about BTS has contributed to the formation of a cohesive global fan community, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries.

Another prime example of the role of online news in spreading Hallyu is the development of Soompi, one of the leading international news channels on Korean culture. With millions of monthly visits, Soompi not only provides K-pop news but also introduces Korean fashion, cosmetics, and lifestyle trends. As a result, the international public can regularly and directly access Hallyu content (Kim & Kim, 2018).

Similarly, AllKpop is also an important platform in promoting Hallyu. This platform facilitates the rapid dissemination of news related to Korean artists, while also providing detailed information about newly released cultural events and products, helping global fans keep up with trends (Jung & Lee, 2021). These platforms, along with social media, have acted as global “gateways,” directly connecting Hallyu with international audiences.

To better illustrate the power of online news in promoting the development of Hallyu, this thesis uses a comparative data table on the level of influence in Southeast Asia from 2000 to the present. The table focuses on three main factors: K-pop views on YouTube, the amount of time spent watching Korean dramas on online platforms, and the number of mentions of Hallyu on social media. The data is compiled by the author from various recent studies on Hallyu, reflecting the practical development trends of this phenomenon in the digital space.

Year	K-pop YouTube Views (billion views)	Time spent watching Korean dramas (million hours)	Hallyu mentions on social media (million mentions)
2000	0.2	10	1
2005	1.5	60	5
2010	4.8	180	20
2015	8.0	350	50
2020	12.3	600	120
2023	15.0	750	150

In Southeast Asia, the role of digital media in spreading Hallyu is clearly demonstrated by the shift from traditional television broadcasting to online platforms. In the early 21st century, Korean dramas such as *Boys Over Flowers* (2009) and *Secret Garden* (2010) were popularized through regional television stations such as VTV (Vietnam), Channel 7 (Thailand), and ABS-CBN (Philippines). However, the emergence and development of online platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and Viki has opened a new era, in which more than 60% of young people in Southeast Asia consume Korean cultural content through streaming services with multilingual subtitles.

Research by Lee and Park (2019) shows that the broadcast of Korean dramas such as *Winter Sonata* (2002) and *Jewel in the Palace* (2003) not only increased the popularity of Korea in Japan and China, but also laid the foundation for the formation of Hallyu fan communities in these countries. *Winter Sonata* is considered a significant milestone, both promoting the Hallyu wave and creating an image of a romantic, modern, yet distinctly East Asian Korea, thereby making a strong impression on international audiences. Jung (2015) noted that this drama became a social phenomenon in Japan due to its repeated broadcasts on television channels, contributing to increased appreciation for Korean culture. Cho (2005) added that this success also led to a surge in demand for other cultural products such as music, cosmetics, and food, while simultaneously boosting tourism and the Korean economy. Another case demonstrating the power of television is the drama *Descendants of the Sun* (2016), which achieved resounding success not only in South Korea but also in many countries such as China, Thailand, and the Philippines. The drama created a social phenomenon as its plot and characters became cultural icons, and it also significantly boosted tourism to the filming locations (Choi, 2018). Kim (2017) also noted that simultaneous broadcasting on KBS2 (South Korea) and iQiyi (China) attracted hundreds of millions of online views in a short time, thus confirming the power of television in shaping the national image and expanding the influence of Korean culture globally.

Similarly, the drama *Dae Jang Geum* (2003) is a prime example of the cultural spread of television. Broadcast in over 90 countries, including China, Iran, and Turkey, it introduced international audiences to aspects of Korean history, culture, and social values through the story of a female royal cook in the Joseon dynasty (Lee, 2008). The success of *Dae Jang*

Geum not only solidified Hallyu's position but also directly contributed to boosting Korean tourism, with many filming locations becoming popular destinations for international visitors.

Besides television dramas, Korean entertainment programs also play a significant role in expanding Hallyu's influence. Running Man is a prime example, quickly becoming a global entertainment phenomenon thanks to its combination of humor, drama, and Korean cultural identity. Kim & Lee (2017) stated that the program had been licensed and broadcast in over 15 countries in Asia and Europe, thereby increasing the popularity of participating artists and strengthening the image of Hallyu. In particular, in China, the remake titled Hurry Up, Brother (2014) achieved millions of views per episode, contributing to expanding Hallyu's influence into advertising, commerce, and tourism (Li & Park, 2019).

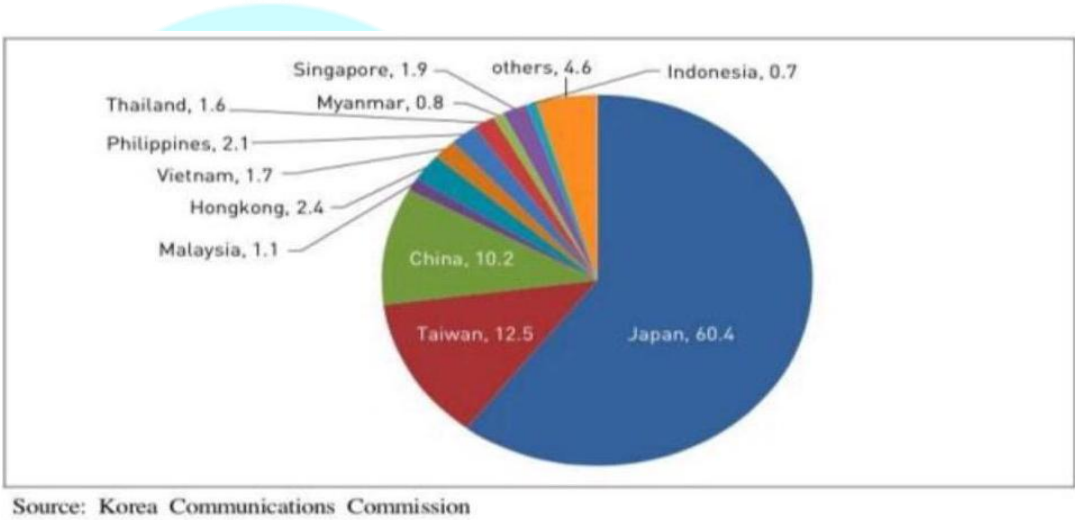


Chart 3: Percentage of Korean television program exports to Southeast Asia (USD value)
Source: Korea Communications Commission, 2011

The pie chart shows the scale of Hallyu's influence through television in Southeast Asia: Vietnam accounts for 1.7%, the Philippines 2.1%, Malaysia 1.1%, and Thailand 1.8% of the total value of South Korean television exports.

From these examples, it can be seen that South Korean television—including dramas and entertainment programs—not only provides entertainment value but also becomes an effective tool in South Korea's cultural diplomacy strategy. The widespread influence of television products has significantly contributed to shaping the national image, promoting

international understanding and goodwill, and laying the foundation for the sustainable development of the Hallyu wave.

The "Digital Hallyu" strategy reflects South Korea's systematic efforts to leverage technology to enhance its national standing. Besides investing in advanced information technology infrastructure, the South Korean government also implements national programs to shape cultural branding through wired and wireless internet (Lee, 2022, p. 72). Major entertainment companies such as SM, YG, and HYBE actively use social media to build global fan communities. For example, K-pop groups like EXO, Girls' Generation, and BTS maintain regular interaction with fans through Twitter, Instagram, and fancafe platforms. The "BTS ARMY" campaign on Twitter attracted millions of fans in Southeast Asia, contributing to the formation of a highly connected global community (Jung, 2011).

The South Korean government also actively supports digital media campaigns such as "Visit Korea," which collaborates with K-pop artists to promote tourism, attracting millions of visitors from Southeast Asia each year (KTO, 2019). Furthermore, livestreaming and virtual reality (VR) technologies were used to enhance cultural experiences amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Online concerts such as "SMTOWN LIVE" and "BTS Map of the Soul ON: E" attracted millions of viewers in Southeast Asia. According to a HYBE report (2021), the region contributed over 40% of global revenue from online music events, highlighting Southeast Asia's strategic role in consuming Korean cultural content.

The convergence of multimedia and telecommunications technologies has led to profound changes in how cultural content is produced, distributed, and consumed. Digital technology has not only expanded the reach of Hallyu but also increased the demand for media products. South Korea has effectively leveraged new technologies to develop creative fields such as video games, animation, and K-pop. Before the rise of social media, K-pop artists' access to Western markets was limited. However, thanks to the support of platforms like YouTube and Twitter, K-pop has overcome traditional barriers, expanding its influence to more distant regions. According to Melissen and Sohn (2016, p. 220), South Korea's public diplomacy has also adapted to the new media environment by integrating online content into its national communication strategy.

The concept of Hallyu 2.0, proposed by Dal Yong Jin, emphasizes the close relationship between digital technology, social media, and how users access Korean culture. According to Jin, digital technology is a prerequisite for Hallyu to transform into a global phenomenon. For the younger generation, digital media becomes a “comprehensive institution,” influencing every aspect of life, from personal identity and self-expression to learning and socialization (Lee, 2015, p.39). Hallyu is not just a cultural phenomenon but also a widely influential socio-technological structure in the digital age.

4.3 Economic and Educational Cooperation

The spread of Korean popular culture, or Hallyu, has been utilized by the Korean government and organizations as an effective tool to enhance the national image and strengthen partnerships with Southeast Asian countries, especially within the framework of Korea-ASEAN cooperation. The growing interest in Korean cultural products has led to a significant increase in the number of Korean language learners, international students, and tourists visiting Korea (Kamaruddin, 2023, p.292). In response, Korea has expanded long-term scholarship programs, particularly in technical education and vocational training, and implemented short-term exchange programs to encourage ASEAN students to explore study opportunities in Korea.

Hallyu is not only a cultural phenomenon but also a lever for economic and educational aspects in South Korea's foreign policy. The popularization of popular culture content such as K-pop dramas, K-pop music, and food has boosted consumption of Korean products in Southeast Asia, particularly cosmetics, fashion, and processed foods. According to Lee (2017), Korean cosmetics exports to Southeast Asia tripled between 2005 and 2015, primarily due to the promotional influence of K-pop artists and television actors. Brands like AmorePacific, The Face Shop, and Lotte have expanded their presence in major urban centers such as Bangkok, Jakarta, and Ho Chi Minh City.

In the food sector, Korean products such as kimchi, bulgogi, bibimbap, instant noodles, and restaurant chains like BBQ Chicken have been widely accepted in Southeast Asia. According to data from the Korean Ministry of Agriculture (2020), Korean food exports to the region reached US\$2 billion in 2019, a 20% increase from the previous year.

In the context of globalization and the strong spread of the Hallyu wave, cuisine has emerged as an important element in Korea's cultural promotion strategy and soft diplomacy. Not limited to music, film, or fashion, Korean cuisine—with typical traditional dishes such as kimchi, bulgogi, and bibimbap—has become a familiar part of the cultural life of many Southeast Asian countries. Lee (2020) argues that exporting and promoting cuisine not only serves economic purposes but also acts as an effective means of building and strengthening Korea's soft power in the region.

To promote the presence of its cuisine in the international arena, Korea has implemented various promotional strategies in Southeast Asia. One popular method is expanding the Korean restaurant system in major cities such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Bangkok, and Jakarta. Park (2019) emphasizes that the rapid increase of popular restaurant chains such as BBQ Chicken, KyoChon, and Bonchon not only spreads Korean cuisine but also allows local people to directly experience Korean culture through the design and service style of the restaurants.

Furthermore, cultural and culinary events such as the Korean Food Festival, held regularly in Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia, have contributed to strengthening cultural ties between Korea and the local public. These events both introduce traditional dishes and provide opportunities for hands-on experience, thereby promoting mutual understanding and building a positive image of Korea (Nguyen, 2020). Simultaneously, reality TV shows like *Running Man* and Korean dramas frequently incorporate images of Korean cuisine, increasing the appeal and popularity of Korean food in ASEAN (Choi & Kim, 2021). For example, the appearance of tteokbokki in many programs has quickly made it a popular choice in Vietnam and Thailand (Lim, 2019).

Korean cuisine also demonstrates a practical role in promoting cultural diplomacy and increasing South Korea's regional influence. Park (2018) argues that the increasing engagement of Southeast Asian publics with Korean food products in their daily lives has helped to enhance cultural acceptance, strengthen bilateral relations, and increase South Korea's political and economic influence in the region. A specific example is the K-Food Support project in Thailand, implemented through cooperation between the Korean government and local food distributors. According to Lim (2020), this program not only

expands the commercial market share for Korean products but also strengthens cultural presence through cuisine.

In addition, culinary cultural exchange programs between South Korea and ASEAN, such as teaching and exchange activities of Korean chefs in Vietnam and Indonesia, have played a significant role in increasing mutual understanding and expanding inter-sectoral cooperation. Lee (2019) asserts that these activities not only create culinary connections but also lay the foundation for cooperation in other fields such as tourism and trade, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of Korean cultural diplomacy in the region

South Korea is also actively promoting educational cooperation as part of its public diplomacy and soft power strategy. Interest in Hallyu has significantly contributed to the increase in the number of ASEAN students studying in South Korea. According to Ahn (2019, p. 110), the number of Vietnamese students studying in South Korea surpassed that of China in 2018, reflecting the effectiveness of scholarship programs, academic exchanges, and cultural promotion. Furthermore, the Korean Government Scholarship Fund (KGSP) and Sejong Hakdang language centers have been widely implemented, with over 50 centers operating in Southeast Asia as of 2020 (King Sejong Institute, 2020). Leading universities such as Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University have established specialized courses on Korean culture, integrating Hallyu content into their curricula to attract international students.

The combination of Hallyu and official development assistance (ODA) also plays a crucial role in South Korea's foreign policy strategy. Based on its experience of rapid development, South Korea has implemented initiatives such as Korea Aid to share its development model with developing countries (Ayhan, 2017, p.26). ODA programs in Southeast Asia focus on human resource training, rural development, resource management, and technical education (Er, 2023, p.65), thereby increasing South Korea's political and development influence.

Korean popular culture also helps to alleviate political concerns in bilateral relations with ASEAN countries. Public favor of Hallyu makes it easier for Southeast Asian governments to promote relations with South Korea without domestic opposition. This gives South Korea a significant advantage in positioning itself as a friendly and reliable partner in the

region (Celik, 2017, p.95). South Korea's positive image is reflected in the widespread popularity of its language, cuisine, cosmetics, aesthetics, and lifestyle in Southeast Asian countries.

Cultural diplomacy, particularly in the field of higher education, is an essential part of South Korea's internationalization efforts. Through sharing cultural values, development models, and academic support, South Korea has solidified its position as a dynamic and open development model. Hallyu, therefore, is not only a cultural phenomenon but also a strategic tool effectively used in expanding South Korea's influence in Southeast Asia across three dimensions: cultural, economic, and educational.

4.4 Integration of Traditional and Modern Culture

Some scholars argue that South Korean popular culture products possess a unique characteristic: combining Western forms with content deeply influenced by Confucian tradition. This blend has created a particular appeal for Asian youth, who tend to favor products with a modern style while still maintaining familiar traditional values (Yang, 2012, p.111). One of the highlights of Hallyu is its ability to harmonize modern and traditional elements. Historical dramas like *Dae Jang Geum* and *Yi San* not only contribute to popularizing Korean history but also convey values such as filial piety, community spirit, and traditional cultural rituals. According to Kim and Ryoo (2007), these elements easily evoke empathy in Southeast Asian audiences, a region with many similarities in family and social values.

Hallyu is considered a prime example of glocal culture, reflecting the ability to flexibly combine Western and Asian values within the framework of Korean cultural products. Through the expression of universal values such as pure love, family values, and aspirations for modernization, Hallyu products retain their distinctive Korean cultural characteristics. Many works adapt American and Western cultural archetypes to suit Asian tastes by incorporating Confucian values into the narrative structure of films, television, and music. According to Cicchelli and Octobre (2021, p.99), Hallyu does not oppose Western culture but represents a hybrid culture that absorbs both Eastern and Western influences while affirming a worldview with Korean identity.

In the music industry, K-pop groups like BTS, BLACKPINK, and Red Velvet often incorporate traditional elements such as folk instruments (gayageum, haegeum) or traditional dances into their contemporary productions. For example, BTS's music video "IDOL" (2018) incorporated mask dances and hanbok costumes, contributing to its unique identity and attracting global attention. Similarly, BLACKPINK included court dance elements in their music video "How You Like That" (2020), thereby supporting the promotion of Korean cultural heritage.

In addition, traditional cultural exchange activities such as Hanbok exhibitions, food festivals, and calligraphy workshops are regularly held in Southeast Asian countries. According to KOCIS (2019), between 2010 and 2019, more than 100 such events were implemented in the region, attracting millions of attendees. These activities not only contribute to enhancing understanding of Korean culture but also create a balance between modernization and traditional preservation within the framework of Hallyu.

Hallyu is defined as a process of cultural hybridity, in which indigenous Korean elements are combined with international forms and styles, especially from the United States and Japan. This is not merely imitation but a creative adaptation to simultaneously meet local and global tastes. For example, the group Seo Taeji and Boys pioneered the combination of American pop music elements (Rap, Metal, Rock) with the aesthetics and emotions of Korean youth.

The ability to combine modernity and tradition is also considered a key factor in Hallyu's success. Korean popular culture products express a worldview that is both technologically advanced and positively individualistic, while also being deeply connected to a sense of collectivism and traditional aesthetics. According to Cicchelli and Octobre (2021, p.235), Hallyu portrays a dynamic and innovative Korean society that still respects cultural values and historical memory, reflecting Korea's high adaptability after historical upheavals.

Despite their hybrid aesthetic, Hallyu products still convey distinctive Korean values. They express pure love, family spirit (familism), and Confucian values through their unique narrative structure. This is considered a key difference from the "Cool Japan" strategy, which focuses on image promotion with less emphasis on spreading profound cultural values. At the same time, Hallyu contributes to creating an image of a "sweet" and non-

threatening Korea, in contrast to the soft power of countries with a history of imperialism. This image is built on a foundation that combines regional and global influence with carefully selected memories of the past to avoid negative associations (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021, p.23).

South Korea's globalization strategies, such as the Segyehwa policy under President Kim Young-sam and Global Korea under President Lee Myung-bak, have laid the institutional and policy foundation for promoting Hallyu as a tool of cultural diplomacy. The Segyehwa policy incorporated a global vision into South Korea's foreign policy, aiming to make the country an advanced nation in the 21st century. Meanwhile, Global Korea leveraged the concept of middle power to increase influence by promoting Korean cultural products, heritage, landscapes, and cuisine to enhance the nation's standing on the international stage (Cicchelli & Octobre, 2021, p. 25).

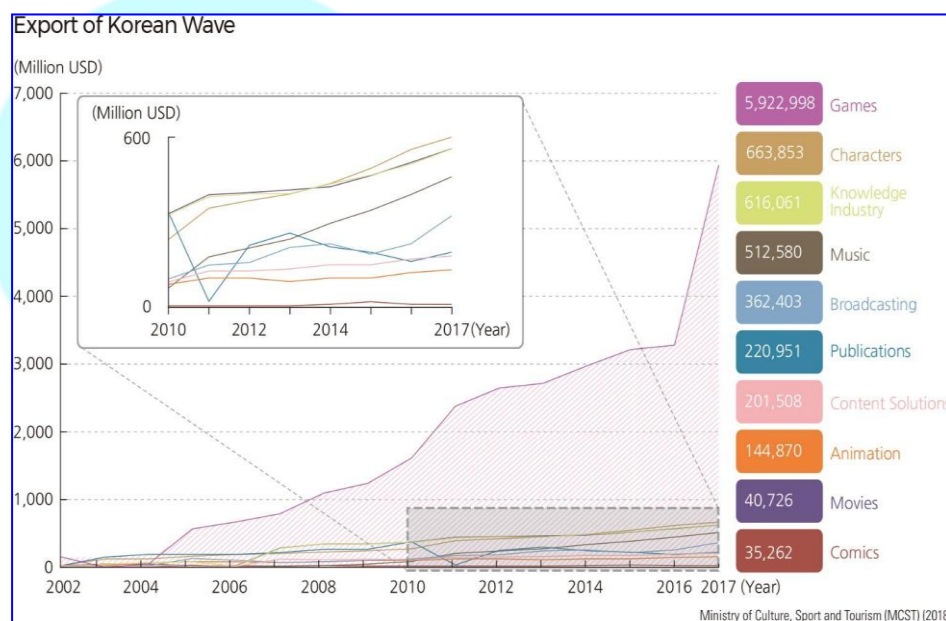


Chart 4: Chart showing the export value of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) by cultural sector from 2002 to 2017

Source: Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST), Republic of Korea, 2018

The chart shows detailed growth rates from 2010–2017 for high-value industries, clearly revealing short-term growth trends.

In short, South Korea's cultural strategy aims to build and promote a hybrid, aesthetically pleasing popular culture, successfully combining modern Western elements with a

distinctive Asian-Korean sensibility. This combination not only creates attractive cultural products for the global market, especially in Southeast Asia, but also contributes to shaping the image of a modern, creative, friendly, and culturally rich South Korea – an image of strategic value in implementing soft power through cultural diplomacy. The success of this strategy is largely due to the active support of the government through guiding policies and specialized organizational structures.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the strategy of deploying Hallyu as an instrument of South Korea's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia during the early twenty-first century. The analysis demonstrates that Hallyu was not simply a popular cultural phenomenon driven by the commercial success of Korean entertainment products, but increasingly became an important cultural resource that supported South Korea's broader diplomatic and international objectives. The expansion of Korean dramas, K-pop, entertainment programs, and other cultural products created opportunities for South Korea to communicate its culture, values, and national image to audiences across Southeast Asia.

A key finding of the study is that the international expansion of Hallyu resulted from the interaction between market-driven cultural production and government-supported cultural diplomacy. While private entertainment companies played a central role in producing and distributing competitive cultural content, the South Korean government and cultural institutions increasingly provided policy support, institutional infrastructure, international cultural programs, and promotional mechanisms. This cooperation between state and non-state actors enabled Hallyu to expand beyond commercial markets and become increasingly connected to South Korea's broader cultural diplomacy.

Southeast Asia represented an important strategic region in this process. The region's large and relatively young population, growing media connectivity, and expanding cultural and economic exchanges with South Korea created favorable conditions for the diffusion of Hallyu. The popularity of Korean cultural products also encouraged broader interest in Korean language, food, tourism, lifestyle, and consumer products. In this sense, Hallyu contributed to increasing cultural familiarity and people-to-people connections between South Korea and Southeast Asian societies. Cultural attraction therefore provided an

important foundation for strengthening South Korea's broader presence and relationships in the region.

The findings further suggest that Hallyu contributed to South Korea's soft power by enhancing the country's attractiveness rather than relying primarily on coercive or material forms of influence. However, the relationship between Hallyu and diplomatic outcomes should not be understood as automatic or linear. Cultural popularity does not necessarily translate directly into political influence. Instead, Hallyu created a favorable environment in which diplomatic engagement, cultural exchange, tourism, education, and economic cooperation could be strengthened. Its diplomatic significance therefore lies partly in its ability to create familiarity, positive perceptions, and social connections that complement formal diplomatic relations.

Overall, the Korean experience demonstrates how a middle-power state can strategically utilize popular culture to enhance its international visibility and cultural influence. The early expansion of Hallyu in Southeast Asia provided an important foundation for the subsequent globalization of Korean culture and contributed to the development of South Korea's cultural diplomacy. The case also illustrates that effective cultural diplomacy requires not only attractive cultural content but also sustained institutional support, cooperation between public and private actors, and adaptation to the cultural characteristics of target societies.

In conclusion, Hallyu should be understood as both a cultural phenomenon and a strategic resource within South Korea's international engagement. Its deployment in Southeast Asia during the early twenty-first century illustrates the growing importance of culture in contemporary diplomacy and international relations. The South Korean experience offers broader implications for understanding how states can transform cultural popularity into long-term international influence while maintaining cultural exchange and mutual understanding as important foundations of diplomatic relations.

References

1. Cicchelli, V., & Octobre, S. (2021). *Sociology of Hallyu pop culture*. Springer International Publishing.

2. Hwang, J.E. (2013). South Korean Cultural Diplomacy and Brokering “K- Culture” outside Asia. *Korean History*, vol.4
3. Iwabuchi, K., Tsai, E., & Berry, C. (Eds.). (2016). *Routledge handbook of East Asian popular culture*. Routledge.
4. Jeon Kyu Chan, Yoon Tae Jin (2005). 아시아 문화의 흐름과 한류, 한국방송학보 통권 19-3 호, 66-87
5. Jeong, H. W. (2022). *South Korea's middle power diplomacy in the Middle East: Development, political and diplomatic trajectories*. Routledge.
6. Jin, D. Y. (2016). *New Korean Wave: Transnational cultural power in the age of social media*. University of Illinois Press.
7. Jo Han Hye Jeong. (2003). 조한혜정 외, 한류와아시아의대중문화, 연세대학교출판부 .
8. Kim Soo Jung. (2012). 김수정, 동남아에서 한류의 특성과 문화취향의 초국가적 흐름, 방송과 커뮤니케이션 제 13 권 제 1 호, 5-54
9. Kim, J. (2016). *The Korean Wave: A new pop culture phenomenon*. Korea Foundation.
10. Kim, Y., & Ni, L. (2011). *The Korean Wave: Korean media go global*. Routledge.
11. Korea Foundation. (2019). *Hallyu White Paper 2018*. Korea Foundation.
12. Lee, S., & Kim, S. (Eds.). (2022). *Korea's middle power diplomacy: Between power and network*. Springer Nature.
13. Lee, S., & Nornes, A. M. (Eds.). (2015). *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the age of social media*. University of Michigan Press.
14. Melissen, J., & Sohn, Y. (Eds.). (2016). *Understanding public diplomacy in East Asia: Middle powers in a troubled region*. Springer.
15. Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. Public Affairs.
16. Yang, J.(2012).동아시아의 한류: 한국 드라마를 시청하는 중국인, 일본인, 대만인들의 비교.

