

South Korea's Strategy to Sustain The Korean Wave as Soft Power in China After The Cultural Restrictions (2016–2021)

ABSTRACT

Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, has evolved into one of South Korea's primary soft power instruments in expanding its cultural influence globally, including in China. However, bilateral relations between the two countries experienced tension following the deployment of the THAAD defense system in 2016, which was followed by China's cultural restriction policy (Hanhanryeong). This situation highlights a gap between South Korea's cultural attractiveness and the political constraints it faces. It raises the question of how soft power can be sustained amid geopolitical pressures. Therefore, this study aims to analyze South Korea's strategies in maintaining and adapting its soft power under such restrictions. This study employs the public diplomacy framework proposed by Nicholas J. Cull, which consists of five elements: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting. The research adopts a qualitative approach using secondary data analysis from official reports, institutional publications, and relevant academic literature. The findings show that post-THAAD cultural restrictions did not halt Hallyu as a soft power instrument, but instead encouraged a shift toward more adaptive and collaborative strategies. Through a combination of listening, advocacy, and the strengthening of cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting, South Korea has been able to maintain cultural connectivity in China. Overall, there has been a transition from defending soft power to rebuilding global strategy in response to geopolitical dynamics.

Keyword: Hallyu, Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, Hanhanryeong, South Korea-China

INTRODUCTION

Culture has become a strategic instrument in South Korea's foreign policy, particularly in expanding its influence and strengthening its national image globally. Instead of relying on hard power strategies such as military threats or economic sanctions, South Korea utilizes cultural assets and cultural diplomacy to build positive and sustainable international relations. This commitment has been institutionalized since the presidency of Chun Doo Hwan (1980–1988), who formally established cultural promotion as a national obligation in the constitution (Rothman & Steven 2011). Since then, South

Korean popular culture has rapidly developed and has been actively promoted through the Korean Wave (Hallyu). The government also supports cultural diplomacy through international festivals and the establishment of cultural centers, with 32 Korean Cultural Centers operating in 28 countries as of August 2023.

The Korean Wave, which originated from music and television dramas, is not merely an entertainment phenomenon but also acts as a cultural bridge connecting South Korea with other countries, including China. Initially introduced through global cultural diffusion in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it began to develop as a form of soft power in the 2010s. According to Jun (2017), Hallyu consists of three phases: Hallyu 1.0 (dramas and films), Hallyu 2.0 (K-Pop), and Hallyu 3.0 (K-lifestyle). China was one of the earliest adopters of Hallyu, beginning with the broadcast of the Korean drama *What is Love All About* on CCTV in 1997 (Yusminda, Yusra, and Austin 2024). The expansion continued with K-Pop performances and concerts, such as H.O.T's concert in 2000, which attracted approximately 40,000 audiences (Sun and Liew 2019).

With the rise of digital platforms such as Bilibili and Weibo, Hallyu's influence in China grew significantly, supported by increasing consumption of Korean content. K-Pop exports to China rose from USD 850,000 in 2006 to USD 42.47 million in 2021, demonstrating strong market demand (Hayeon 2022). Similarly, Korean dramas gained popularity, with imports increasing from 67 titles in 2002 to 150 titles in 2005, and further boosted by global hits such as *My Love from the Star* (Sim 2016).

However, the development of Hallyu in China faced geopolitical challenges following the deployment of the THAAD missile defense system in 2016. China perceived THAAD as a threat to its national security, leading to cultural and economic retaliation against South Korea (Seo 2021). As a result, various restrictions were imposed, including bans on co-production, investment, concerts, and participation of Korean artists in Chinese media (Linbin 2023). These policies significantly impacted South Korea's entertainment industry, causing declines in exports, tourism, and corporate revenues. For instance,

entertainment companies experienced substantial losses, while television exports to China dropped by up to 99% between 2016 and 2018 (Kim 2025).

Following the announcement of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) deployment in 2016, the Chinese government imposed restrictions on South Korea's soft power, which led to diplomatic tensions and significantly affected the expansion of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) in China. Despite these challenges, Hallyu did not completely disappear from the Chinese market. This condition indicates that the South Korean government employed specific strategies to maintain the existence of its soft power under political tension and cultural restrictions. Based on this context, this study seeks to address the following research question: **how does the South Korean government maintain the existence of the Korean Wave as an instrument of soft power in China during the period of cultural restrictions from 2016 to 2021?** The objective of this study is to identify the strategies implemented by the South Korean government through cultural policies, institutional support, and public diplomacy in sustaining the Korean Wave in China during the restriction period of 2016–2021.

This study is expected to contribute theoretically to the development of knowledge on soft power and cultural diplomacy, particularly in understanding how governments respond to cultural restrictions in a geopolitical context. By examining the strategies employed to sustain the Korean Wave in China, this research provides a clearer perspective on how popular culture functions as an instrument of state diplomacy. Practically, this study can serve as a reference for future research on cultural promotion strategies, the role of policy in supporting creative industries, and approaches to addressing geopolitical challenges that affect cultural diplomacy. Moreover, this study encourages readers to view the Korean Wave not merely as entertainment, but as part of a broader strategy for nation branding and strengthening international relations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach. Qualitative research is defined as an approach to explore and understand social phenomena through interpretation of meanings constructed by individuals or groups (John W. Creswell 2018). Furthermore, Denzin Yvonna S. Lincoln (2018), emphasize that qualitative research focuses on understanding phenomena within their social context using multiple data sources. Through this approach, the data collected consist of words, events, and real-life descriptions related to the research object, which are then analyzed to identify patterns and relationships. This method is also aligned with Roby Rakhmadi (2025), who applied qualitative analysis supported by statistical data and literature studies. This study analyzes the strategies of the South Korean government in maintaining the Korean Wave as a soft power instrument in China after the cultural restriction policy (2016–2021), including the role of state and non-state actors such as government institutions, cultural centers, and entertainment agencies.

As analytical tools, this study uses a country-level model and the concept of military intervention to understand the phenomena under study. Measurements in this study do not utilize numbers or statistical approaches, but rather emphasize the accuracy of the description of each variable and the relationships between them (Rakhmadi 2025). Therefore, this study does not employ mathematical or statistical methods in its analysis. This literature study approach aims to produce descriptions that are rich in meaning, as applied in the analysis of other social phenomena that use literature data support to systematically find patterns of relationships between phenomena (Rakhmadi 2026).

This study focuses on examining how the South Korean government maintains the existence of the Korean Wave as a soft power instrument in China following the cultural restriction policy during 2016–2021. To provide a more comprehensive understanding, supporting data up to 2025 are also included, particularly to capture recent developments such as the gradual reopening of cultural activities. The analysis is based on the concept of soft power by Joseph Nye and the five elements of public diplomacy by Nicholas J. Cull, namely

listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting.

This study uses secondary data obtained through literature review, including official government documents, policy reports, academic journals, research reports, and credible media sources, particularly from institutions such as the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MCST), Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS), and Korean Cultural Centers. Data collection is conducted through literature study and documentation, involving the review of academic sources, official reports, policy documents, and digital platforms, as documents are considered essential in qualitative research for providing rich contextual data John W. Creswell (2018). For data analysis, this study applies the qualitative model by Huberman (2014) which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing to identify patterns, relationships, and consistent findings. The analysis integrates policy data with public diplomacy theory to explain South Korea's strategy in maintaining its soft power in China. However, this study faces limitations due to the absence of official documentation on China's cultural restriction policy (Hanhanryeong), requiring reliance on secondary interpretations and analytical synthesis. Despite this, the availability of extensive secondary data supports the analysis, while data triangulation is conducted to ensure validity and reliability.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Crisis Context and Key Actors of Hallyu

The cultural crisis between South Korea and China after 2016 marked a turning point for the Korean Wave (Hallyu) as a soft power instrument. The conflict originated from South Korea's decision to deploy the THAAD missile defense system, which triggered China's cultural restriction policy (Hanhanryeong). This policy disrupted the circulation of Korean cultural content

and challenged the resilience of South Korea's soft power under geopolitical pressure.

Prior to the crisis, South Korea–China relations were characterized by strong economic and cultural interdependence since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1992. China became South Korea's largest trading partner and a key market for Hallyu expansion. However, this interdependence was asymmetric, creating strategic vulnerabilities. Following the THAAD deployment, China utilized economic and cultural coercion, including tourism restrictions, investment limitations, and sanctions on companies such as Lotte, reflecting a shift from cooperative to more competitive bilateral relations (Pradana 2021).

China's cultural restriction policy was driven by intertwined political, economic, and cultural motives. Politically, China perceived THAAD as a direct threat to its national security due to its radar capabilities and alignment with U.S. military strategy. Economically, the restrictions provided opportunities to strengthen domestic entertainment industries and reduce dependence on foreign content. Culturally, Hallyu was seen as a threat to ideological stability and "cultural security," as it introduced foreign values perceived as incompatible with China's socialist system (Park, Lee, and Seo 2019). Consequently, China implemented various measures, including banning co-productions, restricting concerts, limiting investments, and tightening media censorship through institutions such as SAPPRFT.

These restrictions significantly impacted South Korea's entertainment and related industries. Exports of cultural content declined sharply, television exports dropped by up to 99%, and sectors such as tourism and cosmetics experienced substantial losses. Tourist arrivals from China decreased by nearly 48.3%, and companies such as Hyundai, Kia, and Lotte faced declining revenues (Statista 2024). This demonstrates how economic interdependence can be transformed into political leverage during geopolitical tensions.

Despite these challenges, Hallyu did not disappear entirely from China. Public demand remained strong, supported by digital platforms and informal

distribution channels, highlighting a divergence between political tensions and socio-cultural interactions.

The persistence of Hallyu is closely linked to the role of both state and non-state actors. The Korean Wave is primarily driven by private actors such as entertainment agencies, artists, and media industries, whose commercial innovation sustains its global appeal (Jang 2012). However, these actors became targets of China's restrictions due to their symbolic and economic significance. China's large market size and financial capacity further limited South Korea's bargaining power (Oh 2017).

In response, the South Korean government played a crucial role as facilitator and protector. This includes providing financial and institutional support (e.g., KOCCA), policy analysis through KOFICE, diplomatic responses via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), and strategic utilization of entertainment agencies as instruments of cultural diplomacy. Within the framework of public diplomacy, non-state actors such as agencies and fandoms function as independent agents in a multi-stakeholder system, contributing to the resilience of Hallyu through adaptive strategies and grassroots participation (Huijgh 2016).

Overall, private actors act as drivers of cultural production, while the government functions as a facilitator that ensures sustainability and resilience of soft power during crises. This synergy explains how South Korea manages to maintain the Korean Wave as a strategic cultural asset despite geopolitical constraints.

Analysis of South Korea's Strategy after Cultural Restrictions in China

After identifying China's motives for imposing cultural restrictions and confirming the central role of the South Korean government in protecting Hallyu as a valuable soft power asset, this section examines the government's adaptive responses. Facing the pressures of *Hanhanryeong*, South Korea did not rely solely on reactive measures but also adopted proactive strategies aimed at diversifying markets, reducing dependence on China, and maintaining its

international image. These strategies are analyzed through Nicholas J. Cull's five elements of public diplomacy. To ensure objectivity, this section first establishes indicators used to assess the continuing existence of the Korean Wave in China.

4.2.1. Indicators of the Korean Wave's Existence in China

In this study, the persistence of Hallyu in China is measured through cultural consumption, public perception, market demand, educational and social participation, and shifts in government strategy. In terms of cultural consumption, EXO remained one of the most popular K-Pop groups in China despite the restrictions, recording billions of streams across major Chinese music platforms and sustaining a large fan base (Zeta 2024). Market demand also remained strong, especially for K-beauty and K-fashion products. South Korean cosmetic exports to China reached USD 3.81 billion in 2020, accounting for over half of total Korean cosmetic exports, while related sectors such as beauty and fashion also showed continued growth through e-commerce channels (Herald 2021; KOFICE 2021)

The third indicator involves educational mobility and tourism. In 2021, Chinese tourists visiting South Korea and Chinese students and trainees studying there continued to increase, suggesting that Hallyu stimulated broader interest in Korean language, culture, and education (KOFICE 2021). Public perception is another crucial indicator: surveys by KOFICE showed that positive perceptions of Hallyu in China remained relatively stable, with favorable views rising significantly after 2017 despite political tensions. Finally, the South Korean government's policy adjustments, especially through *Post-China Strategies*, indicate institutional recognition that Hallyu's survival required diversification, strategic adaptation, and support for alternative markets (KOFICE 2017). Taken together, these indicators show that the existence of Hallyu in China cannot be measured merely by the physical presence of Korean celebrities, but by its continued consumption, market relevance, and cultural resonance in everyday life.

a. Listening

According to Cull, listening refers to a state's ability to observe and understand public perceptions before formulating communication strategies. South Korea applied this principle by relying on research institutions such as KOFICE to gather data on market conditions, public attitudes, and the sustainability of Hallyu under restrictions. Reports such as *Post-China Strategies*, *Hallyu White Paper 2018*, and *Global Hallyu Trends 2020* were used to evaluate the weakening of Hallyu in some traditional markets, including China, and the growth of alternative markets such as Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East (KOFICE 2018, 2021).

Listening also enabled the government to capture fluctuations in public sentiment toward Hallyu in China. Although negative perceptions spiked in 2017 as a result of the THAAD dispute, they declined in 2018, while interest in Korean cultural content remained strong through digital communities and alternative channels. This suggests that China's restrictions did not fully sever the emotional and social ties between Chinese audiences and Korean popular culture. For South Korea, these findings were important for designing more selective and digitally oriented strategies. Thus, listening functioned not only as data gathering but also as a systematic basis for policy adjustment in the digital era.

b. Advocacy

Cull argues that advocacy in public diplomacy increasingly requires the promotion of ideas and values rather than simple policy defense. In the South Korean case, this principle was reflected in the *Three No's* policy, which emerged after the THAAD controversy. Through this stance, no additional THAAD deployment, no participation in a U.S.-led regional missile defense system, and no trilateral military alliance with the United States and Japan—South Korea sought to present itself as moderate, rational, and committed to regional stability (Norris 2019). Although the *Three No's* were not formal legal commitments, they served as a flexible diplomatic message to ease Chinese concerns while preserving South Korea's security cooperation with the United States.



Figure 1: President Moon Jae-in with EXO-CBX at the 2017 Korea–China Economic and Partnership Forum.
Source: The Blue House KR Facebook.

Advocacy was also expressed symbolically through the South Korean government's use of Hallyu figures in diplomacy. At the Korea–China Economic and Trade Partnership forum in late 2017, President Moon Jae-in included EXO-CBX and actress Song Hye Kyo in an effort to rebuild trust and soften tensions. This demonstrated an ideas-based advocacy strategy: rather than directly defending THAAD, South Korea projected an image of openness, cultural freedom, and regional cooperation. In this way, cultural icons were used to reinforce diplomatic narratives and restore confidence in bilateral relations.

c. Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy became one of South Korea's most visible strategies in responding to China's restrictions. Although much of Hallyu's transnational success relied on private actors, these efforts were supported by the South Korean government through cultural industry promotion and institutional backing. Entertainment agencies adapted their content to the Chinese market, for example by releasing songs in both Korean and Mandarin versions, while Chinese members of Korean idol groups such as Victoria and Lay continued to act as cultural bridges, maintaining Hallyu's visibility in China (Amalia 2018).

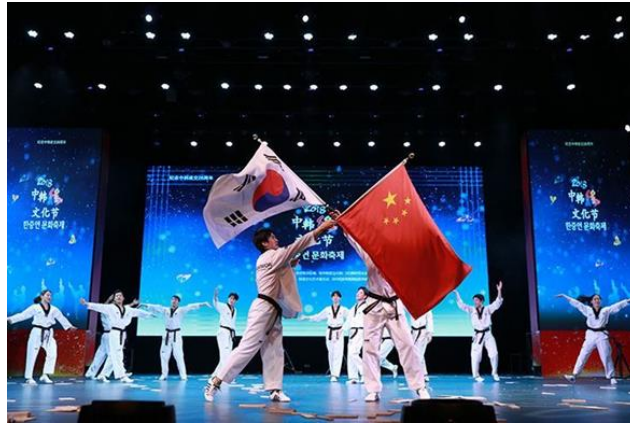


Figure 2: Friendship Fair in Gansu, July 2018.

Source: *The Korea Times*, 2018.

At the institutional level, the Korean Cultural Center (KCC) in Beijing played a frontline role in sustaining cultural exchange. Despite political tensions, KCC continued to offer Korean language and cultural classes, film screenings, performances, exhibitions, and digital engagement through platforms such as WeChat. Activities such as the Friendship Fair in Gansu and public cultural events in different Chinese cities demonstrated that demand for Korean culture remained strong even under formal restrictions. Local initiatives, such as Daegu's cooperation with Chinese authorities through the Chimaek Festival, also reflected the role of local governments in people-to-people diplomacy. These efforts show that cultural diplomacy in this context was not limited to formal state institutions but also relied on local actors, diaspora-like cultural figures, and entertainment industries working within a broader government-supported framework.

d. Exchange Diplomacy

Exchange diplomacy refers to the management of international relations through educational, cultural, and professional exchanges. In South Korea's case, this included scholarship schemes such as the Global Korea Scholarship and a range of university and institutional exchange programs. However, not all Chinese student mobility to South Korea can be interpreted as a direct result of government-led exchange diplomacy. Before the pandemic, Chinese students made up the largest proportion of foreign students in South Korea, peaking at

71,067 in 2019. Yet this mobility was also driven by Hallyu's attractiveness, geographical proximity, education quality, and visa accessibility (Betts 2017; Ministry of Education 2019).

After 2019, the number of Chinese students declined, while Vietnamese students overtook them by 2021. This shift reflects the combined impact of COVID-19, growing opportunities in China's domestic universities, and changing geopolitical conditions. At the same time, the number of South Korean students in China declined sharply, indicating a weakening of educational exchange in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, South Korea continued to realize the principle of mutuality through municipal and cultural exchange initiatives. Programs such as Daegu Amigos, the Korea-China Silver Culture Festival, the Artist Residency Program at KCC Beijing, and the Korea-China Year of Cultural Exchange 2021–2022 demonstrate that exchange diplomacy was maintained through local, artistic, and institutional channels, even when large-scale mobility was restricted. These initiatives suggest that exchange diplomacy remained an important instrument for preserving bilateral cultural ties under difficult political circumstances.

Table 1. South Korea–China Exchange Diplomacy Programs (2016–2022)

Year	Program Name	Type of Exchange	Actors Involved
2016	8th Korea-China Silver Culture Festival (Incheon Seo-gu)	Cultural festival	Local governments, cultural institutions
2017	Korea-China-Russia Asian Cultural Exchange Festival	Multilateral cultural festival	Cultural delegations from three countries
2018	Daegu Amigos	Municipal knowledge exchange	35 Chinese officials
2019	Artist Residency Program (KCC Beijing)	Artist residency	52 Chinese artists
2021-2022	Korea-China Year of Cultural Exchange	169 cultural projects	MCST, Ministry of Culture of China

Source: Compiled by the author, 2026.

e. International Broadcasting

International broadcasting, in Cull's framework, refers to the use of communication technology to reach foreign publics. In the South Korean case,

this involved both traditional state-supported media and digital platforms (Cull 2009). Arirang TV represents the institutional model of international broadcasting, as it promotes South Korea's image globally through news, culture, and documentary programming. However, under the specific conditions of cultural restriction in China, South Korea increasingly relied on digital communication strategies. Government-led communication through official Blue House social media accounts, including Facebook, helped circulate policy messages and cultural narratives that were later shared or reposted in Chinese digital spaces.

At the same time, entertainment agencies and K-Pop idols used Chinese platforms such as Weibo and Huya Live to maintain contact with Chinese fans. These activities effectively substituted for official promotional channels that had been restricted by the Chinese state. Fan communities also played a major role in this process by translating, reposting, and redistributing content, thereby becoming active agents in sustaining Hallyu's circulation. This bottom-up participatory culture complemented official broadcasting efforts and helped preserve the visibility of Korean culture in China. In response, Chinese authorities intensified regulation of digital spaces, including suspending K-Pop fan accounts on Weibo in 2021. This demonstrates that while international broadcasting enabled Hallyu to adapt and survive, it also became a contested arena in which both states sought to shape the circulation of culture and influence.

The Impact of South Korea's Public Diplomacy in Maintaining Hallyu in China

This section analyzes the effectiveness of South Korea's public diplomacy strategies; listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting in maintaining the existence of Hallyu during the Hanhanryeong period.

Listening proved effective as it provided data-driven insights into market trends and public perception through KOFICE reports such as *Post-China Strategies* and *Global Hallyu Trends*. These findings enabled policy adjustments,

particularly market diversification beyond China, while also confirming that Chinese public interest in Hallyu remained relatively resilient despite fluctuations.

Advocacy, particularly through the *Three No's policy*, played a crucial role in restoring diplomatic communication and partially reopening cultural access. Evidence includes the return of Korean content on Chinese platforms, participation in film festivals, and gradual recovery of tourism flows, indicating that political negotiation helped stabilize short-term cultural relations.

Cultural diplomacy demonstrated strong resilience through bottom-up mechanisms. Adaptation by entertainment agencies, the role of Chinese K-pop idols, and continuous activities by Korean Cultural Centers (KCC) maintained public engagement. This strategy was effective due to shared cultural proximity and sustained people-to-people interactions, ensuring Hallyu's continuity despite formal restrictions.

Exchange diplomacy maintained interpersonal connections but had limited direct impact on restoring Hallyu. While academic mobility and cultural exchange programs continued, they were vulnerable to external disruptions such as geopolitics and the COVID-19 pandemic, positioning exchange diplomacy more as a supporting channel rather than a primary recovery tool.

International broadcasting emerged as a key adaptive strategy through digital platforms. Government channels, K-pop idols, and fandom communities ensured continued content circulation via platforms like Weibo and Huya Live. Fan participation (fan-subbing, redistribution) created a bottom-up resistance to censorship, although this strategy also contributed to long-term market diversification away from China.

South Korea's Soft Power Strategy: Defending and Rebuilding

The THAAD-related crisis forced South Korea to shift its soft power strategy from expansion to adaptation. During the peak restriction period (2016–2018), the country focused on **defending soft power**, maintaining Hallyu's

presence through alternative channels such as digital platforms and fan communities.

After 2018, the strategy evolved into **rebuilding soft power**, characterized by market diversification and rebranding Hallyu as a broader cultural and diplomatic asset. Expansion into Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America demonstrated a structural shift away from dependence on China.

This transformation highlights that soft power is dynamic and closely linked to geopolitical conditions. While Hallyu remained influential, its sustainability depended on strong institutional support, economic capacity, and collaboration between state, industry, and society.

Overall, South Korea's experience shows that soft power can survive political constraints through adaptation, diversification, and strategic coordination, even when facing significant geopolitical pressure.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that China's cultural restrictions following the THAAD deployment did not eliminate the Korean Wave as South Korea's soft power instrument; instead, they prompted strategic adaptation in its public diplomacy approach. Using Nicholas J. Cull's five elements of public diplomacy such as; listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting, the analysis shows that South Korea combined state-led efforts with non-state actors such as the entertainment industry and fandom communities. Listening through KOFICE research informed policy direction, advocacy via the Three No's helped ease political tensions, while cultural and exchange diplomacy sustained people-to-people relations despite limitations. Meanwhile, international broadcasting highlighted the crucial role of digital platforms and participatory fandom in maintaining Hallyu's circulation.

Furthermore, South Korea's strategy evolved from **defending soft power** (2016–2018), aimed at preserving Hallyu's influence, to **rebuilding**

soft power (2018–2021), characterized by market diversification and cultural repositioning. Thus, China’s cultural restrictions acted not only as a constraint but also as a catalyst for transforming South Korea’s soft power strategy in a more adaptive and resilient direction.

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