The Role Of Hallyu In The South Korean Government's Pursuit Of Soft Power: A Case Study Of BTS

Introduction

In humankind's history, South Korea is by far the only country in the earth that aims to become the prominent exporter of popular culture. With the continuous efforts of South Korea government in promoting Korean culture, Hallyu, the largest cultural trends across Asia since early 1999, continue to be the buzz in the world in the 21st century (Roll, 2018).

This essay will discuss the role of Hallyu in the South Korean government’s pursuit of soft power. Using BTS, the famed Korean boy band as an example, the function of Hallyu in the South Korean government’s pursuit of soft power will be critically analyzed. An overview of soft power and Hallyu together with the background of BTS will also be covered in this essay.

What is soft power?

What is soft power? The term “soft power” was first coined by a political scientist - Joseph Nye in 1992. Joseph Nye outlines soft power as a country’s tactic to employ its image as political intangible power instead of hard force like military or economic power (Kim, 2015; Roll, 2018). Soft power lies on the capability to influence others’ preferences, not to force individuals to adjust and comply by intimidating military force or economic bans (Kim, 2015; Nye, 2002; Nye, 2004). The way South Korea attracts the world to listen to K-pop (Korean pop music), learn the Korean language, eat Korean food, travel to Korea, buy Samsung’s phone, drive Hyundai or Kia, by leveraging on its enviable nation image, is the illustration of how soft power in play. With soft power, a nation can achieve the results it desires in the world of politics as other nations admire its beliefs and values, and want to be like it (Nye, 2004).

What is Hallyu?

“Hallyu” - the Korean Wave was first termed by the reporter in China back in the 20th century (Eun, 2013; Kim, 2015; Lim, 2016). Scholars define Hallyu as the phenomena of global acceptance of South Korea’s cultural export, particularly in three main genres: drama, movies, and pop music (Choi, 2012; Eun, 2013; Lim, 2016; Roll, 2018). However, Hallyu does not limit to the three major genres, Kim (2015) and Roll (2018) defines Hallyu as a collective term - referring to the rising popularity of everything about Korea, from online games to fashion and gastronomy. Hallyu was first spread to Japan and China, followed by South East Asia, then all over the world (Lim, 2016). Today, it can perceive that Korean popular culture is widely recognized all over the globe (Roll, 2018; Choi, 2012).

Background of BTS

“Bangtan Sonyeondan” or “Beyond the Scene”, which best known as BTS for its fans, made its first appearance in South Korea’s entertainment industry in 2013 (KProfiles, 2018). Since then, this seven members’ Korean boy band has turned out to be an extraordinary global sensation.

BTS is not only popular in South Korea and Asia, but its fans are also widely spread all over the globe. BTS is observed as the most significant indicator of the Korean Wave phenomenon as soft power to boost the economy of South Korea up to the present time (Suntikul, 2019).

BTS drives South Korea’s tourism industry and economy

BTS alone has noticeably contributed to the economy of South Korean to a great extent. The report of Hyundai Research Institute pointed out BTS has contributed about $3.6 billion into the South Korea’s economy every year (Gollayan, 2018; Suntikul, 2019). The contribution of BTS into South Korean economy is not limited to the sales of music, concert tickets and merchandises, the enchantment of BTS also attracted its fans to visit South Korea (Roll, 2018). 7% out of 800,000 tourists who went holiday in South Korea in 2017 claimed that BTS is the main reason that drives them to visit South Korea (Agency, 2018; Roll, 2018). Additionally, based on recent research from South Korea's scholar, 28% of the respondents pointed out that BTS is the reason for them to pick up the Korean language (Omar, 2019).

Seizing the charm of BTS among its fans, the South Korea government deliberately leveraging BTS (Hallyu) as one of the resources for soft power by appointing BTS as “Seoul’s Honorary Tourism Ambassadors”. An initiative like “Live Seoul like I Do' has also been launched to attract the tourists, BTS’ fans to be exact, to visit BTS's favorite spots in the city (Roll, 2018; Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2018). The government official site – “Imagine Your Korea” even listed all the sites of BTS music videos and album covers via “Following the Footsteps of BTS” to draw more tourists, particularly its fans to visit these sites (Korea Tourism Organization, 2018; Roll, 2018). All the mentioned tourism initiatives by the South Korea government has clearly illustrated how the Hallyu plays a significant role in the South Korean government in the pursuit of soft power.

BTS changed the Westerners’ stereotype towards South Korea.

Besides facilitating in boosting South Korea’s tourism industry, BTS has also successfully changed the perception of Westerners towards South Korea. For many years, Westerners like the American perceived South Korea as a poor nation that suffered in the Korean war (Lim, 2018). Besides, research reveals that Westerners have a tendency to stereotypically consider Asians as an indistinguishable, collective bunch who mechanically mimics the West (Hong, 2014; Roh, Huang & Niu, 2015). South Korea is definitely not an exception in the eyes of Westerners. The Westerners think the Asian’s pop culture, including K-pop, is not cool according to their standards and values (Lim, 2018). They perceive Asian’s pop culture does not consist of the element of individuality and self-assertion in general (Lim, 2018). However, BTS has turned the situation around.

BTS is very well-received by Westerners. People from the West think that BTS is as trendy as The Beatles and One Direction (Bruner, 2018). Their concert tickets were sold out promptly in the USA. It was a historical moment as none of the artists from South Korea has managed to achieve that in the past (Bruner, 2018). As compared to other K-pop bands, BTS is much more popular and influential across the world (Choi, 2018).

With content that mostly produced by themselves (very rare in the K-pop’s world), BTS has proven that they are a band that full of personalities apart from having perfect choreography and

appearance like other K-pop bands through their works (Lim, 2018; Petrusich, 2018). Apart from accomplishing many musical awards in their homeland, South Korea, BTS also won numeral prestigious musical awards in the USA and UK, like the American Music Awards (AMAs) and BBC Radio 1 Teen Awards (Kelly, 2018; Kpopmap, 2018). On top of that, BTS performed their music in Times Square, New York for Good Morning America (Romano, 2019). What's more, they were even invited to deliver a speech in United Nation (Kelly, 2018; Kpopmap, 2018).

Their achievement in the world's entertainment industry has certainly brought Hallyu to another level, especially in expanding the American and European market. The soft power of the South Korean government has also been increased due to the accomplishment of BTS. The perception of the Westerners towards South Korea has changed. Today, more and more people from the Western world like Australia, North America, and Europe are interested to know more about South Korea. These people are keen to check out South Korea during their holidays, try Korean food and speak the Korean language, all because of BTS (Voloder, 2019). With the fame of BTS, people from the world has somewhat failed to recall South Korea was once a poverty-stricken nation. Indirectly, the South Korean government is gaining more influences in the world because people all over the globe are attracted BTS (Hallyu), admiring the Korean culture, and see South Korea as an attractive and charismatic country.

Conclusion

To sum up, the role of Hallyu in the South Korean administration's pursuit of soft power has been covered in this essay. The function of Hallyu as resources of South Korean government soft power, using BTS, the Korean boy band, as a case in point, has been deliberately analyzed in the essay as well. In fact, with the aid of Hallyu, South Korea has transformed from one of the world's impoverished counties to the world's 12 leading economies (Roll, 2018). In 2014, Hallyu has generated about USD 11.6 million increase for the Korean economy.

On the whole, Hallyu is indeed a blessing and benediction for Korea, especially in crafting its nation image. Surely, the Korean government has made the most of Hallyu's growing popularity from people worldwide and dedicated many efforts in promoting Korean popular culture to expand its soft power. Hallyu has indeed facilitated in boosting Korea's international reputation and national image, serving as a cultural tool and diplomatic to influencing non-Korean's point of view and likings on subjects of importance to Korea for South Korean government.

References

1. Bruner, R. (2018, October 10). How BTS is taking over the world. TIME. Retrieved from http://time.com/collection-post/5414052/bts-next-generation-leaders/
2. Choi, F. (2018). The BTS phenomenon: From a Korean-American's perspective. Retrieved from https://www.milkmakeup.com/bts-and-kpop-phenomenon.html
3. Hong, E. (2014). The Birth of Korean Cool: How one nation is conquering the world through Pop Culture. Great Britain: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd.
4. Lim, S. (2018). How Korean Boy Band toppled Asian stereotypes and took America by storm. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/how-korean-boy-band-bts-toppled-asian-stereotypes-and-took-america-by-storm-97596
5. Kelly, E. (2018, December 29). From number one albums to speeches at the UN: 2018 was BTS's biggest year yet. Metro.co.uk. Retrieved from https://metro.co.uk/2018/12/29

/from-number-one-albums-to-speeches-at-the-un-2018-was-btss-biggest-year-yet-8273981/
6. Kim, B. (2015). Past, Present and Future of Hallyu (Korean Wave). American International Journal of Contemporary Research, 5.
7. Kim, T.Y. & Jin, D.Y. (2016). Cultural Policy in the Korean Wave: An Analysis of Cultural Diplomacy Embedded in Presidential Speeches. International Journal of Communication 10(2016), 5514–5534.
8. Kpopmap. (2018). A look through the achievement of BTS in 2018. Retrieved from https://www.kpopmap.com/a-look-through-the-achievements-of-bts-in-2018/
9. Nye, J.S. (2004). Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics. New York: Public Affairs.
10. Nye, J.S. (2002). The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone. New York: Oxford University Press.
11. Omar, A. (2019, January 11). #Showbiz: BTS inspires fans to visit Korea and learn Korean. New Straits Times. Retrieved from https://www.nst.com.my/lifestyle/groove/2019/01/449510/showbiz-bts-inspires-fans-visit-korea-and-learn-korean
12. Otmazgin, N. & Ben-Ari, E. (2012). Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia. Oxon: Routledge.
13. Petrusich, A. (2018, May 29). Two theories on How K-pop made it No. 1 in America. The New Yorkers. Retrieved from https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/two-theories-on-how-k-pop-made-it-to-no-1-in-america
14. Roh, D.S., Huang, B. & Niu, G.A. (2015). Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media. Rutgers University Press
15. Roll, M. (2018). Korean Wave (Hallyu) – The Rise of Korea's Cultural Economy & Pop Culture. Retrieved from https://martinroll.com/resources/articles/asia/korean-wave-hallyu-the-rise-of-koreas-cultural-economy-pop-culture/
16. Romano, A. (2019). BTS, the band that changed K-Pop, explained the key to BTS's success: emotional resonance, sincerity, and an ARMY of fans. Retrieved from https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/6/13/17426350/bts-history-members-explained
17. Seoul Metropolitan Government. (2018). Live Seoul like I Do. Retrieved from https://english.visitseoul.net/LiveSeoulEn
18. Suntikul, W. (2019). BTS and the Global Spread of Korean Soft Power. Retrieved from https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/bts-and-the-global-spread-of-korean-soft-power/
19. Voloder, D. (2019). More Australians are learning Korean because of their love of K-pop. Retrieved from https://www.sbs.com.au/news/more-australians-are-learning-korean-because-of-their-love-of-k-pop