

Cultural Diplomacy through the People: A Case Study of the Political Significance of the K-Pop Industry

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the K-pop industry has experienced unprecedented global growth, transforming Korean music into a central component of South Korea's cultural and economic influence. However, these effects reach past this into international politics. While previous scholarship has largely focused on "great powers" and their efforts, this paper explores how middle powers, particularly South Korea, utilize cultural industries to expand their global power. Through an extensive examination of the K-Pop industry and its expansion across the globe, as well as a statistical analysis of listening and tourism data, this paper argues that the K-Pop industry has served as a model for industries and nations across the world to use cultural diplomacy to impact political outcomes.

Keywords

International Relations, Diplomacy, Cultural Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy, People-to-People, South Korea, K-Pop, China, Japan

1. Introduction

"What can I do?" This is the question that many ask themselves in this increasingly integrated global system. With everything going on in the world, it often feels like there is nothing that the "common" person can do. But the truth is, we have already done so much. Cultural diplomacy, though often overlooked, can change the course of global interactions, and we are the people who run it.

By cultural diplomacy, I refer to the exchange of ideas, information, art, and

other aspects of culture between the peoples of nations with the aim of fostering mutual cultural understanding.¹ This is in contrast to traditional diplomacy, which refers to official state-to-state communications, typically through diplomats and/or political leaders.

There has been plenty of discourse over the past few decades about the successes and failures of cultural diplomacy, particularly surrounding the Cold War, but this scholarship has not extended far. For instance, what makes cultural diplomacy different from traditional diplomacy? What makes it successful? And how do we, the people, have influence through it? This paper will explore the K-pop industry as a case study, discovering how it has affected South Korea's place in the international system, specifically focusing on two key relationships: US/China and Japan. The K-pop industry plays a key role in South Korea's diplomatic relations, embodying the concept of cultural diplomacy. Through the K-pop industry, South Korea has been able to improve relations across the world and secure its position in an increasingly polarized political climate. It acts as a model for how cultural diplomacy can succeed and the factors that make it so.

2. What Is Cultural Diplomacy?

Over the past few decades, there have been many different definitions given for cultural diplomacy. Another commonly used term for cultural diplomacy is public diplomacy, or people-to-people diplomacy. To narrow down what cultural diplomacy means in the context of this paper, we must go back to the origins of the concept, which began with Joseph Nye's "Soft Power." In this work, Nye explains how as nonstate actors become increasingly more relevant in world politics, relationships are altered. As Nye states, "power is a relationship" (Nye, 1990a). therefore, as relationships change, so does the definition of power. This shift in power can be seen through a shift towards "soft power" as opposed to "hard power." Nye defined soft power as the "ability to establish preferences" that is associated with intangible resources (Nye, 1990b). This type of power is distinctly different from the traditional type of "hard power," associated with military and economic strength. The concept of soft power is the basis of cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy attempts to increase a country's soft power.

Now for the term itself, the term "cultural diplomacy" was termed by the United States during the Cold War, as an attempt to replace propaganda (E-Reader, *Public Diplomacy of South Korea*, Kuyoun Chung, Taylor & F, n.d.). That is why many cultural diplomacy studies focus on the Cold War and the USA and USSR. So, what is the difference between cultural diplomacy and propaganda? The PDA defines public diplomacy as "diplomatic activities through which the State promotes foreign nationals' understanding of and enhance confidence in the Republic of Korea (South Korea) directly or in cooperation with local governments or the private sector based on culture, knowledge, policies, etc." (*Public Diplomacy Act*, 2025). While this definition encompasses key aspects of cultural/public di-

¹Holmes, Marcus.

plomacy, such as the purpose and basis of it, it does not fully separate cultural diplomacy from propaganda. Propaganda can also be activities where the State promotes itself.

The *Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (ICD) (2025)* brings in the key factor that differentiates the two in its explanation of what it does. While it has many of the same ideas as the PDA definition, it states that the private sector is the best avenue for cultural diplomacy, saying “Businesses that operate with cultural sensitivity and inclusivity are better positioned to earn public trust, access new markets, and contribute to global dialogue” (*Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (ICD), 2025*). This marks the key distinction between propaganda and cultural diplomacy: cultural diplomacy is led by the people, not the government. It should be from person to person, not from government to person. While the PDA’s definition does recognize the involvement of the private sector, it does not realize the degree of involvement of the private sector and just how important autonomy from the state is to distinguish cultural diplomacy from propaganda. That is where the ICD’s definition improves upon that of the PDA.

In this paper, I will define cultural diplomacy as the exchange of cultural ideas and elements to increase cultural understanding that has a positive impact on the relationships between states, defined by the interaction between the peoples of each state.

3. Historical Analysis of Cultural Diplomacy

The Cold War is often referred to as the origin of both the concept and the term “cultural diplomacy.” In this section, I will explore the cultural diplomacy from the two major axes of the Cold War: The United States and the Soviet Union, and what made these interactions successful or not. This will allow me to apply these examples to the K-pop industry and show how it has been successful.

The American-Yugoslav Initiative

The American-Yugoslav Initiative was an exchange program that aimed to share knowledge of urban planning between the United States and Yugoslavia. This initiative took place in the 1960s and 1970s, after Yugoslavia had separated from the Soviet Union, led by the Ford Foundation. The Ford Foundation collaborated with the US government and Yugoslav universities to encourage this exchange of knowledge. The idea behind this was to help Yugoslavia improve their knowledge of infrastructure and city planning after being a part of the Soviet Union (*Overpromising Technocracy’s Potential: The American-Yugoslav Project, Urban Planning, and Cold War Cultural Diplomacy, Tracy Neumann, 2023*). *There was a lot of back and forth through different grant cycles, including changing leadership, but in the end, the project ended up being deemed a failure and the Ford Foundation pulled out of the project and the US ended up giving the funds to Yugoslav scholars to learn by themselves.*

This program meets all the requirements of the earlier definition of cultural diplomacy, there was an exchange of knowledge between cultures and was led by

academics and students. However, there are a few aspects of this project that point to reasons why it might have been unsuccessful. First, it was made to be a short-term project, lasting only a few years, which is what ended up happening. This approach to cultural diplomacy is likely to have had a negative impact on the project. Cultural diplomacy is meant to positively affect countries' relationships in the long run. That cannot be easily done if the project is viewed as a short-term exchange. Another factor is the elite aspect of it. This exchange was not available to the mass public, but only a select few from each country. This severely limited their ability to connect cultures and the people, as the public wasn't involved at all. Finally, there was not so much exchange of culture as there was an exchange of a specific area of knowledge. While this could have been an avenue towards a further exchange of culture through the interaction of the team members, it was not used this way and therefore was largely unsuccessful. And when the Ford Foundation pulled out, there was no longer a second group to exchange with, there was only the Yugoslavs.

Despite all of this, there were some positive outcomes from the initiative. There were a few cultural exchanges through the program, as shown through the change in Yugoslav infrastructure. While the exchanges were minimal, it is important that they are recognized. In addition, this project has a substantial impact on Yugoslavia's infrastructural development, allowing them to improve their city planning.

Dance for Export

The next example of Cold War cultural diplomacy is what came from President Eisenhower's "Emergency Fund for International Affairs" (Prevots, 1999). This fund was started by Eisenhower in 1954 to combat the overall negative view of America around the world that was being spread. This is thought of as the first cultural exchange program in the US, often called a "peacetime gamble by a war-time hero" (Prevots, 1999). Eisenhower's program was used to fund a wide variety of American artists to tour around the world, allowing a more purposeful projection of the US and Americans.

A big part of this program was the choice of artists. However, even though it was the middle of the Cold War, the selection was not controlled by the CIA or any other government agency. The artists were chosen by a group of their peers, separating the process from any overt political influences. In the middle of an intense political period, both domestic and international, the artists that were funded by this project represented the diverse American population. Jose Limon was the first artist to be sent to Latin America through this program. As a Latino artist, Limon was able to allow the people in Latin America to draw connections between themselves and the US. During a time when the US was being widely criticized for its racial discrimination, this was an immensely crucial step. In addition to Jose Limon, there were several African American artists sent abroad as well, broadcasting a new image of the US to the world.

While this program was funded by the government, it was not directly controlled by it, as artists were chosen by their peers and the artists as individuals

directed the interactions they had with the people in foreign countries. The interaction between private citizens of each country allowed for a mostly unfiltered exchange between countries, showing a successful use of cultural diplomacy.

Soviet Union Cultural Diplomacy in the Cold War

So far, we've talked about two American initiatives during the Cold War. Now let's investigate the Soviet Union's Cold War cultural diplomacy efforts. The Soviet Union was actively supporting cultural exchanges throughout the 20s and 30s, but after the second World War, this support dwindled as Stalin pushed for a resistance of pressure from the West. Cultural exchanges were a large part of this. As paranoia about capitalism increased, so did restrictions on any exchanges between the US and the USSR, especially cultural ones. A key aspect of cultural diplomacy is the exchange. This entails the "gaining of access to the other side's society in return for the granting of corresponding access to one's own." ([The Logic of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy on JSTOR, n.d.](#)). When the USSR started pulling away, that made it extremely difficult for cultural diplomacy to occur, as it took away the second group of the exchange.

However, there were still some acts of cultural diplomacy by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. These acts were primarily through academic exchanges and tourism. While there was a significantly larger portion of Americans visiting the USSR than the other way around to limit capitalist ideas spreading to Soviet people, these cultural ideas still managed to be exchanged. Sports and arts were another key method of cultural diplomacy for the USSR. This allowed them to highlight their own cultural diplomacy, sometimes even allowing pre-Bolshevik cultural ideas to come through.

In examining the success of these exchanges, there is one key factor that affects the effectiveness of these efforts: the motivation of these exchanges. Unfortunately, in many of these exchanges, especially those that were academic, there was an ulterior motive for espionage. Throughout the Cold War, there was extreme paranoia of espionage on both sides, both of which were warranted by the large spy force of each country. This ulterior motive restricts the amount of cultural exchange that can occur because it undermines the concept of diplomacy. It is no longer diplomacy if the goal is to uncover secrets from others unwillingly. In addition, espionage is primarily controlled by the state, not the private sector or the public. This causes it to deviate from the definition of cultural diplomacy.

Overall, these three examples of Cold War cultural diplomacy reveal key factors in what makes cultural diplomacy efforts successful. In each instance, the involvement of the private sector is of key importance, the lack of which leads to failure, as seen in the USSR's attempt that turned into espionage. Another takeaway is the importance of the public's involvement. As seen in the American-Yugoslav Initiative, which only involved a select few, they could not foster much of a connection or understanding. In Eisenhower's Dance for Export program, however, when there was a connection made between the public of each state, there was a more positive reaction and impact on relations. These key takeaways give context as we

begin to explore our case study: the K-pop Industry.

4. Timeline of the K-Pop Industry

To determine the political impact that the K-pop industry has, we must first understand how the K-pop industry became what we know it as today. The industry didn't just come out of nowhere, it evolved into what it is today, tracing back to the end of the Korean War.

The first Korean music group to become popular in the US was the Kim Sisters. The Kim Sisters formed in the 1950s, soon after the armistice between North and South Korea. While they spoke no English, their music made its way to America through their English covers, done completely phonetically. The next key actor in the formation of the industry was Kim Min-ki. Kim Min-ki was a solo artist in the 70s, whose music was one of the first to focus on activism, specifically the anti-democratic protests that were occurring at the time.

The first group to resemble the industry that exists today was Seo Taiji and Boys, who debuted in 1992 with their song *난 알아요* ("I Know"). Seo Taiji and Boys revolutionized K-pop by merging traditional Korean style with American style music, making the genre what it is today ([Seo Taiji and Boys: The First K-Pop Group Guide—Kpopisforeveryone, n.d.](#)). They also pioneered the use of rap in K-pop music, which is now often a defining factor of K-pop music. They also used their music to comment on what was going on, following in Kim Min-ki's footsteps. Seo Taiji and Boys were active until 1996, kickstarting the industry into what it is today.

K-pop is often defined by "generations," separating different eras of K-pop by years. Each generation is approximately 11 years. The First Generation began in 1992 with Seo Taiji and the Boys and ended in 2002. During this generation, most group names were referred to as English acronyms of their Korean names, such as H.O.T., which was the first group to have idols undergo training, which is now the basis of the K-pop industry. In addition, most idols would adhere strictly to the Korean beauty standard of being pale, skin, and symmetrical. This generation was full of beginnings and new innovations in the industry.

The Second Generation refers to the years 2003-2011. In this generation, dances became more intricate and photocards became a part of albums, both of which are defining aspects of the industry today ([Jeannielyn, 2022](#)). There were also big milestones for the K-pop industry abroad. In 2003, the Korean Music Festival sold out its first multi-artist concert in Hollywood. And in 2009, BoA was the first K-Pop artist to have a song in the Billboard top 200, and later that year, Wonder Girls became the first in the top 100, eventually opening for the Jonas Brothers. This generation was full of milestones of international expansion, as well as the economic expansion of the K-pop industry through albums and photocards.

The Third Generation is defined from 2012-2017. This generation was arguably the biggest generation in terms of expanding popularity overseas. In 2012, Psy's *강남 스타일* (Gangnam Style) was released, becoming incredibly popular all across the world, especially in America. Psy's single brought the term "K-pop"

into the US and is still well known today. In addition to Psy, BTS debuted in 2013, eventually becoming a worldwide phenomenon. BTS is, to date, the most popular K-pop artist in America. Finally, this generation saw the emergence of the “global line” (Vasconcelos, 2024). As the name suggests, the global line consists of idols that are not originally from Korean. However, these idols are primarily Asian, specifically from the international Korean community.

The Fourth and Fifth generation (2018-2022, 2023-present) have followed the third generation in expanding globally. The Fourth generation saw an expansion in style, bringing in styles not typically associated with K-pop, as well as the digitalization of the industry, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Fifth generation has seen some of the first non-Asian idols, as well as the first global group, Katseye.

There have been many more key milestones in the past few years. One of which was the inclusion of K-pop idols and groups in the famous Met Gala, Choi San and Psy being the first idols and Stray Kids being the first whole group. In addition to that, there was the naming of some idols as UNICEF global ambassadors, including the boy group SEVENTEEN and Stray Kids’ Felix. And of course, BTS’ impact on the K-pop industry cannot be understated. They had many firsts, including being the first K-pop group to make appearances on many late-night shows and being the first K-pop group to win an American Music Award (American Music Awards, 2025).

The K-pop industry is distinctly separate from the state government, but the state government has gotten increasingly involved in the promotion of K-pop, both internationally and abroad. There have been multiple K-pop performances at state-led functions, as well as some grants from the state given to K-pop companies to support the dissemination of K-pop around the world. This cements the role of the state as a supporting player instead of a controlling one.

Now that we have a clear picture of the expansion of the K-pop industry, we can now start to examine the impact of the K-pop industry on international relationships.

5. Listening Statistics

To gain a full picture of the popularity of K-pop across the world, I analyzed listening statistics from 2010-2024. The reason I chose this range is two-fold. Firstly, Statista, the source of my data, had records beginning in 2010. While I could’ve continued to look for other sources of data, I was already planning on beginning around 2010, as that is when the Republic of Korea established the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, announcing its intentions to focus more on cultural diplomacy. The data stops at 2024 because, although there is data for 2025 listening, the year is ongoing and therefore would skew the data.

Statista had both total views and total likes for all artists, but I decided to focus on total views, as not everyone likes a video or artist when watching their videos. Total views would be more reliable. **Figure 1** shows the graph of the total views per year from 2010-2024.

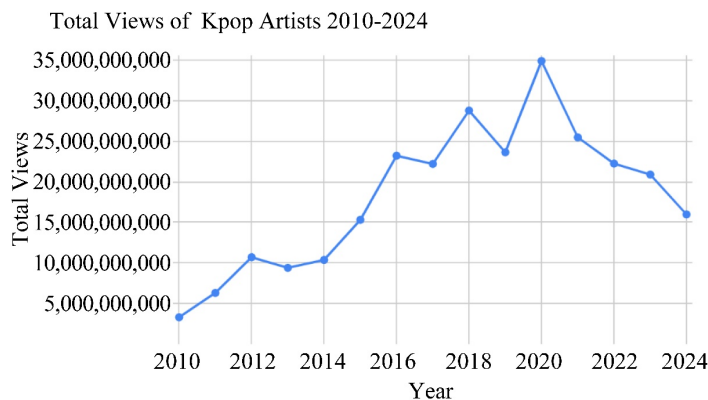


Figure 1. Total views of K-pop Artists 2010-2024.

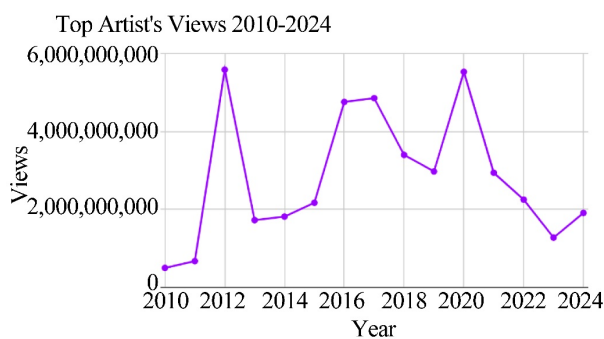


Figure 2. Top artist's views 2010-2024.

In this graph, we can see three big jumps in listening: from 2011-2012, 2015-2016, and 2019-2020. Each of these jumps corresponds to a major event in the earlier timeline. Firstly, 2012 is when Psy's Gangnam Style was released, a huge hit in the States. Next, 2015/16 was when BTS began to become extremely popular. Finally, 2020 was the beginning of COVID. As mentioned earlier, during COVID, the industry started to move online, putting more focus on online promotions and events. This made K-pop music more accessible to people across the world. **Figure 2** supports these jumps in showing the spikes in the listening to the top artists. There are huge spikes in 2012, 2015/16, and 2020 in the top artist's views.

6. Measurement of Soft Power

The next step in this analysis is measuring South Korea's soft power over the years. Irene Wu suggests four primary ways to measure soft power: consumption of media, tourism, education abroad, and emigration. All of these are measured through the number of foreigners visiting, etc. South Korea, not the other way around. For this study, I decided to use tourism as a measure of South Korea's soft power over the years. I chose this for a few reasons. First, the amount of planning and costs it requires makes it a good measure of foreign interest in South Korea. Secondly, international tourism is a large part of South Korea's economy, as its economy is "heavily integrated into international trade and finance" (E-Reader, Public

Diplomacy of South Korea, Kuyoun Chung, Taylor & F, n.d.).

Bae, ES *et al.* conducted a study on the effect of Hallyu, also known as the ‘Korean Wave’ on tourism in South Korea, finding that there is a statistically significant effect from Hallyu on South Korea’s inbound tourists. I plan to expand on this, highlighting the K-pop industry’s specific impact on inbound tourism, which then has a significant impact on international politics.

The data for this study was gathered through the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism’s records of tourists entering the country. Using this data, I created a graph showing the spread from 2000-2024, which can be seen in **Figure 3**. There is, however, one big issue with this data set: the outliers. From 2020-2022, there is a huge dip in tourists due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this, I created a graph excluding those years, which can be seen in **Figure 4**. Both graphs show significant rises in tourism in 2014, 2016, and 2019.



Figure 3. Foreign tourists 2000-2024.

Next, I overlaid the listening data set in **Figure 4**. However, when I first did this, there was a problem with the difference in magnitudes. The listening data was in the billions, while that of tourism was in the millions. Therefore, when overlaid on a graph together, it was extremely difficult to see them together in a way where a comparison was visible in the movement of the data. To reconcile this, I scaled the listening data down by dividing it by 1000. This did not change the relationship between each data point but allowed it to be shown in the same range as the tourist numbers. This comparison can be seen in **Figure 5**.

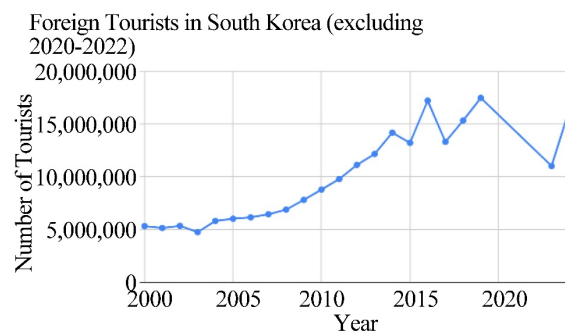


Figure 4. Foreign tourists excluding 2020-2022.

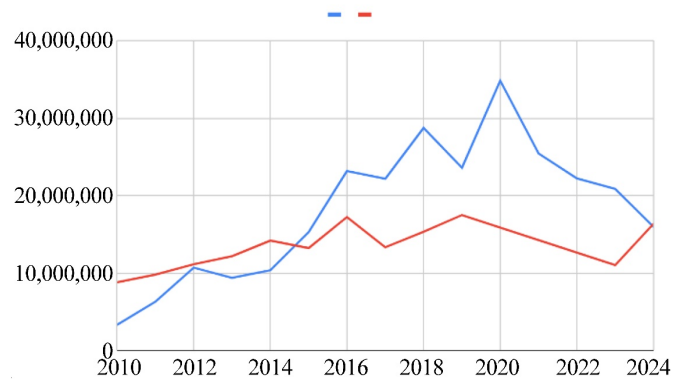


Figure 5. Listening overlaid on Tourism data (excluding 2020-22).

In this graph, we can see a strong correlation between the two sets of data. The red line (tourism) shows rises about a year or two after rises in the blue line (listening). This accounts for the time it takes to plan travel.

To determine their statistical correlation, I calculated the Pearson r coefficient, which measures the amount of correlation there are between the two sets of data. The Pearson coefficient is a number between -1 and 1 , the closer to 0 , the less correlation, and the closer to either end, the higher the correlation. A negative number shows an inverse relationship, while a positive number shows a direct relationship. My hypothesis is that there will be a high positive correlation coefficient between the data sets, as a rise in listening leads to a rise in tourism. **Figure 6** shows the graph of listening statistics (x-axis) against tourism statistics (y-axis).

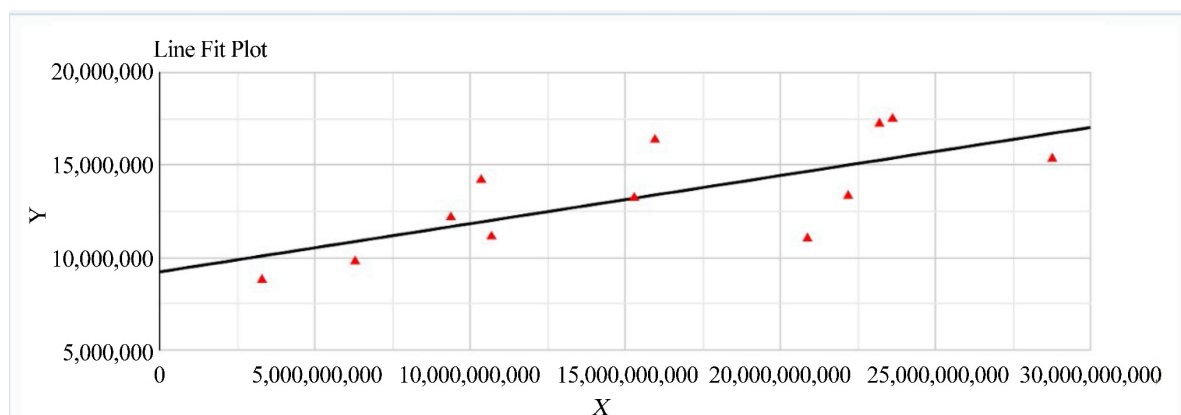


Figure 6. Line plot of listening v. tourism (2010-2024 excluding 2020-2022).

The Pearson coefficient was calculated to be 0.7181 , placing it in the range of high correlation ([Correlation Coefficient Calculator, 2025](#)). This reveals that there is in fact a strong relationship between the consumption of K-pop and inbound tourism to Korea. To support this, I found the statistical significance of this data set through the correlation coefficient and the number of data sets (12). The basis of significance was 0.05 , meaning any number less than that represents that it is

significant and any number larger represents non-significance. The statistical significance was determined to be 0.008531 (Social Science Statistics, 2025). That being less than 0.05 reveals that the correlation is statistically significant, cementing my hypothesis of their strong relationship.

So how does this work out? How does watching a BTS video lead to booking a plane ticket to South Korea? Well, interest in K-pop leads to becoming more familiar with Korean customs, even just through watching a video or listening to their songs. This then can lead to a stronger interest in learning more, most often, learning the language. Most content is in Korean, and while there are often subtitles available, it still makes it more difficult to understand. Part of the attraction of idols and artists is the personal connection made through their music. The language barrier can sometimes make this more difficult. To strengthen this connection, many people will start learning the language. And when you learn a language, you start to learn more about the culture and society. And when you've learned a language, you want to practice it, which leads to travelling to that country to interact.

Even without learning the language, interest in the culture and people leads to an increased awareness of South Korea, making it more likely that when deciding where you want to go on vacation, you might think of it. Overall, K-pop acts as an introduction to Korean culture because it is connected to so many different aspects: the language, the customs, and the place. All these factors account for this correlation between listening to K-pop and eventually visiting South Korea.

It is important to note that K-pop is not the only possible factor for the increase in tourism and the increasing popularity of Korea. There were many other aspects of Hallyu that could also be confounding variables, such as K-dramas, as well as other variables, such as economic conditions and government campaigns. This must be considered when analyzing the results of this analysis. I chose to focus on K-pop specifically for its incredibly large fanbase, especially compared to that of K-dramas, and its widespread impact, including on economic conditions, and its role in some government campaigns.

Case #1: South Korea, China, and the United States

The first case that we will be examining is the relationship between South Korea with China and the United States as a “middle power” in the conflict between the two great powers. South Korea's economic dependence on China and military dependence on the US places it in a difficult position between the two. In this case study, I will show how the K-pop industry has influenced diplomatic relations between the three countries and how it placed the Republic of Korea in a more advantageous position than before.

The concept of a “middle power” has existed since the late sixteenth century when Giovanni Botero classified states into three classes: major powers, middle powers, and minor powers (Schweller, 2017). The term “middle power” refers to states that are neither major nor minor powers. Because of this, there is a wide variety of middle power states that have different populations, GDPs, and other common quantifiers. The most common quantifier, however, is military capacity.

Schweller (2017) describes in his chapter of *The Study of South Korea as a Global Power* three roles a middle power can take on: balancer, who stabilizes the regional system, kingmaker, who tries to push the scale towards one major power, and tertius gauden, who plays major powers against each other for their own game (Schweller, 2017). South Korea is not a kingmaker because its policies do not put favor onto either power. They have diplomatic and economic relations with both China and the United States and have never pushed allies towards one or the other. If South Korea was acting as a tertius gauden, there would be a clear playing of both sides, with contradictory agreements or something of the sort that increases the competition between the United States and China. However, the opposite of this can be seen, as South Korea tries to appease both sides as much as possible, finding middle ground between the two. This section explores how South Korea acts as a balancer between the US and China through cultural diplomacy, securing themselves a stronger position in the international system.

South Korea's position is unique due to it being the only country that is currently split. The two divided parts of Korea (North and South) are what define the priorities of their South Diplomacy (E-Reader, *Public Diplomacy of South Korea*, Kuyoun Chung, Taylor & F, n.d.). Korea was divided into two parts after WWII and liberation from Japanese colonization, one controlled by the USSR and the other controlled by the US. The border was arbitrarily chosen: the 38th parallel. After the Korean War, where North Korea attempted to take power of South Korea, backed by the Soviet Union and China, ended right back where it began, tensions between the two sides increased exponentially. This conflict was created by the existing conflict between the US and the USSR and China. This is a key factor in South Korea's current position between the US and China. The conflict between the two is not only militaristic and economic, but ideological and political, making it much harder to resolve. In the past, South Korea has tried to take a position of strategic ambivalence. Recently, however, they have begun to turn towards an approach of "voice-making," in which they are less of a bystander and more of an active participant (E-Reader, *Public Diplomacy of South Korea*, Kuyoun Chung, Taylor & F, n.d.). The K-pop industry plays a huge role in this approach.

*As mentioned earlier, South Korea's economy is heavily integrated with the international market, a large part of that is the tourism industry. One way that China holds economic power over South Korea is through this industry. Chinese tourists account for a significant percentage of tourists in South Korea. Its impact on South Korea's economy was shown in 2017, after the release of THAAD (the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) System. This system is an element of missile defense systems, put in place by South Korea with help from the US (The Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) System, n.d.). In 2017, after the enactment of THAAD, Chinese travel to Jeju Island, one of the most popular tourist sites, fell by 90% (E-Reader, *Public Diplomacy of South Korea*, Kuyoun Chung, Taylor & F, n.d.). This had a very strong negative effect on South Korea's economy. This event clearly portrays the tensions South Korea faces in relationships between China and the United States.*

In the previous section, it was determined that the amount of global interaction with the K-pop industry and the number of tourists in South Korea had a prominent level of correlation, as well as a statistical significance. This situation is the perfect example of this relationship in action. South Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism has a record of the total number of tourists, as well as the demographics of these tourists. In looking at this record, there is a notable change in the percentage of Chinese tourists each year. In 2016, Chinese tourists accounted for 46% of all tourists in South Korea, the highest level in the 2000s. But by 2024, they only accounted for 28%. This decrease marks a change in the dynamic between South Korea and China, as South Korea begins to become more economically independent. The K-pop industry's impact on tourism can be seen to have a tangible effect on South Korea-China relations in this case.

The K-pop industry does more than impact tourism, however. The use of a private industry allows for an indiscriminate approach to improving views on Korea. Because the K-pop industry is a separate entity, they can reach a wider audience, such as the people in China and the United States. Gallup News conducted a survey of the American public's opinions of South Korea.

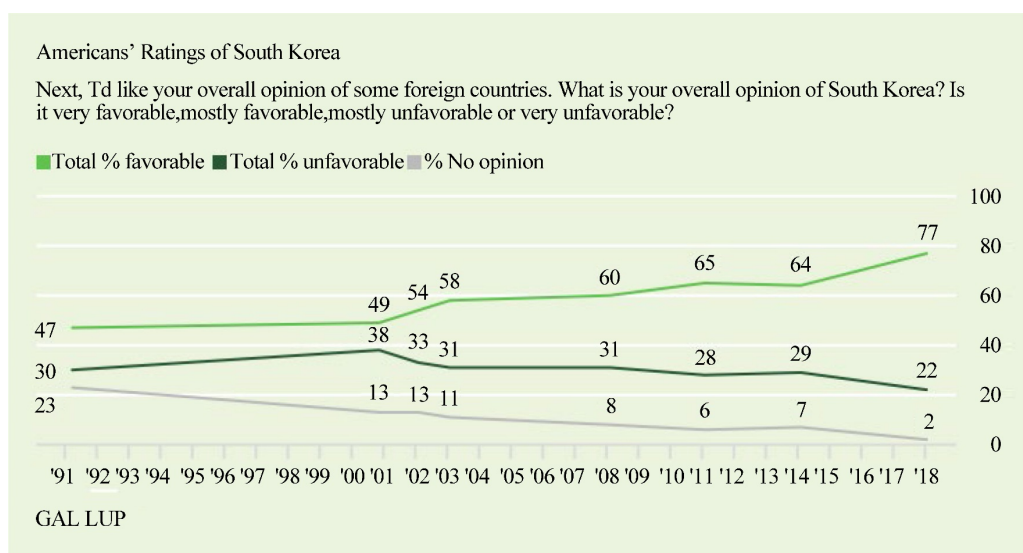


Figure 7. American Ratings of South Korea (1991-2018).

In Figure 7, we can see distinct rises in favorable ratings in 2001, 2008, and 2015. These ratings show a similar pattern to what was seen in the listening statistics, especially the rise around 2015-2018, when BTS became extremely popular.

The US is a strong base for K-pop diplomacy because of its demographic. The United States is a country of immigrants from all over the world, including South Korea. It is what shapes the culture of the United States. Along with Australia, the US has one of the biggest populations of Korean diaspora. This allows for stronger connections to be forged through the K-pop industry, making it a strong base despite geographic distance.

China, on the other hand, is very geographically close to South Korea. But they

also have strong cultural similarities. While this has created many arguments over certain aspects of their culture and where it originated, it also makes China a strong base for K-pop diplomacy. It allows them to see their similarities and view them not just as abstract people, but individuals.

However, the situation is a bit more complex in China due to the limited access to outside media. Most media shown to the public is filtered through the government, making it more difficult to reach them. Media, including K-pop, is more easily accessible to the elite population in China. In a survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in 2010, collected data on the “favorability score” of major countries from the viewpoint of Chinese ordinary citizens and elite (Lee, 2011). The results of this study revealed two important findings. Firstly, South Korea was the second highest rated country, second only to the United States, and above North Korea. Secondly, the favorability score of the elites was 10 points higher than that of the “ordinary citizen”, with the “elite” population scoring South Korea at 67.8 and the mass public at 57.5. This difference shows a difference in knowledge of South Korea. The results of my earlier investigation into K-pop’s positive influence on feelings towards South Korea give one explanation to this. Because the elite population have more access to South Korean media, they have a more positive view of South Korea.

Overall, the K-pop industry can be seen to have a tangible impact on the relationship between South Korea, the United States, and China. It has helped South Korea gain a stronger advantage as a middle power stuck between China and the US. Because of K-pop’s indiscriminate approach to forging cultural connections, it can be used as a tool for both sides. The common issue of middle powers is the idea that they are often forced to pick between the two great powers in certain matters. The K-pop industry is stepping away from that, allowing them to become more economically independent and gain more support across the globe.

Case #2: South Korea and Japan

The second case we will be analyzing is the relationship between South Korea and Japan. These two countries have a lot of history, which has led to many conflicts in the present day. This history is primarily based in the colonization of Korea by Japan, which officially began with the annexation in 1910, but traces back to the fight between China and Japan for control over Korea in 1894-1895 (Central Themes, Asia for Educators, Columbia University, n.d.). Japan held control of Korea until 1945, when it was split between the USSR and US control. Throughout Japan’s colonization of Korea, they routinely enslaved Koreans, forcing some Korean women to keep Japanese military officials’ “company.” These women were known as “comfort women”.

Today, there are two major conflicts between Japan and Korea: comfort women and forced labor. South Korea wants Japan to acknowledge and repay the women who were forced to be comfort women during WWII. This issue has been moved to the global stage as South Korea appealed to the world through human rights. They argued that it is not just a dispute between Japan and South Korea, but a global issue of human rights. This garnered international support for the cause

and has led to some resolving of the issue. The issue of forced labor came up recently in the making of Hasima Island a world memory site. South Korea wanted there to be acknowledgement from Japan of the Korean slave labor that was used in the creation of the site. While Japan promised they would ensure slaves were acknowledged, they did not follow through, bringing backlash from South Korea and eventually people across the world.

All these issues are related to the memory of historical events. These dynamics play a part in the K-pop industry even today. For example, one Japanese idol, Ni-ki of Enhypen, made a comment about being jealous when he was younger that Korean kids got off school on March 1, which was the celebration of the independence movement from Japan. After this comment, Ni-ki received backlash from many Korean fans, and he eventually made an apology, saying he didn't realize the significance of the day. It is events like these that display the extreme tension that still exists between Japan and South Korea. This section will explore how the K-pop industry has reduced these tensions and allowed for a movement towards more positive relations between Japan and South Korea.

The East Asian Institute (EAI) started to conduct surveys in South Korea and Japan about their public opinions on each other in 2013. This data has shown a fluctuating but overall improving trend in public opinion in both South Korea and Japan. The effect has been seen more strongly in Japan's view of South Korea, as shown in the higher favorable ratings than that of South Korea towards Japan (EAI, 2025). 2023 was recorded as the all-time highest favorability since 2013. However, in 2020, they recorded the lowest ratings of each other, interrupting what was a slow but steady rise in favorability ratings. This anomaly can be explained through cultural diplomacy. When COVID-19 hit in 2020, only 1% of people in each country could visit. This meant that the interaction between the people practically came to a stop. This was the point where the K-pop industry started to move online, and by 2021, despite the pandemic still in effect, perceptions of South Korea from Japan had already begun to improve. The complete jump in opinions can be seen in **Figure 8**, a comparison of data from 2015 to 2025 (Poll: Japanese Opinion of South Korea up from 10 Years Prior, *The Asahi Shimbun: Breaking News, Japan News and Analysis*, n.d.).

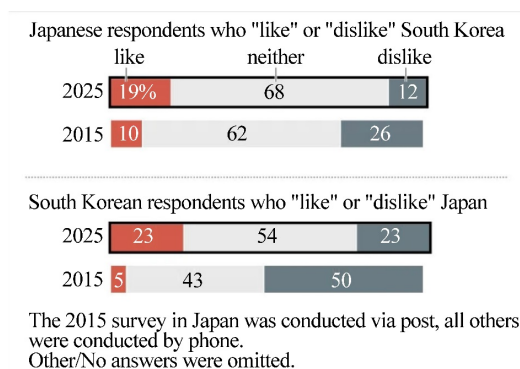


Figure 8. Japanese opinion of South Korea from 10 years prior.

Now, investigating the specific role the K-pop industry has on these relations, we turn to Japanese participation in the industry. The first level of interaction is as a fan/listener. Japan is the number one country that streams K-pop artists, higher than both South Korea and the United States. To understand the significance of these rankings, we must look at the population of each of these countries. Japan has a population of 123 million as of 2025, compared to the United States' 347 million and South Korea's 51.5 million ([Total Population by Country 2025, n.d.](#)). After seeing this data, it makes sense that Japan could have more streams than South Korea, as its population is more than double that of South Korea. However, in comparison to the United States, Japan has more streams than the United States, but about a third of its population. This emphasizes the popularity of K-pop in Japan and the level of interaction between their populations.

The second level of interaction is as an idol. While K-pop started off with only Korean idols, in the third generation (2012-2017) the global line of idols from outside of Korea began to emerge. To find the trend of Japanese idols in K-pop, I used a database of all K-pop idols to find all Japanese K-pop idols. I then determined each of their debut years and laid it all out in a spreadsheet. Finally, I turned that data into a graph, which can be seen in [Figure 9](#). While I could've included trainee years, the information on that was much spottier. I chose to stick with debuted idols because the data was more reliable. In this graph, we can see how the number of Japanese idols started to grow rapidly in 2014, with the steepest rise from 2017-2018.

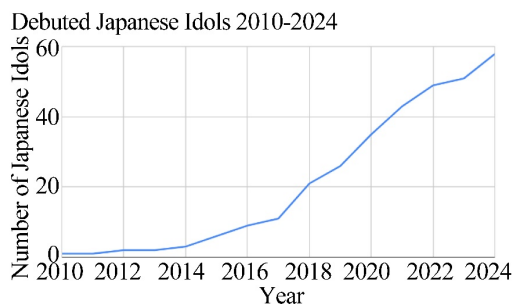


Figure 9. Number of Japanese idols debuted.

The participation of Japanese people in the K-pop industry as idols is extremely important for Korea-Japan relations. In bringing Japanese people into the industry as idols, they have created a stronger sense of connection between fans. It allows people to relate even further and show that despite bad history between them, they can still be together. In addition, it spreads the learning of the Korean language, as idols must be able to speak Korean. This increase in Japanese idols correlates to the increase in positive public views of South Korea, seen in the EAI's report ([EAI, 2025](#)).

Not only has there been an increase in Japanese idols, but there has been a significant increase in Japanese songs and albums. While I was unable to find specific

numbers for every K-pop group, a general rise in the number of Japanese albums by K-pop groups can be seen. For example, the popular group Stray Kids have come out with two Japanese mini albums in the past year, one in November and one in June. This represents an active choice to reach out to the Japanese fan base and population.

The rise of K-pop in Japan has had a tangible impact on public opinion of South Korea, improving relations between the governments. This is seen through the increase in positive interactions and agreements. Japan has become more agreeable over the past few years to acknowledging their past mistakes, as seen through the incident in Hasima when they finally gave acknowledge the Korean slave labor that was used. This is also supported by several news reports connecting the two, one even referring to K-pop as a “route to Japan-South Korea reconciliation” (Dw.Com., *K-Pop as a Route to Japan-South Korea Reconciliation?* 2025). While a correlation has been noted, and causation has been theorized, as this paper does, further study could potentially prove a direct link between the rise of K-pop in Japan and distinct policies and events.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have explored how the K-pop industry has played a role in strengthening South Korea’s diplomatic ties through cultural diplomacy. A detailed analysis of trends in listening and tourism revealed a significant correlation between the two. This was discovered to be more than just an arbitrary connection. An intangible power manifested into a tangible effect in the case of US/China relations with South Korea as a middle power. The K-pop industry demonstrates how middle states, such as South Korea, can use cultural diplomacy to exert more power, or “punch above their weight”, when traditional diplomacy is limited.

I have exemplified these with two key relationships that have been positively affected by the K-pop industry. In addition to US/China relations with South Korea, I have investigated the relationship between Japan and South Korea, two countries with a long history of animosity. In this case, the K-pop industry was shown to have a tangible impact on public opinion between South Korea and Japan, which led to increased support for reconciliation efforts. The dynamic between South Korea and Japan had been able to become more of a collaboration of equals as the K-pop industry allows South Korea to exert more power even as a middle power in conflict with what many scholars consider a major power: Japan.

These results show how important cultural diplomacy is in international relations, and the tangible effects it can have. It proves the importance of the private sector in cultural diplomacy and why the K-pop industry has succeeded where others have failed. By understanding the effectiveness of the K-Pop industry in the international system, leaders of the world can work to form a stronger connection between other countries, one found on a pre-existing cultural appreciation. The K-pop industry’s success models how other countries can foster cultural understanding and appreciation. The balance between private and public control of the

industry and interactions of the K-pop industry is a model that other countries can follow in the future. K-pop is a model for people-led engagement in an increasingly polarized world.² If politicians can recognize the effects that cultural diplomacy can have on the international system, then a shift can be made towards a more balanced approach to diplomacy. This especially is a valuable tool middle powers can use to “punch above their weight” and gain more attention and power in the international system.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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