

Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

DIPL-3000 (3 credits)

South Korea: International Relations and Security

This syllabus is representative of a typical semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

Course Description

This course explores how South Korea projects influence through culture, media, and education as instruments of diplomacy and foreign policy. Students examine the global reach of K-pop, K-drama, film, digital content, and other cultural forms, analyzing how creative industries function as tools of soft power alongside government cultural diplomacy strategies. The course investigates both the remarkable successes and inherent limitations of cultural diplomacy, exploring how Korean culture is received and interpreted in diverse global contexts and how cultural strategies intersect with economic, political, and security interests.

Through theoretical frameworks and case studies, students assess the relationship between state agencies, creative industries, and civil society in shaping Korea's global image as a dynamic, democratic, and innovative nation. The course examines cultural phenomena including the Korean Wave (Hallyu), digital platforms, beauty and fashion industries, and food diplomacy. Field visits to cultural organizations, production studios, government agencies, international exchange programs, and cultural centers provide firsthand insight into how culture functions as a diplomatic resource. Students develop critical perspectives on soft power theory while gaining practical understanding of how cultural diplomacy advances South Korea's global presence, partnerships, and national interests.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

- **Analyze** theories of soft power and cultural diplomacy, evaluating their applicability to South Korea's contemporary cultural strategies and international positioning
- **Assess** how Korean cultural industries (K-pop, K-drama, film, fashion, digital media) function as instruments of soft power and shape global perceptions of Korea
- **Evaluate** the role of government agencies, policies, and funding mechanisms in coordinating cultural diplomacy initiatives and supporting creative industries
- **Examine** how diverse international audiences receive, interpret, and localize Korean cultural products, considering issues of cultural translation, authenticity, and appropriation

- **Analyze** the intersections between cultural diplomacy and Korea's broader economic interests, trade relationships, tourism strategies, and security objectives
- **Demonstrate** cross-cultural communication skills through respectful engagement with diverse perspectives on Korean culture and cultural exchange

Language of Instruction

This course is taught in English.

Instructional Methods

This course is designed around the principle that learning is an active, holistic process that extends well beyond the classroom. Seminars introduce key concepts and interpretive frameworks that are then examined, complicated, and enriched through direct engagement with people, places, and contexts — field visits, expert briefings, guided observation, and community-based learning. Field-based learning is integrated into course design rather than treated as enrichment: faculty prepare students for each engagement, guide interpretation on location, and facilitate the reflection that connects experience to course themes. Students move through cycles of experience, observation, and analysis, progressively taking greater ownership of their own inquiry. This process is not always linear, and that is by design — developing the capacity to learn from unpredictable, context-dependent situations is itself a transferable skill and a foundation for lifelong learning.

Assignment Descriptions and Grading Criteria

Evaluation is based on successful completion of multiple components designed to build analytical, strategic thinking, and communication skills progressively throughout the program. Assignments combine fieldwork observation, strategic analysis, and policy simulation to develop well-rounded international security practitioners.

Assignment Overview

- In-Class Participation and Field Engagement: 10%
- Cultural Product Analysis: 25%
- Global Reception Research Project: 30%
- Cultural Diplomacy Strategy Proposal: 35%

1. In-Class Participation and Field Engagement (10%)

Participation is assessed based on consistent, informed engagement in class sessions, simulation activities, and experiential learning. This includes preparation for discussions, constructive collaboration within teams, responsiveness during simulations, and professional conduct during site visits and guest engagements. Students are expected to contribute thoughtfully, listen actively, and engage respectfully with peers and external partners throughout the course.

Students will be evaluated on the quality of their contributions, critical thinking skills, respectful engagement with diverse cultural perspectives, ability to connect field experiences to theoretical concepts, and openness to cultural immersion experiences. This includes coming prepared with completed readings and media viewings, asking thoughtful questions of guest lecturers and cultural professionals, participating constructively in workshops and creative activities, and demonstrating cultural sensitivity during field visits.

2. Cultural Product Analysis (25%)

Students will select one Korean cultural product or creative industry sector and conduct an in-depth analysis of its role in Korea's soft power strategy. This project combines textual/media analysis, research on production and distribution, examination of government support mechanisms, and assessment of global reception and impact.

Requirements:

- Select one cultural product/sector (K-pop group, K-drama, film, fashion trend, beauty phenomenon, food culture, digital content, video game, webtoon)
- Analyze the cultural product: themes, aesthetics, narratives, target audiences
- Research industry structure: key companies, economic model, government support, international distribution
- Examine how it projects images of Korea: modernity, tradition, innovation, democracy, values
- Analyze global reception in at least two regional contexts
- Evaluate effectiveness as soft power instrument
- Create multimedia presentation (12-15 minutes) with clips, images, and data
- Submit 5-7 page written analysis connecting to soft power theory

3. Global Reception Research Project (30%)

Students will document and analyze how Korean cultural products are received in diverse global contexts, examining processes of cultural translation, localization, and appropriation.

Requirements:

- Select 2 regional contexts (e.g., Southeast Asia, Latin America, Middle East, Africa, Europe)
- Gather evidence: social media, fan communities, media coverage, adaptation practices, commercial data
- Submit two papers in Week 4 and Week 6 (300-400 words) documenting specific reception examples
- Create comparative visual map showing reception patterns across regions
- Conduct interview with international fan or cultural intermediary
- Final 1,500-1,800 word synthesis essay examining patterns and cultural translation dynamics due Week 10

4. Cultural Diplomacy Strategy Proposal (30%)

Working in teams, students develop a comprehensive cultural diplomacy strategy proposal for a government agency or cultural organization, integrating course learning through strategic thinking about objectives, audiences, resources, and partnerships.

Strategy Options:

- Ministry of Culture: Expand Korean Wave to underserved regions
- Korean Cultural Centers: Address stereotypes or negative perceptions
- Korea Foundation: Create educational exchange linking culture and development
- Private sector: Partner creative industries with diplomatic objectives

Components:

- Preliminary presentation (Week 6, 10 minutes) on chosen issue and strategic opportunities
- Final presentation (Week 10, 20 minutes) professional pitch to simulated stakeholders
- Written proposal (12-15 pages) with executive summary, situation analysis, objectives, tactics, timeline, budget, evaluation plan

Grading Scale

94-100%	A	74-76%	C
90-93%	A-	70-73%	C-
87-89%	B+	67-69%	D+
84-86%	B	64-66%	D
80-83%	B-	Below 64	F
77-79%	C+		

Note on Attendance and Participation: Consistent participation in classes, site visits, and required program activities is essential to the academic experience. Students are expected to participate fully and may not opt out of required components, as these activities are integral to course learning and collective discussion. If circumstances such as illness affect attendance, students must communicate promptly with the Center Director or a designated staff member. Absences may affect academic performance and course grades, and repeated or unexcused absences may result in additional academic or programmatic consequences. When absences are unavoidable, alternative academic work may be required.

Program Expectations

To support a respectful, engaging, and academically rigorous learning environment, students are expected to approach this program with professionalism, preparation, and openness. Because this is an intensive, field-based program, individual conduct directly shapes the quality of the shared academic experience.

- **Learning Community:** Students are expected to engage respectfully with differing perspectives, including those of classmates, guest speakers, and local partners. Agreement is not required, but attentive listening, intellectual openness, and respectful dialogue are essential.
- **Content Considerations:** Course materials and activities may engage sensitive or challenging topics. The classroom is a space for thoughtful, respectful engagement with complex ideas. When possible, faculty will flag particularly intense content in advance. Students who find that course content affects their ability to participate or keep up with coursework are encouraged to communicate with faculty and seek appropriate support.
- **Participation and Engagement:** Students are expected to come prepared and to engage actively in classes, discussions, and site-based learning. This includes contributing thoughtfully to discussion, asking questions, and engaging respectfully with faculty, peers, and guest speakers. Meaningful participation supports collective learning and is an essential part of the program experience.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Because this is a multi-country, field-based program, schedules and activities may change in response to local conditions or logistical realities. Students are expected to approach such adjustments with flexibility and professionalism. Adaptability is considered part of meaningful engagement in the program.
- **Academic Integrity:** Students are expected to complete all work honestly and ethically, in accordance with academic integrity standards outlined in course and program policies.
- **Managing Academic Work:** Students are responsible for maintaining reliable access to their academic work by keeping multiple copies using secure storage methods (e.g., cloud-based platforms or the learning management system). Technical issues such as lost files or device failures do not excuse late or missing work.
- **Personal Technology Use:** Personal devices may be used for note-taking and course-related activities. Off-task use is not acceptable, particularly during discussions, site visits, or guest presentations, as it detracts from collective engagement.
- **Course Communication:** Course materials, assignments, and updates will be posted on Canvas. While the course calendar provides a general structure, adjustments may occur based on program flow or site-based learning opportunities. Students are responsible for checking the course site regularly and communicating promptly about access issues.
- **Recording Policy:** To support open discussion, recording of classes or program activities is not permitted without prior written approval from the instructor. Approved recordings are for personal academic use only. Documented academic accommodations may supersede this policy.

SIT Policies and Resources

Please refer to the [SIT Study Abroad Handbook](#) and the [Policies](#) section of the SIT website for all academic and student affairs policies. Students are accountable for complying with all published policies. Of particular relevance to this course are the policies regarding: academic

integrity, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), research and ethics in field study and internships, late assignments, academic status, academic appeals, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and misconduct, and the student code of conduct.

Please refer to the SIT Study Abroad Handbook and SIT website for information on important resources and services provided through our central administration in Vermont, such as [Library resources and research support](#), [Accessibility Services](#), [Counseling Services](#), [Title IX information](#), and [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) resources.

Credit Hours: SIT adheres to the standard that 1 credit hour equals no less than 45 hours of coursework. The calculation is based on the standard 50-minute academic hour. The number of credits each course carries determines how many total hours each course involves in a semester. Of the 45-hours for 1-credit hour, one third is designated for direct faculty instruction. Direct faculty instruction includes all learning activities led by the faculty whether in the classroom or in the field — lectures, guest speakers, site visits, hands-on field activities, etc.

Note on Late Assignments: Because this program integrates classroom learning with site visits and debriefs, assignments are designed to build on one another and connect directly to learning on location. *Timely submission is therefore important for maintaining continuity and full participation in the academic experience.* Extensions may be granted *in limited circumstances and on a case-by-case basis* with approval from the Program Director or a designated staff member. Requests should be made in writing as early as possible and no later than 12 hours before the posted due date. Students are expected to communicate proactively if challenges arise. Work submitted after an approved extension period may receive a reduced or failing grade, depending on the circumstances.

Note on the Use of Generative AI Tools: In this course, students may use generative AI tools only in ways that support their own intellectual work. Acceptable uses may include brainstorming questions, organizing notes, clarifying concepts, or supporting revision at the sentence or structure level. Students may not use AI tools to generate substantive analysis, strategic arguments, written sections, or oral responses that are presented as their own work. Because assignments emphasize applied reasoning, comparative judgment, and place-based analysis, students are expected to remain the primary source of ideas, interpretation, and decision-making.

Expectations for AI use may vary by assignment and will be discussed explicitly with faculty. In some cases, students and faculty may collaboratively establish guidelines for appropriate AI use for a particular task. Students are responsible for following the agreed-upon expectations and for seeking clarification if boundaries are unclear.

When generative AI tools are used in the preparation of an assignment, students are expected to acknowledge their use clearly and transparently, noting the tool used and the nature of its contribution (e.g., brainstorming, outlining, or language revision). This acknowledgment supports academic transparency and does not, on its own, imply inappropriate use.

Policies on AI use may differ across courses and instructors within the program. Students should attend carefully to course-specific guidance and understand that responsible AI use is defined at the course level.

Sample AI Acknowledgment Statement: I used [tool name] for [purpose, e.g., brainstorming or sentence-level revision]. All analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are my own.

Course Schedule

**Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lecturers' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs*

Module 1: Foundations of Soft Power and the Korean Wave

This opening module introduces core theoretical frameworks for understanding soft power and cultural diplomacy, establishing foundational concepts that will be explored throughout the course. Students examine how states use culture as a foreign policy tool and explore South Korea's emergence as a cultural powerhouse through the Korean Wave (Hallyu). Field activities may include visits to government cultural agencies and meetings with cultural diplomacy practitioners.

Session 1: Introduction—What is Soft Power?

Possible topics covered:

- Joseph Nye's concept of soft power: attraction versus coercion
- Cultural diplomacy definitions and historical evolution
- Relationship between culture, economics, and foreign policy
- Critiques of soft power theory: whose culture? What values?
- Course overview and assignment introduction

Required Readings:

- Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign Policy*, 80, 153-171.
- Lee, C. M., & Botto, K. (2020, December 15). *The case for South Korean soft power*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/research/2020/12/the-case-for-south-korean-soft-power>

- New York Times. Jan 14, 2026. [Japan and Korea Reinforce Ties with a K-pop jam session](#)

Session 2: The Korean Wave (Hallyu)—Origins, Evolution, and Government Policy

Possible topics covered:

- Historical development: first wave (TV dramas in Asia) to contemporary global expansion
- Economic impact and creative industries growth
- Government cultural policy architecture: Ministry of Culture, Korean Cultural Centers, Korea Foundation
- Organic cultural appeal versus strategic government promotion

Required Readings:

- Shin, Gi-Wook. "Will Hallyu Swell to a Tidal Wave? Korea's Future as a Cultural Superpower." Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University, August 1, 2022. <https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/news/will-hallyu-swell-tidal-wave-koreas-future-cultural-superpower>.
- Voices 2022 Video. [Hallyu: How the Korean Wave is Sweeping Through Global Culture](#).
- Kim, T. Y., & Jin, D. Y. (2016). Cultural policy in the Korean Wave: An analysis of cultural diplomacy embedded in presidential speeches. *International Journal of Communication*, 10, 5514–5534.

Module 2: Cultural Industries as Soft Power Instruments

This module examines major Korean cultural industries—K-pop, film/television, beauty/fashion, food, and digital content—as instruments of soft power. Students analyze production systems, global distribution strategies, and how each industry projects particular images of Korea. Field visits may include entertainment companies, production studios, cosmetics companies, or cultural content agencies.

Session 3: K-Pop Industry and Musical Diplomacy

Possible topics covered:

- K-pop industry structure: entertainment companies, trainee system, production process
- Global expansion strategies: multilingual content, international members, digital platforms
- K-pop diplomacy: BTS at UN, cultural exchanges, concert diplomacy
- Soft power measurement: tourism impact, Korean language study, consumer products
- Critiques: labor practices, mental health, cultural appropriation

Required Readings:

- Lie, J. (2012). What is the K in K-pop? South Korean popular music, the culture industry, and national identity. *Korea Observer*, 43(3), 339–363.

- Shafie, T. (2025). K-pop idols as diplomats: South Korean celebrities and soft power. *Athens Journal of Politics & International Affairs*, 1(3), 179–202.
<https://doi.org/10.30958/ajpia.1-3-1>

Session 4: K-Drama, Film, and Visual Culture

Possible topics covered:

- K-drama production systems, genres, and narrative conventions
- Netflix and streaming platforms as global distribution channels
- Korean cinema's international recognition: from film festivals to *Parasite*'s Oscar wins
- Themes that resonate globally: family dynamics, class critique, tradition/modernity tensions

Required Readings:

- Lee, S. T. (2022). Film as cultural diplomacy: South Korea's nation branding through *Parasite* (2019). *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 18(1), 93–104.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-020-00192-1>
- Kim, H. (2023). Toward a new cinema: The Seoul Film Collective's aesthetic and political subversion. In *Celluloid democracy: Film and the Korean freedom struggle* (pp. 90–107). University of California Press.

Session 5: Beauty, Fashion, and Consumer Culture

Possible topics covered:

- K-beauty industry: innovation, branding, skincare routines as cultural export
- Global K-beauty markets and consumer appeal
- Plastic surgery tourism and body image controversies

Required Readings:

- Holliday, R., & Elfving-Hwang, J. (2012). Gender, globalization and aesthetic surgery in South Korea. *Body & Society*, 18(2), 58-81.
- Elfving-Hwang, J. (2020). Media, cosmetic surgery and aspirational beauty aesthetics of the ageing body in South Korea. *Asian Studies Review*, 44(2), 1–15.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2020.1736513>

Session 6: Food Diplomacy and Culinary Tourism

Possible topics covered:

- Government promotion of *hansik* (Korean food): campaigns, funding, global initiatives
- Korean food trends: kimchi, bibimbap, Korean fried chicken, mukbang
- Food in K-dramas and culinary tourism
- Authenticity versus adaptation for global palates

Required Readings:

- America Magazine. "Food as a Power Tool," August 13, 2015. <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/some-food-thought-ii-when-food-weapon>.
- Lee, Alex. "'Kimchi Wars' and East Asia's Complicated, Post-Colonial Nationalism." Brown Political Review (blog), October 31, 2021. <https://brownpoliticalreview.org/kimchi-wars-and-east-asias-complicated-post-colonial-nationalism/>.

Module 3: Global Reception and Cultural Translation

This module examines how Korean culture is received and interpreted in diverse global contexts. Students explore regional case studies, analyze processes of cultural translation and localization, and engage with debates about cultural appropriation, authenticity, and power dynamics in global cultural flows. The module considers how different audiences make Korean culture meaningful within their own contexts.

Session 7: Global Audiences and Regional Reception

Possible topics covered:

- Regional case studies: Asia, Latin America, Middle East, Africa, Europe
- How local contexts shape interpretation: cultural proximity, values alignment, aspirational appeal
- Early Hallyu in Asia versus contemporary global expansion
- Fan communities as cultural citizens
- Korean language learning motivated by cultural consumption

Required Readings:

- Jin, D. Y., Yoon, K., & Min, W. (2021). Transnational Hallyu: The globalization of Korean digital and popular culture. Routledge. (Introduction and selected chapters)

Session 8: Cultural Appropriation, Authenticity, and Power

Possible topics covered:

- Cultural appropriation debates: K-pop and Black culture, hip-hop influence
- When does cultural exchange become cultural appropriation?
- Authenticity questions: What counts as "truly Korean"?
- Hybridization versus cultural imperialism
- Power dynamics in global cultural flows
- Orientalism and exoticization concerns
- Who has the right to represent Korean culture?

Required Readings:

- Rogers, R. A. (2006). From cultural exchange to transculturation: A review and reconceptualization of cultural appropriation. *Communication Theory*, 16(4), 474-503.
- Kim, K. A. (2024). Stifled, invisible, and threatened: Cultural appropriation in K-pop through the lens of identity-negotiating fans of color. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 17(1), 17–23. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcad023>

Module 4: Intersections and Critical Perspectives

This final module examines how cultural diplomacy intersects with Korea's broader policy interests and takes a critical perspective on soft power's limitations. Students analyze connections between culture, economics, tourism, and security, explore gaps between cultural representations and social realities, and consider whose interests are served by cultural diplomacy. The module culminates in student presentations of their Cultural Diplomacy Strategy Proposals.

Sessions 9 & 10: Critical Perspectives and Future Directions

Possible topics covered:

- Candlelight Movement and grassroots democracy as alternative soft power
- Multicultural Korea: migrant workers, marriage migrants, ethnic nationalism
- Whose soft power? Race, class, and privilege in cultural diplomacy
- Sustainability of Korean Wave: market saturation, competition, fatigue
- Course synthesis and final reflection

Required Readings:

- Kim, M. (2025). Revolutionary things: The making of South Korea's Candlelight Protests. *Social Semiotics*, 1-21.
- Min, B. S. (2025). The K-pop industry: competitiveness and sustainability. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 31(6), 788-804.
- Kim, M. (2022). The Growth of South Korean Soft Power and Its Geopolitical Implications. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*.

Optional Readings:

- Choi, S., Song, J., Kwon, D., & Kim, B. H. (2024). Population decline and public attitudes toward multicultural immigration policies in South Korea. *Population, Space and Place*, 30(7), e2788.
- Yun, E., & Lim, S. (2022). When Does Cultural Diplomacy Work?: The Effectiveness of South Korea's Diplomatic Anniversary Cultural Events. *Korea Observer*, 53(2), 323-356.
- Kim, T. (2025). Soft Power, Popular Culture, and Diplomacy in the South Korean Context. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 26(1), 282-288.

Final Discussion: Synthesizing course themes: What is the future of Korean cultural diplomacy? What are the most promising opportunities and significant challenges? How can cultural diplomacy be practiced ethically and sustainably?