

Book Review

Kim, Youna. (Ed.).
The Soft Power of the Korean Wave:
Parasite, BTS and Drama (1st ed.)
Oxon and New York. Routledge, 2021. 231 pp.

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The Korean Wave has become one of the world's most recognizable non-Western popular cultures. Korean Wave popular culture has emerged as a potentially vital tool for soft power diplomacy in South Korea. It has increased South Korea's global prominence and caught the interest of a new generation (Kim & Nye, 2013). What is the driving force behind the Korean Wave's global rise in popularity? Who contributed to the spread of the Korean Wave? And what does the Korean Wave mean for South Korea's soft power? To answer these questions, the authors of the book titled "The Soft Power of Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS and Drama" present a different perception that looks beyond the typical Euro-American perspective by demonstrating the causes and implications of the Korean Wave of popular culture around the world. Many people who are interested in the developments of Korean popular and media culture will find this book to be informative and enjoyable to read.

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The book, published in 2021, could be considered the most comprehensive book to date to describe how Hallyu (Korean Wave) has made an important contribution to South Korean diplomacy. As a follow-up to another book by the editor, Youna Kim, titled “The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global” and published in 2013, this book is divided into three sections that focus on the recent phenomena of the Korean Wave: a movie titled *Parasite*, a music group named BTS, and television dramas. It consists of 15 chapters that cover a range of perspectives, including media and communications, cultural studies, sociology, history, and anthropology, and readers will find in them insights about the Korean Wave as a resource of soft power in the global digital age.

The book’s opening section, “Parasite”, explores the significant strike of *Parasite* in the context of the rise of the Korean Wave, especially in bringing the Korean film industry to a global audience. The first chapter demonstrates the role of film and media companies in establishing the global market as the target distribution for *Parasite*. There are also three chapters in this section that generally underlie *Parasite*’s commentary on the social paradox in South Korea, and they have uncovered the film’s criticism of the income inequality, class hierarchy, and gender inequality that are to be found beneath the luxurious image of South Korea (see chapters 2, 3, and 4). At the same time, this criticism can be sympathetic towards global social issues and create a significant charm for *Parasite*. Thereafter, Chapter 5 mostly discusses how *Parasite* can connect with diverse audiences beyond the language barrier through the exploration of emotions and its genres.

The second section of the book, titled “BTS”, investigates this group’s recent fame in the K-pop industry as well as its contribution to consolidating the cultural power of South Korea. The initial chapter introduces BTS’s success in global pop music. The following three chapters highlight BTS’s role in depicting South Korea’s paradox (chapters 7, 8, and 9). Consideration is also given to how the idol-musicians address social problems and young people’s concerns (chapter 7) and offer an alternative masculinity (chapter 8). The group has also sparked fandom activism to social activism around the world (chapter 9). The notion of BTS as South Korea’s soft power instrument is embodied in their appointment as cultural ambassadors and in Western media’s coverage of them.

The book’s third section, “Drama”, discusses how the popularity of Korean dramas has spread beyond Asia and become a phenomenon in other parts of the world, examining the growth in popularity of Korean dramas (chapters 11 and 14) and the role therein played by digital streaming platforms. Netflix’s algorithm system has helped increase the international visibility of K-dramas (see page 171). Netflix rebranded Korean dramas, which used to be known as the “too emotional, with too many crying scenes” TV productions (Franzone, 2011), to a style of one package story-telling that combines elements from several genres, such as comedy, action, horror, and history (see page 179). The company has been successful in meeting the diverse needs of Western audiences, as well as audiences in Asia, the Middle East, and North Korea (see chapters 12, 13, and 16).

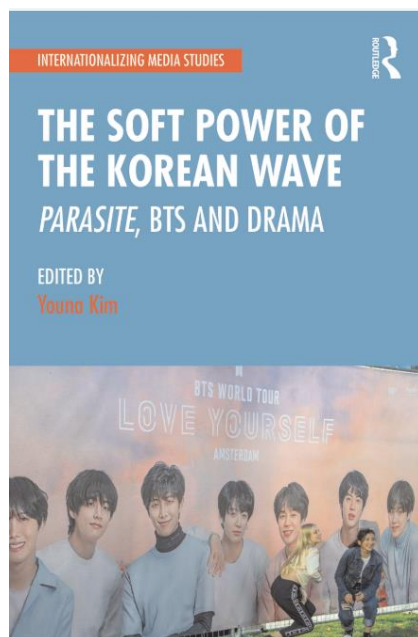
Throughout the three sections, the authors convincingly argue the significance of the Korean Wave as a soft power tool. However, one of the book’s flaws is that it focuses only on three cultural products and their impact: the *Parasite* movie, BTS, and TV dramas. Several intriguing themes in Youna Kim’s 2013 book, the forerunner of the present work, are not covered. One of the missing ideas is the research on online game culture that was actually one of the strongest themes in the 2013 work. Moreover, given that online gaming culture plays an increasingly important role in improving South Korea’s image across the world (Holroyd, 2019), leaving out such an interesting theme is regrettable.

This book lays out South Korea’s strategy of maximizing soft power to shape the country’s image. As film is one example of the numerous weapons that soft power can use to create a country’s image (Nye, 2004, 2008), South Korea has successfully used a global market strategy in promoting Korean cinema. Korean TV drama has put South Korea’s global image in a positive light thanks to the strategic partnership with a global streaming platform company. More importantly, however, is the whole packaging of Korean cultural products, such as foods, tourist attractions, and fashion shown in Korean drama scenes. An added attraction is the boost to South Korea’s tourism industry as foreign tourists visit the filming locations of their favourite dramas and purchase local products. Countries with strong entertainment industries can consider following South Korea’s path to boost their soft power.

The authors of this book provide an excellent overview of the Korean Wave’s cultural production, distribution, and consumption. This book can serve as a comprehensive reference to explain how Hallyu

has grown and developed in South Korean diplomacy. The positive development of South Korea's soft power, as described in this book, offers many lessons for other countries to follow, and the book may also inspire other countries to recognize the vitality of their own unique cultures, which can be projected on a worldwide scale. In the aspect of sustainable development, the book provides studies of the instrumentalization of popular culture to boost the country's economy and global influence in a peaceful way. Proven, Korean Wave as economic and soft power tools is a right investment for South Korea's sustainable development. This book receives 8 out of 10 for its profound strength.

Cover Book



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