

Notes on Strategy

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How Does Culture Become Strategy?

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It is hard to ignore the global craze of the K-drama Squid Game, which aired on Netflix. More than 110 million people have viewed the series in the 26 days since its release, and it reached #1 in the ratings charts in over 90 countries. It is highly likely to be Netflix's best-selling series of all time. The world's interest in this Korean-produced drama is very explosive. Various kinds of parodies are being made, and many YouTubers are analyzing the numerous symbolism and foreshadowing hidden throughout the series. Not only that, the mainstream media in countries across the world are busy analyzing the global fervor inflamed by K-dramas as a type of social phenomenon. Perhaps the show's greatest appeal that draws viewers to the screen and prompts them to binge-watch is the amazing direction of storytelling of characters as human beings. Such traits suggest the amazing ability of those involved in the Korean culture industry.

The global impact of Korean culture

The success of Squid Game confirms the global impact of Korean culture. Already, this has become a

sort of social phenomenon. Various genres have emerged from adding the prefix “K,” meaning “Korea,” and admirers from around the world have come to call themselves “K-fans.” Recently, 26 Korean words were added to the Oxford English Dictionary, including “daebak,” “hanbok,” “kimbap,” and “noona,” suggesting that literally, Korean culture has hit “daebak” (the jackpot) on the global stage. At the same time, foreign interest in learning the Korean language is growing rapidly. The heightened interest in Korean studies may be best described through the Korean expression “sang-jeon-byeok-hae (桑田碧海)” (similar to the English idiom “sea change”).

The global spread of Korean culture goes hand in hand with the rise of Koreans’ self-esteem. South Korea’s growth was one of the most surprising global events to have occurred during the second half of the 20th century. It pursued a so-called “compressed growth” which succeeded in industrialization at a rapid pace, while achieving democratization through the power of the ordinary people. Simultaneously, it has become the sixth largest military power in the world. South Korea today is a country that exports high-quality weapons across the world. Now, the country is focusing on its strategic goal to transform itself into a new global leading power through diplomacy. Here, various cultural products produced by the minds of

Koreans have become attractive enough to captivate other minds of people around the world. The dramatic spread of hallyu, or the Korean Wave, manifests the fact that South Korea is no longer a small country, isolated at the corner of Northeast Asia, but has begun to move to the center stage of the world.

The national identity of cultural phenomena

When cultural products from a certain country spreads beyond its borders, people come to define and accept the identity of that item around the “state” of origin. In other words, this is the national identity of a cultural phenomenon. The film Parasite is not deemed a part of a “Bong Joon-ho wave,” nor do they attribute the popularity of Squid Game through the names of Hwang Dong-hyuk or Lee Jung-jae. Those are simply called as products of K-drama or K-movie. Broadly, they are also defined by the Korean Wave (hallyu) craze, and people accept and consume such cultural phenomena based on the origin “state” of South Korea. Cultural producers may belong to the private sector, but their process of diffusion is tied to the identity of the state. This is the intersection of the national brand and culture. The Times, one of the oldest newspapers in the United Kingdom, published an analytical article on October 10 with the headlines, “Hallyu! How Korean culture conquered the world,”

in which it looked at the global phenomenon created by K-culture. When cultural phenomena spread as part of a national identity, it becomes difficult to exclude them, even intentionally, from the realm of national strategy.

How, then, does culture function as part of a national strategy? Firstly, culture is closely related to the field of industry. The profits generated by cultural industries such as K-beauty, K-food, K-movie, K-pop, and K-entertainment, are comparable to that of other manufacturing sectors. In an economic structure in which cultural products generate additional economic profits through tangible attractiveness, the cultural industry plays an important role in the growth of a state's materialistic wealth. In states like Italy or Greece, tourism revenue accounts for a significant portion of the national budget. When the cultural industry becomes a key component of the creation of national wealth, garnering interest in foreign markets in cultural contents is bound to become a part of a state's national strategy.

More importantly, cultural influence enhances the state's soft power capabilities. The concept of soft power was proposed by the American international political scientist Joseph Nye. Many regard this concept to have opened a new chapter in the study of international politics. The "carrot and stick" of

compensation and coercion is not the only approach that determines the nature and direction of relations between countries. At times, and even more so in the 21st century, Nye points out that persuasion is a more crucial factor.

Cultural contents are released with the trait of attractiveness, but later also take on desires for idolization and imitation. Cultural contents contain inherent perspectives, norms, and values that examine human nature and social phenomena. To share a culture also means to be assimilated into the worldview of such cultural contents. Through this assimilation process, “a sphere of meaning” is formed and culture becomes the basis for persuasion. Even Joseph Nye is closely observing the limitless capabilities and future expandability of Korean soft power. This indicates South Korea as ready to send a positive influence on the world. Through strengthening trust and bonding, Korea has begun to possess the ability to persuade the world.

Culture as a national strategy: what should we consider?

Although culture may be produced and defined on a national level, and even as the government serves as the institution that represents the country externally, the government cannot directly participate in the process of culture production. There are

uncomfortable memories of a past when the government was involved as a direct producer of culture. This is the so-called government-controlling culture. Since the optimal mechanism in stimulating human emotions is through cultural means, such government-controlling culture still flourishes in some authoritarian countries. However, for such methods, the effect of culture is extremely limited. It is also difficult to maintain scalability. The political foundation of hallyu was democratization. In a democratic environment, individual abilities, ideas, and a keen sense of social criticism blossomed in the realm of culture. Following this logic, it is unreasonable to try to force certain ideas into the cultural production process as part of the national strategy.

However, if we keep in mind that culture assumes the identity of the state as it crosses borders, and that cultural capacity is a component of state soft power, then culture should be included in the national strategy up to that point. First of all, it is important to establish a relationship between the government and cultural producers. The government should uphold the principle of “support but not interfere” as an important dictum. A cultural promotion policy should not be one of unnecessary interference. However, as Korean culture spreads across borders into overseas markets and gains broader acceptance across localities, the cultural

industry must be in close harmony with the nation's overall meticulous planning capabilities. Therefore, cooperation between the government and the private sector based on public consensus should be a key principle of a state's cultural strategy.

The vertical division between so-called advanced culture and backward culture is meaningless. It is true that when culture is combined with capital and enters the domain of industry, cultural items may become differentiated by high-priced and low-priced products. However, dividing culture itself into superior culture or inferior culture is an inconvenient legacy left by the age of imperialism in the 19th century and its discourse on civilization. While it is important to have boundless pride of our culture that has now spread to the world, we should not decide to enforce it on others with a sense of superiority. Cultural dialogue should be bi-directional, not unilateral. A social consensus on this principle should also be made among the Korean people as the originators of K-culture. Building and maintaining social consensus thus also becomes part of the national strategy.

Dream of Koreans, and the future of the world

The Korean Peninsula is a place where there are lingering bitter memories of the pain of being constantly plundered by neighboring countries.

International politics was cruel from the viewpoint of the Korean Peninsula. Neighboring countries have always been stronger and rougher. As beautiful as the land may be with mountains, lush rivers, and beautiful four seasons, Korea was a place lacking in natural resources. Once divided, neighboring countries were reluctant to find a solution. Diplomacy was difficult to grasp, let alone tracking the intentions of other countries. Poverty caused by colonization and war left a population desperate for basic survival. Korea sought to be a strong military power, to refuse to be further reduced to a victim. It sought to become a resolute and unshakable country.

These problems and challenges have all now been almost overcome.

What is more, South Korea seeks to stand proud at the center of the world. The country's outstanding cultural capabilities are widening the entrance toward that goal. Korea's cultural contents are sufficiently capable of achieving this. Hallyu, so far, may just be a glimpse of what is to come.

I cannot help but remind myself of Baekbeom Kim Gu's dream about the future of Korea. Kim Gu was the political leader who tearfully experienced the extreme pain of losing his country and a subsequent exile to a foreign land. Soon after the country's

liberation, he painted the future of Korea through the following writing:

"I want our country to be the most beautiful in the world, not the most wealthy or powerful. Because I have felt the pain of being invaded by another country, I do not want my country to invade others. It is sufficient that our wealth makes our lives abundant, and our strength is able to prevent foreign invasions. The only thing I wish for in infinite quantity is the power of a noble culture. This is because the power of culture both makes us happy and gives happiness to others."¹⁾
(Excerpt from Kim Gu's The Country I Want, 1947)

It is now clear that Kim Gu's dream is not impossible. And as clearer this vision has become, the more earnestly we must make his dream come true. We must strive shoulder to shoulder with countries from all over the world, with heightened national pride, to strip away the old memories of passivity that has long weighed us down. We must set a firm belief that we are leading the world, and hence, we must contribute creativity and wisdom for the future of mankind. We must be able to face the world without hesitation. Cultural pride should be the core of national strategy in the sense that an active external strategy should be devised and implemented with this confidence.

1) https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2021/10/794_317596.html

I hope that Korean cultural producers, as the most creative talents in the world's "most beautiful country," will further broaden our scope of reflection and wisdom. It is necessary that they continue to freely imagine the future and develop a keen sense of criticism of our civilized society. I wish that through our eyes, our pens, and our screens, we critically face human concerns, deal with problems of power, and present contradictions of various existing systems in the world by incorporating them into our cultural work. In confronting world-wide problems, I hope that the aspiration for attaining universal human values related to freedom, equality, peace and life will bloom brilliantly in Korean cultural contents. As privileged citizens of "the world's most beautiful country", it is my profound hope that the vision of Koreans will illuminate the first collective steps of humanity.