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“Patient Diplomacy”: How a French Cinema Club Helped Inspire K-Culture ^[1]

This article is the third in a three-part series by Zenja Duell on the fourth World Conference on Creative Economy (WCCE), held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The first part explored international conferences as a tool for public diplomacy, and the second part covered heritage diplomacy.

A prominent topic at the World Conference on Creative Economy in Uzbekistan was “patient diplomacy,” which refers to longer-term strategic engagement with a wider range of partners. Intrigued by the concept, I sat down with Hangjun Lee, Director of the Global Network Division at the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE). He explained to me how “patient diplomacy” helped to spawn a global sensation: K-culture.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, according to Lee, the French Institute in Seoul became a hub for Korea’s creative community. The Institute ran a French cinema programme, where Korean creatives would gather weekly not just to discuss cinema, but also social and political issues. These creatives went on to become some of the most influential voices in Korean cinema, including film critics, film festival organizers, and filmmakers.


France’s “patient diplomacy” and investment in Korea’s creative community was serendipitously timed with a concerted effort by the Korean government to put itself forward on the global stage. Lee noted that mega-events were an important factor in the technological, economic and creative development of Korea. While some commentators have criticized  mega-events for leading host countries in developing parts of the world into debt, due to the significant investment in infrastructure required, Lee highlighted their value as a learning opportunity for the host nation. In Korea, the sports, tourism and event infrastructure generated by the 1993 World Expo and the 2002 FIFA World Cup catalyzed a series of investments in cultural infrastructure, such as museums, galleries and educational programs. This broader socio-economic movement paired with public diplomacy to create the perfect conditions for a cultural explosion of Korean-led creativity.

Thirty years on, we seem to be witnessing the zenith of K-culture, with the first Korean winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. K-pop bands in particular are playing an important role in cultural diplomacy. At the latest fanbase meeting of the band NewJeans in Tokyo, lead singer Hanni performed her rendition of the Japanese classic “Blue Coral Reef” to a rapturous audience. Lee emphasised the importance of the relationship between Korea and Japan, particularly in terms of cultural exchange. Hanni’s performance in Tokyo was perceived as an appreciation of Japan’s cultural “golden era” in the 1980s and spoke to the mutual respect between the two nations.

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While Korean creatives were meeting at the French Institute in Seoul, the Goethe-Institut was also investing in "patient diplomacy" in the Philippines, running film workshops in Manila that trained a new generation of filmmakers. Researcher Merv Espina runs a long-term project to track down and collate some of the experimental films produced in these workshops, many of which capture the social upheavals and turbulent politics of the era. However, these same political circumstances may have curtailed the development of a creative community in Manila, while the political investment in Seoul acted as a catalyst.

1990s Korea may offer important lessons for Uzbekistan, a country that appears to be experiencing a similar confluence of creativity and investment. Lee and I spoke inside Tashkent's newly opened conference center. Directly opposite the center was a building site where several stadiums are being erected, ready to host the Asian Games in 2025. In Samarkand, Uzbekistan's second city, a new complex was recently constructed to host the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 2022, including several five-star hotels and an artificial lake. This investment in infrastructure, instigated by Uzbekistan's successful bids to host several mega-events, is accompanied by significant investment in arts and culture, both from the Uzbek government via the Arts and Culture Development Foundation, and from foreign direct investment, including the Qatar Fund for Development and the British Council.

The parallel case studies of Korea and the Philippines demonstrate that patient diplomacy can be an effective strategy. But for that patient investment to mature into effective cultural diplomacy, it needs to take place in a context of political stability and broader infrastructure development. Developed countries should take these important factors into account when strategizing their target investments for patient diplomacy with developing nations. Uzbekistan, with its youthful energy and clear, target-driven development strategy , may be a good place to start.
