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# **CINEMA AS A SOFT POWER TOOL IN SOUTH KOREA: DIPLOMACY THROUGH THE CINEMATIC INDUSTRY**

Is Soft Power a Geopolitical Strategy? The case study of *Parasite* and  
*Squid Game*

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## PART I. STATE OF THE ART AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

South Korea has been recently gaining international recognition due to the phenomenon of both *Parasite* and *Squid Game*, which have created an immense economic and political development for the country as part of the Korean wave. This study will focus on a single Korean wave cultural product, that is, the cinematic industry.

The Korean wave, which many thought started with K-pop music, actually goes back to the 1990s through the development of the Korean creative industry. This paper examines the role of the cinematic industry in the nation branding of South Korea to understand the government's approach towards cultural diplomacy and the soft power potential of the country. We will be analyzing the industry's evolution and the fact that it has progressively become a “soft resource” that has greatly improved South Korea's soft power.

Soft resources do not always translate into soft power. The aim of this paper is giving an extensive analysis as to why these soft resources have indeed transformed into soft power and have, as a result, enhanced South Korea's international position. In order to do so, we will be focusing our study on the cinematic industry, since the phenomenon of the Korean wave encompasses as well, many other fields. The emphasis of the analysis will be on how the Korean wave and especially its latest development through the already mentioned examples, has become the main soft power strategy of the country. Until we are able to reach our conclusions, we will also compare the approach to power taken by South Korea, as opposed to North Korea's, which will clearly help us identify the difference between soft and hard power and understand how South Korean culture has developed since its difficult origins.

Lastly, we will end our study by thoroughly explaining the implications of the Korean wave both internationally and in the Asian countries, as well as analyzing whether South Korea's government has effectively used this soft power to achieve the country's specific goals, since even though South Korea's soft power cannot turn the country into a superpower, a smart use of it may position the country way beyond their expectations.

## CHAPTER 2. STATE OF THE ART

There have been many studies about the Korean wave, especially since the emergence of Korean pop groups. Moreover, with the phenomenon of *Parasite* and *Squid Game*, Korean cinema has been given an increasing attention. The starting point from which this study is born is from the soft power that South Korea holds since the development of the Korean wave and specifically, following the development of its cinematic industry, as I believe it is a territory that is yet to be deeply explored.

Since the development of K-Pop, more and more interest has been drawn to the nation. As a result, Korean cultural products such as makeup, technology, videogames, or fashion have been gaining more recognition. The nation's latest cultural great export has been the cinematic industry. Nevertheless, its development has been so recent that most academics have not yet analyzed it.

My paper's analysis will come from a more contemporary approach, by breaking down whether the development of Korean films and series has had a real geopolitical implication. For this, we will answer the question "Are *Parasite* and *Squid Game* a geopolitical strategy?", in order to examine if they have indeed become a real source of power for the country and whether the government has had an active or a passive role in its development.

For this purpose, I have consulted many books and articles that dissect the concept of power and specifically, of soft power. Although finding bibliography about the Korean wave was simple, the difficulty lay in the few studies on film culture currently, due to the novelty of it all. Finding papers that focused on the cinematic industry was challenging, especially with *Squid Game*, as most articles only focused on its success without really analyzing its cause. This issue has not yet been deeply analyzed by the academic world, although the general opinion is that filmography is another of the resources that the country has to develop its soft power.

We must highlight the book *Soft Power: the means to success in world politics* by Joseph Nye, through which I understood more deeply concepts such as soft power, hard power, smart power and public diplomacy, enabling me to establish a theoretical framework on which to work. This book allowed me to give this paper a strong base, but in order to apply these concepts to the current reality of South Korea, the book *The soft power of the Korean wave: Parasite, BTS and drama* coordinated by Youna Kim, was

essential. This book was published at the end of 2022 and is the most current source that focuses on Korean movies and series. Thanks to it, I managed to carry out a major analysis on the subject.

Nevertheless, as I mentioned, most articles focused on the musical part of the Korean wave and did not analyze the latest development, so I had some difficulties to access more current studies and references. To this end, the primary sources that I used were the *BTI Transformation Index* to get an overview of South Korea, *Statista* to get the exact figures of the industry's success and public sites such as the *Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Council on Foreign Relations*, to inform me about the public diplomacy strategy and how Korean cinema has affected it. Overall, they allowed me to give an exact representation of the country's position worldwide, as well as the role that the development of the cinema has had in it.

Along with these resources, I must highlight some articles that were extremely helpful to fully understand the hold that Korean cinema specifically has had. The ones that I found the most relevant were *Film as cultural diplomacy: South Korea's nation branding through Parasite* by Seow Ting Lee; *Parasite: Moving Beyond Foreign* by Layne Vandenberg; *Hallyu and Soft Power: The Impact of the Korean Wave* by Marissa Trunfio; *Analysis on South Korean Soft Power- Taking BTS, Parasite and Squid Game as Examples* by Yihang Huang. These articles focus on analyzing why cinema can be considered a soft power tool for South Korea and explain specifically the change that the country has experienced since the *Parasite* phenomenon. Nonetheless, they lacked the depth that this topic deserves, mostly because most articles were written just after the release of the film and as a result, have not analyzed the evolution of Korean cinema since then.

This paper differs from previous studies, therefore in that it focusses more specifically on the *Parasite* and *Squid Game* phenomena and on the country's current situation. This issue has not been truly explored, as most papers analyze the role that Korean pop groups such as BTS, have led to the creation of the Korean fever or analyze the Korean wave as a whole. Moreover, it diverges from other papers in that it zooms in on the government's role in boosting the sector and on the analysis of it being or not a geopolitical strategy. Everyone knows the importance that it has had worldwide but why? What makes these

products different from the rest? Has the government been implicated in their development, or has it just taken advantage of their success?

## **CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES**

### **3.1. METHODOLOGY**

Regarding the methodology of the work, I carried out a general research work at the beginning with the objective of establishing a general outline of what I wanted to deal with. The origin of these sources was Google Scholar and Dialnet, both of which along with the books I bought, allowed me to give this study a strong base. In order to write this paper, the studies and books that I mentioned previously were essential to define key concepts of international relations and create the basis of the work. Once this general research was done, I turned to more specific studies that dealt with the film world in South Korea and how the country's soft power has developed today.

For greater clarification, I have divided the paper into two parts, a theoretical and methodological one and the analysis. Moreover, I have divided it into different chapters, being the first part formed by the introduction, the state of the art, the methodology and objectives and the theoretical framework. The second one is an analysis of the Korean cinema and its relation to power, as well as the contextualization of the country and the conclusions, which enable us to answer the question of study.

### **3.2. OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS**

Regarding the objectives and purpose of the work, we can differentiate between general and specific objectives. The general objective of the paper will be to analyze the relationship between the film industry and power, in the case of South Korea. That is, to analyze how the country's film industry has become a weapon of soft power.

Concerning the specific objectives, I would like to examine several issues and find the answer to some questions. First of all, there are indeed different ways of expressing power, but is soft power the better path? Does the approach taken by South Korea offer a greater prospect of success than the coercive power taken by North Korea? In second place, I would like to break down whether the success of the Korean wave in the cinematic sector is due to national efforts or not and to understand if it is because of the Korean

wave that the nation has experienced an increase in power and an improved geopolitical position. Finally, although we will analyze the consequences that the popularity of the cinematic industry has had for South Korea, has it truly affected the country's position? And how has it affected the surrounding countries and even the Western world?

## **CHAPTER 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this chapter we will establish the theoretical framework that has enabled me to achieve a deep analysis of South Korea's soft power, by breaking down important concepts related to international relations.

### **4.1. DEFINITION OF POWER**

In order to understand how the cinematic industry in South Korea has become a tool for the country to grow and gain power, we have to answer a few questions first: what is power? Are there different types of power?

According to Nye, power is "the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants" (Nye, 2004, 2). However, there are different ways to get those outcomes, which is why we can distinguish different kinds of power. The thing about power is that what is considered powerful today can vary, as it has. Before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the greatest form of power was considered the military capacity and the possibility to win the war. Then came the resources that each country had, such as coal or gas. However, with time, different actors came into play, such as the role of technology or the image each country projects, making the concept of power more complex. In this sense, while hard power used to be more popular before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, different forms of power have come into the picture. One of them would be soft power, which is a great source of power that brings different issues onto the table, such as the way a country is perceived, its popularity, its allies and so on.

### **4.2. HARD, SOFT AND SMART POWER**

#### **4.2.1. Definition**

Everyone is familiar with the term hard power, even if they don't know its definition. It consists of "military intervention, economic sanctions and so on" (Dennison & Sawyer,

2021, 1). It is the kind of power used by authoritarian regimes, such as North Korea, a dictatorship under the leadership of the Workers' Party of Korea which has used its nuclear power as its main source of power. However, what is soft power and how has it changed the international sphere?

The concept of soft power was first coined by Nye, a famous American political scientist and the co-founder of the international relations theory of neoliberalism<sup>1</sup>. He first mentioned it in its book *Soft Power: the means to success in world politics* (2004) in which he defined soft power as a less aggressive way to “getting others to want the outcomes that you want” (Nye, 2004, 5). Through soft power a country can obtain the outcomes it wants when people want to follow it due to the values it projects, instead of because they are forced to do so due to military force or the possibility to impose economic sanctions (Nye, 2004, 5). It “refers to the ability of a country to influence through attraction rather coercion” (Dennison & Sawyer, 2021, 1). This power can be directed inwards (to reinforce national identity, cohesion of the population, etc.), or outwards, as part of a public diplomacy to improve the country’s image. This power is more often used by democracies, such as South Korea, which we will thoroughly analyze in this paper.

However, soft power is not as simple as that, it is not merely influence, even though the ability to move people is part of it. It is also made of both attraction and persuasion, which can come from different assets, such as sports, music, videogames, makeup, fashion, or the cinematic industry, which is what we will focus on. It does not necessarily come from the government, as opposed to hard power, being armed forces or the use of resources decided by governmental actors, but the government can utilize soft power and incorporate it to its strategies.

There are some skeptics to the idea of soft power, as explained by Margaret Seymour in her analysis of the problems of soft power. She believes that attraction cannot be considered power and that soft power is very difficult to quantify, as opposed to hard power. She argues that it is challenging to quantify soft power’s success, while hard power, as it is more focused on measurable resources, is easier. The author explains that

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<sup>1</sup> Neoliberalism is a theory in international relations that originated as a revival of the classical liberalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As its predecessor, it is characterized by the emphasis on the free-market competition that arose from the decline that followed the Second World War.

skeptics also believe soft power cannot be catalogued as such because of the fact that it does not often come from the government (Seymour, 2020). That is, most times soft power is exercised by private entities and once the government has recognized its relevance, it may decide to either take advantage of that success and invest in those initiatives or to make initiatives of its own. Nevertheless, Hollywood, Microsoft, Harvard, Apple and even civil society itself are different forms of soft power and the fact that it comes from within rather than from the government does not disqualify it. Through this kind of power, democracy is as well promoted, and I must say, sometimes more effectively for the younger public who is not conscious of what politics entail.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to find skeptics to the concept of soft power, since nowadays, most people have realized its importance, being only criticized because sometimes, soft power may not be enough, it has limitations. This is where the concept of smart power comes into place. Soft power may be a good strategy to gain international relevance, but once that has happened, actual policies must be enforced by the government. Otherwise, people will only be attracted to the country, but it will not have any economic gain from that relevance, which is what every state is after: economic and political power.

Smart power is a concept that was coined by Nye in 2003 “to counter the misperception that soft power alone can produce effective foreign policy” (Nye, 2009, 160). This concept refers to the combination of both hard and soft power. Figuring out how to do so is what Nye calls “contextual intelligence”, a diagnostic skill that allows policymakers to create smart strategies, for which they must align objectives and policies. This concept is what Nye believed to be the way to achieve real and sustainable success, which could only be achieved through the combination of hard and soft power resources. A good example of the use of smart power can be seen in the US, a country that has created an attractive image but has at the same time imposed hard power policies that have allowed it to both be loved and feared. This is smart power at its finest, being able to both conquer culturally and politically, to make the world be drawn to your country and use that power to improve its economic and political position through having a strong military and economy (Nye, 2009, 161).

Regarding the specific case of South Korea, it is clear that the strategy that the government has taken on is to enhance its soft power and through that enhancement,

improve its economy. For this reason, we cannot talk about smart power in South Korea, being smart power only achievable if the government combined soft power with hard power measures, such as the development of the military and the imposition of more competitive economic measures. This will not be possible until the country develops a lot more and finds a way to be a threat to the rest of the countries, either because of its nuclear power, as North Korea, or because of its economic or technological power, like China.

#### **4.2.2. Sources of Soft Power**

Soft power rests mainly on three sources: culture, political values and foreign policies. All of them create soft power and when used wisely, allow a nation to boost its image.

In first place, we have **culture**, which is "the set of values and practices that create meaning for a society" (Nye, 2004, 11). We can differentiate between high culture and popular culture. While high culture refers to art, literature and education, popular culture refers to mass entertainment. Thus, what this paper will be focused on is how mass entertainment and specifically, cinema, has shaped South Korea's approach to power. This first source is what cultural diplomacy is about, using a nation's cultural products to attract others.

In second place, **political values and internal policies** can be a potential source of soft power. However, at the same time, if we do not agree with such government policies, they will act as the opposite of power. This is what happens today regarding the capital punishment and weak gun control policies in the US, policies that undercut the US' soft power (Nye, 2004, 13). The same goes for the North Korean approach to nuclear power and restrictive policies, which have only caused the rest of the world rejection towards the country and its leader. It is impossible for dictatorial regimes to exert soft power, as they are the literal image of coercion, of hard power.

Finally, **foreign policies** can also affect soft power, since how countries act towards one another will affect the world's perception and undermine soft power, if the country is perceived as indifferent to the rest of the world. Such is the case of Russia and its egotistical approach to international politics (Nye, 2004, 14).

Once we know how soft power can be exerted, we must explain concepts such as public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and nation branding, all of which are deeply related to how soft power materializes. **Public diplomacy** refers to "government communication aimed at foreign audiences to achieve changes in the 'hearts or minds' of the people" (Szondi, 2008, 6). This concept entails the governments' cultivation of public opinion in other countries and its efforts to convince to support a government. Public diplomacy can be defined as "interactions aimed not only at foreign governments but primarily with nongovernmental individuals and organizations" (Nye, 2004, 107). Public diplomacy goes beyond mere public relations and is related to how a country communicates and creates long-term relationships, so it is basically made of daily communications, strategic communication, and the development of lasting relationships. The three of them help the countries create an attractive image, which could then lead to the desired outcomes (Nye, 2008, 10).

It is the way a country connects with its people and with other countries, a relationship that involves both listening and talking and protecting the values that are the base of soft power. Thus, "the resources that produce soft power arise in large part from the values an organization or country expresses in its culture, in the examples it sets by its internal practices and policies, and in the way it handles its relations with others" (Nye, 2008, 3). Soft power comes from public diplomacy since public diplomacy is the instrument through which governments mobilize these resources in order to attract people from other countries. The key behind public diplomacy is that "if the content of a country's culture, values and policies are not attractive, public diplomacy that broadcasts them cannot produce soft power" (Nye, 2008, 95). Public diplomacy thus works along with all these concepts in a symbiotic relationship without which there will be no real use of smart power.

Although we will explain thoroughly how public diplomacy and is exercised in South Korea in the analysis, in an introductory manner, manifestations of public diplomacy could be for instance the cultural events held in South Korea, such as the Jeonju International Film Festival, which promotes tourism and encourages foreign audiences to be more interested in the country. This festival exemplifies both public diplomacy and **cultural diplomacy**, a form of public diplomacy, that can be used by a nation to promote its interests "through making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmissions abroad". Cultural diplomacy is a type of public

diplomacy, that aims to use a country's culture to appeal the foreign countries, thus creating economic and political support to the country. It includes both high culture and popular culture. Most people consider cultural diplomacy to be one of the most successful ways to exert public diplomacy, being culture the best way to captivate people. Examples of cultural diplomacy are exhibitions, educations programs established abroad, films, music, dance... (Cull, 2008, 31)

Both concepts are at the same time related to the notion of **nation branding**, which refers to the use of branding marketing to promote a nation's image and to enhance the country's reputation in order to create “reputational capital through economic, political and social interest promotion at home and abroad” (Szondi, 2008, 5). We could say that nation branding is the most powerful tool that a country has to exert public diplomacy, to change how a country is perceived. Hence, this image can shift and be shaped (Ting, 2021, 94) and the way governments and private companies do so, is nation branding. To sum up, it refers to the perception that a country's got on the eyes of foreigners, which is very similar to public diplomacy, being different in the fact that nation branding is a tool that public diplomacy can use to shape the image of the country, while public diplomacy as a whole, has different tools, all of which aim to affect people through government communications. For instance, Germany is known and respected among other things, for its motor industry, since companies as important as Mercedes, Audi and BMW are German. The same happens in Japan with anime and in South Korea with K-Pop groups. All these countries have enhanced their reputation and increased their exports thanks to these cultural products, which have created an image that is always associated with those countries.

#### **4.2.3. Cinematic industry: the new soft power tool**

Film is one of the most powerful tools of cultural diplomacy due to its way to entertain, educate and to project a certain image of a specific country, which might not necessarily be accurate. Regarding the topic we are debating here, it can also be a tool for nation- branding and for helping a country to break into global markets. However, most times it is not seen as a conscious geopolitical strategy, but rather they generate that effect consequently. That is, the government does not participate in the making of the movies because it believes it will help the nation, but rather takes advantage of the success they

create to publicize the country and after realizing the potential of the sector, it stimulates it (Ting, 2008, 96).

South Korea has not been the first country that has used cinema as a soft power tool. If we want to understand the power that cinema holds as a soft power tool, we may have to briefly mention the case study of both Bollywood and Hollywood. Bollywood was born after the country's economic liberalization of 1991 and has since then, become the epicenter of soft power in India as well as an example for the rest of the world as to how "non- state actors in the audio- visual culture can play a key role in the promotion of a particular view of people and places" (Dennison & Dwyer, 2021, 41). Its inspiration came from Hollywood, since one of the most relevant aspects regarding the US' cultural power is its cinematic history. That way, even though the US is not a country with a long history, due to its late origin, it has, through Hollywood created a whole image of the country that has made foreigners want to be part of that American dream. Now, coming back to Bollywood, even though India's culture had already been found interesting by many people, it was this industry which gave the final push so that more people started to pay attention to the country, which has since then gained a lot of popularity. It has thus become the representation of the modern India.

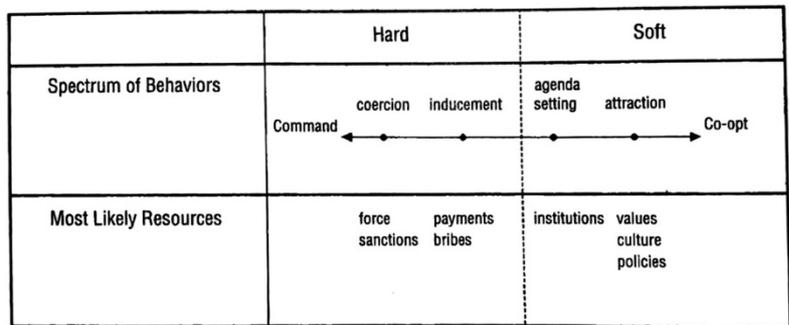
Regarding the question of why cinema is a relevant soft power tool, culture attractiveness influences social development within a country but most of all has "direct impact on relations between countries and helps a country to achieve important foreign policy goals" (Ding, 2008, 62). However, cinema by itself will not affect international relations, being necessary that the power of cinema is utilized to shape a positive image of the country, which must then be translated into effective policies. Proof of that we have the 2015 *Soft Power 30 report*, which stated that the UK's combined hard military, economic strength, soft diplomatic and cultural influence were the key to position the country as the world's leading global power (McClory, 2015). Hence, cultural power is not enough, but we must not undermine the importance of the attractiveness of the national culture as a path towards gaining competitive advantage over other countries, something that most countries had not realized until the last decade (Dennison & Dwyer, 2021, 219).

#### 4.2.4. Which power prevails today?

In order to analyze which power prevails today, we have to really understand the differences between both. In this sense we could say that hard power, is "the ability to change what others do" (Nye, 2004, 7), something that relies on coercion. Meanwhile, soft power, entails the opposite:

The ability to shape what others want, [...] which can rest on the attractiveness of one's culture and values or the ability to manipulate the agenda of political choices in a manner that makes others fail to express some preferences because they seem too unrealistic (Nye, 2004, 7).

The following graphic perfectly illustrates the difference among the two. Hard power uses inducements and coercion to command with resources like sanctions, weapons, and bribes. Meanwhile, soft power uses institutions, values, culture, and policies to be attractive in order to make countries feel like they are cooperating by choice, not by force. This power comes from "the values an organization or country expresses in its culture, in the examples it sets by its internal practices and policies, and in the way it handles its relations with others" (Nye, 2004, 8).



**Figure 1.** Differences between Hard and Soft Power.

Source: Nye, 2004.

Hence, in world politics it is more important to get people to do what you want, freely, without depending on coercion since otherwise, what happens when you do not have the resources to force people to act as you want? They will turn on you, because it is not an alliance based on respect, only on fear.

In this sense we could state that even though hard power is still present today and is very relevant in the international sphere, soft power is becoming more and more important, being the better way for a country to gain respect instead of fear. The ideal situation would be to be able to develop both powers, which is the case of the United

States, a country that not only holds economic and military power but has also created the image of the "American Dream", thus expanding its values and its popularity through its whole image. As foreign minister Vedrine said:

Americans are powerful because they can inspire the dreams and desires of others, thanks to the mastery of global images through film and television and because, for these same reasons, large numbers of students from other countries come to the United States to finish their studies (Vedrine & Dominique, 2021, 3).

One thing is clear, "hard and soft power sometimes reinforce and sometimes interfere with each other" (Nye, 2004, 25). Although promoting a country's image is not new, the conditions in which soft power is projected are. We live today in a global information age in which power is less coercive than it was before, mainly because there is a greater number of advanced democracies than of authoritarian regimes. Proof of that we have the fact that preindustrial agricultural economics, failed states and countries with unstable and weak institutions such as African and the Middle Eastern countries are considered more violent, whilst democratic countries have different ways to expose its power (Nye, 2008, 7).

Hence, soft power will be more frequent in democratic countries and hard power in authoritarian ones. However, democratic countries usually combine both types, using hard power through its military and economic influence when necessary but generating at the same time a perception that allows them to develop their soft power. Both powers remain relevant but **in a different degree and in different contexts**, a concept also known as "smart power", which we already explained in the theoretical framework.

In this sense, politics is a contest for credibility and popularity in which the country with the better image wins, especially if it learns to combine soft and hard power. In this case, South Korea, a country whose citizens have been continuously under the pressure of North Korea, but which has managed to follow democratic values, has everything to win and nothing to lose and has indeed used the Korean wave as a way to gain international acknowledgment. If we can reach one conclusion is that, as Nye said, smart power, the combination of hard and soft power, is the kind of power that countries should pursue in the global information age in which we live, being the US the main representation of this power (2008, 16).

## PART II. ANALYSIS

### **CHAPTER 5. SOUTH KOREA'S APPROACH TO POWER**

Once we have understood the object of study, through this chapter we will apply that knowledge onto South Korea's reality. Taking this into account, we will offer a contextualization for the country and reflect on South Korea's approach to power, as opposed to North Korea's.

#### 5.1.SOUTH KOREA'S CONTEXTUALIZATION

In order to understand why South Korea has been developing its soft power, we have to understand the country's origin, as well as the political spectre currently. South Korea has a population of approximately 51 million people and has in the last decades "emerged as a cultural powerhouse shaping the zeitgeist of global culture" (Ting, 2021, 94), distancing itself from the underdeveloped, authoritarian, and violent image some had of the country.

The nation has been economically developing since the 1960s, although it was democratized in the 1980s, owing to the socioeconomic modernization, which led, after decades of authoritarian rule, to South Koreans overthrowing the military dictatorship in 1987 (BTI, 2022). Regarding its socioeconomic development, South Korea has a high level of human development but has on the contrary, a high poverty rate (BTI, 2022). This fact, along with the gender wage gap that characterises the country, shows that it still has many issues to work on, although the continuous opening of the South Korean market has helped put the country on the map. Despite the changes in power since then, we must highlight Roh Moo- Huyn's presidency, which from 2003 to 2007 deepened democracy through the continuation of the process of economic liberalization and through the protection of human rights, among other things. Via this democratization, South Korea has transformed "from a protectionist and state-directed developmental state to a more open and market-oriented economy" (BTI, 2022).

Although afterwards conservatives came to rule again, the last president's authoritarian governing style led the democratic President Moon Jae- in, into power. Nevertheless, the new elections that took place in 2022 replaced him with Yoon Suk-yeol, a conservative elected in March 2022. Despite the fact that the new president is more

conservative, both presidents have in common their interest in South Korea's foreign policy. As proof of that we have the developing relationship that the country holds with the US, which is of course influenced by the soft power that South Korea has developed lately. For instance, "Yoon is expanding South Korea's alliance with the United States beyond the security realm and into geopolitically charged economic terrain" (Terry, 2022) and has "pledged to expand the scope of South Korean foreign policy beyond peninsular preoccupations to make the country a "global pivotal state" that "advances freedom, peace, and prosperity through liberal democratic values and substantial cooperation" (Snyder, 2022).

This paper focuses on how cultural diplomacy has become part of the foreign policy, which is the reason why now we will analyse how public diplomacy is handled in South Korea, through the promotion of the country's traditions, arts, values and history, thus creating stronger diplomatic relations and increasing both the country's global influence and the international community's trust. In this sense, the Ministry holds 5 main goals with their subsequent strategies (MFA, 2022):

Firstly, **to share Korean Culture**, through "spreading cultural attraction, elevating national image through cultural assets and strengthening two-way communication through cultural exchange" (MFA, 2022). Secondly, **to deepen the understanding of Korea**, specifically of Korean history, national development as well as Korean studies and language (MFA, 2022). Thirdly, **to gain global support for Korean's Policies**, "expanding the scope of public diplomacy for Korean's policies" (MFA, 2022). In fourth place, **to strengthen public diplomacy's** capacity by "developing participatory public diplomacy framework" (MFA, 2022). Finally, **to promote a public- private partnership**, through online platforms for communications and national and local cooperation (MFA, 2022).

To sum up, South Korea wants to be known and be attractive to the public via the promotion of the country's culture and national image, as many of the most recent policies show. For this purpose, the country created the Consultative Committee on Cultural Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is composed of 13 experts on different fields of culture and arts, being one of them, the cinema (MFA, 2022). Moreover, South Korea's Foreign Ministry created the public diplomacy division and the whole

"Global Korea" slogan, so a lot of time, human and economic resources were invested in the expansion of soft power (CSIS, 2021).

Today, Korea has become one of the most developed and industrialized countries in the world, with a nominal GDP of \$1.63 trillion, that places the country among the top 10 countries by GDP in 2022. Most of the revenues are spent on education, innovation and of course, the development of the country (Global PEO Services, 2022). Nevertheless, the country still suffers from high youth unemployment, a stagnating economy, impossible home prices, social inequality and inequality towards income distribution, being 66% of the nation's wealth concentrated in the top 10% of South Koreans (Ting, 2021, 102). This income gap, one of the issues that preoccupies the society the most, was one of Moon's priorities, although he was unable to find a solution, which was one of the reasons behind another president being chosen.

## 5.2. SOUTH KOREA APPROACH TO POWER VS. NORTH KOREA' S

Although this paper analyses the new approach to foster power through the cinematic industry of South Korea, the country has been developing up until today different ways such as its economic and most of all, democratic progress, which have brought closer the popular opinion.

Despite not being of course as large as China, the US or even Japan, South Korea has the potential to become "not only an economic powerhouse but what we might consider a soft power superpower" (CSIS, 2021), partly thanks to South Korea's pop music, dramas, food, TV and gaming industry, all of which are part of the well-known Korean wave. This strategic approach to soft power of course not only brings popularity to the country and helps with its global position, but also enhances South Korea's economic development. In fact, "according to Hyundai Research Institute, BTS<sup>2</sup> alone is estimated to bring more than \$3.6 billion into South Korean economy annually" (CSIS, 2021). Studies also show that before the pandemic, around 800.000 tourists visited the country because of the band.

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<sup>2</sup> As an explanatory note, and without intending to explain Korean pop to any great extent, as this study is focused on film, BTS is the most famous Korean pop group in the world since its founding in 2010. South Korea's cultural popularity is largely due to the success of this group, thanks to which the country has grown economically and gained a more relevant position on the global stage.

However, South Korea's popular culture has expanded well beyond music. South Korea has widened its horizons, focusing on different paths such as sports, gaming, cinema, or education. For instance, "the number of foreign students studying in Korea grew at a pre-pandemic high of 160.000 foreign students in 2019", which compared to the 12.000 foreign students there were in 2003 proves that South Korea is gaining the recognition it has longed for. The same goes for the billion- dollar gaming industry or the renowned gastronomic culture, the examples are endless (CSIS, 2021).

The field we will focus on the next chapter is cinema, a new possibility that had not yet been exploited at its maximum, at least, until the great phenomenon of *Parasite*, which at the 2020 Academy Awards won four Oscars, including best picture, being the first non-English language film to do so. The development of the cinematic industry, both through TV shows and films has become a successful export of South Korea's culture. This is the reason why we are focusing this paper in a different sector of the Korean wave, since it is very clear that K-pop music was the start, but not the end.

As we explained earlier, soft power is a combination of a country's culture, its values and its policies, as long as they are seen as legitimate by the rest of the world. If we apply these aspects to South Korea, we reach the conclusion that the country's soft power has indeed developed. Even though the first category, culture, is what we are focusing on, if we want to understand the way soft power has shaped South Korea's international relations, we will have to pay attention to the other two criteria we already mentioned: domestic values and internal and foreign policies (CSIS, 2021).

In this sense, regarding domestic values, the country has learnt to **combine economic success with democratic culture**. Nevertheless, the third category, the policies implemented, still has a lot of room for improvement, which is the reason why South Korean soft power still has not reached its full potential, as soft power cannot be reduced to a country's culture. If we want soft power to fructify and to create a positive result in the international sphere, we need more than popularity and propaganda. In the specific case of South Korea, the country will have to combine its new popularity with a strategic public diplomacy through which the country can become closer to other democratic countries. From my viewpoint, soft power has opened up South Korea to the world and has proven its potential, but now, the country must use this popularity and this influence to create closer relations with key individuals.

If South Korea combines its soft power with strategic communication and lasting relationships, the country will be able to create an attractive image which can thus lead to the desired outcomes, that is, distancing from North Korea and accessing the occidental allies. Additionally, if the country acts wisely, it could continue to develop until it possesses the economic and technological hold that China has, which combined with its soft power would allow the nation to cultivate smart power.

Now, **regarding North Korea**, the authoritarian regime based on isolationism and authoritarianism has taken a different approach to power. The country is known for being one of the most tightly controlled countries in the world, due to the governance of the Korean Worker's Party and the dynastic dictatorship. Three generations of the Kim family have now been in power, being the latest leader, Kim Jong- Un, who has focused, as his predecessors, on the development of hard power (Albert, 2020). Kim Jong- Un has been focusing on the development of missile and nuclear capabilities, the development of the military power, under the tenet of military first (*songun*), through which it is clear the military in North Korea is the main element in society. In 2020, most economic resources were dedicated to the sector, which amounted over 1.2 million active personnel (Albert, 2020). However, North Korea is one of the world's poorest nations, which is striking, since if the country were to allocate more money towards the quality of life, rather than spending billions in military, there would not be the malnutrition the country is known for.

As we can see, even though both countries have problems, they are not comparable. North Korea has not developed the way South Korea has, due to the different priorities the country has, because most money is spent in the enhancement of the military and the regime itself. The country clearly has a different approach to power, which is related to the political process, since the country is focused on being feared, rather than admired, as opposed to South Korea. North Korea has taken a hard power approach and developed an intense isolationism, being soft power null in the country. Meanwhile, South Korea has done the complete opposite.

## CHAPTER 6. CINEMA IN SOUTH KOREA THROUGH THE DECADES

This chapter, which constitutes the epicenter of the paper, will examine how the South Korean cinematic industry has acted as the most recent and relevant soft power tool for the country. On account of that, we will start the chapter by introducing the Korean wave, which will be followed by the elaboration on the evolution of the industry and the position that K-dramas had in it. Afterwards, we will focus on the role that the government has played in boosting this sector and end up with the focal segment of this paper: the analysis of both *Parasite* and *Squid Game* and the repercussions that they and the Korean wave as a whole, have had within the country and geopolitically.

### 6.1. THE KOREAN WAVE

#### 6.1.1. Definition and Origin

The Korean wave is also known as *Hallyu*, which is an adaptation of the Chinese term *Hánliú* or translated, *the flow of Korea*. It refers to the recent phenomenon of Korea's culture expansion through television, music, or cinema which "convey South Korean social values and are used as mechanisms of soft power" (Trunfio, 2015, 2). These cultural exports allow South Korea to expand into political spheres and international marketplaces.

Although this phenomenon is quite recent, it has been forming for more than 20 years. In this sense, the Korean government has been investing millions of dollars since the economic crisis of 1997 in the development of music groups, video games and television dramas, as well as cosmetics or even food exports (Trunfio, 2015, 3). Moreover, South Korea's attempt to look more Western has now been replaced by the desire to create an independent image whilst adapting to changing perceptions of consumers. Moreover, something that we must take into account, is that the Korean wave is not automatically soft power. As we stated, soft resources do not always result in soft power, in order to do so, soft power strategies must be in place, as South Korea has done, through the investment in the Ministry of Culture. Nevertheless, a greater mobilization of South Korea's soft resources is needed if the country wants to effectively achieve its political goals. For this reason, in a sense, there is still a lot of work to be done to convert said resources into a powerful weapon, even though the plan is already in place.

### 6.1.2. Characteristics of the Korean wave

Even though the Korean wave has become a way for South Korea to improve its international popularity, it was not a calculated attempt to do so, at least the first stage, being basically a mix of favorable circumstances (Laima, 2011, 135). However, once we have defined it and understood where it comes from, I would like to point out its characteristics.

First and foremost, its **geographic and cultural scope** is not just Confucian East Asia, even if it is where its origins lie. Now the Korean wave has also extended to non-Confucian countries, and basically to most countries. This shows that this wave has progressed gradually and is now gaining universal appeal, allowing the country's soft power to be projected into diverse regions (Lee, 2009, 132). Secondly, the movement is shaped by its **diversity**, which has led every country to hold different preferences within it. This movement is basically made of a wide cultural network that has created so much content that most countries will become attracted to one of its facets. As a result, natural market barriers against foreign content will likely be slowly fading in the future, since there is something for everyone in the mix (Lee, 2009, 133). Third, the Korean wave is **not ephemeral** and will not be transitory, it has been developing for decades, but due to the popularity of other cultural products like music, it is now that it has been given the attention it deserves (Lee, 2009, 133).

## 6.2. EVOLUTION OF THE CINEMATIC INDUSTRY IN SOUTH KOREA

### 6.2.1. Surviving the censorship

Before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and especially between 1910 and 1996, artistic creativity was suppressed by the dictatorial governments in South Korea through censorship, which “prevented local filmmakers from making films that the authorities thought would be offensive or detrimental to the government’s political agenda” (Park, 2002, 120). It started in 1910 because of the Japanese occupation of the country. The government’s control was the greatest difficulty for the development of the Korean cinematic industry, being the capacity for cinematic expression decreased with time and having its peak after the end of the Japanese colonization and after the country was divided into two separate states.

The expansion of the industry went hand in hand with the democratization of the country. The media liberalization of the late 1980s and the market opening to foreign

distributors were possible due to the amendment in 1986 of the Motion Picture Law, alleviating "the regulations on foreign investment in the South Korean film industry" (Laima, 2011, 124) and abolishing both the import quota and the tax imposed on foreign films. However, as a result, the local film production decreased due to the increase of foreign films imports. The beginning of the end of the censorship was in 1987, when "nationwide antigovernment protests brought about a chance to promote Korea's democratic potential" (Park, 2002, 120). The turning point was the ruling of the Constitutional Court, which in 1996 established that the censorship was unconstitutional, allowing this industry to expand (Ting, 2021, 96).

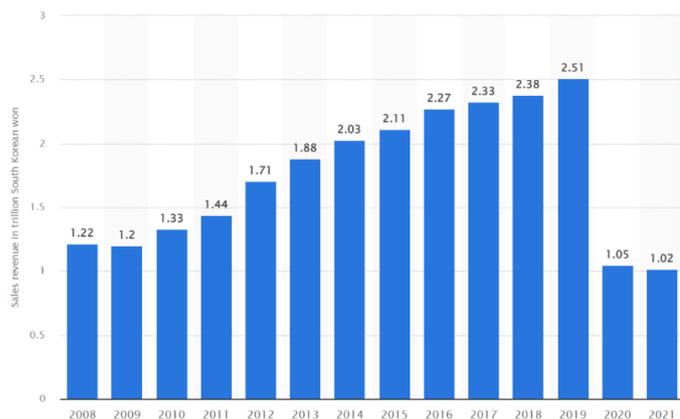
Nevertheless, because in 1994 "President Kim Youngsam proposed that South Korea should develop cinema and other media content production as a national strategic industry" (Laima, 2011, 125), a new Motion Picture Law was set, allowing the government to provide tax incentives for film production. As a result, *chaebols*, major domestic conglomerates, took it upon them to invest in the cultural industry. After several years of such investments, they did not meet their revenue- like expectations, so taking advantage of the 1997 financial crisis, they exited the industry (Laima, 2011, 125).

Although that may have been the end for the industry, it revitalized it because of the following reasons. First, these companies recruited fresh talent and helped debut several successful young directors. Moreover, staff from those *chaebols* were put into the cinema business and stayed there even after the *chaebols* disassociated from the cinematic industry. Overall, the whole industry was transformed into a more professional structure (Laima, 2011, 125). As a result, the industry started to blossom and movies such as *Shiri* (1999), that became a hit, led to the sponsorship of venture capitalists. The fact that individuals were now investing in the film production, allowed the industry to produce more and more blockbusters, such as *Joint Security Area* (2000), *Friends* (2001) or *King and the Clown* (2005), all of which sold millions of tickets, increasing South Korean cinema's domestic market share from 15.9% in 1993 to over 50% in 2005 (Laima, 2011, 126). In the late 1990s, South Korean commercial cinema was succeeding due to the preference of the middle- class younger generations to "watch domestic movies that were genre-savvy, visually sophisticated and entertaining" (Kim, 2020, 5).

Once the domestic success was on, it was a matter of time until it expanded internationally. This expansion of course began with the surrounding countries and since

the success of *Shiri*, audiences in Japan became more and more interested, so many South Korean movies were released in foreign theatres and started winning awards in Cannes, Berlin and Venice. Some of the most popular films and television dramas were *Jewel in the Palace* (2003), *You're beautiful* (2009), *Full House* (2004) or *Oldboy* (2003), among others. The change was such that while in 1995 only 15 South Korean movies were shown outside of Korea, earning \$200.000, in 2004 the number ascended to 193 movies and in 62 different countries, earning \$58 million (Laima, 2011, 126).

Latest research showed that despite the pandemic, "in 2021, the movie industry's sales revenue in South Korea amounted to approximately 1.02 trillion South Korean won" (Statista, 2022a). In fact, right now, South Korea's film industry "is the fifth biggest in the world in terms of box office sales" (Bicker, 2020), and "has become a widely consumed cultural commodity not only in Asia but also in Europe, the Americas, and other parts of the world" (Laima, 2011, 123). As the following graphic shows, the sales revenue of the film industry has increased progressively, even though there has been a great slope since the pandemic.



**Figure 2.** Sales revenue of the film industry in South Korea from 2008 to 2021.

**Source:** Statista (2022a).

### 6.2.2. K- Dramas

Notwithstanding the great popularity of South Korean films abroad, which we will speak of later on, K-Dramas were until recently the most successful export commodity in the audio- visual industry (Laima, 2011, 127). It was due to K- Dramas, that the industry was first expanded after the censorship.

K- Dramas or Korean Dramas are Korean television series that despite addressing several topics, are usually characterised by their portrayal of the Korean society and its

societal problems. As its name states, they are dramas, which revolve around topics such as friendship, romance and family, all of which are surrounded by great tragedy. K-Dramas are the way the Korean wave translated into the surrounding countries, since while the previous examples became an international phenomenon, K- Dramas were the first stage of this Korean fever. Through them, countries such as China or Japan first became interested in South Korea (Laima, 2011, 127).

They became popular in the 1990s, being, *Eyes of the Dawn* (1991) "the first South Korean television drama to be exported to a European country" (Laima, 2011, 127), specifically, to Turkey. Due to the 1990s crisis in Asia, South Korean dramas gained popularity because they were much cheaper to acquire than the Japanese ones (Laima, 2011, 127).

After the great reception within China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Vietnam, K- Dramas expanded their reach. In fact, they are the first manifestation of the Korean wave, which as opposed to the marketisation of Korean music, happened by accident. The first K-Drama that I would like to mention is *My Love From the Star* (2013), whose lead actress triggered a fervour for *chi- mek*<sup>3</sup> since she announced it was her favourite food. Although it may seem like an uninteresting fact, this announcement skyrocketed Chinese businesses of the dish, since China is "one of the biggest markets for Korean wave cultural exports, as it is South Korea's largest trading partner" (Trunfio, 2015, 13). The importance of this relies on the fact that the viewers' dedication has translated "into real profits for local businesses, an increased interest in Korean cuisine" (Trunfio, 2015, 12) and overall, tangible benefits, which South Korea has benefited from.

K- Dramas are being distributed globally thanks to platforms such as Netflix, which has become one of the most important promoters of K- Dramas since 2016, allowing their inflow to the West (Ju, 2022, 172). There has been a revitalisation of the K- Drama industry because of the collaboration between Korean TV production houses and streaming services, that has allowed new forms of K-Dramas to develop, in particular, owing to the success of *Squid Game*, which we will revise later on (Ju, 2022, 179). This cultural product has created direct economic impact through soundtrack sales and sales of streaming rights and as well, indirect economic impact due to the popularisation of Korean products and the increasing popularity of the country, which has deeply improved

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<sup>3</sup> *Chi- mek* is a South Korean typical dish, which is basically fried chicken and beer.

the tourism rate. Hence, it has become a nation branding strategy that has allowed to reach the younger generations thanks to the digital platforms that have allowed its mass consumption (Jo, 2022, 217).

### 6.3.THE GROWTH OF KOREAN CINEMATIC CULTURE

#### 6.3.1. Reasons behind its growth

Before getting into why South Korea's cinema production is on the rise, we must consider why is Korea's popular culture successful in the first place, which is due to both internal and external factors.

As for internal factors "an **increased economic capability** and living standard functioned as a booster to support the blossoming of Korean popular culture" (Lee, 2009, 130). The Korean wave, as we will explain later, had its start in K- Dramas and music. In the beginning, the popularity of Korean songs in the country led to a greater consumption than of foreign ones. Added to this we have the fact that the Korean pop market had a lot of Korean Americans, which led to a mix of cultures that was reflected in the industry. Another of the domestic factors is the already mentioned success of *chaebols*, which started to invest in the cultural industries. As a result, the competitiveness of South Korea was increased, basically because of the **mass demand and consumption** and because of the creation of multinational music companies which **coproduced music** with Korean ones. The **private- sector support** also has become crucial for the development of the industry as a way to decentralize the cultural diplomacy efforts.

The government's support is also relevant to the cause as shown by its **policy to protect intellectual property rights** that "made the illegal the circulation of foreign pop music extremely difficult and rolled- back the dominance of foreign pop music in Korea" (Lee, 2009, 131). Since then, the different Ministries of Culture have allocated more and more resources to the cause, promoting its development. Aside from the governmental support, **technology** played a big role in the promotion of the industry, since the proliferation of digital platforms allowed South Korea's culture to become a global phenomenon. That way, even though at the beginning South Korea's culture only reached the countries nearby, after the development of platform such as YouTube, everything changed, especially, after the music video of *Gangnam style*, became viral and got billions of views. In fact, "in 2019, CJ E & M, South Korea's largest entertainment company and

a key financial backer of *Parasite*, entered into a strategic partnership with Netflix based on a multi-year content production and distribution agreement" (Ting, 2021, 97). This agreement will keep bolstering the country's influence all around the world, allowing more and more users to access SK's films and TV shows legally and easily.

Lastly, one of the most important factors is the **fans**. Beyond the fandom that has been created around actors and singers, the fans have helped to the actual development of the industry through amateur subtitling. One of the problems that Korean cinema and TV shows have is the need of subtitles. Nevertheless, the fans have started making subtitles files and this has been essential for the growth of the Korean wave, allowing the products to reach different audiences (Kim, 2022, 2).

As for external factors, it depends on the different countries that were influenced by South Korea. For instance, China opened its market to South Korea, and because of its growing economy, a greater demand for Korean cinematic products was created, especially among the younger generations. In Japan, people became interested in the culture due to the broadcasting of the TV drama *Winter Sonata* (2002), but the real reason behind the success was the fact that those K-Dramas were "a reminiscence of Japan's past culture and memory of pure love<sup>4</sup> on the part of Japanese women" (Lee, 2009, 131).

Now, the specific reasons that help us understand how the cinematic culture has become what it is today, are the following:

The first reason is the **combination of tradition and technological quality**. These films and dramas retain those traditional values but at the same time achieve technical sophistication. Thus, South Korean culture is portrayed, and Asian values<sup>5</sup> are given a place in a well- developed industry (Laima, 2011, 128). The second reason, as ironic as it may sound, is the **economic decline that Asia experimented in the 1990s**, since, as we already mentioned, television producers became more interested in South

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<sup>4</sup> Japanese's TV Shows are often characterized by having a *jun-ai* relationship, that is, a pure love relationship, a platonic relationship that is based on a pure romantic connection. One of the elements that made K- Dramas so popular in Japan was the portrayal of pure love relationships.

<sup>5</sup> Asian Values were the set of values promoted by Asian political leaders since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as an alternative to Western ones, which were too individualist. Some of those values were "discipline, hard work, frugality, educational achievement, balancing individual and societal needs, and deference to authority" (Henders, 2022).

Korean cultural commodities because of their cheaper price. Thirdly, beyond the values expressed through the industry, South Korea's especially portrays **nationalism and healthy self- confidence**. The last reason, which also serves as a general explanation is the fact that South Korean popular culture has managed to combine Korean characteristics and the best of the West.

### **6.3.2. What measures has the Government implemented?**

The expansion of the cultural industry in South Korea has boosted its domestic economy, as the figures about the export of cultural goods show, since between 1998 and 2019 it has increased from \$188.9 million to \$12.3 billion and specifically, it has grown a 22.4% from 2018, only in one year (Ting, 2021, 98). As a result, corporations have since then employed more cultural content creators having risen the number from 575.060 in 2005 to 644.847 in 2017 (Ting, 2021, 98).

The rise of the Korean wave was in part thanks to the government's decisions, since after recognizing the potential for cultural diplomacy that the country had, it took advantage of it so that it could become a more important ally in the globalizing world that the country had been isolating from (Ting, 2021, 96). So, even though there is still a lot to be done if the country wants to transform soft resources into soft power, this phenomenon would have not been as big as it is if it were not for the government's help.

The whole phenomenon of South Korean pop culture was first portrayed by South Korean media in the 1990s. Consequently, the government established as one of their priorities, cultural technology, dedicating a lot of financial investment towards it. In fact, in 1984 the South Korean government funded the Korean Academy of Film Arts (KAFA) and in 2001, the Korea Culture and Content Agency, for which it reserved a budget of \$90 million. This agency later turned into the Korea Creative Content Agency, which today helps expand this whole industry. Moreover, in 2001 South Korea also launched "Asia's largest trade fair in the broadcasting and visual industry" (Laima, 2011, 134).

Governmental efforts have not gone unnoticed, since the country's epicenter has been working to develop the industry as soon as they realized what they had in their hands. For instance, "in 2009, South Korea became the first country to establish a presidential council to coordinate efforts to improve its national image and national brand" (Ting, 2021, 97). The importance on the creation of this presidential council lies in the fact that

through its creation, there was a general control on the activities that were taking place to achieve these goals and there was a coordinated effort with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Such was the importance and the coordination that in 2010, the Ministry published a Cultural Diplomacy Manual, which regarded culture as the third pillar of diplomatic power, along with national defense and economy and trade (Ting, 2021, 97).

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism also plays a huge role in the accomplishment of the government's foreign policy through the Korean wave. The Ministry has been focusing since the beginning in the promotion of culture diplomacy and tourism, two different fields that are very much related, since the popularization of South Korean culture has led to a growth in the tourism sector. Regarding the specific example of *Parasite*, tourism has been greatly expanded since its success and the government has taken advantage of that, by promoting locations that appear on the film as tourism attractions. Not only Seoul has profited from the movie, but also more cities in which it was filmed (Se- jeong, 2020). Generally, the Ministry dedicated many of its resources to disseminating government communication that supported Korean artists and to create long- lasting relationships with other countries so that they would invest in the country's cultural production (Ting, 2021, 97).

Aside from the collaboration with private entities, the government also invests in these productions through grants. In 2020, 100 billion won were allocated by the Korean Film Council in order to allow film development, increasing a 32% from the 2019 budget (Ting, 2021, 98). To sum up the last decades "the government has developed a distinct cultural policy based on state- developmentalism, public diplomacy and nation branding to meet their foreign policy agendas" (Ting, 2021, 94) due to the problems the country has faced to gain visibility worldwide.

## 6.4. *PARASITE AND SQUID GAME*

### 6.4.1. *Parasite*

#### 6.4.1.1. *Context*

*Parasite* is the name of the first non- English-speaking film to win Best Picture at the Academy Awards, a major breakthrough that took place on February 2020. It also won

Oscars for Best Foreign Language Film, Best Director and Best Original Screenplay. These awards became a living proof of the relevancy of the country, as well as a great nation branding opportunity and a step towards the enhancement of South Korea's soft power, a trend that had been especially developed since the beginning of the Korean wave. However, we must highlight that it is not the first brilliant moment of Korean cinema, but rather, the first time that the West decided to recognize such success (Kim, 2022, 5).

First of all, the success of the movie is heavily influenced by its director, Bong Joon Ho- a South Korean director that has previously worked for American film studios and produced films so important as *The Host* (2006), *Snowpiercer* (2013) or *Okja* (2017), all of which gave the director critical acclaim. Thus, due to his previous work in the US, he was familiar with what the public wanted to see, and used this to his advantage, by mixing those desires with his culture. Moreover, his use of irony and sarcasm as well as the capability to transform terror into humor in one second, make of all his productions unexpected, immediately catching the audience's eyes (Bicker, 2020).

The film's argument relies on the parasitic relationship a poor family, the Kim family and a wealthy one, the Park family, hold, not only because the poorest family is trying to take advantage of the wealthy one, but also, because the wealthy one “is exploiting the cheap labor of the poor in a symbiotic relationship of capitalistic structure” (Kim, 2022, 8). The two families first cross paths when the daughter of the Park family is looking for an English tutor. The Kim family, then exploits this opportunity so that every member in the family can work for the Park family, by "posing as unrelated, highly- qualified individuals" (Son, 2020). In the end of the film, it is discovered that there is a third family, the Ohs, who live outside the margins. This family is made up of the house maid and his husband, who lives in the unknown underground basement that the house has.

This film was set in South Korea, filmed in Seoul, and has been projected in Korean language in most cinemas all around the world. Also, it was produced by an almost exclusively Korean cast and crew and on a budget of \$11 million, even though it grossed over \$267 million (Ting, 2021, 94). In fact, while in 2018, the South Korean film industry had brought \$2 billion, only *Parasite* grossed over \$165 million at the box office (Kim, & Lee, 2020). Its commercial and cultural success is a new record in the whole concept of the Korean wave, which has allowed a rapid spread of popular culture, beyond the

music sector. However, as the director asserted in different interviews, *Parasite* would have not been as prosperous as it was if it were not for the previous 20 years of success of the Korean wave (Ting, 2021, 96). What are the reasons behind the boom of the movie and why did it resonate with the international public?

As we explained earlier, one of the reasons behind the growth of the cultural diplomacy in the country is the **support received by the private sector**. This is patent in the movie, which was a private-sector initiative and whose producer was the "South Korean businesswoman Miky Lee, a Samsung heiress and one of the early investors in DreamWorks" (Ting, 2021, 97). Miky Lee, the co-producer of the movie and vice-chairman of CJ Group, has been a huge supporter of Bong's movies and is indeed a big part of the whole South Korean film and TV industry, being almost considered as "the fairy godmother" of South Korean film industry (Ting, 2021, 97). The **integration of modern and traditional cultures in a multicultural world**, that is, of incorporating elements from modern times and mixing them with traditional features of South Korea has been another reason behind the success of the movie. This mixture, along with the lack of knowledge the rest of the world had about the country and with the already successful music industry that raised the international interest on South Korea, also explained why the movie became a universal phenomenon (Huang, 2022, 81). The last reason that has allowed the movie to resonate with people all around the world has been its **portrayal of economic polarization**, which will be shown through the different symbols that were inserted into the film, symbols that the director has made sure that are understood by the international public and not just by South Koreans.

#### 6.4.1.2. *Symbology*

The whole movie is a critique of the income inequality and class tensions that are always present in South Korea, despite the country being the fourth largest economy in Asia and the 12<sup>th</sup> largest in the world. The movie tries to portray the not so fancy reality that the country has, at least for the poorest sectors, which do not benefit from the rapid economic growth of the country. In this sense, the movie has resonated with international audiences because the absurdity of neoliberal capitalism and the inequality that has been created as a result, is an issue worldwide (Kim, 2022, 9).

There are many elements that have been carefully and symbolically inserted onto the film. For instance, this plot relies on the Western elements that we already talked about, since the fact that the whole family is obsessed with native Americans, proves its upper class, contrarily to the Kim family. In fact, throughout the film, the family uses English vocabulary to prove that upper level as well as to distance themselves from the South Korean reality (Vandenberg, 2019). Furthermore, the younger child is obsessed with dressing up as a Native Indian, which is another reference towards the US' origins and towards the stereotypical version of Americans and the ignorance due to the reduction of such complicated origins, to a mere costume. These costumes, which are shown in different moments of the film, are the way the director has of criticizing the lack of culture that the upper class usually has and its indifference towards everything that is not money-related because of their arrogance (Jeong, 2022a, 73).

The second relevant symbol in the movie is the WIFI. The Kims do not own a WIFI and are instead, using someone else's, depending on other's people WIFI to function, which they could lose at any moment. This portrays both the dependance of the lower class towards the upper class and the irony behind South Korea being one of the countries most connected in the world, but at the same time, that connection not being applicable to the lowest class of society, that is directly marginalized (Jeong, 2022b, 81).

Another element of major significance is the torrential rain, which in the movie, refers to how one circumstance that can be insignificant for the wealthy can be crucial for the poor. In this sense, while for the Parks this rain is a mere inconvenience, for the Kims, it entails the possibility to lose their "home" due to the flood (Jeong, 2022b, 84).

The fourth metaphorical element to emphasize is the basement in which the husband of the housemaid lives. This metaphor subtly references North Korea, since hidden basements were built in case of an invasion by that country. It symbolizes as well, the fact that North Korea is living outside the margins in such a challenging situation (Jeong, 2022b, 80). Nevertheless, it is not the only reference towards the communist country, since when the husband living in the basement is discovered by the Kims, his wife ties them up, so that they will not give them away and when doing so, she does an impression of North Korean news broadcasts, talking about Kim Jong- Un and the denuclearization.

Nonetheless, the most significant symbol within the movie is the Parks' house, a Western- style house that represents the wealth of the West. This symbol is, however,

more profound than it seems. First of all, the wealthy family lives in a mansion while the poor one lives in a semi- basement which is a vertical representation of social hierarchy (Son, 2020). The stairs in the house are a metaphor for the social ladder and the simplification (Jeong, 2022a, 71) and along with the house itself, they represent “the impossibility of transcending the boundaries between contrasting socio- economic world” (Kim, 2022, 9).

#### **6.4.2. *Squid Game***

##### *6.4.2.1. Context*

*Squid Game* is the name of a Korean drama series that was created by Hwang Dong-hyuk for Netflix in 2021. This has been the latest Korean great phenomenon since *Parasite*, regaining international attention and becoming another important manifestation of the Korean wave. Since its release in Netflix, the K- drama "has become the biggest show in Netflix's history in any language, hitting number sport all over the world, over 90 countries, including the United States" (CSIS, 2021) and generating \$900 million, which has led Netflix to announce an investment of \$500 million in South Korean content (Wang, 2021).

The TV show's argument is based on the creation of a contest for hundreds of people who have financial problems and want to earn money at all costs. This contest is controlled by people who are masked up and whose masks have different figures on them depending on their ranks. They, the controllers, are controlled by one person, who remains a mystery until the end of the show. The contest, which promises to be as simple as a few children games, ends up as a massacre, because people who are eliminated are brutally murdered and their deaths, are what increase the final prize. Although at the beginning the contestants are scared and try to scape, they are given the opportunity to stay in the contest if the majority votes to do so.

*Squid Game* has achieved to mix severe violence with a social metaphor, covering South Korea's financial crisis and the society's issues, such as social inequality, the lack of stable employments or the economic problems that most citizens have. It is a great example of South Korea's past, which is deeply scarred with violence, poverty, war and totalitarian regimes, all of which have resulted in societal problems (Huang, 2021, 81). The TV show has become a unique way of showing South Korea's culture and problems

in an almost satirical way, by highlighting class inequality but at the same time, mixing up the country's past and present, the country's traditions with its day to day, as *Parasite* did. Both products criticize the same thing, the discrimination that the lower class suffers and the exploitation of the wealthier classes, using irony as a way to prove that economic development does not always translate into social development (Huang, 2021, 83).

#### 6.4.2.2. *Symbology*

The series opens with a scene which explains a game called “squid”, that consists of getting to the other side of the field no matter what. This scene sums up the K- Drama completely, since through the different symbols that are inserted into the TV show, there is one clear conclusion: anything seems to be fair game.

The series depicts the capitalist society through many symbols. The first representation of capitalism can be found in the argument, as all of the people who enter the contest are people who are in debt and need that money, for which they are willing to do whatever it takes. Proof of that is the scene in which they are given the choice to leave if the majority votes so and they end up staying. In reality, although they may seem free, most of them do not have a choice, similarly as what happens in a purely capitalist society. If the critique about capitalism was not clear enough, the money that is collected in the games is put into a piggy bank, which has always been a symbol for capitalism and greed (Romano, 2021).

Another metaphor within the series is the voting method, which is individual and in public, thus having peer pressure much to do with it. In the end, because there is a tail, the last player gets to decide, which exemplifies how despite living in a democratic world, power is mostly concentrated in the hands of a few. Furthermore, ironically enough, the person who got to decide was in fact, the controllers’ boss, something that shows us that even if people feel like they have a choice, they do not.

The third symbol is the layout of the controllers’ workplace, which resembles a corporation, full of people sitting behind cubicles and focused on their computers. Moreover, as we mentioned before, they are covered by masks, which are a representation of the lack of individuality and the reduction of our identity to the purpose we have in a company.

One of the most important symbolic scenes is the one when the man who is considered “the bully”, who has already had his meal, wants to have another one, so he gets into the queue again. As a result, some contestants were not able to get their meal, something that clearly symbolizes that because wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, many people do not have access to the resources they need. Additionally, the bully ended up killing someone because of the conflict created and even though people asked the controllers to do something about it, they did not punish him. As a result, people realize that if this behavior is not condemned, people can kill one another to speed up the game, which could result in an anarchical and sum- zero game in which one part loses everything (Romano, 2021). The sum- zero concept is also visible in the activities that are part of the contest. The first one is “red light, green light”, in which you have to get to the end by moving when it is your turn and you can win by hiding behind another’s mistake and only looking out for yourself, since if you help others, you will be dragged down with them. This is also represented through the game of the rope in which both sides have to pull until one side gets to the edge and gets killed. Capitalism is either kill or be killed.

Finally, even the corruption within the system is portrayed when one of the contestants is given a note with a clue about the next game because he is a doctor that is helping the people within the organization to commercialize with the organs of the contestants<sup>6</sup> who have died. In reality, having a connection with people in power goes over the meritocracy.

## 6.5. IMPLICATION OF THE KOREAN WAVE GEOPOLITICALLY

As it has been shown throughout this paper, and will continue to be shown in this epigraph, the cinematic part of the Korean wave has affected deeply the position that South Korea has worldwide, and the government is taking advantage of it. In this epigraph, we will conclude the analysis on how the cinematic industry, as part of the Korean wave, has become influential geopolitically, within South Korea, but also in North Korea, in the regions nearby and globally.

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<sup>6</sup> In the TV Show, the organs of the contestants who die are carved out and sold in the black market at great prices.

### 6.5.1. South Korea

As we mentioned in the beginning of this paper, soft power can be directed inwards or outwards. In this sense, the Korean wave has immensely affected South Korea's position worldwide and has even influenced the country from within, by raising awareness of the issues that need a solution.

Regarding the internal issues, *Parasite's* and *Squid Game's* hidden clues have achieved indeed to apply pressure to the government by bringing international attention to the country's reality. As a result, the government has launched initiatives to improve the living conditions in semi- basement apartments. For instance, the government "announced a plan to financially support 1,500 households living in semi-basement apartments" (Sharf, 2020). Another of the initiatives that the government is launching is the improvement of these basements' conditions, with a partnership with the Korea Energy Foundation and the Seoul Metropolitan Government. They are offering 3.2 million won per household so that they can "enhance heating systems, replace floors, and install air conditioners, dehumidifiers, ventilators, windows, and fire alarms" (Sharf, 2020).

Moreover, as a result of the success of both products, South Korea's creative industry has become one of the most important fields within the country's policies. In this sense, "the government has strongly subsidized and supported the industry, which is one of the reasons why it became as prominent as it is today. What's more, the government "is investing in university programs to train highly- skilled citizens to perpetuate growth of the sector" (Trunfio, 2015, 19). Nevertheless, the success of the industry goes beyond the immense economic growth it has created. It has resulted in less discrimination of Koreans, the improvement of some of the bilateral relations and overall, a favorable image of the country (Lee, 2009, 135). South Korean's are no longer ostracized.

Thus, these products have produced a change for the country, but this is not the same as saying they, along with Korean cinema as a whole, exert soft power and are even a geopolitical strategy, since in order to be so, it should have been the government who created these cultural exports intentionally to gain international recognition. This is not the case, which makes us conclude that they cannot be seen as a geopolitical strategy. However, they have indeed materialized into a soft power tool and the government has taken advantage of it. In this sense, the government has been giving investments to the

cultural sector and has used the movie as a way to promote tourism. It has mostly taken advantage of the success of the movies to change the way the country was perceived and to boost the country's economy. These products, which are only the most successful representations of cultural diplomacy exerted through cinema, have been used as a nation branding tool because the government has used their success to foster the country's growth. It is true that the government has taken an active approach through the allocation of resources and the establishment of tax incentives for film production, but if it were not for the private entities, the sector would not have developed as it has. In this sense, the government supports cultural diplomacy as a whole, but not specifically cinema, which has come mostly from non-governmental actors.

Once we have analyzed the presence of a greater soft power in South Korea, we must ask ourselves, what advantage can the Korean government take of this power? What strategic goals can be achieved through soft power and are relevant in the grand scheme of things? Basically, how can this soft power turn into tangible benefits for the country?

First of all, we encounter one problem here, which is the fact that soft power is progressing rapidly, and South Korea's foreign policy is not progressing at the same rate, so it is not catching up with it. Despite the development of soft power by the country, what the people who make its policies really want to know is how this power can affect the things that South Korea really cares about, like the problems that we talked about in the contextualization of the country. This is where our previous reflection on power must be considered: even though power of attraction holds a very relevant place in politics, further efforts are needed "to fully achieve the core foreign policy objectives that are most central" (CSIS, 2021).

### **6.5.2. North Korea**

The Korean wave has reached the communist North Korea. Despite being the most closed of country in the world, "smugglers across the Chinese border bringing in K-Dramas and K-Pop on CDs, DVSSs, and flash drives" (Trunfio, 2015, 14) have become a real struggle, which has led Kim Jong- Un to issue a proclamation about how the government must combat the cultural infiltration of the country that aims to destabilize his regime (Trunfio, 2015, 14). These infiltrations "are quietly transforming how North Koreans self reflexively see the outside world, their country and the conditions of their

lives” (Kim, 2022, 27). As a result, defectors believe South Korea to be the place to run to. In fact, "one defector interviewed in an article by the Associated Press revealed that K- Drama allowed him to become aware of the impoverished, degenerative condition of the totalitarian regime when compared to more stable countries overseas" (Trunfio, 2015, 14).

North Koreans have been influenced by the Korean wave and as result, more and more people from North Korea have tried to defect in pursuance of a greater life. These increasing defections are possible thanks to the digital advances that have allowed North Koreans to step a little outside of their bubble and discover the outside world, thus triggering an immigration wave. In fact, most of those defectors acknowledge that many people have consumed South Korean cultural products, especially South Korean dramas and films and that they were influenced by the South Korean dramas, music or movies that they consumed (Kim, 2022, 220). For this reason, North Korea’s leader has officially called for the stop of the spread of South Korean products and their intrinsic capitalistic ideology. This is why “distribution or consumption of the South Korean media can be subject to severe punishments, imprisonment or even public executions” (Kim, 2022, 221). Despite those restrictive measures, the penetration of South Korean culture within the country is increasing and a hole in the domestic system of control has been created, leading to a civil guerrilla warfare between the politically powerless majority and the politically powerful rulers (Kim, 2022, 229). Thus, the exposure to South Korea’s cinematography is a conduit of soft power that a vital role in opening the eyes of the repressed North Koreans and the success of both *Parasite* and *Squid Game* has made keeping the citizens isolated more difficult for the government.

### **6.5.3. Regional Context**

As we explained before, the first expansion of the Korean culture came with K-Dramas. The reasons behind the success of *hallyu* in the Asian region are both, cultural proximity, as well as shared historical and cultural legacy. They converted into a soft power weapon first with the countries nearby, because of their proximity and open trade boundaries, as the case study of China shows. South Korea's *hallyu* has translated into economic growth, an improvement in trade relations among the two countries and positive diplomacy, a trend that has also expanded towards Japan (Trunfio, 2015, 13).

In the specific case of China, the dissemination of South Korean culture has been very significant from the beginning. First of all, they have encouraged the country to "reassess their own cultural legacy" (Laima, 2011, 127), which has been clearly on decline. In a way, it has helped the country to know how to merge Oriental and Occidental elements in an economic and cultural context. Despite the People's Republic of China being rigid on the protection and implementation of its culture, the country has indeed taken a rather Western approach economic-wise, which has positioned it as the main superpower along with the US. In this sense, from South Korean cinema, the Chinese government has learnt to blend Asian and Western elements and create a blend that can be used to its advantage (Kyung- hwa & Huyn- jeong, 2015). The same goes for Japan, where people become so interested in the Korean wave that many *hallyu* related magazines were created and a proficiency test on the Korean wave was made in the country so that if you passed you were entitled to a certificate and a special TV tour to South Korea (Laima, 2011, 132).

Nevertheless, even though cultural exchange among the countries has been prolific, political relations between Japan, China and South Korea have been rocky, as the third-year consecutive cancellation of the China- Japan- Korea summit shows. After Japanese colonialism, it was not until 1965 that diplomatic ties were normalized between the two countries and until 1998 that in the spirit of a real reconciliation, Japan "lifted its unilateral restrictions on the import of Korean cultural products in the same year, in what was known as the Open Door Policy" (Linbin, 2023). Since then, there has been an increasing cultural diplomacy, as opposed to the decreasing political relation. This is due to the separation that culture and politics have, especially among the youth, "whose engagement in politics is the lowest in history" (Linbin, 2023). Thus, even if the Korean wave is very successful in Japan, the cultural diplomacy has not been enough to make a real change in the political sphere.

Regarding China, the lack of political affinity between China and South Korea has caused a great resistance in the market, especially due to the relationship of the country with the US. Proof of this was the 2016 "Korean Performing Arts Activities Ban", through which all media and cultural products coming from Korea were banned (Leung, 2022, 191). The motive behind this ban was the geopolitical tension that steamed from the

THAAD U.S. missile defence system that was stationed in South Korea<sup>7</sup>. It was not until the end of 2022 that China decided to lift said ban, after a six-year suspension of Korean entertainment.

Overall, this region has been affected by the Korean wave as a whole, not specifically by its latest development of the cinematic sector. In this sense, bilateral relationships with South Korea continue to be unstable and although they have improved, this improvement cannot be really traced back to the popularity of the country for its cinematic products, but rather to the better image that South Korea has gradually created through its soft power.

#### **6.5.4. Global context**

With the growth of the Korean wave, South Korean culture started to be seen as a viable international product, something that the country could commercialize with, since it generated a ripple effect, influencing the domestic economy. Indeed, due to cultural interest groups, the Korean wave has spread overseas. Now, although soft power is not the answer for every country, it has allowed South Korea to boost its economy whilst empowering its diplomatic ties, enhancing the country's competitiveness, as well as its brand value (Gnedash, Ivanov & Khaimina, 2021, 51). In fact, now the country's brand is competing with Japanese and American brands (Huang, 2021, 82).

If we look at the different rankings, there is no doubt that South Korea is almost a champion regarding soft power: according to Brand Finance, in 2021 South Korea ranked 11<sup>th</sup> among the world's soft power nations and according to U.K. magazine Monocle, in 2021 South Korea was the second most powerful country soft power related, only next to Germany (CSIS, 2021). As a result of the Korean wave, citizens all around the world have created an attachment towards the values and the lifestyle promoted through Korean content. However, one of South Korea's fears is that known as "*hallyu* fatigue", which refers to the oversaturation that the Korean wave can cause if not promoted in the right way. The country must show some restraint and not allow this cultural phenomenon to turn into a visible propaganda campaign and must diversify if it wants this fervor to be sustainable over time (Trunfio, 2015, 16).

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<sup>7</sup> "China had argued that THAAD's powerful radar could peer into its airspace and reacted by sharply cutting trade and cultural imports with South Korea, in a major blow to bilateral ties" (Reuters, 2022).

## CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the question that we asked ourselves at the beginning, that is, if *Parasite* and *Squid Game* were a geopolitical strategy, we can draw the following conclusion: even if at the beginning the expansion of South Korea's culture was due to many favorable factors, not being the government conscious of the potential the country had, the country is already conscious of it, and it is taking advantage, which is different from these products being a geopolitical strategy.

At the beginning of the Korean wave, the government did not know the potential of what it had between hands. Right now, South Korea's government has found within the sector the possibility to exploit its soft power at its maximum and has slowly learnt to use it to support its foreign policy. Nevertheless, the government is failing to give the cinematic industry the push it deserves, since most initiatives come from private entities and the government's efforts are not concentrated specifically in this sector, but rather in culture as a whole. There is no doubt that South Korea has, in the last decade, put itself in the map and as a result, has improved greatly its economy and its global position, but the government can only take partial credit, there is government still has a lot to do to transform this power into a political one. Thus, beyond any doubt we can affirm that the government has learnt to transform the soft resources into soft power and has consistently, although now throughout cinema, TV shows and technology mainly, used them as economic assets through the enhancement of the cultural diplomacy approach.

Taking into account the growth in the number of travelers to the country, as well as the increase in commercial operations with South Korea, we must think that much of this international relevance may be due to the attention that the country has received since *Parasite* and *Squid Game*. However, it is such a recent topic that we still cannot find studies that support it. Thus, although these two cultural products have contributed to increasing the popularity of the country, they are only the most recent example of the cultural diplomacy that South Korea has developed through multiple products, such as music, technology, makeup or cinema, in this case.

Soft power is indeed the path to follow by the government, which could of course get a greater prospect of success than North Korea's hard power. National efforts are responsible for some of that success, but there are not still enough governmental efforts and initiatives, since it is rather using the success, it has received to improve the

geopolitical position, taking a more passive approach. However, now the government must dedicate more resources to the cause and create a culture- oriented economy which could be the distinguishing factor with other countries. This culture must be paired with exports and trade and combined with effective measures that allow the country to become a top exporting country. There is a bright future ahead of South Korea if the government manages to transform its cultural diplomacy into functioning diplomatic ties, which will only be possible, as Nye said, through smart power. It will take time, but the country has everything it needs to do so, and the soft power it is developing and taking advantage of, the first step.

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