Riding the Korean Wave
From ‘Gangnam Style’
To Global Recognition
By Wu-Suk Cho

Ever since Joseph Nye coined the term “soft power” it has captivated much of the diplomatic discussion. As opposed to traditional power, soft power puts the selling of culture front and center, writes Wu-Suk Cho. The ‘Korean wave,’ once dismissed as a fad, is now a key part of South Korea’s diplomacy and has enhanced the country’s image immeasurably.

The dramatic story of the Korean wave and how it has enhanced South Korea’s image is unique in the country’s history. It draws our attention to the following questions: How do we link traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy? How should we best use the enormous energy of the private sector for the nation branding of South Korea?

But the implications of these questions go beyond the boundaries of Korea, implying a global and contemporary context: How can the current Korean “attraction” contribute to enriching the global culture of the 21st century?

For me, this is fascinating. I am amazed to see South Korea getting so much global attention. In this regard, the case of South Korea as a cultural landmark is in sharp contrast to that of the United States. The current status of the US as a liberal empire was born through a combination of traditional hard power and pervasive soft power in the 20th century. In fact, the concept of what became known as soft power first appeared in discussions of imperialism and the way culture contributes to global influence. But South Korea, given its relatively small population and profile, is classified as only a middle power. Therefore, it is a wholly different case.

Korea has never been an empire. It was just a weak nation in poverty when it declared its
and the power of Korea’s creative industries, it is time to review the concept and the strategic plan for the future of the Korean wave. I was recently shocked twice: first by the music video “Gangnam Style” — 225 million views on YouTube and counting — written and performed by the rapper PSY, who has become a rising star in the world of Korean music; and second, by an intense but sweet feeling I got from watching an unknown Korean band, Windy City, during a recent appearance on the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS).

To tell the truth, I was one of those who were cynical about the Korean wave. The term sparked not only a sense of pride but also a feeling of looming rejection, as if it might be a mirage that could quickly disappear. I was also concerned about a sense of arrogance coming from Koreans who suffered repression for so long in their history.

However, I have changed my mind over the last two years. After watching flash mobs pop up in Europe and South America, starting in Paris in the fall of 2010, I became convinced that the Korean wave is driven by the global village of our time and it will not prove to be a short-lived stunt.

‘Gangnam Style’ and the Inner Shaman

On the contrary, it is now growing in terms of size, influence and genres. Ranging from pop music, TV dramas and films to a boom in Korean language and food, the global appetite for Korean culture really is a sustained wave. Now that the image of the Korean wave as an overnight sensation is changing because of the staying power of Korean pop culture and the power of Korea’s creative industries, it is time to review the concept and the strategic plan for the future of the Korean wave. I was recently shocked twice: first by the music video “Gangnam Style” — 225 million views on YouTube and counting — written and performed by the rapper PSY, who has become a rising star in the world of Korean music; and second, by an intense but sweet feeling I got from watching an unknown Korean band, Windy City, during a recent appearance on the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS).

What makes PSY so amazing? As you get into his music, you realize he has a totally different edge from other popular Korean pop stars such as Girls’ Generation, Big Bang and 2NE1. His music has humor and breathtaking energy. What generates this energy, which is truly Korean, is PSY’s unique audacity, which transformed a peculiar rustic and provincial Korean vibe into superb kitsch. This is something other Korean pop stars are lacking with their typical format of group dancing. But what really matters is that people in other parts of the world are enjoying
the energy of PSY’s music. I am absolutely thrilled by this phenomenon, which clearly signals diversification and expansion of the Korean wave.

The Korean Peninsula is a rare place where shamanism and shamanism still have a strong presence in modern industrialized society, in my eyes, PSY projects himself as a shaman for the 21st century. While the PSY phenomenon is an expansion and explosion of the Korean wave, Windy City also demonstrates the great potential of our wave. The group proves that the Korean wave can also be a true cultural melting pot. Windy City plays Jamaican Reggae music that has almost been Koreanized. Nicknamed Doenjang Reggae or Cheonggukjang Reggae, (doenjang) is a traditional Korean fermented soybean paste, cheonggukjang is similar but with a more caustic smell and taste, the music is so confusing that it can be difficult to figure out whether it is Carribean or Korean traditional music. In other words, it is both extremely Koreanized and extremely globalized. Windy City is just one of many talented musical groups in Korea, and I am convinced that foreigners will soon love them just as much as they love PSY now.

My conclusion is that there is plenty of evidence that the Korean wave has only taken its first steps, and that its potential for future development is massive. This also applies to Korean dramas and films. South Korean drama has been wierding its power over the globe alongside K-pop.1 Once dubbed by pop culture critic Young-mi Lee as “a tongue-stinging spicy taste,” 2 it has become an obsession in parts of the world. It has been faring well from Southeast Asia, India, and China to Eastern Europe and Latin America.

What Sets It Apart?

What makes the Korean wave unique when compared to Hollywood or J-pop is that it covers almost every part of culture, ranging from music, drama and film to food. Whereas Hollywood and J-pop lean heavily on one particular genre and remain strongly localized, the Korean wave covers a full range of genres with greater universality. As we all know, the term Bollywood is a portmanteau derived from Bombay (known since 1995 as Mumbai) and Hollywood, and is used to refer to the whole Indian movie industry. Bollywood films, of course, are quite distinct from Hollywood ones. Movies, musicals, concerts and dances are all combined, and the stories are repeated over and over throughout the movie, making you feel as if you are watching a fancy dress party. Bollywood movies, which have long flourished in India, have recently been spreading to England, Japan and Russia as well as being popular in many parts of Asia. Although it will continue to be a way to spread Asian culture, it is doubtful whether Bollywood is truly contemporary and multinational. In addition, Japan’s ubiquitous J-pop still has a strong local flavor, lacking the resources to go fully global.

So does the relatively new phenomenon, for example, of Nigeria’s “Nollywood” film industry. Last year it was selected by Forbes Online as a notable film industry. It certainly is, and someone with a good eye for culture would pay natural attention to this huge film market. The Nigerian movie industry is worth about $800 million and is home to some 300,000 actors, directors, and marketing experts.3 It is the second-largest film market in the world, beating Bollywood in per capita sales. In Nollywood, it is jokingly said that not everyone knows Julia Roberts or Denzel Washington but they all know local stars Genevieve Nnaji or Ramsey Noah. The question is whether Nollywood will go global. Many people suspect that it will remain primarily local.

In this regard, the Korean wave is distinct from Nollywood, Bollywood and J-pop. Why so? Do the charms of Korean culture come from some superior cultural gene, as is often said here in Korea? If you were to take the wave as an ethnic virtue, you would veer into obsolete nationalism. I believe that the power of the Korean wave emanates from the pain, tension, and wounds inflicted upon modern Korea. Is there any other nation that went through as dramatic a change as Korea did in the past century? As Bruce Cummings, a Korean studies expert, said in his book Korea’s Place in the Sun, Korea has risen to become “the nation of the sun” from the ashes of its modern history. Soo-young Park, a writer and historian, once explained in a book dedicated to her European friends that the energy of Koreans is a result of past pains:

Koreans have lived in an era of identity crisis over the past century. They could watch only their self-portrait worn out with colonialism, war, division of the nation, and dictatorship. Then, this depressive shadow began to be rolled up in the late 20th century. Getting out of this shadow and the feeling of being victimized, they can now finally talk about democracy, progress and modernization too. You can rightly say that the World Cup in 2002 was such a party for it. The frantic excitement at that time was nothing but a great cheer for their ‘inner self’. Even if it is a self-portrait in rags and tatters, it is wanted to love themselves strongly. Wait for more to see what the next party would be.5

It is true that some Koreans see the Korean wave in a complacent and egocentric manner. They argue that it is a product of a superior Korean cultural gene and is a symbol of victory by Korean aesthetics. I often feel the urge to agree with them, but resist it. Why? Haven’t we explained that until recently the essence of Korean sentiment is sadness and han (deep resentment)? Now that it has appeared frequently in university and secondary school textbooks, it seems outdated. I can understand the psychological desire to fill the void with presumptuous nationalism, but it is not normal.

I like to emphasize that just as industrialization, democratization and the popular culture of South Korea came about in the light and shadow of rapid growth, global sympathy toward the Korean wave came about in the same context. The 20th century was an era of horrific violence and unlimited change. Because we Koreans went through the miserable history of colonialism and division, we are now emanating a cultural energy of empathy. It is our task to make this starting cultural wave into a sustainable cultural movement.

A Role for Government

The attitudes of our government and officials in foreign affairs are important. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade traditionally carried out its diplomacy and international negotiations within a typical framework, like other governments. But the emergence of public diplomacy heralds a change in this paradigm. Co-operating with citizens and civil society in other countries is absolutely necessary. Should that be the sole job of the private sector? Can the government sit on its hands and leave the mission of public and cultural diplomacy to K-pop management companies, singers, TV producers and actors?

Absolutely not. This is because only competent government and diplomatic officials can draw up a long-term strategic plan. No less important is the participation by intellectuals who are capable of seeing the big picture of culture in which Korea and the world is coming to play a role. They are called independent intellectuals. They should know not only about politics, economy and society, but also about arts, culture and mass media. They should use the government and official institutions to draw up a plan and strategy that is more competent and more in line with global trends.

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