

Korean Public Diplomacy in Chile: Analysis of Recent Trends and Changes in Reception of Korean Culture among Chileans

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Introduction

As part of one of the three pillars of Korean foreign policy, public diplomacy focuses on improving Korea's soft power assets, such as culture, shared values, and national image (MOFA, n.d). As a component of the latter, cultural diplomacy in Korea has been institutionalized to enhance the national prestige since the early 90s, when the government launched a concerted effort to globally engage in the promotion of Korean culture (Barden, 2019; Kang, 2015), this way cultural diplomacy has been used to build soft power assets by making Korea's cultural resources part of diplomatic activities such as exchange programs, the spread of information and cultural activities.

The government efforts and the active collaboration with private cultural industries have enabled the country to project its cultural soft power in different regions of the world and the Korean Wave is a perfect example of it. Lee (2009) identifies the Korean Wave as a resource of soft power that became a phenomenon that has reached significant notoriety in many regions of the world and has been capable of spreading Korean standards, behavioral codes, consumer preferences, fashion, cuisine, and other points (p.135), having also the capability of bringing the attention of the global audience to Korea.

Diplomatic Relations between Latin America and Korea

The relations between Latin America date back to the 1950s, but in the early 2000s the biggest efforts were made to improve relations between Korea and this region, increasing the number of bilateral summits, official state visits and improving economic relations with FTAs signed with Chile, Peru, and Colombia in 2003, 2011 and 2016 respectively. Later, Korea would sign FTAs with other Central American countries¹. Throughout the administration of presidents Park Myung-Bak and Park Geun-Hye, South Korea aimed to build a reputation as a middle power to boost and diversify diplomatic relations.

According to Faure (2017), this strategy did enhance the relations between Latin America and South Korea, but to fully reach its potential, South Korea must increase its visibility, so the visits of both Lee and Park, the participation with regional organizations, and inter-regional forums, the active role of the Korean Embassies and Cultural Centers in Latin America increased the awareness of the general public about South Korea.

Little has been written about Korean cultural diplomacy in Latin America, Uscaga (2017) focuses on the changes in the strategy of the Korean Foundation to capitalize on the growing interest in South Korean music and pop culture, expanding the promotion of the culture, society, and politics of South Korea in higher education institutions of Mexico. Hernández (2018) focused on the teaching and promotion of Hangul as an expression of Korean soft power in Mexico. Lastly, Pedraza (2014) explores how the Korean cultural diplomacy strategy has been used in Colombia to promote the demand for Korean educational and cultural products between 2011 and 2013, concluding that during the presidency of Lee Myung-Bak the Korean cultural diplomacy to promote their brand as a nation

¹ Panama, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras in March 2017, currently under the ratification process in the Korean National Assembly (MOFAT, 2021).

and to increase the demand of Korean products. These studies contribute to understanding the Korean strategy to promote their interests and values in Latin America.

In Chile's case, diplomatic relations began in 1962 and the Embassy opened in Chile in 1974. During the 90s the relationship between these two countries strengthened when both started promoting democratic values, respect for human rights, and market openness, signing the first FTA between these two countries. In 2021 ministers Chung Eui-young and Andrés Allamand agreed to strengthen cooperation in areas like the digital economy, infrastructure, climate change, and green hydrogen economy, among others. Many efforts have been made by both governments to strengthen bilateral relations, but the research related to Korean cultural diplomacy or how the Korean Wave as a soft power resource contributes to shaping the way the general public sees Korea.

The Soft Power of Korean Wave (Hallyu)

Today, the Korean Wave is an undeniable influence around the globe, however, it's important to note that despite the efforts the government has made to increase its cultural presence internationally, the Korean Wave now is a phenomenon self-sustained where the role of the private sectors has been key to achieve the current level of international presence, reaching even the Middle East, Russia, and South America (Kim, 2011).

In Latin America the success of the Korean Wave is more obvious by the day, however, the reason why the Hallyu became so popular in the region has no simple explanation. First, as a region, the cultural consumption of these countries has been dominated by the influence of the United States and European cultural contents, this is mainly because of the massive exports of the United States cultural products to the region, and the common values that Latin America shares with Europe because of the tragic colonial past that led to a heavy cultural syncretism with the pre-Hispanic cultures.

Secondly, Latin American countries and Korea do not share a language, and there is no geographical proximity or cultural affinity between them. Also, despite certain commonalities, each of all 33 countries in Latin America is ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse (Han, 2017; Min et al., 2019), therefore, the Korean Wave's success varies depending on each country and even if its popularity is increasing, the consumption of Korean cultural products is still small when compared to American products that have a great success globally (Feigenbaum, 2001).

Studies about the success of the Korean Wave in Latin America have been made in terms of transcultural values or the efforts of Korean institutions to increase the cultural diplomacy reach in the region. But there is yet to know if this interaction is capable of changing Latin America's understanding and approach to Asia as a source of cultural content or long-term interest.

The impact of the Korean Wave can potentially contribute to reducing the distance between Eastern and Western cultures, and this article² will focus on addressing the ways the interaction with K-pop has contributed to changing the knowledge and preferences of Chileans regarding Korea by focusing on three different aspects:

1. Does the interaction with Korean cultural products change the knowledge about Asia and Korea?
2. Can the interaction with cultural products of the Korean wave contribute to changing choices of international higher education, travel destinations, or living abroad?

² This article is based on a 2022 research that focused on understanding how the Korean Wave influences preferences and/or changes the knowledge about Asia and Korea in Latin American countries. The study held semi-structured interviews between January and March of 2022, and the sample was divided into two groups: 10 Chileans living in Korea for longer than 6 months, and another 10 Chileans living in Chile. Overall, the study shows that the Korean Wave has served to increase awareness of the differences in Asian cultures and to position South Korea as an interesting country to live, work and study. This was a qualitative and exploratory study.

3. In what ways has the experience of living in Korea changed or confirmed the pre-conceived ideas about Korea?

This article is organized as follows: First, it will address how the knowledge about Asia and Korea has changed thanks to the interaction with cultural products of the region; second, how the interaction with Korean cultural products worked as an incentive to change people's choices of pursuing higher education abroad, travel or moving to another country; lastly, it will address how the experience of living in Korea became a positive experience for Chileans living in the peninsula.

Asia and Korea

Asian people are typically addressed in Chile as “Chinese”, without caring to distinguish between countries and cultures (Min, 2021). This lack of interest is linked to the thought of Asian cultures being too different from what Chileans usually consume in cultural products (Min, 2020, Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2021), and the exclusion of Asian cultures in the school curriculum for middle and high schoolers.

However, according to Quijada (2022), the interaction with Asian pop cultural content has contributed to changing the overly simplistic way Chileans understand Asian cultures and become more conscious about the cultural differences and beliefs of these countries.

The interaction with elements of the Hallyu is often led by curiosity. Chileans mention being more open to learning about Korean pop culture because of their previous interest in Japanese content like anime or J-pop. This previous interaction created an opportunity for the Korean Wave to engage with Chilean society without having to break all the barriers and prejudice of Asian or non-western cultures face in Chile. Also, the display of a different culture with some resemblance to Western cultures makes it easier for Korean products to engage in Chilean public.

The interest in Korean or Asian content is not always strong enough to modify preferences and life choices as not everyone has considered Korea as a place to travel or live for a long period of time. This is especially true for the participants who live in Chile, some of them have traveled to the country and consider doing it again, but others have yet to materialize their intentions of visiting Korea.

On the other hand, the commitment of those who live in Korea is clear, as they made important efforts to migrate to another country, many study Korean before moving to the country and participated in different activities sponsored by Korean institutions. Among these, the King Sejong Institute (KSI) is mentioned as important because of the many opportunities and incentives that are given to the students: Such as scholarships or short travel sponsorship to travel to Korea and try to retain their interest in Korea. Rather than a language institution, the KSI is seen as a place to create a community to meet people with similar interests, creating the atmosphere to explore more about Korean culture.

Life in Korea

When asking Chileans about their reasons to move to Korea their common answers are related to seeking higher education or learning the language, while others moved for more personal reasons. For most, the scholarships offered by Korean Institutions were key for most participants as they come sponsored while just a few moved to Korea at their own expense. The KSI, or the Global Korea Scholarship, for example, played a critical role to maintain their interest and some of them would have not considered visiting or living in Korea without their sponsorship.

The Korean pop culture might not be the primary reason to come to Korea, but it has contributed to creating interest in Korea to the point of wanting to move to the country as most of the participants did not know much about Korea before they started interacting with the Hallyu. Learning from Korea positioned the country as an attractive place to move to, and the peninsula's reputation for higher education is seen today as an opportunity for professional growth.

Imaginary and Reality

Regardless of the place of residence, Chileans interested in Korea and its culture are attracted to diverse aspects of Korean society, no matter whether the interest stems from a direct experience with the culture or was reconstructed from interaction with cultural products, three aspects of Korea were considered very positive and attractive.

It is frequently mentioned that they admire the high levels of security, the way respect is displayed to others, and how Koreans show love for their traditions and culture while sharing a strong attachment to their own culture that is not seen in Chilean society.

The romanticized idea of Korea built based on K-dramas or similar cultural products changes when they move to Korea. While Security and traditions remain the same, respect tends to be drastically re-evaluated by Chileans that live in Korea, they realize that what they understand as respect is different from what Koreans understand and become more critical of those things that once they thought they liked about the culture. Chileans who have not experienced this directly tend to idealize the concept of respect due to the interpretation of it based on what Chilean society considers as respect.

To conclude, this study shows that the Korean Wave has contributed to learning about Korean culture, to separate Korea from the rest of Asia and the curiosity that comes from it also led to wanting to learn about the culture, history, and language. It also successfully promotes Korean culture to other countries and can contribute to creating long-term effects, on this, Korean institutions play an important role in creating spaces in Chile to learn about the peninsula and offer diverse opportunities to experience it.

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