

# K-POP AS A MAIN TOOL OF KOREAN 'SOFT POWER' TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA

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**Abstract.** The Republic of Korea plays one of the leading roles in the global economy and is a dynamically developing country. As one of the key elements of South Korea's success, many researchers in their works note the so-called concept of "soft power". The strategy of the contemporary notion of "soft power" of the Republic of Korea is based on the dissemination of traditional cultural values and pop culture. South Korea places a great emphasis on the "soft power" of culture, which helped it shape a positive image and create its South Korean attractive brand on the world stage.

The main focus of this paper is to examine the essence of the Korean popular culture and its implementation in Central Asian states. Toward this objective, this research first explores the emergence and diffusion of Korean popular culture, especially with regards to globalization, soft power and value change. Further, its impact on CA will be considered in different perspectives. The research concludes that the implementation of Korean popular culture works as an efficient 'soft power' policy instrument for South Korea's cultural diplomacy.

**Keywords:** *K-pop, Korean popular culture, soft power, Central Asia, South Korea.*

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Корея Республикасы әлемдік экономикада жетекші рөлдердің бірін атқаратын және қарқынды дамып келе жатқан мемлекет. Оңтүстік Кореяның жетістігінің негізгі элементтерінің бірі ретінде көптеген зерттеушілер өз еңбектерінде «жұмсақ күш» ұғымын атайды. Корея Республикасының қазіргі заманғы «жұмсақ күш» саясатының стратегиясы дәстүрлі мәдени құндылықтар мен поп-мәдениетті таратуға негізделген. Оңтүстік Корея мәдениетінің «жұмсақ күшіне» үлкен мән береді, бұл оның оң имиджін қалыптастыруға және әлемдік аренада өзінің оңтүстік корейлік тартымды брендині құруға көмектесуде.

Осы жұмыстың басты бағыты корейлік мәдениеттің мәні мен оның Орталық Азия елдерінде жүзеге асырылуын зерттеу болып табылады. Осы мақсатқа сәйкес, бұл зерттеу алдымен корейлік поп мәдениеттің пайда болуы мен таралуын, және оның алып келген өзгерістерін зерттейді. Әрі қарай, оның Орталық Азияға әсері түрлі тұрғыдан қарастырылады.

**Түйін сөздер:** *К-рор, корейлік танымал мәдениет, жұмсақ қуат, Орталық Азия, Оңтүстік Корея*

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Республика Корея играет одну из ведущих ролей в мировой экономике и является динамично развивающейся страной. В качестве одного из ключевых элементов успеха Южной Кореи многие исследователи в своих работах отмечают так называемую концепцию «мягкой силы». Стратегия современного понятия «мягкой силы» Республики Корея основана на распространении традиционных культурных ценностей и поп-культуры. Южная Корея придает большое значение «мягкой силе» культуры, которая помогла ей сформировать положительный имидж и создать привлекательный южнокорейский бренд на мировой арене.

Основное внимание в данной статье уделяется исследованию сущности корейской поп-культуры и ее реализации в государствах Центральной Азии. Для достижения этой цели данное исследование сначала исследует возникновение и распространение корейской поп-культуры, особенно в том, что касается глобализации, мягкой силы и изменения ценностей. Далее его влияние на Центральную Азию будет рассмотрено с разных точек зрения. В исследовании делается вывод, что внедрение корейской поп-культуры работает как эффективный инструмент политики «мягкой силы» для культурной дипломатии Южной Кореи.

**Ключевые слова:** *К-поп, корейская популярная культура, мягкая сила, Центральная Азия, Южная Корея.*

## Introduction

In just a few decades, South Korean culture has taken the world by storm. Since the country's democratization in the late 1980s, it started the global spread of its culture. Hallyu, or the 'Korean wave' of culture, especially Korean popular music (K-pop) has been a deliberate tool of soft power [1]. South Korea isn't alone in this; many countries invest in cultural councils and exchanges partly to strengthen diplomatic aims. However, the South Korean government's push for cultural power has had remarkably quick success.

It is obvious that there is a list of K-pop acts which have already established dominance in Asia, particularly in Central Asia. From fashion to television to music, South Korea has blossomed into a cultural force in the region. Young people in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan view Korea as the new "cool" country. Underneath the shiny veneer of rainbows, dancing, drama, pop hooks, and compulsory cuteness lies a force that could affect everything from perceptions of nationality to regional beauty standards [2]. Though many authors have praised K-pop's soft power potential, it is important to qualify how such influence could be realized.

The South Korean popular music draws an ultimate attention as it is spreading as a storm and different changes in social and political sphere are emerging. So, what changes have occurred since Korean popular music appeared in the CA region will be examined in this research. Moreover, this paper will cover the attitude and perception of fans of Korean pop-music towards South Korea and will test the argument if the K-pop's distraction may be an influential soft power of a country regarding its cultural diplomacy.

Studies on Korean wave refer to the significantly increased popularity of South Korean culture around the world. Kim writes that the term was coined in China in mid-1999 by Beijing journalists surprised by the fast growing popularity of Korean entertainment and culture in China [3]. Broadly speaking, it can be said that the popularity of Korean pop music and television soap operas in China and Taiwan sparked the Korean wave abroad. Since then, the boom of Korean popular culture in the neighboring Asian countries has remarkably increased and significantly penetrated them over the past several years, and in the years 2000 through 2002, according to Hyejung and Sue Jin Lee, "the Korean wave moved forward to diverse parts of Asia, including Southeast and Central Asia, and therefore this wave reached an active penetration stage" [4-5].

The scope of the literature consists articles and books, official web-sites on flow of Korean Wave and Korean soft power diplomacy. However, while telling Korean wave only Korean popular culture and its spread in Central Asian Region are taken into account. Although there are plenty of literature on Korean Wave and its growing importance all over the world, an official information (articles, books) relating its spread in Central Asia can hardly be found. In this case, I believe that this topic needs a future research.

Considering the importance of the K-pop spread to Asians Doobo claims that it is especially meaningful for the Korean government "since the country's national image has not always been positive in neighboring countries" [6, p. 6]. Lee depicts many Asians did not know much about South Korea or knew only a few simple, often stereotypical things about this country. Images associated with South Korea were negative and related to events

such as the Korean War, cycles of poverty and political instability [5]. These negative images have diminished dramatically due to modern entertainers, new technology, and the image of contemporary South Korean lives through dramas and movies. The impact of the Korean wave has not only permeated popular culture but is also a measure of positive lifestyle for many Asian people [7].

By the way, the Republic of Korea is considered to be among the leading places to use soft power in its external policy. As for Central Asia, Korean official electronic journal, Donga.com pronounces that Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, has swept not only Korea's major trading partners such as China, Japan, the U.S. and France, but also far-off countries in Central Asia [8]. The influence of Korean pop culture in Central Asia is the most pronounced in Kazakhstan. Popular cultural items in Kazakhstan instantly spread to neighboring countries including Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Olivia and Bondas give several points on why Korean soft power affects Central Asian countries: the experience of overcoming economic crisis, business, medical tourism, education, traditional and popular culture [9]. Jon Simons argues that though K-pop videos and K-drama often contain very little true "Korean-ness," the receiver can quickly consume the product and still recognize its Korean "coolness." That's why K-pop became well-known among the youth of CA states [10].

Observers generally agree that the most likely explanations for the popularity of South Korean shows, singers, and movies throughout Central Asia include South Korea's high-income levels, business, the close cultural proximity and education and a new image of "cool" Korea. As a result of these and other economic

developments, "South Korea is now the twelfth largest economy in the world, and its entertainment companies are able to finance shows and movies with production values much higher than in most of Asia" [7].

### **Methods and Results of Study**

The work draws on several methodological approaches. Firstly, critical analysis of the literature and resources relating Korean Wave and its diffusion in the world, particularly in CAR is done. Secondly, quantitative study (survey) to measure Korean music supporters in Kazakhstan was conducted. Also, when writing the paper, such scientific method as structural approach in determining the implementation of K-pop in CA states was used.

The research results that the implementation of Korean popular culture works as an efficient 'soft power' policy instrument for South Korea's cultural diplomacy. Korean popular culture has spread to CA states, mostly to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan because of the Korean diasporas living there since 1930-s. Countries of Central Asia view Korea as a model of implementing its "soft power" diplomacy. Meanwhile, young people of all five countries has a great image of being 'cool' from k-pop and their supporters becoming more and more year by year. Tendencies of changing lifestyle, taste for food and an ultimate will to become and look alike k-pop celebrity is growing rapidly.

### **The Role of Korean Wave as a 'Soft Power' Instrument in the Foreign Policy of South Korea**

In modern international relations, "soft power" is an important component of a successful foreign policy. The concept of "soft power", introduced into scientific

circulation by Harvard University professor Joseph Nye in 1990, implies the ability to achieve a set goal by influencing the behavior of other factors, not through coercion, but through cooperation and persuasion [11]. In foreign policy, "soft power" is used by the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, Great Britain, Turkey, India and a number of other states

The Republic of Korea turned to the concept of "soft power" about twenty years ago. It was then that the Korean nation first seriously considered the importance of cultural technologies and public diplomacy in promoting an attractive image of the country on the world stage. President Kim Yong Sam recognized the exceptional importance of the national cultural identity, its popularization abroad in the face of growing globalization and international economic rivalry [12].

The modern strategy of "soft power" of South Korea is based not only on the promotion of national culture and traditional cultural values, but also the state of the Republic of Korea is actively engaged in the distribution of products of the pop industry. V.O. Zhidkov in his work "Elements of the South Korean soft power" writes that: "We cannot fail to note the country's efforts in exporting its culture - from kimchi to K-pop (Korean pop) [13]. The peculiarity of Korean pop culture is that it combines both elements of traditional Asian culture and Western culture, which allows to talk about it as a mixed nature. Thanks to such a unique nature, Korean pop culture is interesting and at the same time such combination is the key to its success. Already starting around the 1990s, Korean culture has been gaining worldwide popularity step by step.

Such a phenomenon as "hallyu" or "Korean wave" first appeared after the establishment of diplomatic relations

between the Republic of Korea and the PRC in 1992. From 1992 to 1997 many Korean movies and TV shows have been shown on Chinese television. Since 1997, the broadcasting of the program "Seoul Music Agency" started in Beijing and the Korean, especially dance, music has become popular among young people. When referring to the success of Korean mass culture in the Korean media, the term "hallyu" or "Korean wave" has been widely used [14]. In 2009, J. Nye characterized this phenomenon as follows: "... in the late 1990's saw the rise of "Hallyu," or "the Korean wave" – the growing popularity of all things Korean, from fashion and film to music and cuisine ... As a result, South Korea is beginning to design a foreign policy that will allow it to play a larger role in the international institutions and networks that will be essential to global governance" [15]. "Korean wave" has also contributed to the building of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea and other states. Examples include Korea Foundation, such events as Korean oral speech contest, a series of lectures on Korea, bilateral forums, musical performances of traditional Korean music in a modern way, etc. [16].

In one of his works on the "soft power" of the Republic of Korea, J. Nye said: "The Republic of Korea has an exceptional potential of "soft power", as it has an extremely successful experience of economic development, modernization and technological breakthrough, as well as a highly developed democratic political system with a deferred mechanism for the peaceful transition of power from party to party, ensuring universal protection of human rights and freedoms" [12, 15]. The strategy of the modern concept of "soft power" of the Republic of Korea is based on the dissemination of traditional

and modern cultural values. For example, the phenomenon considered in this paper as the "Korean wave" is very popular in many countries.

To sum, The Republic of Korea places a great emphasis on culture, which can be explained by the cultural peculiarities of the countries of the Far East. For Asian countries, culture, especially traditional, has a high value due to its uniqueness and great difference from the culture of other countries. Therefore, to date, culture as one of the elements of "soft power" of South Korea is one of the most developed and actively used by the state. Thanks to such a phenomenon as "Korean wave", the Korean lifestyle, Korean fashion, Korean cuisine, etc. became popular. The main achievement was the formation of a positive image and the creation of its South Korean attractive brand on the world stage. The creation of a positive image and attractive brand makes it possible for South Korea to implement its national interests without conflicts, to pursue foreign policy without the threat of using force and confrontation.

### **Distraction of Korean Popular Music in Central Asian Region and Emerging Changes**

K-pop in South Korea itself is a multi-billion dollar industry and one of the country's main export commodities. Promotion of Korean culture for Seoul is a matter of national importance. It all started with the reform of South Korean television in 1996 and the decision of former President Kim Dae-Jung to focus resources on developing the country's technology and pop culture. Korean Wave have got its popularity in CA when in 2012 [1], PSY's Gangnam Style became the first Korean hit to capture the world's music charts.

**Kazakhstan.** Kazakhstan experienced

the Korean Wave when South Korean dramas and movies started entering the country in the mid-2000s [18]. This phenomenon, assisted by the increasing accessibility of internet, sparked more interests in South Korean pop culture among Kazakhstanis, which helped the popularization of K-pop music genre in Kazakhstan [19-20]. K-pop is regarded as an attractive, less-restrictive and unique genre. The high popularity of K-pop in Kazakhstan spurred the creation of the first Q-pop project in 2014, when JUZ Entertainment formed Ninety-One [21]. After the group debuted in 2015, they became instantly popular among youth, due to its high-quality music and the use of Kazakh in its songs.

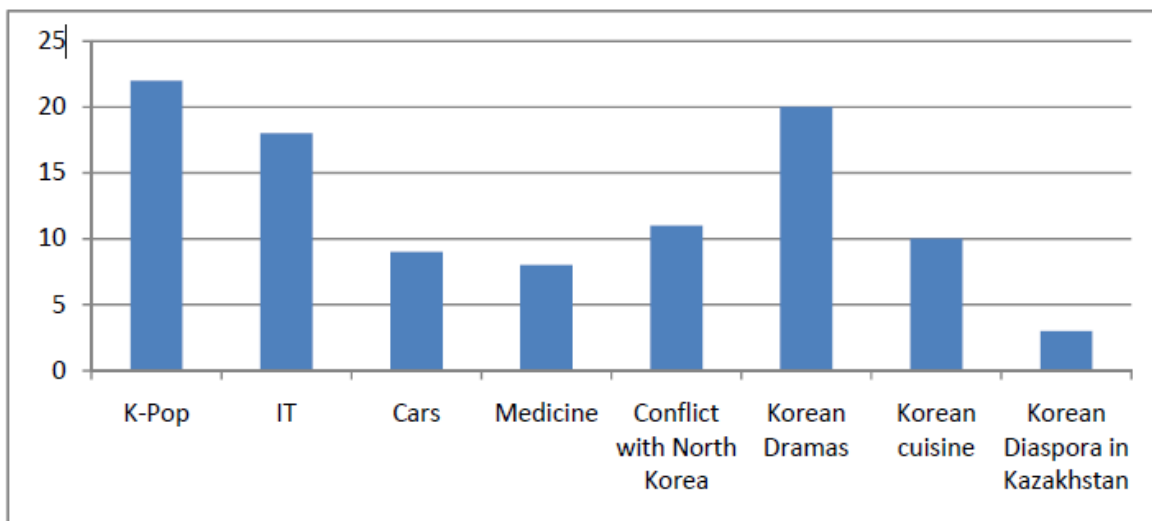
For the first time, the Korean dramas "Sorry. I love you", "Winter Sonata", "Full House" on Kazakh television started broadcasting at the beginning of 2000 [18], but the starting point, which marked the "boom" of the Korean wave in Kazakhstan, is the "Jumong" series and "Boys after flowers". 2011 was declared the year of Korea in Kazakhstan. On this occasion, a concert was held in Astana, where for the first time Korean pop stars, JQT, T-max groups, solo singer Seo Yeon Eun, Korean traditional theatre and actor Song Il Guk, who played the title role in the popular Jumong series "Prince", were invited [19]. Korean performers Super Junior, Girl's Generation, EXO, TVXQ, Big Bang, BTS fell in love with the Kazakh listeners. In 2011, the production center SM Entertainment carried out a global casting in the CIS countries, including Kazakhstan. Also, there are annual K-pop festivals and flash mobs organized by Korean culture fans. Also, the organizers of such events sometimes invite Korean idols such as MYNAME, Boyfriend, Highlight, AOA, ASTRO, BNF, etc.

2022-2023 years are considered to be the Year of Cultural Exchange between the Republic of Korea and the Republic of Kazakhstan. This year, on July 22 the large-scale festival “Meeting with Korean Culture”, organized by the Korean Cultural Center of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea, was successfully held at the Astana Ballet Theatre. This festival featured guest artists such as K-Pop idol group TRENDZ and K-Street Dance team Justevee Crew. In this regard, under the slogan of “a culturally attractive country,” the Center is promoting the “Getting to Know Korea and Korean Culture” program through K-Culture. Moreover, the Center, being at the forefront of exporting K-Culture in Central Asia, can rightfully be considered the national representative, “sales associate” of Korean tourism. In order to successfully commemorate

the “Visit Korea Years 2023-2024” this year, the Center is implementing various projects to expand the base of the Korean Hallyu Wave in Kazakhstan [22].

Today, Kazakh youth are attracted by the Korean lifestyle. Preference is given to clothing, cosmetics and equipment of Korean production. It was the spread of the Hallyu phenomenon that to a large extent contributed to the popularization of other components of the South Korean soft power model, and also helped to increase tourist flows.

This research was conducted to estimate whether Korean Soft power strategy is successful in Kazakhstan or not. The research was based on quantitative data obtained as a result of the survey (opinion poll) [17]. The survey was done by social networks and involved 100 respondents from several parts of Kazakhstan.



**Figure 1.** What do you associate with South Korea?(%)

As we can observe from the chart above the Republic of Korea mostly known for Kazakh people by their K-pop culture. So, this says that the realization of Korean soft power policy through Korean wave is working in a high level in our country.

**Kyrgyzstan.** Korean culture is not new to Kyrgyzstanis: the country is home to so-called Soviet Koreans who were

deported from the border regions of the Far East in the 1930s [23]. Thanks to them, Kyrgyz people, for example, have long been familiar with Korean cuisine, which differs from modern South Korean food both in products and spices.

The effectiveness of promoting Korea’s soft power can be measured by the activities of KOCIS and Korea.net. KOCIS

(Korea Cultural Information Service) is the service that has been operating on promoting everything Korean in the world, providing up-to-date background information [24].

Korea.net is an online platform in 9 languages that provides contemporary information on Korea in almost every area, from government announcements to information on musicians and upcoming events [24].

Hallyu attracts different age groups in the country through video games, music, TV series and films. There are several directions within Hallyu that are popular there:

-K-pop is popular with young performers, and family toi (wedding) and celebrations are hard to imagine without Gangnam Style. Having a desire of being “cool” young people of Kyrgyzstan are looking at South Korea. At the streets of Bishkek, it is possible to see young men and women dressed in black with extravagant hairstyles and perfectly aligned face tone - this is how Kyrgyz fans of the so-called Korean wave look like. "It is quite easy to calculate a Korean man: they are mainly teenagers and young people aged 14-25 in expensive sneakers, skinny jeans, T-shirts with the names of Korean pop groups and colored hair," says Adinai Ermatova, an employee of the Korean Embassy in Kyrgyzstan [23].

-Doramas – Korean drama series, that are well-known for their short duration, and which hold viewers’ attention until the end. By the way, the name Ku Joon Pyo (or Goo Joon Pyo) is known to many. In Kyrgyzstan, they even filmed the movie “How to Marry Gu Jun Pe” in 2011 with a budget of \$ 20,000 [25].

There is also a new wave of influence from Seoul: over the past three years, according to the South Korean embassy, the number of South Koreans entering

Kyrgyzstan has grown by 30%. K-poppers (fans and performers of Korean pop hits) are not shy about showing love for Korean idols. In Kyrgyzstan, K-pop fans not only closely follow their work, but also perform K-pop hits themselves, imitating the artists in everything.

The Korean subculture in Kyrgyzstan is not limited to music and TV series: numerous Hallyu fans are creating a market for the import of Korean clothing, cosmetics and even Korean food. The governments of the two countries are negotiating the launch of a direct flight Bishkek-Seoul. South Korea is also helping Kyrgyzstan move its public service system online and is providing a loan to Bishkek to modernize a public hospital. However, Korean investors are still investing cautiously in Kyrgyzstan - mainly small and medium-sized businesses enter the market [23].

Furthermore, like in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz youngsters are creating their own k-pop groups calling it Z-pop and Kg-pop. Compared to 2015, the level of popularity of k-pop in Kyrgyzstan has grown significantly. There are people teaching dances, and quite popular Kyrgyz groups have appeared [23].

**Uzbekistan.** Korean popular culture has reached to our neighbor Uzbekistan as well. However, the distraction of k-pop is not like in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. The Embassy of the Republic of Korea in the Republic of Uzbekistan together with the fan club "K-POP Association in Uzbekistan" conducted a regional tour "2019-K-POP World Festival in Uzbekistan" in Uzbekistan. This kind of fest has been conducted for 8 years in Uzbekistan. This shows that K-POP or Korean contemporary music is gaining popularity every year. The number of fans of this musical genre is growing at an incredible progression. The Association



of Korean Businessmen in the Republic of Uzbekistan, headed by the Head Mr. Pak Si Nam, which in every possible way contributes to the Korean business operating in the Republic of Uzbekistan, presented all the participants with music albums of the world's most famous K-POP groups "BTS" and "Black Pink". Here, we can observe the active participation of Korean diaspora in Uzbekistan in promoting its cultural values within Uzbekistan [27].

K-Pop is the locomotive of Hallyu's popularity in Uzbekistan, the main stars of which are Infinity, Miss A, B2ST, EXO, Airlie, etc. K-Pop is especially popular with young people and students aged 15 to 25 who are learning Korean. In 2013, at the World K-Pop Festival, which was attended by representatives of about 50 countries, a group from Uzbekistan Aladdin (a female group of 5 people) received the award "For the best performance" [28]. The members of this group are also very popular in Uzbekistan, which in turn increases the interest of Uzbek youth in Korean cultural events.

**Turkmenistan.** The Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Turkmenistan has been holding the Korea Cultural Week annually from 2016 [29]. Every time the event is held, rapidly growing interest in Korean culture among Turkmen people, especially young people can be witnessed. Korean Wave has just started gaining its popularity in Turkmenistan. According to fans of the k-pop group "BTS" there are hundreds of supporters and lovers of Korean pop music. However, the spread of k-pop will take time because it has been holding only by the implementation of the Korean Embassy in Turkmenistan.

**Tajikistan.** The spread of Korean culture, in contrast to the spontaneous Korean wave of Hallyu, occurs mainly through the efforts of employees of the

Embassy of the Republic of Korea in the Republic of Tajikistan through various cultural events. There are practically no Korean enterprises in Tajikistan, and the number of Korean citizens living is very small (about 100 people), in addition, as a result of the 1992-1997 civil war [30], a large number of Korean compatriots left the territory of Tajikistan, which severely restricts the ways of penetration of Hallyu and restrains its growth in comparison with neighboring states.

Currently, K-Pop in Tajikistan is mainly common among Korean language learners, but there is still no formation of fans or K-Pop circles. As a result of the worldwide popularity of PSY's song "Gangnam Style" in 2012, the youth of Tajikistan also showed interest in it. However, until now, residents of Tajikistan receive basic information about the Korean variety art through the Internet, and not through the broadcasting of TV channels or radio, which indicates a low level of its distribution. After the "I Tajik K-Pop Festival", which was a qualifying round for the World K-Pop Festival 2015", in 2016, the "II Tajik K-Pop Festival" was opened within the framework of the Karavan Korea-Central Asia 2016" forum, at which performances of Korean pop stars were held in support with M-107, GAMBLERZ CREW, B-boy, which received a great response from the residents of Tajikistan [30].

In this way, we can see that South Korea has managed to attract the Central Asian countries through soft leverage. And they managed to create their own national "soft power" model, capable of competing with the "soft power" of such powers as Japan, USA, Great Britain. By introducing modern technologies and innovations, Korea has managed to preserve its traditional flavor, culture and customs and through "soft power" to

spread the language and culture in Central Asia. In general, the passion for music, dramas and films contributes to the intensification of interest in the Korean language, culture, cuisine, and the state as a whole, which undoubtedly increases the symbolic capital of the Republic of Korea in the Central Asian region.

### **Conclusion**

The Republic of Korea places a great accent on culture. Consequently, culture as one of the elements of "soft power" of South Korea is actively used by the state. As phenomenon "Korean wave" has been spreading to the world the Korean lifestyle, fashion, music, movies, cuisine, became popular everywhere. The main achievement for Korea was the formation of a positive image and the creation of its attractive brand on the world stage.

Korean industry has gained prominence due to its widespread use on the Internet. K-pop has gone from a region of a little-known Asian music genre to an incredibly popular youth subculture around the world. Hallyu fans are driven by an interest in contemporary South Korean fashion and style, which includes more than just music.

As seen in the paper the realization of Korean popular music in Central Asia is growing year by year. Young people from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are starting their own music bands (Q-pop, Z-pop) imitating or having a heavy impact from K-pop. The majority of people, especially youth, view Korea as a new 'cool' country because of its significant influence in the minds of society. Here, we can see the developed use of soft power diplomacy of South Korea in our region.

The impact of k-pop has its own pros and cons. The good sides are that it entered the country to a new culture, cuisine, new modern market. As k-pop

becomes popular the tourist flow to South Korea also grows. Moreover, bilateral, cultural and economic relations between Korea and Central Asian states increased as well. However, where is a good, also bad things can happen. By gaining new culture, young people in CA countries could start forgetting their own culture. As youth is the future of the country itself, one of the most important goals they have to do is to promote their native culture to others.

In conclusion, South Korea was able to quickly and successfully implement its policy due to a number of factors:

- Firstly, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have a strong Korean diasporas, which are not just a living bridge between the two countries, but also an active element in the development of bilateral relations. The formed positive perception of Korea and Koreans by the population of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is one of the main factors contributing to the easy promotion of South Korean business in the republic;
- Secondly, South Korea has created the image of a technologically advanced country, a leader in solving global problems, an advanced state in the field of economic and democratic development. This appeals to the countries of Central Asia.
- The popularity of Korean culture in CA, the successful operation of human resource development centers, and active humanitarian exchanges testify to the interest of the region's residents in the Land of the Rising Sun.

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