

When culture creates power: Analyzing South Korea and Thailand's soft power

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze and compare the mechanisms of soft power construction between South Korea and Thailand by applying Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory as an analytical framework. The research encompasses three primary dimensions: cultural industry, cultural tourism, and culinary diplomacy, to understand the underlying mechanisms driving the international influence of both nations. The research employs documentary analysis and secondary data methodology, incorporating government cultural policies, relevant academic research, international statistics, and case studies of leading cultural organizations. The findings reveal distinct strategic differences, whereby South Korea utilizes standardized and highly efficient industrial cultural production systems to expand global influence, while Thailand maintains regional appeal through authentic cultural experiences that reflect profound emotional values and traditional heritage. Differences in state roles, religious and cultural foundations, and technology adoption have resulted in two principal approaches to cultural export: an institution and technology-driven approach employed by South Korea, and a culture and emotion-driven approach adopted by Thailand. This study proposes the concept of "cultural discount rate" to explain the challenges in global acceptance of cultural differences. The findings from this study provide theoretical and practical guidance for various countries, particularly the People's Republic of China, in developing cultural export strategies that balance industrial system efficiency with local cultural authenticity to enhance soft power within the context of globalization.

Keywords: Soft Power; Cultural Export; Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions; South Korea; Thailand

Introduction

Soft power was proposed by American political scientist Joseph Nye in the early 1990s. It refers to a country's ability to influence the behavior of other countries through attraction rather than coercion or economic inducement. Different from traditional "hard power" such as military strength and economic resources, soft power emphasizes the international influence of non-coercive factors such as cultural values, political ideas, and foreign policy. In his



masterpiece “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics” (2004), Nye pointed out that cultural attraction, the legitimacy of the national system, and the moral sense of foreign policy constitute the three core components of soft power (Jin, DY, 2016).

With the acceleration of globalization, cultural products, media communication, tourism and educational exchanges are increasingly becoming new battlefields for national competition. Especially in the Asia-Pacific region, countries have laid out soft power strategies such as cultural diplomacy, film and television communication, and food culture, trying to win discourse power and regional influence through cultural identity. Therefore, studying soft power is of great significance to understanding the contemporary international relations. By comparing the soft power construction paths of South Korea and Thailand, we can reveal the dual logic of standardized industrial output and emotional cultural experience, and provide a realistic basis and inspiration for emerging cultural countries such as China to formulate a “cultural going out” strategy (Korea Tourism Organization (KTO), 2022).

Comparison of core size

When exploring the cultural industry systems, tourist attractions, and effectiveness of food diplomacy in different countries, we can find that there are significant differences and unique strategies among countries in these core dimensions. These differences are not only reflected in the competition of cultural output and tourism market, but also in how to display and promote national culture through food, and how to shape the national image on the international stage. The construction of cultural industry system, tourist attractions and effectiveness of food diplomacy are all important components of national soft power, and they jointly shape the national image and enhance international influence.

1. Comparison of cultural industry systems

In the construction of cultural industry systems, different countries have taken different development paths. Taking South Korea as an example, the “cultural technology” strategy implemented by SM Entertainment not only promoted the innovation of the cultural industry system, but also injected new vitality into the development of the cultural industry. In this way, Hallyu not only has a layout in the field of cultural industry, but also has achieved global expansion through the combination of trainee system and AI composition technology. This strategy has effectively promoted Korean pop culture to all parts of the world, forming the so-called “Hallyu” phenomenon. Hallyu is not only a cultural phenomenon, but also drives the development of related industries such as fashion, beauty, and electronic products, forming a complete industrial chain. (Jin, DY, 2016). Thailand has adopted a different strategy. GMM has cleverly incorporated Buddhist elements into pop music through a localization strategy, which not only showcases the unique charm of Thai culture, but also enhances the international appeal of its cultural products. (Park & Lin, 2020). By integrating tradition and modernity, the Thai music industry has not only achieved success in the domestic market, but

also won international recognition, becoming an important part of Thailand's cultural output. Data shows that in 2022, South Korea's cultural content exports reached US\$12.6 billion, far exceeding Thailand's US\$370 million. This not only reflects the significant differences in the cultural industry systems of the two countries, but also highlights South Korea's leading position in the global cultural market. South Korean cultural products not only dominate the Asian market, but also gain significant market share in North America, Europe and other regions. (Thailand Ministry of Commerce, 2022).

In summary, South Korea and Thailand have taken different approaches to developing their cultural industries. South Korea promotes its culture globally through a “cultural technology” strategy, combining trainee systems and AI to drive the Korean Wave. In contrast, Thailand integrates Buddhist cultural elements into modern pop music, creating a unique identity that has gained international recognition. These differences reflect the varying capacities and export values of the two countries' cultural industries.

2. Construction of tourist attractions

In terms of creating tourist attractions, South Korea and Thailand have also adopted different strategies to attract international tourists. South Korea has successfully attracted a large number of Hallyu fans by promoting tourist routes with the theme of “Hallyu Pilgrimage”, such as the filming locations of famous film and television works such as the Ewha-dong Mural Village. These places have become pilgrimage sites for Hallyu fans. Hallyu tourism has not only brought economic benefits to South Korea, but also enhanced South Korea's international image, making it a cultural tourism hotspot in Asia and even the world. (Korea Tourism Organization (KTO), 2022). Thailand has made Thai massage a globally certified service brand by promoting the “Smiling Service” standardized system. In 2022, Thailand's medical tourism revenue reached US\$6.5 billion, more than three times that of South Korea, demonstrating Thailand's success in creating tourism appeal. Thailand's medical tourism is not limited to massage services, but also includes a variety of traditional therapies and modern medical services, attracting tourists from all over the world seeking health and relaxation. (Cohen, 2008).

In summary, South Korea attracts tourists through Hallyu-themed routes, enhancing its global cultural image. Thailand focuses on medical tourism, promoting Thai massage and traditional therapies under the “Smiling Service” system. In 2022, Thailand's medical tourism revenue significantly surpassed South Korea's, reflecting its strong appeal to health-focused travelers.

3. Effectiveness of Food Diplomacy

In terms of food diplomacy, both South Korea and Thailand have demonstrated their cultural characteristics and international influence. South Korea's vigorous promotion of “kimchi nationalism” and the controversy surrounding ISO standard certification reflect the global influence of Korean food culture. As a fermented food, kimchi is not only popular in



South Korea, but also widely recognized and loved around the world. As the world's fourth largest food exporter, Thailand has raised the international status of its food culture by transforming traditional delicacies such as Tom Yum Goong into molecular cuisine. This strategy not only preserves the essence of traditional cuisine, but also enables it to gain new international recognition. Thailand's food exports are not limited to finished products, but also include a variety of seasonings and semi-finished products, providing convenience for global consumers. In terms of health, the research on lactic acid bacteria in Korean kimchi and antioxidants in Thai fragrant rice shows the competition and cooperation between the two countries in the field of food health. These studies not only help to improve the nutritional value and health benefits of their respective foods, but also provide new options for the international food market. Both South Korea and Thailand are working hard to combine their own food culture with health concepts to meet the needs of global consumers for healthy diets (Choe & Kim, 2018).

In summary, South Korea and Thailand use food diplomacy to showcase cultural identity and global influence. South Korea promotes kimchi as a national symbol, while Thailand modernizes traditional dishes like Tom Yum Goong. Both countries combine food culture with health concepts, enhancing global appeal and meeting the demand for nutritious cuisine.

Deep mechanism analysis

1. Differences in government roles

When exploring the underlying mechanisms of cultural exports in different countries, the difference in government roles is a factor that cannot be ignored. Take South Korea as an example. Since 1998, the "culture-based nation" strategy promoted by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism has become an important driving force for South Korea's cultural exports. This strategy has not only promoted the rapid development of South Korea's cultural industry but also enhanced the influence of South Korean culture around the world. In contrast, the Thai government plays a unique role in building cultural soft power and is deeply influenced by the royal family-led philosophy of "happiness" (sanuk). This philosophy permeates all aspects of Thai society, allowing the Thai government to take a different path from South Korea in promoting and protecting its own culture.

In summary, government involvement plays a key role in shaping cultural exports. South Korea's cultural success stems from its proactive "culture-based nation" strategy, launched in 1998, which strengthened global influence. In contrast, Thailand's approach is guided by the royal philosophy of sanuk (happiness), creating a distinct, culturally rooted model of soft power development.

2. Religious and cultural foundation

Religious culture is another important factor that affects a country's cultural output. In South Korea, the combination of Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism has provided a strong impetus for the development of South Korea's cultural industry. This combination is not only reflected in South Korea's business practices, but also in the widespread cultural sponsorship phenomenon of large churches, which further promotes the prosperity of South Korea's cultural industry (Weber & Kalberg, 2013). In Thailand, the “merit economy” of Theravada Buddhism and the “Michelin phenomenon” of temples all demonstrate the profound influence of Thai religious culture on soft power. These phenomena not only reflect the close connection between Thai religion and economic activities, but also show the unique charm of Thai culture on the international stage (Thailand Ministry of Culture, 2021)

In summary, religion shapes cultural output differently in each country. South Korea's Protestant-capitalist blend fuels cultural industry growth, while Thailand's Theravada Buddhism drives a “merit economy,” linking temples to cultural and economic influence on the global stage.

3. Technology Acceptance Gap

The difference in technology acceptance is also a key factor affecting cultural output. South Korea's leading position in new technologies is fully reflected through 5G cultural applications. For example, innovative forms such as virtual idol concerts not only demonstrate South Korea's advancement in technology application but also enhance the appeal of Korean culture (Kim, Youna, 2011). Although Thailand is relatively backward in technology acceptance, its unique “slow technology” strategy, such as short videos of craftsmen, reflects the unique charm of Thai culture. Although this strategy is different from South Korea's high-tech cultural application, it is equally effective in enhancing the international influence of Thai culture. Cho, (2010; Yasmeen, 2016; Lim, 2022).

In summary, technology acceptance shapes cultural output strategies. South Korea leads with high-tech innovations like virtual idol concerts, boosting cultural appeal. Thailand, though slower in tech adoption, uses a “slow technology” approach such as artisan short videos to effectively showcase its cultural charm globally in a distinct way.

Conclusion

1. Study Results

Through in-depth analysis, this study reveals the performance of cultural products from different countries in the global market and the reasons behind it. The details are as follows

South Korea: With the efficiency advantage of standardized output, Korean cultural products have shown strong competitiveness in the global market. This standardization is not only reflected in the quality control of products, but also in marketing strategies and brand



building, enabling Korean cultural products to quickly occupy the international market. The Korean entertainment industry, especially Hallyu and Korean dramas, has become an important part of global popular culture. Their success stems from their keen insight into popular trends and their ability to transform these trends into products with global appeal.

Thailand: Thai cultural products are characterized by the emotional value of non-standardized experiences, which gives them a unique advantage in regional communication. Thai cultural products are often able to touch people's emotions and provide unique cultural experiences, making them more attractive and influential in the region. Thai movies and TV series, such as Thai romance dramas and horror films, are deeply loved by audiences in other parts of Asia with their unique narrative style and cultural elements.

In addition, the study also found that the success of cultural products depends not only on the innovation and diversity of their content, but also on the international dissemination capabilities of cultural products can often reflect a country's cultural influence and competitiveness in the context of globalization.

2. Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contributions of this study are mainly reflected in the following aspects: Proposing the concept of "cultural discount rate": This study innovatively proposed the concept of "cultural discount rate" by comparing the audience acceptance of Korean dramas and Thai dramas. This concept provides a new perspective and tool for analyzing the international dissemination of cultural products and helps to more accurately evaluate the acceptance and potential value of cultural products in different markets. The concept of cultural discount rate emphasizes the impact of cultural differences on product value and provides a theoretical basis for the market strategy of cultural products.

Expanded the theoretical framework of the international dissemination of cultural products: This study not only focuses on the intrinsic attributes of cultural products, but also explores in depth the impact of external environmental factors such as cultural policies, international relations, and globalization trends on the international dissemination of cultural products, so as to better understand how cultural products can effectively disseminate and compete in a complex international environment.

3. Practical significance

The practical significance of this study is that it provides important reference and inspiration for China and other countries to promote "cultural export" A mirror for China's "cultural going global" In the process of cultural products going global, China needs to find a balance between improving the industrial system and localization strategy. Drawing on the experience of South Korea and Thailand, China can better achieve the global dissemination of culture while maintaining its uniqueness and appeal. Chinese cultural products such as online novels, animation, and movies are gradually moving towards the international market, but to gain a wider international influence, it is necessary to further

improve product quality and diversity, while strengthening cross-cultural marketing and brand building. Promote the formulation of internationalization strategies for cultural products This study emphasizes how governments and enterprises can formulate effective strategies in the process of internationalization of cultural products. The government should formulate policies that are conducive to the export of cultural products and support cultural enterprises in expanding international markets. Enterprises should focus on the localization of products and the cultural connection with the international market, so as to enhance the international competitiveness of products.

In summary, This study compares South Korea's standardized, trend-driven cultural exports with Thailand's emotionally rich, non-standardized cultural experiences. South Korea dominates globally through efficient production and marketing, while Thailand excels regionally through unique storytelling. The study introduces the concept of “cultural discount rate” to analyze cross-cultural acceptance, enriching the theoretical framework of international cultural dissemination. It also highlights the importance of content innovation, policy support, and international strategy. Practically, it offers insights for countries like China to balance industrial development and localization, improve cultural product quality, and implement effective globalization strategies for stronger cultural influence and competitiveness in the global market.

New knowledge from studies

The Cultural Product Analysis and Strategy framework highlights four key factors for global success. High-standard cultural products focus on quality to gain popularity. Enhancing global marketing considers external influences. Emotional experience helps connect with Asian markets. Lastly, market acceptance analysis ensures products meet local needs. As presented in Figure 1



Picture 1 New knowledge from studies

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