

Korea's Soft Power - a cross-cultural Conversation with Fiona Bae and Sébastien Falletti

Moderated by Philippe Le Corre (KEY)

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KEY recently sat down with two experts of Korean soft power: London-based communication specialist and Korean entrepreneur **Fiona Bae** and Seoul-based French journalist **Sébastien Falletti**. In a wide-range, candid exchange moderated by Philippe Le Corre (who himself shared his professional life between Asia, Europe and the US), they discuss the rise of the Korean brand and its impact on the international stage.

KEY: How would you characterize the success of Korean soft power?

Sébastien: 10 years ago, I would have never anticipated the amplitude that the Hallyu phenomenon would take. Despite writing numerous articles about the emergence of Korean artists such as Psy I could not imagine it would become a global trend.

Fiona: I agree. I also felt curious as to where the phenomenon was heading and whether it was going to last. After finishing my book *K-Style*, I got answers that made me feel confident about the fact that the success of Korean soft power would last.

KEY: Can we say that the tensions inherent to Korean society help generate creative power in young people?

Fiona: If we look at the example of tattoos in Korea, we see that they used to be associated with organized crime, although they are illegal without a medical license. Korea has the image of being a futuristic society but at the same time, Korea is very backwards and conservative.

Sébastien: The tension that is created might explain the creative power in young people: a rigid society creates pain but also brings up stories. Happy people don't have stories. There is always drama in this country.

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Fiona: The explosive energy of young creators is a counter reaction to a very conformist society (rebellion against rigid societal norms / expectations).

KEY: Can Korean and Japanese cultural phenomenon be compared?

Fiona: A lot of people want to compare what is happening in Korea with what is happening in Japan. However, the two countries' cultures are quite different : in Japan, confrontation is highly discouraged (importance of harmony) whereas in Korea, tension and arguments are accepted. The acceptance of disagreements produces energy and creative power.

KEY: Korea went from being a very rigid / conservative society with a complicated history to a “global brand” within a few decades. What are the key reasons behind this successful transition?

Fiona: The three characteristics that can explain this explosive growth are speed, competition between people - creating an emulation effect - and strong work ethic. In the eyes of Koreans, Korea is a small country that is squeezed between giants: learning how to be flexible/adaptable is a necessary skill to survive and Koreans have learnt it throughout history. Fast speed has been a matter of survival for Korea.

KEY: Can we say that Korea is already a global brand?

Sébastien: Korea is in the making of becoming a global brand. For young generations, the phenomenon is already obvious but work still needs to be done for older generations. In order to be successful, there needs to be a meeting between a product and a demand. The product is already well developed but the demand needs to continue expanding. Indeed, before, the success of Hallyu used to be confined to Korea and neighboring Asian countries but over the last decade, the Hallyu wave has reached the West. Asia has become trendy in the West: first, it was Japan (now mainstream) and then Korea. This can be explained by two things: (1) a plateau in the attraction to Japanese culture (people want new things) (2) By closing its doors to the world between 2020-2023, China opened a door to Korea to emerge as the next “country of innovation/the future”.

The fact that Korea became trendy shows that the world has become Korean in a way: the digital revolution was just burgeoning 10 years ago but it is now part of everyday life. The digital revolution is very Korean in a way: people are fast-paced, constantly running after new trends, and in search of visual/aestheticism and immediacy (빨리빨리 "ppalli ppalli" culture).

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KEY: What about the impact of Covid on Korea's fast-paced lifestyle? Due to the pandemic, many people in the West seem to be pausing from the fast-paced world.

Sébastien: The Covid years became an opportunity for K-Content as many people discovered Korean shows and movies during the pandemic (thanks to Netflix, among others). After talking with travel agents, I realized that many of them mention the "Netflix effect on tourism" to explain the flows of new types of people visiting Korea post-pandemic. All in all, K-Content has been spreading even more rapidly during Covid.

KEY: About the image/perception of Korea in big cities around the world (ex : London), does the change in perception affect the image of Korea or does it only remain a pop culture phenomenon?

Fiona: I completely agree with Sébastien's point about the pandemic. Also, Korean dramas and films have a much broader audience than Kpop which is still quite niche: it's the Squid Game / Parasite phenomenon. This change in perception generates positive economic aftereffects as more and more people are now considering Korea for tourism. They also develop an interest in transversal topics when watching K-Dramas such as fashion, art, etc. This raises curiosity about the "broader Korea".

Sébastien: I would say that Kpop is the YouTube generation while Kdramas is the videostream generation (Netflix). The recency of the phenomenon is fascinating: the speed and power with which K-Content has spread is unprecedented. A decade ago, people did not know where Korea was and thought first of North Korea when hearing about the Korean peninsula. Traveling to Korea also used to be something very niche whereas it is now mainstream. The fact that Korea is now on the map is a huge plus for Korean soft power.

Fiona: The speed with which Korean soft power spread has never been seen before and many influencers and celebrities, respected in their fields, now choose to go to Seoul more than any other city.

KEY: Is language still a barrier when guiding oneself through Korean society today?

Sébastien: Coming from Europe, language is still a major issue but it is nothing compared to what it was 10 years ago. The younger generations speak much better English and the help of digital tools is very useful. Nonetheless, the big challenge for the country now is the gap between the perception of Korea as very international (because of its attractiveness)

and the reality of a society that is still quite conservative. The perception / expectation gap has become the challenge now for Korea.

Fiona: Koreans are obsessed with international recognition, which is why they entertain the idealized image of Korea with non-Koreans.

Sébastien: K-Pop bands such as BTS are raising the flag and are strong contributors to this very positive image internationally. However, does wanting Korea to be recognized internationally equals wanting Korea to become a globalized place?

KEY: Is the Hallyu wave a spontaneous culture or an organized narrative built strategically by the government?

Fiona: The narrative has not changed at all since the Yeosu exposition : the Korean government is promoting itself through the success of the Hallyu wave. However, when interviewing content creators, most of the time they do not acknowledge the role that the government is giving itself. People should also be warned about the danger of the next step mentioned by some government officials (“spreading our values to the world”) as it mimics the colonization era.

Young people are very spontaneous and individualistic but at the same time, they are proud that people are paying attention to what they are doing as Koreans. The fact that many content creators get instant attention on Instagram because they are Korean is like a Korean explosion. Korean content creators did not get as much attention before but the success of Hallyu is amplifying the phenomenon and puts the spotlight on many other aspects of Korean culture.

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Sébastien: This perception of Korea as a small country is interesting because it is mostly only in the minds of Koreans. This belief is ingrained in the minds of Koreans even though Korea is much bigger than many European countries. The constant tendency to compare itself to its neighbors (China, Japan) explains this unconscious belief. Even though Koreans among themselves might criticize the country/government, they act as proud ambassadors of their country abroad.

KEY: Is the interest for Korean culture a mere trend or a long-term phenomenon?

Sébastien: Personally, I wonder if the interest for Korean culture is only a trend or if it is a phenomenon that is going to last.

Fiona: People will always be looking for something new. If we look at music or art for instance, we see that creators from the Philippines and Thailand are getting more attention these days. Interest in Korean culture is "like an onion": new layers are being discovered as time goes by. Korean architecture and art might be the next big elements of Korean culture that will garner international attention as museums realized only recently how mature the Korean art scene is.

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KEY: Is the Hallyu Wave a trend that is coming out of a spontaneous generation or an organized strategy from the Korean government, or both? From a public diplomacy point of view, how is the Korean government capitalizing on the Hallyu phenomenon? How well-planned is this?

Sébastien: The Hallyu wave is more of a spontaneous phenomenon that uses all the technological changes as a medium to spread more rapidly. If the government does have a role in the success of Korean soft power, it remains minor. Nevertheless, they have tried to instrumentalize it as part of their strategy.

Korea as a country has a unique opportunity to influence the global conversation, the big question now is what is the message that Koreans want to convey to the world? As a Confucian society, Korea has always wanted to be "the good student", taking inspiration from the best countries in every field. However, now, Korea is in a position where they might have to take the lead and it seems like the government is not so sure of the message they want to spread just yet.

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Fiona: This moment is actually the moment we have all been waiting for and the government is still trying to figure out what they want to do with this strong international interest. In order for Korea to continue to have influence, I do not think the country needs to join forces: the phenomenon can continue being spontaneous. Indeed, as long as the government doesn't implement policies that will hinder the spread of Korean culture or try to become the main player, Korea will continue to garner international interest. Like the Korean government did with some Korean dramas and movies when choosing to subsidize them, it should remain a silent supporter and not try to take too much credit or become arrogant about the phenomenon.

KEY: The USA is very good at building soft power and a positive image that will help America thrive. However, if no one in Korea is trying to structure the movement behind the scene, it might end up losing its momentum. What is the actual thinking process between the government and the young creators?

Sébastien: The Korean government is indeed trying to structure the movement but they are pushing for it "the old school way". If we look at the example of the Busan exposition, we realized that the Korean government is strongly supporting it, massively investing in advertisement and promotional events but the enthusiasm of the Korean population does not match that of the government officials.

Fiona: The people I interviewed for my book often hate being associated with the letter "K". Indeed, content creators are so independent that they are against the idea of being labeled. It is the government that is adding the K-Label to everything, against the will of creators, and who might make people tired of K-Content.

KEY: Which European countries perform well in Korea in terms of soft power?

Sébastien: Historically, Korea is very much under US influence. The irony is that despite the strong American influence in Korea, Korean people aspire more to the European lifestyle (work/life balance, etc). France and Italy have an extremely powerful image. Germany as well but more from an industrial/economic point of view. As a good student, Koreans want to copy the best masters in each field.

Hence, there is a big demand for European culture in Korea but so far, Europeans haven't been able to fully make the most of it. Ironically, Paris Baguette, a Korean company, derived its success from French soft power in Korea.

The other element to keep in mind is that Korea is still a protected market that Europeans don't necessarily know how to enter. The interest of Europeans for Korea is also quite recent compared to their interest for China and Japan. Luxury brands understood that they need to be big in Korea to shine across Asia and the world.

KEY: Can Korea play a role in strengthening democratic values in the context of the rise of authoritarian regimes? What are the common values that bring Europe and Korea closer?

Fiona: The history of peaceful protests that put an end to the dictatorship in Korea taught young people that they have the power to change the world and that what the Korean government deems as illegal is sometimes irrelevant. This importance of independent thinking is a value that can be shared with Europeans. Furthermore, the importance of caring for your family and others is a value that resonates a lot with Europeans as well.

Sébastien: The USA has a monopoly on everything that is defense or politics-related but on the lifestyle, work/life balance, environment and demography, Europe is more of a role model for Koreans.

Fiona Bae is the author of the internationally acclaimed book *Make Break Remix: The Rise of K-Style* published by Thames & Hudson. Born and raised in Korea, she is proud of her heritage and passionate about promoting her country and culture. Following graduation from Yonsei University in Seoul, she has lived around the world, including stints at the United Nations in New York and four years in Hong Kong. She now resides in London. Fiona runs her own consultancy that looks to bridge Korean culture and the rest of the world by promoting Korean artists, designers and architects internationally. She consults for businesses looking to enter the Korean market. She supports communications for Frieze Seoul, represented the Korean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and worked with museum M+ in Hong Kong.

Sébastien Falletti is a journalist, author and speaker, currently the Seoul based Asia correspondent for French daily newspaper *Le Figaro*. He has been covering Asian geopolitics, business, social and cultural trends since 2009, successively posted in Seoul,

Shanghai and Beijing. He has interviewed several South Korean presidents, including Park Guen Hye, Moon Jae-in or Lee Myung bak, is the author of "A thousand miles to freedom: my escape from North Korea" with defector Eunsun Kim and has also published an introduction to South Korea: "Corée du sud, le goût du miracle".

Falletti is a speaker in public conferences, media trainer and also a correspondent for France 24. His bylines appeared in Jane's Defence Weekly, Financial Times, Le Temps, Geo Magazine.

Born in Paris, he studied at Sorbonne and the London School of Economics, and was successful at l'Agrégation d'Histoire. He taught history in France.