SECTION «POLITICAL SCIENCES»

MECHANISMS AND TOOLS OF SOUTH KOREAN SOFT POWER POLICY IN JAPAN

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Abstract. The article provides a comprehensive political science analysis of the institutional mechanisms, practical instruments, and socio-cultural impacts of the Republic of Korea's (ROK) soft power policy in Japan. *The purpose* of the study is to identify the structural configuration and functional features of the South Korean model of soft influence on Japanese society, examine key institutional, cultural, educational, and techno-economic channels of its diffusion, analyze structural barriers (historical memory, political friction, and xenophobic movements), and assess prospects for transforming South Korea's socio-cultural attraction into a factor of strategic partnership and security solidarity. *The methodology* of the study employs a multi-dimensional methodological approach: systemic analysis (to evaluate the public-private partnership ecosystem), institutional and structural-functional methods (to analyze the regulatory framework, role and effectiveness of state entities such as MOFA, MCST, KOCCA, KOFICE, and KF), the case study method (to examine specific cultural, media, educational, and technological cases in Japan), periodization (tracing the three evolutionary phases of the Korean Wave / *Hallyu* in Japan), and prognostic analysis (to model future bilateral security and cultural cooperation). *Survey results* show that South Korea's soft power success relies on close coordination between state ministries and private creative/tech corporations. The paper traces Hallyu's evolution in Japan from early TV drama consumption ("Winter Sonata", 2003) and K-pop

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expansion to full socio-cultural lifestyle integration (the BTS phenomenon, the King Sejong Institutes network, K-Beauty market leadership, and high-tech R&D investments by Samsung and Hyundai). It identifies historical trauma (1910–1945 colonial period), the "memory gap", ultra-nationalist movements (*Zaitokukai* hate speech), and competition with Japan's "Cool Japan" strategy as main structural constraints. Furthermore, the study substantiates that amidst East Asian security threats, Korean soft power bridges historical divides and provides a societal foundation for pragmatic "security solidarity" and co-production between Seoul and Tokyo. *Practical Implications.* The findings serve as a framework for developing national public diplomacy strategies, designing university courses in International Relations, Asian Studies, and Political Science, and analyzing regional dynamics in East Asia. *Value / Originality.* The paper synthesizes the transformation of South Korean soft power in Japan from an external cultural import into an organic component of Japan's domestic cultural landscape and a strategic platform for a bilateral security-technological alliance.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, appeal, openness, and the ability to build lasting interpersonal connections have become critical levers of influence for both the global community and domestic publics. Accelerating technological development, the growing role of digital media, and the increasing mobility of people and cultural products have transformed how states communicate with foreign audiences. These changes have encouraged actors in international relations to rethink traditional approaches to influence and to expand their diplomatic toolkit beyond political and economic instruments. In this context, culture, education, media, tourism, and creative industries have become increasingly important channels for shaping perceptions and establishing long-term social connections. This transition has paved the way for the phenomenon of "soft power" – a state's ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction, persuasion, and the appeal of its values, cultural identity, and development model rather than through coercion or material pressure.

The importance of soft power has become particularly evident in an environment where public opinion and interpersonal contacts increasingly

influence international relations. Unlike traditional forms of state influence, soft power operates not only through official diplomatic institutions but also through cultural products, entertainment, educational exchanges, language learning, tourism, digital platforms, and everyday consumer practices. Consequently, its effects may extend beyond the immediate promotion of a country's image and shape how foreign societies perceive its culture, people, and national identity. The growing interconnectedness of societies therefore makes studying cultural influence an important component of contemporary international relations and public diplomacy.

The Republic of Korea has achieved significant results in its cultural expansion in the 21st century and serves as a distinctive case for scientific analysis. The international spread of Korean popular culture, commonly referred to as Hallyu or the "Korean Wave," has increased the visibility of Korean music, television dramas, cinema, food, fashion, language, and lifestyle. At the same time, the Korean experience shows that cultural influence is not limited to exporting individual cultural products. It can involve a coordinated combination of state-supported cultural policies, media strategies, educational initiatives, creative industries, economic presence, and people-to-people contacts.

Studying the Republic of Korea's soft power in Japan matters because of the profound dissonance inherent in this process. The situation is unique: severe historical trauma and persistent political disagreements coexist with extensive cultural diffusion and growing interest in Korean cultural products. The historical legacy of colonial rule continues to influence perceptions within Korean-Japanese relations, while contemporary cultural interaction creates new forms of communication and social engagement between the two societies. This makes the relationship between Korea and Japan particularly valuable for examining how cultural attraction operates in an environment characterized by both historical sensitivity and intensive interpersonal exchange.

The Korean-Japanese case also demonstrates that cultural influence can develop independently of the pace of political rapprochement. Korean music, television dramas, food, fashion, language, and other cultural products have created channels of interaction that connect audiences beyond formal diplomatic frameworks. These processes raise an important question

about the capacity of cultural diplomacy and soft power to contribute to mutual understanding when political relations remain shaped by unresolved historical issues. Culture may therefore function not only as an instrument for promoting national attractiveness but also as a potential space for dialogue, social interaction, and gradual transformation of perceptions.

Against this background, studying the mechanisms and instruments of the Republic of Korea's soft power in Japan is relevant to understanding the broader relationship between culture and international influence. The Korean-Japanese context provides an opportunity to examine how cultural attraction is produced, institutionalized, distributed, and received by a foreign audience, as well as the limitations that historical memory and political tensions impose on its effectiveness. In this regard, the study contributes to a broader discussion of how culture can serve as a bridge for communication and reconciliation amid protracted bilateral tensions.

1. Institutional Mechanisms for Exercising the Republic of Korea's Soft Power

The success of the Republic of Korea's soft power results from a targeted state policy that combines institutional, cultural, and economic instruments of influence. Unlike many other countries, where soft power develops spontaneously, the Korean model is characterized by strong coordination among government agencies, quasi-governmental organizations, and the private sector.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea (MOFA) plays a key role in the institutional framework, ensuring the strategic coordination of the state's public and cultural diplomacy. Since its establishment in 1948, MOFA has evolved from a closed institution of the postwar period into an open, innovative center for external communication, becoming a key champion of public diplomacy. The inclusion of public diplomacy as a key area of activity has taken on particular significance, and relevant legislation and strategic plans have enshrined it institutionally. Through cooperation with other agencies, the implementation of digital diplomacy, support for international exchanges, and the development of global partnerships, MOFA ensures the effective dissemination of Korea's influence worldwide, particularly in Japan, where cultural diplomacy serves

as a bridge for reconciliation and a tool for mitigating historical disputes and fostering bilateral dialogue [34].

The Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of the Republic of Korea (MCST) can be considered the heart of South Korea's soft power. The secret to the South Korean MCST's success lies in the fact that it has ceased to be merely a "ministry" and has transformed into a massive "producer" for the entire country. Instead of merely observing culture, the state began to act as an active player. Today, massive investments (amounting to 1.74 trillion won for 2024 alone) in video games, TV series, and webtoons are viewed as investments in the country's geopolitical significance. This approach followed a "financial revolution" in the public sector, triggered by the rapid expansion of "Hallyu." Recognizing the potential of cultural exports, Seoul made an unprecedented leap in funding the industry: while budget allocations in 2011 amounted to a modest 1.8 billion won, just one year later they had grown more than 140-fold to 257.5 billion won, and in 2013, they surpassed 319 billion won. It is important to note that a portion of these resources is directed toward supporting an international cultural presence, particularly the activities of cultural centers abroad, among which the Korean Cultural Center Tokyo plays a key role – one of the main hubs for promoting Korean culture in Japan through exhibitions, language programs, and cultural events [34].

The main executive body within the soft power framework is the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), established in 2001 to support the planning, production, and creation of creative content worldwide, including video games, fashion, music, and broadcasting. A key feature of KOCCA is its focus on market adaptability; the agency does not simply export Korean products, but localizes them through an extensive network of business centers in key global capitals (in the U.S., Mexico, China, and the U.K.), which enabled Korea to surpass the $10 billion threshold in cultural content exports even during the 2019 pandemic [34]. Such localization is particularly important for the Japanese market, which is traditionally considered resistant to foreign cultural influence. Through these approaches, Korean content is not only exported but also adapted to Japan's local cultural characteristics, significantly increasing its acceptance and popularity [5; 35].

The Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (hereinafter "KOFICE"), established in 2003 by the Ministry of Culture, Sports

and Tourism (MCST), promotes international cultural exchange. The foundation's primary mission and vision is "to connect Korea with the world through culture." KOFICE's objectives include fostering cooperation between central and local government agencies and the private sector; planning and supporting mutual cultural exchange projects tailored to each region; training experts in international cultural exchange; and serving as a leading institution for research and study of international cultural exchange. At the same time, KOFICE functions as a leading think tank that, through regular reports – including the "Halle White Paper" and studies on global trends – provides the scientific basis for adjusting the national cultural strategy [32].

Another equally important institution is the Korea Foundation (KF), which was established in 1991 by decision of the MOFA. Its primary focus is institutionalizing Korean studies globally, particularly in Japan. The foundation provides grants and scholarships to students who wish to study the Korean language and conduct research related to South Korea. As of 2023, the foundation supports more than 200 universities in 73 countries worldwide and develops professional networks through high-level forums. Beyond its academic focus, the KF integrates Korean art into the global museum landscape by funding curatorial positions abroad and publishing the cultural studies journal "KOREANA" in eleven languages, which helps foster a deep, professional understanding of Korean culture among the world's elites [32; 54].

The 1998 Joint Declaration ("A New Partnership in the 21st Century") laid the legal foundation for this cooperation, effectively legalizing the export of Korean culture to Japan and vice versa [1]. The current phase of cooperation is governed by Memoranda of Cooperation, specifically the September 2024 document, which designated 2025–2026 as the Years of Cultural Exchange and prioritized youth exchanges and the digital content industry to overcome historical disputes between the two countries [30].

However, South Korea's soft power framework operates closely with the private sector, particularly corporate giants such as HYBE Corporation, SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and others. These companies are the key producers of cultural and musical content that has gained immense popularity in Japan over the past few decades.

2. Korean Cultural Products and Media Influence in Japan

The spread of the Korean Wave ("Hallyu") in Japan is a unique example of cultural diffusion that took place despite complex and tense historical relations and skepticism within Japanese society. Popular culture served as a "bridge of reconciliation" in bilateral relations, changing attitudes in both countries toward one another. Based on an analysis of the dynamics of Korean content consumption, several key stages of penetration and a significant transformation in the Japanese audience's perception can be identified.

The first phase spans the late 1990s to the early 2000s, following South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's 1998 decision to lift restrictions on importing and exporting Japanese cultural products. This policy, dubbed the "open-door policy," laid the foundation for improved South Korean-Japanese relations. The conditions for the spread of Korean culture in Japan were shaped by the Japanese audience's growing interest in Korean films such as "Shiri" and "Joint Security Area", which showcased a whole new quality of Korean cinema [41]. However, this phase culminated in the 2003 broadcast of the drama "Winter Sonata," which sparked a cultural boom and marked the beginning of the first "Hallyu" wave in Japan. A defining feature of this reception was the enthusiasm among middle-aged women, who saw nostalgic themes in Korean TV series that resonated with Japanese society of past decades. The number of Japanese tourists visiting the drama's filming location, Chuncheon, increased 3.5-fold – from 40,000 to 140,000 visitors in 2003 [11].

While the first phase was marked by growing interest in Korean cinema, the second phase (late 2000s – mid-2010s) shifted focus toward the music industry. K-pop artists such as BoA, TVXQ, Girls' Generation, and KARA gained popularity in the Japanese market, marking a shift toward a younger audience [46]. A key trend was the so-called "Japanization" of Korean entertainment content, including collaborations with Japanese companies, the inclusion of Japanese members in idol groups, and the release of albums in Japanese, which helped them break into the Japanese charts (Oricon) alongside local artists. The success and popularity of Korean groups stem from a fundamental difference between Japanese and Korean idols. While Japanese performers – particularly groups such as AKB48 – position themselves as "accessible" to fans and grow alongside them, forming an

emotional bond, Korean idols undergo extensive professional training and debut as fully-fledged, high-caliber artists. That is why they are perceived not as "one of us," but as stars who inspire admiration and awe and are focused on perfection [11; 41].

The third phase of the Korean Wave began in 2015 and continues to this day. At this stage, "Hallyu" has ceased to be a foreign trend and has become an integral part of everyday Japanese cultural life. Whereas the content previously attracted audiences with its novelty, it is now seamlessly accepted as part of Japanese pop culture, alongside local productions. The most striking example of this phase is the phenomenon of the band BTS, which in 2021 effectively "conquered" the Japanese music market. They topped the Oricon annual sales chart, becoming the first foreign artist to do so since the chart's inception in 1968. Their total sales reached 18.48 billion yen (about $162 million), surpassing even leading Japanese bands. BTS's album "THE BEST" sold nearly 1 million copies (993,000) in just one year, topping the annual album chart – a testament to their exceptional popularity in a market traditionally closed to foreign artists [47]. Equally telling is the fact that BTS's fan base in Japan is extremely loyal and spans various age groups. Tickets for concerts in Tokyo and Osaka sell out within minutes and draw hundreds of thousands of attendees. The group has also actively released and continues to create content in Japanese (translating albums into Japanese, releasing exclusive Japanese-language music content, appearing on TV shows, etc.), facilitating deeper integration into the local market without losing its Korean identity [11].

At the same time, this success is not an isolated phenomenon but reflects a broader trend of growing popularity for the Korean cultural industry: in 2021, exports of Korean video content to Japan reached $1.81 billion, up about 50% from the previous year. Thus, the third phase demonstrates not only the popularity of individual artists or dramas but also deep economic and cultural integration [38].

Thus, the spread of "Hallyu" in Japan has evolved from a local media phenomenon into a permanent feature of the cultural landscape, reflecting not only the entertainment industry's development but also deeper transformations in intercultural communication and public diplomacy.

Broadcasting serves as an important tool for the Republic of Korea to exercise its soft power, particularly in the context of Korea-Japan relations.

Through a systematic media content export policy, program adaptation for Japanese audiences, and an active presence in international markets, Korean broadcasters are shaping a positive image of the country, promoting cultural dialogue, and strengthening the influence of "Hallyu."

The Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), particularly its international satellite television channel KBS World, plays a central role in shaping a positive image of Korea within Japanese society. KBS traces its origins to 1927 as the Gyeongseong Broadcasting Corporation, making it South Korea's first television service. The corporation defines its main objectives as follows: promoting national culture, establishing a harmonious television culture, and bringing Korean culture to the world stage as a global player [2]. KBS World was established in 2003 as a global broadcasting platform. Its activities aim to disseminate news, Korean cultural content, music, and educational programs to international audiences, including Japanese viewers. A separate version of the channel operates in Japan, broadcasting programs in Korean with Japanese subtitles under the name KBS Japan. Such localization exists in only two countries worldwide – Japan and the United States – underscoring the priority these nations place on disseminating Korean television and radio broadcasting.

KBS World's content is quite diverse and includes popular Korean dramas, entertainment shows, and cultural and educational programs that help shape an appealing image of South Korea as an innovative, modern, and culturally rich country. KBS World Radio also broadcasts news in various languages, including Japanese, and strengthens Korea's media presence in the region.

Alongside KBS, the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) plays an equally important role and is also actively involved in international content exchange. MBC specializes in producing popular television programs and series that are exported to foreign markets, particularly Japan. Content commercialization, cooperation with foreign broadcasters, and MBC's participation in the global media market help promote Korean culture and strengthen South Korea's cultural presence abroad. The development of multi-channel broadcasting and expansion into international markets have become defining features of the Korean media industry's transformation [3].

The key to the success of Korean television and radio broadcasting in Japan is content adaptation. This process involves the following:

– translating and providing Japanese subtitles for all programs;

– taking into account the cultural characteristics of the Japanese audience;

– selecting programs with high emotional and cultural resonance (dramas, romantic series, variety shows) [19].

This approach helps bridge the cultural gap and increase acceptance of Korean content. As a result, Korean media content is perceived not as "foreign," but as familiar and relatable.

It is also worth mentioning the mechanism for licensing content and retransmitting it via Japanese cable and satellite networks. For example, KBS World is available in Japan via cable TV platforms and reaches millions of households. Furthermore, Korean dramas are often sold to Japanese TV channels or streaming platforms, which ultimately broadens their audience reach. A striking example is the Japanese remakes of popular Korean dramas such as "Sky Castle" and "Itaewon Class," as well as active collaboration with Japanese networks such as NHK and Fuji TV. This model of cooperation provides not only cultural exchange but also economic benefits through content exports [10].

For example, the Korean drama "Winter Sonata," which first aired on the Japanese television channel NHK BS in 2003, became a true breakthrough in the Japanese market. Despite its moderate success in South Korea, the series gained phenomenal popularity in Japan and generated over $40 million in revenue from DVD sales, merchandise, and tourism. The drama's success opened up the Japanese market to Korean cultural exports and served as the starting point for the widespread spread of the "Korean Wave" in the region [7].

Statistics on the expansion of Korean media content from 2005 to 2010 illustrate a concentration on the Japanese market. Japan remained the primary recipient of Korean audiovisual products, significantly outpacing China and Southeast Asian countries. In particular, in 2008, Japan's share of total exports reached an impressive 68.7%, indicating the strong adaptability of Korean cultural products to Japanese consumer demand [14].

3. Educational, Scientific, and Linguistic Instruments of the Republic of Korea's Soft Power Policy

A key element of the Republic of Korea's soft power in Japan is educational and scientific cooperation, carried out through government

scholarship programs, academic exchanges, and joint university initiatives. These programs aim to foster a positive image of the Republic of Korea among Japan's intellectual elite and youth. The central institution in this process is the National Institute for International Education (NIIED), which operates under the Republic of Korea's Ministry of Education and coordinates the country's international education policy.

One of the most striking examples of bilateral educational cooperation is the government scholarship programs, particularly the "Korea-Japan Joint Higher Education Student Exchange Program." The program traces its origins to the 1998 Joint Declaration (Kim Dae-jung–Keizo Obuchi), which laid the foundation for a "new partnership in the 21st century." Initially, it targeted students in technical fields (the "Joint Science and Engineering Undergraduate Program"), but in 2019, the program was reformed into a comprehensive higher education exchange project. Currently, it includes not only undergraduate engineering students but also master's and doctoral students. Through the NIIED, the South Korean government covers all expenses – including tuition, housing, airfare, and even health insurance – for Japanese students, thereby creating the most favorable conditions possible [26].

Equally promising is the "Korea-Japan Future Talent Invitational Program," which is aimed at undergraduate students from Japan. The program includes one year of Korean language training and 4–6 years of university education, along with financial support covering tuition, transportation costs, and a stipend. The main objective of this program is to cultivate a new generation of professionals who understand the economies, cultures, and educational systems of both countries and can serve as intermediaries in bilateral cooperation [25].

It is also worth mentioning the "Korea–Japan Student Exchange Program," which provides short- and long-term student exchanges. A distinctive feature of this program is that it also includes faculty exchanges and joint educational projects, which help institutionalize contacts between universities and educational institutions in both countries [27].

The Korea Foundation (KF) plays an equally important role by implementing long-term projects to fund tenured faculty positions and research centers at leading Japanese universities, particularly in Tokyo and Kyoto [8; 39]. Through this initiative, Seoul is establishing centers for

Korean studies that prepare Japan's future political and intellectual elite to understand the Korean context deeply. In addition to directly funding departments, the KF is actively promoting digital educational diplomacy through the "Global e-School" project. This initiative provides Japanese students (including those at the University of Tokyo) with real-time access to South Korean academic resources, integrating Korean educational standards into the Japanese higher education system [22].

Thus, South Korea's educational and scientific initiatives in Japan play an important role in training future professionals and serve as a strategic channel for soft power. Through systematic support for academic mobility, education funding, and the creation of joint educational spaces, South Korea is fostering goodwill among Japanese youth and laying the foundation for a long-term partnership between the two countries.

A telling indicator of the deepening sociocultural ties between South Korea and Japan is the trend in educational mobility. According to data from the Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI), the number of Japanese students studying at higher education institutions in South Korea rose from 2,418 in 2004 to 4,392 in 2019. After a temporary decline partly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, their number stood at 3,818 in 2021 and reached 5,250 in 2024. Thus, over the long term, educational ties between the two countries have expanded, particularly in the post-pandemic period [53]. This trend can be viewed in the broader context of growing interest in the Korean language and culture within Japanese society. At the same time, the statistical data presented do not provide grounds to automatically equate the increase in the number of Japanese students with a direct consequence of Hallyu's popularity. Educational mobility is shaped by a complex set of factors, including a country's cultural appeal, the accessibility of educational programs, academic and professional opportunities, inter-university exchanges, and the overall intensity of bilateral contacts. Therefore, the growth in the number of Japanese students is more appropriately interpreted as a quantitative indicator of deepening sociocultural interaction between South Korea and Japan, which may also be linked to the expanding influence of Korean culture.

As of today, at least 20 Korean educational institutions operate in Japan (the largest number in the world), including 5 Korean schools (elementary, middle, and high schools) and 15 Korean educational centers (Korean

Education Institutions/Centers). These include centers in Tokyo (The Korean Education Institution in Tokyo), Osaka (Osaka Korea Education Center), Kyoto (Kyoto Korean Education Center), as well as in the prefectures of Kanagawa, Chiba, Saitama (The Saitama Korean Education Institution), Nara, Sendai, Nagano, Kobe, and others. These centers offer adult language courses, TOPIK preparation, and cultural events. The Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea established these institutions. This extensive network allows South Korea to influence Japanese society not only in the capital but also in Japan's remote prefectures [9].

Alongside the network of educational centers, the King Sejong Institutes play a key role in promoting the Korean language, serving as Seoul's primary tool for cultural diplomacy. Unlike academic schools, these institutes integrate language learning into the broader context of "Hallyu," offering Japanese audiences courses that combine grammar with K-pop, Korean cuisine, and contemporary art. Japan has one of the densest networks of King Sejong Institutes in the world (more than 15 branches), which often operate out of Korean cultural centers or partner Japanese universities. This creates a multi-level system of influence: Korean educational centers provide the institutional foundation, while the Sejong Institutes ensure widespread cultural engagement among the Japanese population [52].

A notable trend in recent years has been the rise of "language tourism" among Japanese citizens traveling to the Republic of Korea. Many Japanese students come to the country specifically to study Korean through short-term programs, which require a D-4 visa. Leading universities offer such programs, including Yonsei University, Seoul National University, and Ewha Womans University, where Japanese students traditionally make up one of the largest national groups. This demonstrates the strong appeal of Korean language education and the trust placed in the Republic of Korea's educational institutions [49].

4. The Economic and Technological Dimensions of Korean Soft Power in Japan: The Influence of Korean Brands

At this stage, the economic dimension of the Republic of Korea's soft power in Japan reflects a shift from exporting goods to deep technological integration and dominance in the domestic market. The Japanese market, traditionally closed to foreign products, has transformed significantly under

pressure from the growing popularity of the Korean Wave. This influence is clearest in Samsung Electronics' strategic investments, Hyundai Motor Company's return to the renewable energy market, and the unprecedented expansion of the K-Beauty sector.

One of the most telling examples is Samsung, whose activities have long gone beyond traditional electronics exports. In 2025, the company announced a major investment of 25 billion yen (approximately $170 million) to establish a state-of-the-art semiconductor packaging research center in Yokohama, which is scheduled to open by 2027. This center will also serve as a platform for collaboration with Japanese high-tech companies (including Disco, Namics, and Rasonac) and the University of Tokyo, confirming the deep integration of Korean business into Japan's critical ecosystem. Thus, Japan – which embodies technological hegemony – has opened the door to cooperation and agreed to provide subsidies to the Korean giant, despite political differences between Seoul and Tokyo [12].

Hyundai Motor Company is demonstrating a similar trend; after a long hiatus, it has made a major comeback to the Japanese market by focusing on technological exclusivity and an environmental agenda. According to The Korea Times, Hyundai, in partnership with Kia, is actively implementing new business models focused on the electric vehicle (EV) and hydrogen vehicle segments, allowing them to distance themselves from traditional competition with Japanese brands in the internal combustion engine segment. Innovative models such as the IONIQ 5 and the compact electric crossover Casper Electric (known in Japan as the Inster) aim to meet demand for "smart mobility" among urban residents. As a result, Korean brands can compete confidently in the Japanese market, which has traditionally been dominated by domestic products [31].

At the same time, the K-beauty phenomenon reflects a broader spread of Korean influence in Japanese daily life. According to 2025 statistics from the OEC (Observatory of Economic Complexity), Korea surpassed France – the traditional leader in the cosmetics industry – for the first time and became the leading supplier of cosmetics to Japan. In 2025, exports of Korean cosmetics reached a record high – over $11 billion – and Japan became one of the key markets. Specifically, exports to Japan exceeded $1 billion, allowing Korean products to capture over 30% of the cosmetics import market. Moreover, Korean cosmetics exports are growing

steadily: in the first half of 2024 alone, shipment volumes increased by more than 20% [37].

This success can be attributed not only to the quality of Korean products but also to their "integration" into "Hallyu." K-beauty extends the Korean Wave, as consumers of Korean dramas and K-pop often perceive Korean cosmetics as part of the lifestyle they aspire to. Having understood this dynamic, cosmetics brands enlist K-pop idols and actors as brand ambassadors to promote specific products.

Aesthetic medicine and plastic surgery complement this influence, transforming medical services into part of a cultural pilgrimage. Japanese patients make up a significant share of medical tourists in South Korea, driven not only by higher-quality services but also by the desire to meet the aesthetic standards conveyed through K-pop and dramas. In 2024, the country surpassed 1 million foreign patients for the first time, with over 705,000 people (56.6%) seeking dermatological services, while plastic surgery accounted for 11.4% (over 140,000 patients). Of these, 441,000 were Japanese citizens, a 135% increase compared to the previous year [23].

In the context of South Korea's soft power policy, tourism is a key tool for shaping a positive image of the country in the minds of the Japanese people. Tourism facilitates direct contact between citizens of both countries, which is particularly important given the complex historical context of bilateral relations.

Current trends show a growing interest in South Korea among Japanese tourists. In particular, South Korea has been experiencing a veritable tourism boom in recent years: in 2025, the number of foreign visitors reached a record 18.7 million, surpassing even pre-pandemic figures. Japan ranks second in terms of the number of foreign tourists, reaching 3.61 million – the highest level in the past 13 years [29].

Unlike in previous decades, when tourism in Korea was associated exclusively with historical sites, today's Japanese tourists seek to "synchronize" with Korean life. According to a study by "The Chosun Daily" (2025), more than 65% of Japanese travelers are 20 and older. The main attractions are no longer palaces, but creative clusters such as the Seongsu-dong district, where Japanese spending on local brands and K-beauty has increased by 215.6% compared to previous years. This shows a strong desire to experience Korean culture, not just observe it [6].

A key factor behind this growth is the influence of the "Korean Wave," which turns cultural interest into real, profitable tourist flows. The rising popularity of Korean dramas and K-pop has significantly changed the structure of Japanese tourism to Korea, attracting new demographic groups, particularly young people and women. Tourists visit filming locations for TV series and music videos, concert venues, and cultural sites, which creates a deeper emotional connection with the country [43].

Particularly telling is the impact of the TV series "Winter Sonata", which marked a turning point in how Japanese audiences perceived South Korea. Its success not only opened up the Korean media landscape to Japanese viewers but also gave rise to the phenomenon of "Hallyu tourism." Japanese tourists began visiting filming locations, turning fictional storylines into part of their own experiences [43].

An important component in shaping the image of a developed and modern nation is medical tourism, which we explored in greater detail in the previous section. The high concentration of Japanese clients at Gangnam's aesthetic medicine clinics (about 45% of all payments in the district's healthcare sector) demonstrates trust in Korean technologies and quality standards, as well as the widespread influence of Korean beauty standards on the Japanese [6].

In this context, it is also worth mentioning the Korea Tourism Organization's activities, which actively promote Korea in the Japanese market through marketing campaigns, cultural events, and tourism festivals. By participating in international tourism events in Japan, the organization facilitates direct contact with potential tourists and fosters an attractive image of the country as modern and culturally rich [43].

5. Challenges in South Korea's Soft Power Outreach in Japan

The spread of Korean soft power in Japan is a rather paradoxical phenomenon: on the one hand, the Hallyu phenomenon enjoys unprecedented popularity among Japanese audiences, while on the other, it is constantly accompanied by deep structural and historical-political problems. It is precisely this "duality" – where cultural enthusiasm persists despite political tensions – that constitutes the key feature of Korea's cultural presence in Japan.

First and foremost, historical memory remains the main obstacle to the effective spread of South Korea's soft power, acting as a barrier to trust. Despite Japan's current image as a pacifist state, unresolved issues from the past - such as the "comfort women," territorial claims over the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands, and the Abe administration's revisionist attempts to revise the "Kono Statement" (a statement in which it was officially acknowledged for the first time that Korean women were forcibly subjected to sexual slavery to provide services to Japanese military personnel) – continually undermine the trusting relationship between the two countries. The colonial period of 1910–1945 is perceived in Korean society as an ontological trauma and an injustice, whereas Japan often resorts to downplaying these events and "normalizing" them. This creates a situation that researchers refer to as a "memory gap" – a disconnect in the collective memory of the two societies [24].

Anti-Korean movements in Japan pose an equally serious obstacle to the Korean Wave's effective spread. The most well-known and striking example is the far-right group Zaitokukai (translated as the "Association of Citizens Against Special Privileges for Koreans in Japan"), which has been actively organizing anti-Korean demonstrations and spreading xenophobic narratives since the 2000s. The organization's ideological foundation is based on ultra-nationalism and the belief that the Korean minority (the so-called zainichi, who have lived in Japan for decades) enjoys "unfair privileges" in Japanese society. At the same time, studies show that such movements not only reflect fringe sentiments but also help normalize anti-Korean rhetoric in the public sphere [50].

Particularly telling are the practices of public "hate speech" rallies, in which activists hold mass marches in areas with large Korean populations (such as Shin-Okubo in Tokyo), chanting slogans like "Koreans, go home" [13]. In some cases, the rhetoric has escalated to open calls for violence and threats to reenact a massacre similar to the Nanking Massacre of 1937 (in which the Japanese army killed over 300,000 Chinese), indicating the radicalization of a segment of the movement [45]. Importantly, such actions are often broadcast online, which significantly expands their reach and contributes to the spread of xenophobic ideas beyond the confines of small activist groups. This ultimately creates a toxic environment that directly undermines Korea's soft power efforts by

marginalizing Korean culture as "foreign" or "hostile" to Japan's national interests [40; 50].

The politicization of this issue has reached a peak in recent years, as anti-Korean sentiment has begun to be fueled not only by street activists but also by conservative media and the political establishment. As The Chosun Daily notes, calls to limit Korean cultural influence often serve as a tool in a broader strategy of historical revisionism. Far-right movements often use social media to spread narratives claiming that the success of "Hallyu" stems not from the phenomenal quality and originality of Korean entertainment content and products, but from systematic government funding, thereby diminishing their value in the eyes of Japanese society [51].

Another significant barrier to Korean cultural expansion is direct competition from Japan's "Cool Japan" national strategy. It covers a wide range of areas – from anime, manga, and video games to cuisine, fashion, and technology – and aims to create an appealing image of Japan around the world. According to the study "An Analysis of the Evolution and Influence of Japan's Cool Japan Strategy on National Image and Soft Power," Japan deliberately uses culture to transform its postwar image, shifting from associations with militarism to a modern, innovative, and culturally appealing country. Japan actively promotes this constructed cultural identity both domestically and globally. This, in turn, means that the traditionally insular Japanese sphere is already "filled" with its own strong narrative, leaving little room for Korean influences. Moreover, the Japanese political establishment perceives the success of Hallyu not merely as a commercial phenomenon, but as a full-fledged challenge to the geopolitical dominance of Japan's national brand [15; 48].

At the same time, "Cool Japan" shapes a specific perception of Japan as a "unique" and "aesthetically appealing" civilization. As noted in a study by Duoer Yang, 93% of respondents in Europe acknowledge Japan's cultural richness, attesting to the global legitimacy of this image. This strong, well-established image makes it difficult for Korea to "redefine" the region's cultural center: even with the popularity of K-pop and Korean dramas, Japan remains the symbolically dominant cultural player [48].

Another obstacle is adapting Korean content to the strict requirements of the world's second-largest music market. Researchers from Edith Cowan University point out that Korean agencies are forced to resort to localization

strategies, which often include releasing exclusive Japanese-language content, collaborating with conservative Japanese media conglomerates, and even recruiting Japanese members for idol groups. This "Japanization" of Korean soft power, while boosting commercial success, also erodes its authenticity and limits its ability to convey uniquely Korean value narratives [15].

One of the most interesting and paradoxical issues surrounding Hallyu in Japan is that culture here is never "just culture." It is constantly entangled in a political context. As Joseph Nye notes in his concept of soft power, culture's effectiveness depends on its perception as voluntary and appealing [33]. However, research confirms that in relations between Japan and Korea, this logic is disrupted: culture becomes an instrument of state policy and, consequently, loses some of its "softness." As a result, K-pop or Korean dramas can easily shift from "popular trends" into political controversy. As an example, one can cite the 2018 incident when the Japanese television network TV Asahi canceled a BTS performance due to a controversial photo of Jimin (one of the members) wearing a T-shirt featuring a print of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. This incident became a symbol of how pop culture can become caught in the crossfire of historical animosity, since for Koreans, the T-shirt design symbolized liberation from colonial oppression (with the slogan "Patriotism Our History Liberation Korea"), whereas for the Japanese, it was seen as an act of disrespect toward the victims of the atomic bombing [4].

6. Prospects and Opportunities for Strengthening South Korea's Soft Power in Japan

The current phase of South Korean-Japanese relations reflects an evolution from historically rooted asymmetry and tension toward a pragmatic partnership, in which the Republic of Korea's (ROK) soft power tools serve as a key de-escalation factor. According to the Global Soft Power Index 2026, the ROK maintains a stable position among the top twenty global leaders (11th place), thanks to its high technology index, national brand recognition, and innovative potential. In the context of bilateral relations with Tokyo, Korean soft power has shifted from a purely sociocultural phenomenon to an effective tool for historical reconciliation and minimizing political risks [42].

A promising trend is the diversification of mutual cultural interest at the civil-society level in both countries. The Korean Wave (Hallyu) in Japan has transcended the boundaries of mere pop culture consumption and become integrated into everyday life – from the food industry to a sustained trend of Japanese consumers learning the Korean language. This process is characterized by significant two-way sociocultural diffusion. According to the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), more than 9.45 million South Korean citizens visited Japan in 2025, cementing its status as the dominant tourist destination for South Korean residents [16]. Analysts at the Brookings Institution emphasize that despite historical differences, South Korea and Japan share many sociocultural characteristics: a commitment to democratic values, high urbanization, and similar demographic challenges (depopulation, an aging population). This creates an objective foundation for building a transplanetary space of trust and long-term humanitarian cooperation [20].

This sociocultural foundation helps translate soft power into hard power, particularly by deepening high-tech and industrial cooperation. According to estimates by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, joint Korean-Japanese projects in semiconductor manufacturing, artificial intelligence development, and digital network architecture hold strategic promise and could stabilize bilateral relations even amid political turbulence [28]. In this context, South Korea's reputational capital as a global innovator reduces transaction costs and mistrust within the Japanese business community, thereby fostering resilient supply chains. The economic and technological synergy between Seoul and Tokyo is becoming a factor in East Asia's regional stability amid China's growing geopolitical revisionism and the militarization of the North Korean regime [44].

The creative industry, which functions as an integrated ecosystem (music, film, webtoons, and the beauty sector), remains the main driver and institutional "engine" of Korean soft power. Yukiko Fukagawa, a professor at the School of Political Science and Economics at Waseda University (Tokyo), notes that the current Korean generation aged 20-30, which has come of age in a developed liberal democracy, exhibits a depoliticized, cosmopolitan view of Japan. For this generation, the neighboring country is not a source of historical trauma but a legitimate segment of the global cultural market. Similar processes are taking place among Japanese

youth, laying the groundwork for a values-based dialogue in future intergovernmental relations [44].

In the context of APEC reports (2025), the creative sector is defined as a new frontier for macroeconomic growth, with South Korea serving as a generator of ideas and methodologies and Japan as a priority market and co-creator of the product. As The Korea Times notes, digital co-productions and joint media platforms are integrating artists from both countries into shared clusters. An example of deep structural integration is the involvement of Japanese residents in the Korean idol industry (both through international K-pop groups and through localized projects adapted for the Japanese market, such as &TEAM or XG under a Korean umbrella management company). This approach maximizes Japanese consumers' sense of local identification with Korean cultural products and blurs the boundary between Korea and a "foreign" entity [21; 36].

Security considerations are a key catalyst for strengthening Korea's soft power in the medium term. Geopolitical destabilization in 2024–2026, driven by the escalation of North Korea's missile and nuclear threat and systemic rivalry among major powers, has pushed Seoul and Tokyo toward a model of "security solidarity." Analysts at the IP Defense Forum (2026) note that intensifying trilateral military-technical cooperation involving the United States is reshaping perceptions of South Korea in Japanese public discourse: from a historical rival to a strategically essential partner. In the face of existential security challenges, "memory politics" is temporarily sidelined in favor of defense pragmatism [17]. The Center for Strategic and Cultural Diplomacy (CSCD) emphasizes that, in the current context, "Strength in Unity" rests on the psychological convergence of nations. Japanese society's loyalty to Korean cultural brands and lifestyle creates additional public demand to legitimize and support military-political alliances with Seoul [18; 21].

In the long term, Korean-Japanese relations are expected to shift toward a model of "shared sociocultural stability," in which Korean soft power will ultimately lose its character as an exogenous (external) product and become an organic element of Japan's internal cultural landscape. Three macro-factors will contribute to this: first, an irreversible generational shift and the depoliticization of youth perceptions; second, a transition from distributing ready-made content to joint transnational co-production; third,

a security consensus that aligns with the level of cultural convergence and the goals of regional stability. Thus, Korean soft power is evolving into a key platform for forming a strategic defense and economic alliance between the two leading democracies of East Asia.

CONCLUSIONS

The study shows that the Republic of Korea's "soft power" in Japan functions as a multilevel and cross-sectoral system that combines strategic government planning (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, KOCCA, and the Korea Foundation) with the market flexibility of private business. Institutional coordination and deep content localization have allowed Korean influence to extend beyond traditional diplomacy and become integrated into the everyday practices of Japanese society. The "Hallyu" phenomenon played a central role: through K-pop, dramas, gastronomy, fashion, and K-beauty, Korean cultural products have shifted from being perceived as "foreign" and exotic to creating a sustainable, emotionally resonant environment.

Media broadcasts (KBS World, MBC), along with educational and linguistic tools such as scholarship programs, academic mobility, the King Sejong Institutes network, and support for Korean studies, have become important channels for building long-term relationships. At the same time, economic and technological factors reinforce cultural appeal: Korean brands in electronics, automotive manufacturing, and innovation serve as symbols of the country's high status.

Despite its widespread popularity, soft power operates in an environment of constant tension. It does not automatically resolve historical conflicts, disagreements over the colonial past, territorial claims, the actions of anti-Korean groups, or competition with Japan's "Cool Japan" strategy. A key risk remains the excessive politicization of culture, which can provoke public resistance; therefore, its sustainability requires preserving the autonomy of the creative and commercial sectors. The prospects for Korean influence lie in a shift from one-way exports to two-way sociocultural diffusion: joint media production, tourism, and academic exchanges. Another impetus for stabilizing relations is the changing regional security environment, which is prompting Seoul and Tokyo to pursue a pragmatic partnership and gradually overcome conflicting historical narratives.

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