

제출양식(Proposal)

Consolidating Korea's International Image: Four Grand Strategies to Elevate Understanding Korea Abroad

Theme: Image of Korea from the International Point of View

Introduction

Transforming from a war-torn nation to an Asian economic powerhouse, the rags-to-riches story of South Korea impresses the entire world. In recent decades, Korean government has been striving to amplify its international roles and reputations to fully realize the ultimate goal of becoming a genuine middle power and influential regional player. However, geopolitically sandwiched in the middle of two giant neighbors, China and Japan, Korea's image has been pushed to peripheral edge. Moreover, given relatively limited attention from international media coverage and academic community, learning materials and information on Korea are sparse and sketchy. In the last decades, the situation has improved as Korea is better known abroad thanks to its internationally-oriented foreign policy, active international roles, public diplomacy, and exportation of entertainment contents. Yet, there remain bundles of tasks to accomplish to improve, correct, and elevate the understanding of Korea in international stage.

Dominant Korea-related Contents

To many foreigners, at least until lately, Korea is small nation whose identity is often mistakable with either Chinese or Japanese. Such confusing similarity has led many to regard Korea as trivial. Personally, though I took up Korean language course in 2008, understanding Korea remained uncertain to me until I went to Korea as an exchange student in 2012. Korea is little known to people, especially students, due to exiguous resources and coverage in textbooks, at least in the case of Cambodia. Even in English textbooks, the same situation prevails. Particularly, compared to its Northeast Asian neighbors, information about Korea is inadequate, consisting of only few topics such as Korean War, Korea's economic miracle, or K-pop; and little elaboration is dedicated to those headings. As a lecturer of International Studies, I have unique opportunity prepare lessons and evaluate the breadth and depth of Korea-related contents discussed in various English textbooks used in my university's curriculum. For instance, I have taught subjects such as world history and civilization, Introduction to East and Southeast Asia, and Atlas of World Affairs. Interestingly, Korean War and economic development miracle remain the dominant topics discussed in those books, while a wide array of issues on China and Japan were considerably touched upon. To exemplify, Korean history was not included in world history textbook used at my university. Given its relatively smaller size and geopolitical importance, topics on Korea have been neglected and left out. All of these are the factors that contribute to the lack of understanding of Korea in general. More often than not, information about Korea does not reflect current developments in the country and is sometimes outdated. With minimal elaboration, it is onerous to comprehensively understand Korea and its society. More importantly, Korea's images abroad are too much overwhelmed by pop culture such as K-pop, and in certain cases

plastic surgery given due concentration of international media on such issues. Because of scanty information, limited media coverage, and shortage of learning materials, especially in English, complete and multi-dimensional understanding of Korea seems to be out of reach for many people who do not understand Korean language or have personal linkage with the country.

In order to help general public abroad properly fathom Korea and create multi-dimensional understanding of the country, the contents of textbooks and other learning materials have to be enriched and reinforced. Concerted with glowing image of Hallyu wave, other topics should also be underpinned to create a consummate picture of Korea. Obviously, Hallyu wave export is an effective softpower tool Korea has been using to reach out to the world. However, while the entire nation is acclaiming this as a significant cultural phenomena, that image is just a part of an iceberg and in certain cases unstainable in the long run. As experiences suggest, such cultural phenomena is short-lived and temporary. Thus, heavy concentration on promoting Hallyu wave could consequently engulf other aspects and produce unhealthy images of Korea when this phenomena abates. Exacerbating the problem, untoward trends in Korea such as plastic surgery, cultural racism, and extreme academic pressure have triggered unpleasant image and stereotype of Koreans abroad. To twist the situation, various public diplomacy tools should be utilized duly along with this cultural tool. Adding on dominant contents such as Korean War, economic miracle, and Hallyu wave, diverse topics such as geography, history, lifestyles, tourism, architecture, literatures, food, culture, and other traditions should be augmented to showcase other sides of Korea to general public abroad.

Four Grand Strategies to Elevate Understanding Korea Abroad

In order to consolidate healthy image of Korea in international stage, four major strategies should be carefully undertaken to stimulate proper understanding and further raise awareness of Korea in foreign countries. First of all, basic materials such Understanding Korea 101 should be publicized and distributed widely to capture attention of those who have rudimentary or no knowledge of Korea and to breed the ground for young learners. At this point, the question is how can complicated contents such as history, cultures or geography appeal to the public. Making catchy contents is truly a bottleneck and takes time. Therefore, gradual approaches should be initially taken to lay the ground for future intensification. In this connection, fun and easy-to-understand principle should be the bottom line of such kind of publications. The design of basic materials is aimed at promoting Korea among non-academic public. Easy and fun contents could help readers digest information quickly and draw their interests into further research. Inclusion of complicated texts bombarding information on readers in the first place is impracticable and unnecessary. Meanwhile, different level of books and materials should also be produced as complementary documents to meet demands of enthusiasts and advanced learners.

Second strategy is to correct and enrich contents included in various textbooks and materials produced by non-Koreans. It is a strenuous step to take provided that authors' choice of preferences cannot be simply censored, controlled, or directed. A key to penetrate the contents is to influence authors' perspectives and understandings of Korea. A directive approach Korean institutions could take is to further produce or translate existing books and materials into foreign languages, especially into English, to offer a pool of literary references for foreign authors and commentators. The other bold step, that Korean government has been taking and should be further invigorated, is to encourage Korean Studies amongst foreign

academia and scholars through scholarship programs and research funding. This step could further generate interests in Korea, increase literature resources, and shape perspectives of authors in the years to come. In tandem, seminars and workshops on Korea should also be fostered to provide foreign Korean Studies scholars and commentators opportunities to engage in genuine and meaningful discussion. This approach, obviously, has been undertaken seriously by various Korean institutions; however, since it is relatively recent, more assertive actions have to be put in place to ensure desirable outcomes.

The third strategy is to intensify diverse topics and literatures on Korea. As a matter of fact, Korea presents a number of interesting dimensions and aspects. Yet, pieces of information and materials are mostly in Korean, making it hard for most foreign learners to comprehend and get access to. In other words, Korea is a nation with strong national pride; and most of materials, both physical and online, are confined to Korean language. Therefore, language remains a barrier among foreign learners who wish to comprehensively understand Korea with studying Korean. In this relation, reducing language barrier is a triumph card to successful softpower offensive. As the case of American softpower illustrates, language is an imposing factor that sustains American footprints in the world. To ameliorate the situation and motivate diverse topics on Korea, production of materials and articles in English should be supported among both foreign and native Korean writers as well as commentators. To date, most Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) programs are offered in Korean, so papers, journals, theses, and dissertations produced are majorly in Korean. Encouraging foreign students to write about Korea in English would significantly improve the pool of resources on Korean Studies and understanding Korea per se. A suggestion I wish to make is to create one-stop platform or online archive where English materials and literatures on Korea, particularly those produced by GKS students, could be freely accessible. On top of academic materials, Korean netizens could also play important roles in promoting Korea and improve its image via online platforms. Most online contents about Korea are mostly written in Korean by Koreans and solely for Koreans. As I have noticed, if one does not have basic Korean language skills, it is quite hard for him or her to get access to the information given ignorance of pertinent keywords. In this regard, translating important documents and materials from Korean to English would be more plausible and practical than teaching entire public abroad Korean language. Another solution is to encourage some Korean bloggers to write more in English so as to produce various contents on Korea from diverse points of view. Alternatively, foreigners who live in Korea with passion and talent in writing should be advocated to write and project Korea to their communities.

Increasing Korea's reputation abroad relies much on how the country is known around the world. In order to capture large coverage of audiences, the fourth strategy is to broaden information outreaches and channels where materials about Korea could be widely accessible. One of the straightforward approach is reaching out to the world as what Korean government has been doing. Primarily, reading materials on Korea should be donated or disseminated to libraries in different countries. Cambodia, in particular, is the second largest aid recipient country of Korea. Along with development aid, books and materials on Korea should be made widely available for Cambodian students to provide them with reliable sources of references and upraise deeper knowledge of Korea. Moreover, events such as tourism fairs, education fairs, K-food festival, K-pop festival, or Korean cinema week should be encouraged and further extended to broader public. As I have noticed, participants in such events remain confined to those whose major is Korean language, while public attention has not been fully captured. Of equal significance, types of materials should be diversified.

Reading materials would be boring and time-consuming for some people. Therefore, interesting and entertaining educational contents should be produced to appeal quickly to mass audiences. Production of English documentary films, short clips, and other visual contents reporting various aspects of Korea to the outside world should be incentivized. Targeted at foreign audiences, films and visual materials about Korea have to be well-disseminated via accessible channels. For instance, as part of cooperation, Korean development agency such as KOICA could provide documentary films to broadcasters in partner countries. China and Japan had done the same things in Cambodia, and these films helped embed positive images in viewers' mind. Complementarily, such films and videos could be made available freely on 'youtube' or other social media platforms. To date, documentary films or videos about Korea in English remain short in quantity. To overcome this situation, international media arms of Korea such Arirang or KBS World should collaborate to produce more internationally-oriented films to reach out to public abroad.

Conclusion

In the nutshell, despite rapid increase in popularity of Korea and Korean culture abroad, proper understanding of Korea remains a challenge given its geopolitical backdrop, sketchy materials in foreign languages, inaccurate information sources, and limited media coverage. To fully realize the ultimate goal of becoming an important middle power, public diplomacy and softpower offensive play crucial role in dotting Korea in international landscape. Until recently, dominant topics about Korea are confined to Korean War, economic development success, and particularly K-pop, which are just some parts of an iceberg. To ensure sustainable international reputation and healthy image of Korea, insightful and multi-dimensional picture need to be drawn through enriched and accurate contents. As discussed, four strategies, including producing basic contents that quickly appeal to the public; correcting and influencing foreign authors' perspectives; intensifying and diversifying literatures on Korea; and expanding information channels, could help Korea boost its softpower offensive and maintain healthy image in international arena.

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