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Implications of Pop Cultural Diplomacy: An Analysis of Idol-State Interactions

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Implications of Pop Cultural Diplomacy: An Analysis of Idol-State Interactions

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Implications of Pop Cultural Diplomacy: An Analysis of Idol-State Interactions

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of the requirements
for the Murray State University Honors Diploma

Elizabeth Erwin

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Abstract: This paper uses media coverage of idol-state interactions to understand the ways in which states utilize pop culture as a component of their public diplomacy strategy. Idol-state interactions are defined as an event where a pop cultural figure accompanies or is accompanied by a state official to a formal meeting with a representative of a foreign government. Looking specifically at South Korean diplomatic events where K-Pop idols are present, I find that idol-state interactions have the potential to increase media coverage, further cultural understanding and serve as a relationship-building tool.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Previous Literature	3
<i>Soft Power</i>	3
<i>Public Diplomacy</i>	6
<i>Cultural Diplomacy</i>	7
Methodology	13
Case I: Idol-State Interactions with North Korea	17
<i>'Spring is Coming' Performance in Pyongyang</i>	17
<i>Analysis</i>	25
<i>Subsequent Idol-State Interactions with North Korea</i>	30
Case II: Idol-State Interactions with the United States	34
Additional Findings	38
Conclusion	41
Appendix A: Photo Gallery	45
Appendix B: News Articles	50
References	56

Introduction

On November 7, 2017, several news outlets reported on a viral video¹ of former first lady Melania Trump being ‘upstaged’ by K-Pop idol Choi Min-ho. The two were together at an event hosted by the U.S. Embassy in Seoul to launch the “Girls Play 2!” initiative, a campaign to promote girls’ participation in sports ahead of the 2018 Winter Olympic Games. However, coverage about the event focused more on the viral video versus the mission behind the event.² In the video, two teenage girls are talking with Melania Trump, unaware that Min-ho from idol group SHINee is standing behind them. Suddenly, one girl realizes Min-ho is standing behind them and taps the other girl to tell her. The second girl turns around, sees Min-ho standing behind her and excitedly reacts by screaming, shocking the first lady. At the same time in Seoul, United States President Donald Trump and South Korean President Moon Jae-in were holding a historic summit to discuss the nuclear threat of North Korea.

While drastically different from one another, these two events signify the changing framework public diplomacy operates within. While the Trumps’ visit to South Korea was the first state visit to the country by a U.S. President in 25 years,³ a few months prior former U.S. President Barack Obama had spoken at a conference in Seoul. During his speech, Obama discussed the increased popularity of Korean pop culture as well as the impact it could have on foreign relations.

¹ Hana. 2017 November 6. “갑자기 민호가 뉴스에 나온다고 해서 급하게 여기저기 틀어보다 집캠찍어봄ㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋ 방한한 멜라니아 여사와 평창올림픽 홍보관런으로 행사를 진행한것 같다~ 민호보고 놀란 소녀보는 표정 개귀욤 TTTTTT.” @mint_minho_1209. Twitter.

For better quality, see BBC News. 2017 Nov. 11. *Melania “upstaged” by Korean Pop Star - BBC News*. YouTube.

² Example headlines include “Video of US first lady, teens and K-pop star goes viral” from *The Associated Press*, “Choi Min-ho of K-Pop Group SHINee Steals Spotlight in Viral Video of First Lady Melania Trump & South Korean Teens” from *Billboard*, and “Melania Trump meets Minho of Shinee” from *The Korea Herald*.

³U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea. 2017 November 8. “Joint Press Release by the U.S.-ROK: President Donald Trump’s State Visit to the Republic of Korea.” U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea.

“You’ve [South Korea] become an exporter of popular culture to the rest of the world,” Obama said. “So many of our young people in America have even learned to speak some Korean so they can keep up with the band SHINee. In exchange, I understand SHINee has developed a passion for America’s In-N-Out Burgers.”⁴

While there is much research about how exposure to foreign pop cultural products can change individual perceptions of a nation, or how the global spread of pop culture can impact a state’s economy and tourism industry, there has been little research on the ways governments can harness pop culture directly into formal diplomatic relations. In this paper, I argue that the increasing global popularity of K-Pop coupled with the use of K-Pop idols at state-sponsored events, can provide a framework for studying how governments use pop culture in public diplomacy. I define these events as idol-state interactions. That is, where a K-Pop idol is accompanied by or accompanies a Korean government official to a formal event with a representative of a foreign government. While this paper will explicitly examine the use of K-Pop idols, the conceptualization of idol-state interactions can be applied more broadly to any pop cultural figure including actors, influencers, celebrities, etc. Additionally, the concept of idol-state interactions has the potential to be applied beyond the case of South Korea. By looking exclusively at the use of K-Pop idols, I hope that future research can apply these findings to other pop culture phenomena. Through an exploratory qualitative content analysis of idol-state interactions, I find that these events can be used to promote cultural understanding, to increase the audience for coverage of diplomatic events, and as a tool for building relationships.

⁴Han, Sang-hyuk. 2017 July 3. “Obama ‘So long as North Korea chooses to remain outside of the world order, they must face the consequences.’” *The Chosun Ilbo*.

Previous Literature

Cultural diplomacy is a field that is deeply entangled with the notions of soft power and public diplomacy. This section will discuss how these three fields are related with one another, the potential for pop cultural diplomacy to provide distinction and clarity, and the benefit of using idol-state interactions to examine how these concepts are put into practice.

Soft Power

Soft power, as defined by Nye (2004), is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.” This differs from hard power, which is dependent on coercing other actors to achieve goals. Because soft power is reliant on attraction, culture is considered to be a soft power resource due to its ability to shape preferences (Nye 1990; Nye 2004; Su 2013; Ang, Isar, and Mar 2015). But soft power is not solely based on cultural influence. A state’s soft power ability can also be influenced by its political values and foreign policies (Nye 1990). These other areas are important to consider and how they work alongside a state’s culture. To be more precise, culture can be viewed as a soft power *resource* that can be used strategically in the process of achieving a state’s defined goals (Ang, Isar, and Mar 2015).

Nye (2008) defines culture as ‘a set of practices that create meaning for a society.’ While the tangible and intangible manifestations of culture are diverse, scholars have typically divided them into two categories: high culture and popular culture. High culture is often categorized as that which appeals to the preferences of elites. A simplified example of this could be ballet, fine art, etc. In contrast, popular culture is that which appeals to the masses. This could include stuff like blockbuster films, video games and pop music.

While popular culture can reflect the wants and needs of the masses (Gans 2008), states have traditionally had a higher incentive to appeal to high culture both domestically and in their interactions abroad. This practice is based on elite theory or the idea that elites within a society are more likely to possess influence beyond the scope of political processes. If elites are those that have the power to influence their government, it would then be in the interest of governments to recognize the preferences of elites. This incentive for states to appeal to high culture can help us understand the differences in how cultural products are given legitimacy.

Historically, high cultural products have traditionally been those that are legitimized via official recognition by governments, nongovernmental organizations and international organizations (Nye 2008). A simplified example of this process could be a government establishing a museum of fine arts. Since the museum is established by the government, the art inside the museum is then considered to be 'high culture.' This in turn can implicate the perceived superiority of the art in the museum versus other types of art. In contrast, popular cultural products have traditionally not been legitimized via state institutions, but rather through media or market success (Nye 2008). An example of this is pop music. While historically not recognized by governments as a 'fine art craft,' pop music garners its legitimacy through media attention or in how many people purchase an album. While some would prefer to debate over the superiority of high culture and popular culture, it is important to recognize them both as potential cultural components of a state's soft power ability.

The development of new technologies has further pushed forward this idea of equal potential for high culture and popular culture as soft power resources. Further promoting this is the acceptance that power is not something solely exerted by states, but nonstate actors as well (Nye 1990; Matthews 1997). This in turn recognizes the ability for multinational corporations or

other firms to utilize soft power (Nye 1990); which is important when considering who is responsible for creating popular cultural products and who has a stake in their promotion. An example of this could be a multinational entertainment agency. The ability for nonstate actors to wield power is also related to the development of new technologies which allow more actors to have access to information, deteriorating historical information hierarchies that states and elites previously relied on to assert dominance (Su 2013). This is because before the development of modern information and communications technologies, states and elites were better able to maintain a monopoly on information. However, with the emergence of nonstate actors into power structures, a plethora of actors are now able to communicate their ideas and preferences to others. While Nye (1990) specifically discusses the potential power of multinational corporations, this ability can also be extended to the preferences of individuals.

As previously mentioned, pop culture has the ability to reflect the preferences of the masses (Gans 2008). Therefore, as technology increases information flows and disrupts information hierarchies, the need for states to strategically utilize a variety of cultural products to shape the preferences of others becomes more pronounced. But implementing policies and practices that effectively accomplish this has proven difficult. Additionally, governments' willingness to recognize the potential power of pop cultural products has lagged, leading to pop culture becoming an 'untapped resource' within states' soft power initiatives (Schneider 2009). This in turn has also led to a lack of explicit research on the ways states strategically use cultural products to increase their soft power capacity. Meanwhile, globalization has allowed multinational corporations to better utilize popular culture in their own strategies (Nye 1990). As a result of increased competition between state and nonstate actors, the processes states use to

strategically achieve their goals have become more convoluted. One of these processes being public diplomacy.

Public Diplomacy

While historically public diplomacy has been confined to an action performed by states, the rise of nonstate actors and information technologies has made its practice as well as intended purpose more complex. Traditionally, public diplomacy was defined as “direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking and ultimately that of their governments” (Malone 1985). While this definition does not explicitly identify the type of actor initiating communication with foreign peoples, at the time there was a strong belief that only states could use public diplomacy (Gilboa 2008). Eventually, the initiating role of the state became more explicit as public diplomacy was redefined as “a government’s process of communication with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation’s ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies, as the means through which governments would aim to influence foreign peoples’ thinking” (Tuch 1990). According to Gilboa (2008), Frederick (1993) further outlined the activities through which states could perform public diplomacy, in which the use of cultural activities was clearly defined. Together, these conceptualizations show public diplomacy as the process through which states achieve a mutual understanding, noting that the use of cultural activities can be implemented during this process. However, these early conceptualizations still emphasize the role of the state as the initiator. Similar to the concept of power, as time progressed public diplomacy eventually came to be recognized as a process that nonstate actors could also engage in and with.

To illustrate this, Signitzer and Coombs (1992) defined public diplomacy as the “way in which both government and private individuals and groups influence directly or indirectly the public attitudes and opinions which bear directly on another government’s foreign policy decisions.” While this conceptualization was more inclusive of potential soft power actors, this definition lacked a clear direction about the objective of public diplomacy tactics. This need for direction led to public diplomacy being defined as “the process of building long-term relationships that create an enabling environment for government policies as well as conveying information and selling a positive image of it” (Leonard, Stead and Smewing 2002).

Much like the progression of soft power research, post-Cold War power shifts have caused the number and type of actors able to participate in public diplomacy to rapidly expand (Cooper and Thakur 2013). Now, public diplomacy is a process that nongovernmental organizations, regional organizations, multinational corporations and private sector firms can engage in, among others (Cooper and Thakur 2013). Since such a diverse number of actors can participate in public diplomacy, there has been significant debate about whether the ability to implement certain public diplomacy tactics are extended to nonstate actors. A debate that has been very prominent within the study of cultural diplomacy.

Cultural Diplomacy

Broadly speaking, cultural diplomacy can be conceptualized as the exchange of cultural products between states/individuals to foster a mutual understanding (Cummings 2009). The ability to foster mutual understanding between different actors is important because it contributes to the process of building long-term relationships and creating the enabling environment public diplomacy aims to achieve (Leonard, Stead and Smewing 2002). Cultural diplomacy is a unique

public diplomacy strategy because it provides human context that policy alone cannot achieve. Cultural diplomacy is also an accessible public diplomacy strategy because the populations it reaches are usually those that would not be involved in traditional diplomatic settings (Goff 2013).

An example of cultural diplomacy in action is educational exchange programs between nations. These experiences allow individuals to experience the culture of a nation up close and can aid in the process of fostering a mutual understanding between citizens of each nation. The ability to create mutual understanding then helps contribute to a nation's overall public diplomacy goals. In addition, a diverse group of people are often able to participate in educational exchange programs whereas formal diplomatic exchanges are often limited to the diplomats themselves. This shows the accessible nature cultural diplomacy can have over other public diplomacy strategies. However, as noted by Mulcahy (1999) the tactics of cultural diplomacy are often long-range in nature, making it difficult to measure the short-term success of cultural diplomacy tactics. But when used effectively and consistently over time, cultural diplomacy can help build or rebuild relationships between actors. But as argued by Goff (2013), cultural diplomacy tactics have limited capacity to change policy outcomes.

Considering this, there is benefit for states to use cultural diplomacy to increase the effectiveness of their long-term public diplomacy strategy. In addition, it is also important to note that unlike public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy is not always a two-way exchange (Cummings 2009). For example, a cultural center promoting language learning would be a form of a one-way cultural diplomacy tactic since the cultural center would not necessarily be influenced by the cultural community it exists within. Conversely, educational exchange agreements between states

are an example of two-way cultural diplomacy since both parties are actively engaging. Unfortunately, a state's ability to effectively utilize cultural diplomacy is complex.

The perceived legitimacy of cultural diplomacy is fragile. This is most seen in one-way cultural diplomacy tactics where a state is actively seeking to share its culture to an audience, without engaging with the culture of their audience. It is in these instances where the cultural products utilized in a states' cultural diplomacy tactic can be perceived as propaganda versus an attempt at mutual understanding (Feigenbaum 2002). As a result, the cultural product itself is delegitimized in the eyes of its targeted audience. However, it is difficult to measure what an appropriate distance between governments and potential cultural products is (Huygens 2008). In addition, states and the actors behind the creation and promotion of cultural products often have conflicting goals. While the goal of the state might be to increase cultural awareness, the goal of a corporation is ultimately to make money. And since both states and nonstate actors can wield their own power resources, it can be more difficult for states to maintain control in their relationships with certain nonstate actors.

Further complicating this interaction is mass media. Global television and the internet have become two of the most effective channels for states to communicate their culture and exert soft power (Su 2013). However, because of the increase in types of powerful actors, states are not always able to effectively utilize these channels to achieve their goals. This is where the potential of pop culture comes into play.

The potential of pop culture within cultural diplomacy has widely been disregarded by both states and researchers. However, this is also due to an avoidance to the development of cultural diplomacy tactics as a whole. From the state level, this is partially due to a lack of existing structures within the state that allow culture to be harnessed into public diplomacy

endeavors (Cummings 2009; Goff 2013). In addition, measuring the ‘success’ of cultural diplomacy tactics is difficult because they are long-term strategies (Mulcahy 1999), oftentimes making their implementation more difficult to justify. As a result, states are often hesitant to attempt the use of pop cultural diplomacy or further develop cultural diplomacy tactics that are already in progress. The major exception to this being when there is a perceived threat by the state (Cummings 2009). However, it is important to note that most of the research on cultural diplomacy has been conducted about the United States and the models of other states have not been widely taken into consideration.

But by analyzing instances where states have implemented new cultural diplomacy tactics, the potential effectiveness of cultural diplomacy can be better understood. Additionally, the rise of global mass media provides new avenues for researchers to operationalize success of cultural diplomacy tactics, both in the long-term and short-term.

Pop culture provides a clear outlet for researchers to measure success of these tactics due to its reliance on media attention to maintain legitimacy (Nye 2008). But as previously mentioned, the apparent issue for research is prioritizing discussion on whether states *will* utilize their pop cultural resources versus analyzing instances where states already *are*. While this predicament could be due to a perceived triviality to pop culture amongst scholars, researchers should not let this perception create an unwillingness to recognize instances where pop cultural diplomacy is already occurring.

Additional arguments against the use and study of pop cultural diplomacy are that it is difficult for states to control the agents responsible for cultural products due to the ability for those agents to wield power. However, this argument assumes that the goals of states and cultural agents are always conflictual. In fact, sometimes governments and cultural agents can have goals

that are well-aligned. When this occurs, states will likely be able to exert more control over a situation or the agents will believe it is in their best interest to go along with the state. Therefore, by studying how states implement pop cultural diplomacy tactics, we will better be able to understand the dynamics that play out in relationships between states and nonstate actors, such as cultural agents.

This is where an examination of idol-state interactions can be helpful. I define idol-state interactions as an instance where a pop cultural figure accompanies or is accompanied by a state official to a formal meeting with a representative of a foreign government. Under this definition, the state retains the initiating power in the interaction between the cultural figure and foreign government. This aligns with the conceptualization of cultural diplomacy as a state-sponsored process. At the same time, the definition of idol-state interactions is expansive enough to allow us to consider instances of cultural diplomacy that are one-way and two-way in nature (Cummings 2009).

Considering the ability for pop cultural figures to garner media attention, I argue that idol-state interactions can be used to increase audience for coverage of diplomatic events. This is because idol-state interactions can be considered as a potential 'media event' (Dayan and Katz 1994) because they break the norm of diplomatic interactions between states. The potential for idol-state interactions to be media events is also supported by studies of celebrity diplomacy. According to Cooper (2007), while celebrity diplomats often have a greater capacity than states to redefine norms and other mechanisms of public diplomacy, they often lack the credentials, credibility or constituency to properly do so. Idol-state interactions alleviate this because they are instances of state-sponsored celebrity diplomacy, potentially allowing the celebrities involved to be perceived as more credible. At the same time, idol-state interactions put restrictions on the

capacity for celebrities to redefine norms. From a control standpoint, this is beneficial to the state. However, to the benefit of both parties, idol-state interactions still allow a capacity for the state and celebrity to redefine mechanisms of public diplomacy, because an idol-state interaction itself is not a traditional method. In turn, idol-state interactions are more likely to garner media coverage. As a media event, these interactions can then be used to build confidence and gain public support prior, during or following a diplomatic exchange (Dayan and Katz 1994; Gilboa 2001).

Finally, because idol-state interactions involve pop cultural figures, they still provide an opportunity for the state to foster a sense of cultural understanding with the foreign party. This is beneficial to both the state and the idol. For the idol, official recognition by the government of their cultural value helps blur the lines between pop culture and high culture. This in turn can help the agents behind cultural figures, such as entertainment agencies, achieve their goals of increasing the market for their products. For the state, the individual actors within the regime have the potential to be perceived as though they better understand their constituency since they are interacting with the cultural products that reflect the preferences of the masses (Gans 2008). In the age of digital technology, idol-state interactions can also help the state influence mass media because they utilize popular figures that the media is already prone to covering.

Considering all of this, I argue that idol-state interactions can be used to promote cultural understanding and increase the audience for coverage of important diplomatic events. As a result of these two things, idol-state interactions also have the potential to be perceived as a relationship building tool because of the cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy framework they operate within.

Methodology

As mentioned in the previous section, idol-state interactions have the potential to garner significant media attention. This provides the opportunity for scholars to utilize news coverage to comprehensively paint a picture of these interactions. By understanding the context within which these interactions occur, it will be easier to understand the instances in which pop cultural diplomacy is used.

Using news coverage from the following sources, I compiled two cases about idol-state interactions. The first case covers idol-state interactions between North and South Korea during 2018. The second case involves idol-state interactions between South Korea and the Trump administration. In addition to the media outlets listed below, official government press releases from the Korean Ministry of Unification, Cheong Wa Dae and the U.S. Embassy in South Korea were used. A description of each media outlet and the justification for its use can be found below.

- *Reuters*: An international news provider based in London, *Reuters* reports on global events across various industries. *Reuters* is a signatory to the International Fact-Checking Network through the Poynter Institute. Many of their articles are available for free and translated into several languages. Within international relations research, *Reuters* articles are often used for international event analysis research via the Integrated Data for Event Analysis. For this exploratory qualitative content analysis, *Reuters* was selected for its factual reporting with little accompanying analysis as well as their wide international scope.
- *The Associated Press*: An American-based newswire service, *The Associated Press* is an independent global news organization. According to their website, *The*

Associated Press operates in 250 locations worldwide. Like *Reuters*, they are signatories to the International Fact-Checking Network through the Poynter Institute. *The Associated Press* was selected for its factual reporting with little accompanying analysis and accessibility.

- *Yonhap News Agency*: Based in Seoul, *Yonhap News* is a news agency that provides information on South Korea's domestic and foreign affairs. *Yonhap News* was selected due to their large amount of English-language content with limited analysis.
- *The Korea Herald*: According to their website, *The Korea Herald* is the number one English newspaper in South Korea. In addition, *The Korea Herald* is affiliated to several other English publications including the *KPOP Herald* which reports exclusively on K-Pop. *The Korea Herald* is the only South Korean publication that is a member of the Asia News Network, a regional media coalition of English-language newspapers from across Asia. *The Korea Herald* was selected for their English-language content, in-depth reporting and accessibility of articles.
- *The New York Times*: Based in New York City, *The New York Times* was selected to show a comprehensive American perspective of idol-state interactions that other publications might be unable to illustrate.
- *The South China Morning Post*: Based in Hong Kong, *SCMP* is an English-language newspaper. This publication was selected to show a larger Asian perspective of idol-state interactions. The publication also has a dedicated K-Pop section.

- *Billboard*: An American-based weekly magazine that reports on events related to the global music industry. *Billboard* is known for its music charts such as the Hot 100, Billboard 200, Global 200 and Social 50. Additionally, *Billboard* has a dedicated K-Pop section known as ‘K-Town.’ *Billboard* was selected for an industry-specific perspective on idol-state interactions.

Along with news articles, videos from verified YouTube channels were used when news coverage was not sufficient or possible. The YouTube channels include KBS World TV and Arirang TV. KBS World TV is owned by the Korean Broadcasting System and often provides English translations of segments from their Korean-language channels. Similarly, Arirang TV is an English-language South Korean television network that is owned by the Korean International Broadcasting Foundation (KIBF). Arirang TV has been the main operating body for international broadcasting designated by the South Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports & Tourism since 1998.

A total of 63 articles and videos were used to compile the two case studies. General coverage was condensed to events that occurred after the election of South Korean President Moon Jae-in on May 10, 2017. However, 3 articles published before his election were used to provide context for specific events. The rest of the articles span from May 21, 2017 to January 21, 2021. Only interactions where a K-Pop idol and a South Korean government official jointly interacted with a foreign head of state or foreign government official were considered while compiling each case. Interactions were limited to K-Pop idols versus Korean actors due to the amount of news outlets that have sections dedicated to K-Pop. Upon conclusion of initial research, I divided idol-state interactions into two categories: those between North and South Korea, and those between South Korea and the United States. Idol-state interactions that did not

fit into these categories or were significant but did not completely adhere to my conceptualization of idol-state interactions are briefly discussed in the ‘Additional Findings’ section.

Case I: Idol-State Interactions with North Korea

In early April 2018, pictures of K-Pop idol group Red Velvet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un went viral after a historic musical performance by South Korean artists in Pyongyang. Less than a month after the performance, Kim Jong-un would cross the North-South border to meet with President Moon Jae-in during the 2018 Inter-Korean Summit, a feat never before accomplished by a North Korean leader. This case will provide an overview of the events surrounding the meeting between Red Velvet and Kim, as well as the subsequent Inter-Korean Summit in September 2018. While this case aligns more closely with traditional conceptualizations of cultural diplomacy, it also shows the ways pop cultural exchanges can be used to indicate a diplomatic commitment to an otherwise strenuous relationship.

‘Spring is Coming’ Performance in Pyongyang:

On March 20, 2018, the South Korean Ministry of Unification⁵ announced in a press release that a 160-member art troupe would visit Pyongyang, North Korea from March 31 to April 3. While there, the troupe would hold two performances.⁶ Famous Korean trot singers Cho Yong-pil, Lee Sunhee and Choi Jin-hee would be members of the troupe, alongside rock singer Yoon Do-hyun, balladist Baek Z-young, former idol-group singer Seohyun, and K-Pop girl group Red Velvet. As a whole, the members of the performance troupe would encompass several generations of Korean music. Domestically, all attention was on Cho Yong-pil, who had been the last South Korean singer to perform in North Korea during a solo concert in 2005.⁷ Meanwhile,

⁵ The South Korean Ministry of Unification is responsible for all events and communications with North Korea.

⁶ Ministry of Unification. 2018 March 20. “Joint Press Release of Inter-Korean Working-Level Contact Regarding Art Troupe’s Pyeongyang Performance. [Press Release]

⁷ Kim, Christine. 2018 March 20. “South Korea to Send K-Pop Singers to Pyongyang in Late March.” *Reuters*.

domestic and international attention was on Red Velvet because this event was set to occur as the group continued to achieve record-breaking international success. Not only would Red Velvet be the only idol group to perform, but also the youngest members of the troupe and sole representatives of the increasingly global K-Pop industry.

Before the troupe departed for North Korea, the music director and chief delegate for the art troupe, Lee Yoon-sang, said, “Our goal is to impress North Koreans in the same way as South Koreans are moved by their musicians.”⁸

Lee’s appointment to chief delegate for the troupe also represented the first time an entertainer had represented South Korea during inter-Korean talks.⁹ In this role, Lee was responsible for planning the entire troupe’s performance and coordinating with the North Korean representative. While Lee’s appointment was likely due to his past experience planning elaborate musical performances in a short amount of time, his appointment also helped distance the performance from the South Korean government. Instead of the performance troupe being perceived as a direct extension of a South Korean propaganda campaign, it appeared more as an artist-to-artist exchange with the aim of creating friendlier relations on the Korean peninsula. The attempt to illustrate the performance as a sincere artistic exchange was also supported by North Korea’s appointment of Hyon Song-wol as their delegate in the working-talks with the South. Similar to Lee, Hyon was not a government official, but instead, the leader of the North Korean Moranbong Band.¹⁰

⁸ Kim, Soo Yeon. 2018 March 20. “S. Korea to Send 160-Member Art Troupe to N.K. for Concerts.” *Yonhap News Agency*.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The Moranbong Band is often labeled as North Korea’s answer to the global popularity of K-Pop. They are known for their ‘Western-stye’ songs and performances. More can be found at Ock, Hyun-ju. 2018 January 15. “[Newsmaker] Hyon Song-Wol, Moranbong Band Leader and More.”

While the overall announcement of South Korean musicians performing in North Korea might appear out of place, when put in the context of other North-South events at the time, it is clear that the concert was meant to signify the thawing of North-South relations. This intention was even more explicit given the official theme of the concert, “Spring is Coming.”

In February, North and South Korea had achieved historic cooperation during the 2018 Winter Olympic Games in PyeongChang, South Korea. During the Olympics, the two countries competed together under a joint Korean women’s hockey team. In addition, during the opening ceremony athletes from both countries marched alongside one another under the Korean unification flag.¹¹ As for cultural exchange, the North Korean Samjiyon Orchestra held several performances in Seoul in the nights leading up to the opening ceremony.

The orchestra’s performances signified the first time the North had sent an art troupe to South Korea since 2002.¹² According to a Ministry of Unification press release, over 1,000 South Korean citizens were invited to participate in a lottery for the chance to attend one of the orchestra’s performances.¹³ Of which, more than 150,000 South Koreans entered.¹⁴ South Korean President Moon Jae-in, Kim Yo-jong (the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un), and the constitutional North Korean head of state Kim Yong-nam also attended one of the performances together.¹⁵ Their presence at the orchestra’s performance and subsequent Olympic games marked the first time the constitutional North Korean head of state and a family member of the North

¹¹ Olympics. 2020 March 30. *PyeongChang 2018 Opening Ceremony | PyeongChang 2018 Replays*. YouTube.

¹² Qin, Amy. 2018 February 8. “North Korean Orchestra Gives an Emotional Concert in the South.” *The New York Times*.

¹³ Ministry of Unification. 2018 February 1. “Invitation to Special Performance of the Samjiyon Orchestra Commemorating the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics and Paralympics.” [Press Release]

¹⁴ Qin, Amy. 2018 February 8. “North Korean Orchestra Gives an Emotional Concert in the South.” *The New York Times*.

¹⁵ Park, Sangsoo. 2018 February 11. “Moon, N. Korean Leader’s Sister Attends N.K. Art Troupe’s Performance.” *Yonhap News Agency*.

Korean leader had visited South Korea.¹⁶ During the performance, Seohyun, a former member from girl-group Girls' Generation¹⁷ also made a surprise appearance and sang a popular song about Korean unification alongside the singers from North Korea.¹⁸

Therefore, the announcement of the South Korean art troupe's trip to Pyongyang appeared to be a reciprocal action in response to the orchestra's performance, as well as an attempt to further improve the North-South relationship. To further support this, days before the troupe was set to depart for Pyongyang, the Ministry of Unification announced that the 2018 Inter-Korean Summit would occur on April 27 within the Demilitarized Zone.¹⁹ While the idea of a summit between the two Koreas had been previously discussed during talks about the North's participation in the Olympics, the exact details of any summit were not announced until days before the performance troupe left for Pyongyang. In addition, heightened tensions between North Korea and the United States over the North's missile tests served as the backdrop for North-South events to occur. Together, these events signified South Korea's attempt to diplomatically ease the tension between the United States and North Korea, or at the very least a willingness for North Korea to open up to the rest of the world.

Leading up to the South Korean troupe's performance in Pyongyang, there was no mention of which North Korea officials would be in attendance. So, it was a surprise to the international community when North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and his wife showed up to the concert. Kim's attendance marked the first time a North Korean leader had attended a South

¹⁶ Ministry of Unification. 2018 February 11. "Explanation of North Korean High-Level Delegation Visit to the Republic of Korea."

¹⁷ Girls' Generation is one of the most well-known second-generation K-Pop groups. During the height of the group's success, they were dubbed "The Nation's Girl Group." They are best known for their song "Gee."

¹⁸ Chang, Dong-woo. 2018 March 20. "From Classic to Cutting-Edge, Seoul Seeks Balance in Pyongyang K-Pop Shows." *Yonhap News Agency*.

¹⁹ Ministry of Unification. 2018 March 29. "Joint Press Release of High-Level Talks for 2018 Inter-Korean Summit." [Press Release]

Korean artistic performance.²⁰ During the performance, Kim sat alongside the South Korean Cultural Minister Do Jong-hwan. Pictures from before the performance show the two shaking hands.²¹ While Do was the official government representative for South Korea during the event, his presence and role in orchestrating the event was not heavily reported on. Instead, most of the focus was on the artists and their meeting with Kim. However, there were multiple reports that Do said Kim enjoyed the South Koreans' performance, as well as videos of Kim clapping during the concert.²² North Korean state media also confirmed that Kim enjoyed the performance.

“Our dear leader comrade said his heart swelled and he was moved by the sight of his people deepen their understanding of South Korean popular culture and cheer with sincerity,” North Korean KCNA state media said, according to a Reuters article.²³

When the performance was over, Kim met with all of the members of the South Korean troupe. Following this, an image of Kim talking with the members of Red Velvet was widely circulated. As a result, news outlets dubbed Kim as a superfan of the five-member girl-group.²⁴

Red Velvet was the fifth idol group to perform in North Korea. Prior to their performance, boy-group Sechs Kies and girl-group Fin.K.L had performed in 1999. A few years later in 2003, another concert occurred featuring girl-group Baby Vox and boy-group Shinhwa.²⁵ Leading up to the departure of the 2018 performance troupe, it was unclear how North Koreans would respond to the music of Red Velvet due to the amount of ‘loanwords’²⁶ in their lyrics, their

²⁰ Kang, Yoon-seung. 2018 April 1. “N. Korean Leader Kim Jong-Un, Wife Attend Performance by S. Korean Art Troupe.” *Yonhap News Agency*.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³ Kim, Christine, and Heekyong Yang. 2018 April 2. “North Korea’s Kim Jong Un, Wife, Watch South Korean K-Pop Stars Perform in Pyongyang.” *Reuters*.

²⁴ Agency Report. 2018 April 2. “Kim Jong-Un Is a Red Velvet Superfan, Praising K-Pop Girl Band Who Serenade Him with ‘Bad Boy’ and ‘Red Flavour.’” *South China Morning Post*.

²⁵ Shim, Seo-nah. 2018 March 26. “Red Velvet to Sing ‘Red Flavor,’ ‘Bad Boy’ in Pyongyang.” *Yonhap News Agency*.

²⁶ Loanwords are Korean words derived from lyrics. A segment about the use of loanwords in Red Velvet’s songs can be found at KBS World TV. 2018 April 10. “*In-Depth Report on Pyongyang Concert! [Entertainment Weekly/2018.04.09].*” *YouTube*.

fashion style and choreography. In the days leading up to their performance, the members of Shinhwa publicly wished Red Velvet good luck with the performance. In 2003, the members of Shinhwa had prepared a ‘powerful’ song and dance number only to be met with no response from their North Korean audience, creating what was described as an ‘awkward situation’ for the artists.²⁷ In addition, prior to the performance troupe’s departure, there was public debate about if Psy, an idol known for the global hit “Gangnam Style,” should be included in the troupe. Ultimately, no additional idol singers were added to the setlist in order to avoid creating any awkwardness between the South Korean artists and North Korean audience.²⁸ However, other news outlets reported the North had flatout rejected the addition of Psy to the setlist.²⁹ Considering the previous lackluster responses to K-Pop idols in the North, the picture with Kim and Red Velvet signaled that K-Pop was something that could be enjoyed by North Koreans, as well as a fundamental component of South Korean cultural diplomacy.

During the performance, the members of Red Velvet sang their songs “Red Flavor” and “Bad Boy.” While “Red Flavor” is more of a bubblegum pop track³⁰ about love during the summer, the song “Bad Boy” is an R&B-inspired track with sultry lyrics and choreography. According to an article from *Yonhap News*, these songs were selected because they were the most recent releases from the group at the time.³¹ However, it is important to note that before their performance in Pyongyang, both of these songs played a major role in the group’s international success and global spread of K-Pop. A month before the performance in

²⁷ Kim, Seung-yeon. 2018 March 25. “As Ex-Performers, Boyband Shinhwa Wishes Success for S. Korean Artists’ Pyongyang Gig.” *Yonhap News Agency*.

²⁸ Yoon, Min-sik. 2018 April 3. “Yun Sang Wishes There’d Been More Idol Singers in NK Performance.” *The Korea Herald*.

²⁹ Rich, Motoko, and Su-Hyun Lee. 2018 March 30. “Can North Korea Handle a K-Pop Invasion?” *The New York Times*.

³⁰ Herman, Tamar. 2017 July 9. “Red Velvet Offers a Taste of Summer With ‘Red Flavor’ Song & Video: Watch.” *Billboard*.

³¹ Shim, Seo-nah. 2018 March 26. “Red Velvet to Sing ‘Red Flavor,’ ‘Bad Boy’ in Pyongyang.” *Yonhap News Agency*.

Pyongyang, the song “Bad Boy” had earned the group the number 2 spot on *Billboard’s* World Digital Song Sales chart.³² This win occurred alongside the group’s entry into the top 10 of *Billboard’s* Social 50 chart,³³ which ranks global artists’ social media activity and engagement.³⁴ Additionally, less than a week after their performance in Pyongyang, Red Velvet performed alongside boy-group EXO in Dubai. The concert in Dubai was the first S.M. Entertainment concert to be held in the Middle East.³⁵ Together, these events signify the increasingly global popularity of Red Velvet and K-Pop at the time.

Therefore, Kim’s vocal approval of Red Velvet was surprising to many, especially when considering the criminalization of South Korean pop cultural products in North Korea. Before the 2018 performance, Kim had previously called South Korean pop culture products poor attempts by the South at “decadent capitalist influence.”³⁶

In addition, K-Pop had previously been used as a propaganda tool by the South Korean military at the DMZ. During occasions of increased tension between the countries, the South Korean military would play songs by famous idol groups like Girls’ Generation and BIGBANG nonstop on loudspeakers aimed at the North.³⁷ While the loudspeakers were turned off following an agreement made in 2015, they were turned back on in response to the North’s nuclear tests in early 2016. Based on news coverage about the loudspeakers, it is reasonable to assume that they were still being used at the DMZ at the same time Kim was meeting with the South Korean

³² Benjamin, Jeff. 2018 February 8. “Red Velvet Earn Their Best Song Sales Week in the U.S. Yet With ‘Bad Boy.’” *Billboard*.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ At the time of Red Velvet’s entry onto the Social 50 chart, K-Pop boy-groups BTS and EXO were ranked no. 1 and no. 2 on the chart respectively. Together, these groups’ social media presence beat out Western artists like Ariana Grande and Justin Bieber, further indicating the global popularity of K-Pop at the time.

³⁵ Korea Times. 2018 March 14. “K-Pop Concert in Dubai Hosted by SM to Star EXO and Red Velvet.” South China Morning Post.

³⁶ Choe, Sang-Hun. 2018 April 1. “Onstage, South Korean K-Pop Stars. In the Balcony, Kim Jong-Un, Clapping.” *The New York Times*.

³⁷ Choe, Sang-Hun. 2015 August 30. “To Jar North, South Korea Used a Pop-Music Barrage.” *The New York Times*.

performance troupe. Creating a situation where a song by Girls' Generation could have been blasting through loudspeakers at the DMZ while Kim met with Seohyun, a former member of Girls' Generation and the designated host during the South Korean performances in Pyongyang.

In addition, Kim was reported to have said that the South and North should hold cultural and arts performances more frequently.³⁸ Following the "Spring is Coming" performance, Kim reportedly suggested the countries hosting another concert in the fall with the theme of 'Autumn has come' to signify the development of the relationship between the two countries.³⁹

While it is unclear if the performance was televised in North Korea, the entire event was broadcasted on MBC, a public South Korean cable channel owned by the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation.⁴⁰ MBC is well-known for its international reach as well as a K-Pop TV program called "Show! Music Core." As a result, Red Velvet's performance was uploaded onto the official MBC K-Pop YouTube channel, expanding the performances' international reach.⁴¹

In the weeks following the Pyongyang performances, attention shifted to the 2018 Inter-Korean Summit between President Moon and Kim Jong-un. The April 27 meeting would be the first of three meetings between the Korean leaders in 2018, all of which would focus on the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and the North's relationship with the United States. By itself, the April summit was a historic occasion because it was the first time a North Korean leader stepped over the dividing line into South Korea. News coverage from the event shows Kim and Moon shaking hands before Moon invites Kim onto the Southern border. After crossing

³⁸ The Associated Press. 2018 April 2. "Red Velvet Perform for North Korean Leader Kim Jong-Un in Rare Pyongyang Concert." *Billboard*.

³⁹ Kim, Christine, and Heekyong Yang. 2018. "North Korea's Kim Jong Un, Wife, Watch South Korean K-Pop Stars Perform in Pyongyang." *Reuters*.

⁴⁰ Shim, Seo-nah. 2018 March 31. "Main Part of S. Korean Art Troupe to Leave for N. Korea." *Yonhap News Agency*.

⁴¹ MBC. 2018. *[HARMONY] Red Velvet - 'Red Flavor' @Spring Is Coming20180405*. YouTube.

over into the South, Kim in turn invited Moon to step into North Korea.⁴² Both countries also gave a joint-statement where they agreed to the “the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.”⁴³ While no concrete plans were given about how both countries would approach denuclearization, the announcement appeared to be a positive sign that the relationship between the two countries would continue to thaw.

Also at the forefront of the summit was the countries’ participation in the 2018 Asian Games. During the summit, both countries agreed to participate in certain events with a joint Korean team as well as have their athletes march as a unified Korean during the opening and closing ceremony, in a fashion similar to the 2018 Winter Olympic Games.⁴⁴ As a sign of commitment to their agreed-upon goals, in the days following the meeting between the two Korean leaders it was reported that the loudspeakers at the DMZ border would be dismantled,⁴⁵ effectively ending an era of K-Pop as propaganda.

Analysis

Several themes can be taken away from this case, the first being the use of pop cultural figures in conjunction with sporting events. Since culture is not monolithic, it makes sense for the South Korean government to employ different cultural products at once. Considering the timing of these events leading up to and following the 2018 Winter Olympic Games, one could argue that the winter games served as a foundation for several types of cultural diplomacy to occur. This is because while much of the focus at the Olympics is on sports, it is also often a time

⁴²The Associated Press. 2018 April 26. “Video: Kim Jong-Un Crosses Inter-Korean Border.” *The New York Times*.

⁴³ Staff Report. 2018 April 27. “[2018 Inter-Korean Summit] Panmunjeom Declaration Full Text.” *The Korea Herald*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

⁴⁵ Roh, Joori. 2018 May 1. “North and South Korea Start to Dismantle Border Speakers, Fulfilling Summit Pledge.” *Reuters*.

for a country to showcase their culture: both traditional and popular. This was represented in the use of high-tech robots alongside traditional Korean dances in the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympics. Since both Koreas share a common cultural heritage, the Olympics helped create a common ground between each country. As a result, the Olympics provided a platform for the two countries to showcase their shared culture. In addition, participation in sports is something that connects both Koreas beyond cultural heritage. While the unified women's hockey team was the most overt example of sports diplomacy, several sporting events occurred alongside the concerts in Pyongyang.

While drastically less publicized, a South Korean taekwondo team traveled to North Korea alongside the performance troupe. The day after the concert with Red Velvet and Kim Jong-un, the South Korean taekwondo team gave several demonstrations to a North Korean audience.⁴⁶ Considering the popularity of taekwondo across the Korean peninsula, this choice of sport was symbolic in itself because taekwondo embodies both sport and Korean culture. Structurally speaking, it also makes sense for the South Korean government to use cultural events alongside sporting events because the promotion of these activities falls under the same government agency: The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. In contrast, other states do not always have an agency that overlooks the promotion of culture. This aligns well with scholarship on how cultural diplomacy is a long-term process (Mulcahy 1999) that can flourish when there are systems that support its use (Cummings 2009). When considering all these factors, the theme of cultural diplomacy alongside sports diplomacy makes sense.

Another interesting aspect of this idol-state interaction is the appointment of Lee Yoon Sang as the chief delegate during the working-talks with the North. A common argument against

⁴⁶ Joo, Kyung-don. 2018. "S. Korean Taekwondo Demonstration Team to Perform Twice in Pyongyang." *Yonhap News Agency*.

the use of cultural diplomacy is that it can put the reputations of ‘cultural agents’ such as actors, musicians and artists at-risk for their proximity to government officials (Feigenbaum 2002). The appointment of Lee helped frame the event as an artist-to-artist interaction versus one that was under strict government control. While the Cultural Minister accompanied the South Korean performance troupe to Pyongyang, a lot of the new coverage about these events used Lee as the point of contact instead of the state official. As a result, this event was something both the South Korean government and the artists involved could take pride in and/or claim responsibility for.

The comprehensive lineup of musicians involved in the Pyongyang concert was another interesting aspect of this idol-state interaction. Traditionally, diplomatic cultural performances have been aimed at the promotion of ‘high culture’ (Nye 2008; Goff 2013). Even the Samjiyon Orchestra’s performance in Seoul could be seen as an event aimed at high culture. This is because the orchestra performed mostly traditional North Korean music and the performers themselves were dressed in traditional hanbok before changing to formal ball gowns. In contrast, the South Korean performance troupe included music from all genres including ballads, trot, rock and K-Pop. While on one hand the musical lineup could be seen as an attempt to appeal to North Koreans of all ages, at the same time such a comprehensive lineup likely helped increase the international and domestic audience for the event. Further supporting this is the fact the concert was broadcast in South Korea on MBC. By including artists from several generations of Korean music and broadcasting their performances on a public channel, it increased the accessibility and reach of the performance. Had the lineup only included Korean trot singers, it is likely that only a specific South Korean demographic would have watched the broadcast.

As previously mentioned, following the broadcast on MBC performances from the concert were uploaded onto the official MBC K-Pop YouTube channel. By doing this, the event

was able to reach a larger international audience because people from all over the world were able to watch Red Velvet perform in Pyongyang and see the reactions of North Koreans. This in turn likely helped humanize the citizens of North Korea. Going along with this, the titles of the performance videos uploaded onto the MBC K-Pop channel did not directly mention North Korea or Pyongyang. Instead, the videos were titled with the word ‘harmony’ followed by the name of the performer, the song and the title of the concert, ‘Spring is Coming.’ For example, the official title of the Red Velvet performance video is “[HARMONY] Red Velvet - ‘Red Flavor’ @Spring is Coming 20180405.” While this might appear as a strange title for a video, it is important to note that this is the same format MBC K-Pop uses for all its videos, and it is often written in both Korean and English. However, the titles of the performance videos from the Pyongyang concert were only written in English. This could signify an attempt to showcase the presence of K-Pop in North Korea directly to non-Korean speaking audiences while simultaneously desensationalizing North Korea.

The inclusion of Red Velvet during a record-breaking year for the group likely helped garner more media attention to the event. From my own exploratory analysis, it was difficult to find a headline about the concert that did not mention Red Velvet or K-Pop. From a publisher’s perspective, it would make sense to include Red Velvet in headlines given the group’s highly engaged following on social media (as proven by their ranking on the *Billboard* Social 50 chart). The use of Red Velvet coupled with the timeliness of the Pyongyang performance immediately following the 2018 Winter Olympics (where K-Pop was also showcased on the global stage), likely helped garner more attention to Inter-Korean relations. However, formal media monitoring research would have to be conducted to confirm this.

Looking at this idol-state interaction from the perspective of a political strategist, when considering the inflammatory dialogue that was occurring between North Korea and the United States during this time, it would make sense for the South Korean government to increase awareness about their efforts at public diplomacy with the North. The domestic dynamics of South Korea politics are also important to consider. Both the Olympics and Inter-Korean Summit occurred before President Moon finished his first year in the office. Considering Moon came into power as the first democratic candidate in ten years following a major corruption scandal under the Park administration, it would make sense for Moon to want to reassert South Korea's image on the global stage. In addition, as a democratic candidate whose parents were North Korean refugees, Moon heavily campaigned on a platform of peaceful relations with the North. Therefore, his apparent willingness to form a diplomatic relationship with Kim Jong-un in spite of the United States makes sense.

Additionally, the election of Moon was well aligned with the increased global popularity of K-Pop. Less than two weeks after Moon assumed office in 2017, K-Pop group BTS won the Top Social Artist award at the Billboard Music Awards.⁴⁷ The award is solely dependent on social media fan interactions and engagement. By winning this award, BTS helped legitimize the power K-Pop groups often have on social media. Considering the importance of modern technology to boosting soft power (Nye 1990; Matthews 1997; Su 2013), BTS' win at the awards show was not only a milestone for how popular K-Pop had become but a representation of K-Pop as a soft power resource. Recognizing this, it would make sense for Red Velvet, a group with a massive, international following on social media, to be included in a historic cultural exchange with North Korea. If not as an attempt to increase awareness about the thaw in Korean relations

⁴⁷Lipshutz, Jason. 2017 May 21. "BTS Thanks Fans For Top Social Artist Win at Billboard Music Awards 2017: Watch." *Billboard*.

but to further legitimize the global power of K-Pop. A power that was only further legitimized when praised by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

However, the perceived acceptance of K-Pop by Kim could also be viewed as an attempt for him to earn credibility. Several news articles argued that Kim could have likely only attended the concert in an attempt to get sanctions against North Korea lifted. This signifies the potential downside of using pop cultural diplomacy. This is because pop cultural diplomacy is relational in nature, allowing both the initiator and receiver to get different things out of its use. Regardless of Kim's motivations for attending the concert, the picture of him with the members of Red Velvet signifies the potential role pop culture can play in public diplomacy. And if not the picture, the headlines that dubbed the North Korean Supreme Leader as a K-Pop superfan certainly do.

Subsequent Idol-State Interactions with North Korea

Following the April meeting between President Moon and Kim Jong-un, international attention shifted to the proposed US-North Korean talks. However, South Korea's efforts at sports diplomacy did not stop. In August, the two Koreas competed as a unified team during several events in the 2018 Asian Games in Indonesia.⁴⁸ Similar to the Winter Olympic Games, the Koreas joint participation in the Asian Games helped set the stage for attempts at pop cultural diplomacy. During the games, it was announced that Moon would visit North Korea for another Inter-Korean summit by the end of September. On September 18, 2018 Moon arrived in Pyongyang. While the focus of the summit was on denuclearization and improving relations on the Korean peninsula, attention was also cast towards the entourage Moon brought with him to the North.

⁴⁸Ives, Mike. 2018 August 25. "Unified Korean Team, Victor on the Court, Tries to Win Hearts, Too." *The New York Times*.

During his visit, Moon brought a 52-person group of business leaders, government officials, community figures and K-Pop idols. The idols included Zico, a prominent rapper and member of boy-group Block B, as well as R&B singer Ailee and balladist ALi.⁴⁹ Interestingly, none of the three idols belonged to the ‘big three’ South Korean entertainment agencies. Instead, all three artists were known for their music producing or songwriting abilities.

According to *The Korea Herald*, the presidential chief of staff Im Jong-seok said, “We hope that the ‘harmony of peace’ drawn up by the three of them [Zico, Ailee and ALi] will depict the fruitful autumn that is the Inter-Korean relations.”⁵⁰ In itself, this statement alludes back to comments made by Kim Jong-un during the April performance about hosting an ‘Autumn has come’ concert.

However, unlike the earlier concerts in Pyongyang, the September performances by the K-Pop artists were met with much less fanfare and media coverage. Instead of a grand concert, the idols reportedly performed at a dinner banquet.⁵¹ During which, Zico performed his hip hop track titled ‘Artist.’ Leading up to the trip, there had been concern about how Zico’s music would resonate with the North Korean audience. Similar to Red Velvet, his lyrics include a lot of loanwords from English that could be unfamiliar to North Koreans. But upon returning to the South, Zico said that his performance was met with a good response.

"Usually, I ad lib 'put your hands up' (in English) in the middle of performance," Zico said in an interview with Yonhap News Agency. "But I replaced it with 'raise your hands' (in Korean) and the North Korean participants did put their hands above their heads."⁵²

⁴⁹ Yoon, Min-sik. 2018 September 16. "K-Pop Stars Zico, Ailee to Visit Pyongyang." *The Korea Herald*.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Park, Boram. 2018 September 21. "Rapper Zico Impressed by N. Korean Audience." Yonhap News Agency.

⁵² Ibid.

Based on media coverage, it was unclear how Kim Jong-un reacted to the idols' performance. As representatives of various genres of South Korean music, the role of the idols was to reportedly introduce their respective genres to North Koreans.⁵³ However, video coverage of the idols' performance during the dinner banquet was limited, with only a poorly filmed, one-minute video of Zico's performance being made public.⁵⁴ However, one video that did come out of the Inter-Korean Summit was a video of ALi singing "Arirang," a classic Korean folk song, at Mt. Baekdu in front of Kim, Moon and their wives.⁵⁵ Despite the symbolism of the song and the mountain, the public performance was not reported on by international media outlets. Since global mass media is one of the most effective channels for a state to share its culture (Su 2013), the lack of coverage by international news sources about this performance signifies a missed opportunity for Moon to globally showcase this historic moment in Inter-Korean relations.

Besides performing at the dinner banquet, the idols also attended North Korean cultural events, including a gymnastics show⁵⁶ and a luncheon at a famous cold noodle restaurant in Pyongyang.⁵⁷ While the gymnastics show was something the South Korean performance troupe in April did not get to witness, the artists in April were able to eat the infamous North Korean cold noodles at a local Pyongyang restaurant. But unlike Red Velvet, the September artists that

⁵³ Herman, Tamar. 2018 September 18. "Ailee & Zico Set to Perform in North Korea Amid Inter-Korean Summit." *Billboard*.

⁵⁴ Hong, Dam-young. 2018 September 23. "[Video] Footage of Zico's N. Korea Performance Revealed." *The Korea Herald*.

⁵⁵ Yim, Hyun-su. 2018 September 21. "[Video] No Live Performance from K-Pop Stars during 3rd Inter-Korean Summit." *The Korea Herald*.

⁵⁶ Yim, Hyun-su. 2018 September 20. "K-Pop Stars in Pyongyang React to 150,000-Capacity Event." *The Korea Herald*.

⁵⁷ Yoon, Min-sik. 2018 September 19. "[Video] Zico Raves about Pyongyang Naengmyeon." *The Korea Herald*.

did not have any pictures taken with Kim Jong-un. Similarly, Kim Jong-un did not make any public statements about the idols during the summit.

Considering all of this, while it is clear that the idol-state interaction promoted cultural exchange between the two states, the North Korean perceptions of that exchange are uncertain. In contrast, Zico conducted several interviews with media outlets upon returning to South Korea where he talked fondly about his experience in the North. Given the lack of media coverage about the artists leading up to and during the summit, it is reasonable to assume that the role of the idols in September was not to boost awareness about events occurring between the North and South. This could also be supported by the lack of videos from the artists' performance and international media coverage.

When looking at idol-state interactions from the perspective of a relationship-building tool, the presence of ALi on the trip makes more sense. This is because ALi was also a member of the performance troupe in April and as a result, had previously met Kim Jong-un. Additionally, the only full performance-related video from the September summit was of ALi singing "Arirang" at Mt. Baekdu in front of both Kim and Moon. Therefore, the strategy of bringing along an idol who has already met Kim could be a relationship-building tactic. But due to the lack of expansive media coverage, there is limited evidence to support this.

Instead, it appears that the three idols were influenced more by the exposure to North Korean culture versus their capacity to share South Korean culture to North Koreans. This hints at the limitations of pop cultural diplomacy in certain diplomatic settings. Had the three artists performed in Pyongyang prior to the beginning of the summit, they might have had more fanfare. But because their presence overlapped with the higher priority talks of denuclearization, they did not appear to fully fulfil their intended role.

Case II: Idol-State Interactions with the United States

Following the closing ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympic Games in PyeongChang, the official Twitter account for K-Pop boy-group EXO tweeted a photo. In it, the members of EXO stood alongside South Korean President Moon Jae-in, First Lady Kim Jung-Sook, fellow idol singer CL and Ivanka Trump - senior White House adviser and daughter of U.S. President Donald Trump. The caption to the photo read:

*“It was a great pleasure to meet President Moon, First Lady Kim, and Ms. Ivanka Trump at the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics Closing Ceremony! Hope everyone enjoyed our performance! Thank you very much for your love and support for K-POP and EXO!”*⁵⁸

Prior to meeting with Ms. Trump, CL and EXO had performed in the closing ceremony as the official Olympic representatives of the K-Pop industry. While not much context was given to the photo of the idols with Trump, several news outlets reported that Trump had requested to meet them after she told Moon her daughter was a K-Pop fan.⁵⁹

Besides Ivanka Trump, the only other individual EXO was reported to have met after the closing ceremony was Russian figure skater Evgenia Medvedeva.⁶⁰ At the beginning of the winter games, Medvedeva gained attention after she revealed herself to be an EXO superfan and

⁵⁸ EXO [@weareoneEXO]. 2018 February 26. “It Was a Great Pleasure to Meet President Moon, First Lady Kim, and Ms. Ivanka Trump at the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics Closing Ceremony! Hope Everyone Enjoyed Our Performance! Thank You Very Much for Your Love and Support for K-POP and EXO!” Twitter.

⁵⁹ Yun, Suh-young. 2018 February 27. “Ivanka Trump’s ‘incredible’ Encounter with CL, EXO.” *The Korea Times*.

⁶⁰ Herman, Tamar. 2018 February 25. “K-Pop Stars CL & EXO Impress at Winter Olympics Closing Ceremony.” *Billboard*.

K-Pop listener.⁶¹ But overall, the picture with Trump and the idols appeared to be an informal idol-state interaction.

In light of the preparations the Moon administration was making for Trump's official visit to South Korea for the closing ceremony, several news outlets reported how unusual it was for a family member of the U.S. President to receive such fanfare.⁶² At the same time, it was believed that there was heightened hospitality towards Trump given the public tension between U.S. Vice President Mike Pence and North Korea's Kim Yo-jong during the opening ceremony. There were also concerns that the U.S. should receive the same level of hospitality as North Korea so as not to upset. This makes sense considering that at the time, the Moon administration had taken on the role of mediating dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea about denuclearization. In addition, others perceived the arrival of Ivanka Trump as the U.S. response to Kim Yo-jong. After all, upon her arrival in South Korea, Kim Yo-jong was quickly labeled as "North Korea's Ivanka."⁶³

While there is no accessible video footage of the meeting between Trump and the idols, it was reported that EXO gifted Trump several items related to Korean culture.⁶⁴ When examining this particular idol-state interaction, it can be viewed from a relationship-building perspective. Whether or not Ivanka Trump's daughter is a K-Pop fan, a photo of the daughter of the U.S. President alongside the South Korean President and one of the number one K-Pop groups of all time makes a statement. On one hand, this statement could be seen as an attempt by Trump to

⁶¹Braca, Nina. 2018 February 12. "Russian Figure Skater Evgenia Medvedeva Reveals K-Pop Stars EXO Pump Her Up Before Skating." *Billboard*.

⁶²Arirang News. 2018 February 20. *Seoul to Give Ivanka Trump Warm Reception for South Korea Trip*. YouTube.

⁶³Rich, Motoko, and Sang-Hun Choe. 2018 February 11. "Kim Jong-Un's Sister Turns On the Charm, Taking Pence's Spotlight." *The New York Times*.

⁶⁴Yun, Suh-young. 2018 February 27. "Ivanka Trump's 'incredible' Encounter with CL, EXO." *The Korea Times*.

show the United States' approval of South Korean pop cultural goods. On the other hand, upon discovering Ivanka was a K-Pop fan, the photo could have represented a larger political strategy by Moon to promote the legitimacy of K-Pop. From a public relations perspective, a photo of an American government official alongside one of the most successful K-Pop groups is a much better photo depicting the U.S. government at the winter games, compared to earlier photos of Vice President Pence remaining seated at the opening ceremony during the entrance of the unified Korean team.⁶⁵

Following this encounter at the Olympics, there were limited idol-state interactions with the United States. Throughout the rest of 2018, the U.S. and South Korea focused on meeting with North Korean officials to discuss denuclearization. All of the US-South Korean interactions about denuclearization occurred alongside South Korea's pop cultural diplomacy towards the North, as previously discussed. Following the Olympics, official talks between South Korea and the United States took place outside of South Korea.

It was not until June 29, 2019, when the U.S. President Donald Trump visited South Korea again. His visit lasted two days following a summit with other world leaders in Japan and was announced after a letter exchange about potentially meeting with North Korea's Kim Jong-un.⁶⁶ Prior to Trump's arrival, news coverage was focused on whether Trump would meet with Kim while in the South. However, upon his arrival, news coverage quickly shifted. That is because when Trump arrived at Cheong Wa Dae for a welcome dinner with President Moon, a familiar K-Pop group was there to greet him: EXO.

⁶⁵ Rich, Motoko, and Sang-Hun Choe. 2018 February 11. "Kim Jong-Un's Sister Turns On the Charm, Taking Pence's Spotlight." *The New York Times*.

⁶⁶ Shin, Hyonhee, and Jeff Mason. 2019 June 24. "Trump to Visit South Korea as Pompeo Raises Hope for New North Korea Talks after Letter." *Reuters*.

While the presence of EXO at the official welcome dinner between Moon and Trump seemed strange, it was reported that EXO was invited to greet officials from the Trump administration because of their previous meeting with Ivanka.⁶⁷ In addition to EXO, South Korean golf coach Pak Se-ri was also present. Once again, illustrating South Korea's ability to use pop cultural diplomacy in conjunction with sports diplomacy. This was because Pak was reported to have been invited given President Trump's affinity for golf.⁶⁸

Before dinner was served, an official photo of the occasion was taken. In it is President Trump, President Moon, First Lady Kim, Ivanka Trump, Jared Kushner, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin, four additional members of the Moon administration and of course, EXO.⁶⁹ The idols also gave three signed copies of their album to the U.S. delegation: one to President Trump, and two to Ivanka (so she could give a copy to her daughter).⁷⁰

While this idol-state interaction appears more symbolic in nature, the presence of EXO also likely contributed to the level of media coverage given to the event. As a political strategy, this could have been a small way for the Moon administration to reassert itself in news coverage about the potential meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-un. Additionally, the presence of EXO further legitimized the global power of K-Pop as if to show, "even the granddaughter of the U.S. President listens to K-Pop." Given the amount of coverage the welcome dinner received compared to previous welcome dinners, this idol-state interaction

⁶⁷Arirang News. 2019 June 29. *Trump and Ivanka Met Special Guests at Welcoming Dinner at Blue House*. YouTube.

⁶⁸KOREA NOW. 2019 June 29. *K-Pop Boy Band EXO Welcomes Trump and His Daughter Ivanka with Signed Albums*. YouTube.

⁶⁹ U.S. Mission Korea. 2019 June 30. "U.S. President Donald Trump (Center) and South Korean President Moon Jae-in (Fifth Right) Meet with Guests Including Members of the Band EXO at the Blue House in Seoul. (AP Photo)." *U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea*.

⁷⁰ KOREA NOW. 2019 June 29. *K-Pop Boy Band EXO Welcomes Trump and His Daughter Ivanka with Signed Albums*. YouTube.

illustrates the ability for pop cultural diplomacy to increase audience. Finally, allowing Ivanka Trump to meet again with EXO further solidified their own relationship and shows the potential for pop culture figures to be used as a relationship-building tool. However, it will be interesting to see if Ivanka Trump attends an EXO concert with her daughter in the future as well as if this relationship extends beyond the Trump administration.

Additional Findings

Additional findings from this exploratory study show the need to expand the scope of idol-state interactions. For example, on his first state visit to China, President Moon brought three members of EXO and actress Song Hye-kyo from the popular 2016 Korean drama, “Descendants of the Sun.”⁷¹ While the members of EXO were only present at a business event, Song attended a dinner with Moon and Chinese leader Xi Jinping. The presence of K-Pop idols was widely seen as a representation of Moon’s intention to achieve friendlier trade relations with China.⁷² However, it is interesting that the members of EXO were only present at a business event where Xi was not in attendance.

This “attempted” idol-state interaction occurred while South Korean pop cultural goods were still being blocked and targeted in China due to South Korea’s alignment with the United States on THAAD, an anti-missile defense system.⁷³ The presence of Song was particularly interesting because her drama, “Descendants of the Sun” achieved great success in China.⁷⁴ However, its success was also likely due to the fact the drama aired before the South Korean

⁷¹Shepherd, Christian, and Joyce Lee. 2017 December 14. “South Korea’s Moon Tries K-Pop and TV Stars in China Charm Offensive.” *Reuters*.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Hong, Dam-young. 2017 December 14. “Song Hye-Kyo, EXO-CBX Meet President Moon Jae-in in Beijing.” *The Korea Herald*.

⁷⁴For more, see Jung, Eun-jin. 2016 March 14. “‘Descendants of the Sun’ Hits 440m Views in China.” *The Korea Herald*.

government formally approved the deployment of THAAD in 2016. Regardless, the choice of EXO and Song for Moon’s state visit seemed to be very intentional. On one hand, EXO was representative of an industry that had lost a large portion of its Chinese market as a result of the THAAD fallout.⁷⁵ On the other hand, Song appeared to represent the success the Korean wave had achieved in China before the dispute over THAAD. However, more research should be conducted about this topic.

In addition to expanding the scope of idol-state interactions, my findings also saw the need for examining ‘idol-driven’ interactions. These are instances where a pop culture figure meets a representative of a foreign government, but a state official from their home country is not necessarily present or does not arrange the meeting. An example of this is the speech BTS gave at the United Nations on Sept. 24, 2018. While the focus of the BTS speech was about their campaign with UNICEF and promoting confidence and individuality amongst youth,⁷⁶ President Moon was also present at the United Nations. At the same time BTS gave their speech, Moon met with U.S. President Donald Trump to discuss North Korea’s denuclearization.⁷⁷ Therefore, the speech appears to be a BTS-driven interaction that happened to occur in the same place where Moon was present. This is further supported by media coverage about BTS meeting Moon for the first time after performing at a French-South Korean friendship concert in October.⁷⁸ While idol-driven interactions might coincide with state events, these interactions can also provide insight for conceptualizing ‘celebrity diplomacy.’ Afterall, BTS was the first K-Pop

⁷⁵ Kim, Ji-hyun. 2016 August 5. “[THAAD] Korea’s Top Entertainment Firms Lose Stock Value on THAAD.” *The Korea Herald*.

Also see: Shepherd, Christian, and Joyce Lee. 2017 December 14. “South Korea’s Moon Tries K-Pop and TV Stars in China Charm Offensive.” *Reuters*.

⁷⁶ UNICEF. 2018 September 24. *BTS Speech at the United Nations | UNICEF*. YouTube.

⁷⁷ Cheong Wa Dae. 2018 September 24. “The President and U.S. President Donald Trump Hold Summit.” *Cheong Wa Dae*.

⁷⁸ Herman, Tamar. 2018. “BTS Performs at Korea-France Friendship Concert in Paris with South Korean President in Attendance.” *Billboard*. This event was not included in the preceding cases because it was unclear what French officials attended the concert with Moon.

group to speak at the United Nations. But to understand the weight of idol-driven interactions versus idol-state interactions, more research should be conducted.

My research also found that direct idol-state interactions were only utilized in certain circumstances. For example, when President Moon travelled to Indonesia on his first state visit, no K-Pop idols came along despite his 200-person delegation of business leaders.⁷⁹ This is interesting considering how popular K-Pop is in Indonesia and how active Indonesian K-Pop fans are on social media.⁸⁰ Had Moon included a K-Pop idol as a member of his delegation, it is not unreasonable to assume it would have garnered a lot of attention. However, K-Pop was not completely absent during Moon's visit to Indonesia. According to *The Jakarta Post*, Moon gave a signed EXO album and video message from SHINee's Choi Min-ho to the daughter of Indonesian President Joko Widodo.⁸¹ This was because Widodo's daughter was known to be an avid K-Pop fan and had just gotten married. But considering the meeting between Ivanka Trump and EXO, it is interesting that no idol was present with Moon during his visit to Indonesia. This could indicate the limitations of idol-state interactions and their ability to be used in countries that do not neighbor the home state. It is also important to note the number of foreign officials who visited South Korea and were not greeted by K-Pop idols, potentially indicating that idols are only used in certain circumstances or to ease politically tense relationships. But once again, more research should be conducted by expanding the scope of idol-state interactions to include actors. This is because while numerous foreign officials were not greeted by K-Pop idols upon

⁷⁹ Whiteside, Darren. 2017 November 9. "South Korea's Moon Unveils New Focus on Southeast Asia." *Reuters*.

⁸⁰Jung, Sun, and Doobo Shim. 2014. "Social Distribution: K-Pop Fan Practices in Indonesia and the 'Gangnam Style' Phenomenon." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 17(5): 485–501.

⁸¹News Desk. 2017 November 11. "South Korean President Gifts Signed EXO Album to Newly Wed First Daughter." *The Jakarta Post*.

their arrival in South Korea, it is unclear if representatives from other pop cultural products were present instead.

Lastly, the level of reported idol-state interactions seemed to change annually under the Moon administration. While this was partially due to the Olympics and historic Inter-Korean summits occurring during Moon's first year in office, it is interesting to see how the South Korean government has utilized K-Pop over time. In a previous section, it was mentioned that cultural diplomacy is a tactic that should be used over a long period of time to garner results. Therefore, more research should be conducted about the use of K-Pop idols in post-pandemic diplomacy. While face to face interactions between diplomats ceased during the pandemic, the global popularity of K-Pop did not. For example, immediately upon assuming office on Jan. 21, 2021, the official Twitter account for the U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris followed BTS. This led to theories that Harris might be a BTS or K-Pop fan.⁸² Therefore, it will be interesting to see the context of events if and when Harris meets BTS in the future.

Conclusion

This exploratory paper underscores the need for increased analysis on the use of pop cultural figures in public diplomacy. By looking specifically at state-sponsored events, idol-state interactions appear to make up only one tactic within the Moon administration's public diplomacy strategy. As illustrated in the different treatment of Ivanka Trump and the daughter of the Indonesian President, idol-state interactions are only utilized in certain circumstances. This is because while both individuals were reported to be fans of K-Pop, only Ivanka Trump was able to meet an idol group in-person with the help of the South Korean government.

⁸²Aniftos, Rania. 2021. "So, Vice President Kamala Harris Might Be Part of the BTS ARMY." *Billboard*.

The two case studies presented in this paper also allude to the use of idol-state interactions during politically tense situations. While this could be a tactic to soften media coverage or increase the audience for diplomatic affairs, future research should be conducted using media monitoring to understand the target audience for idol-state interactions.

As the global popularity and economic power of K-Pop continues to grow, future research should also examine how the increased popularity of K-Pop translates into foreign policy decisions. Within South Korea, the international success of K-Pop is transforming South Korean institutions and norms. One group at the forefront of this is BTS, whose international success sparked domestic debate about if K-Pop idols should be exempted from South Korea's mandatory military service. As a result of this debate, a law was passed by the South Korean National Assembly allowing those who excel in popular culture to delay their military service requirement by two years. The caveat to this law being that qualified individuals must be recommended by the Minister of Culture. However, this also indicates the South Korean government's commitment to the promotion of popular culture. Therefore, it will be interesting to see how idol-state interactions occur in the future. Additionally, a comparison of Korean-language media coverage and English-language media coverage on idol-state interactions could prove interesting. While this paper was limited to English-language news outlets, it would be interesting to compare how idol-state interactions are reported domestically versus internationally.

Beyond South Korea, scholars could examine how other pop cultural figures are being used in state public diplomacy strategies. While this study was limited to K-Pop idols and the South Korean government, it would be interesting to see if idol-state interactions occur between Bollywood actors and the Indian government, or reggaeton artists and Latin American

governments. While both Bollywood films and reggaeton have witnessed extreme success in the global market, the relationship between these cultural products and state government is unclear. If possible, future research should seek to identify if these phenomena are being harnessed by states or not, and if not, why not.

Idol-state interactions make up one aspect of pop cultural diplomacy. As state-sponsored activities, analyzing these interactions can provide the opportunity for scholars to examine interactions that occur beyond the scope of the state, or idol-driven interactions. The idol-state framework could also be applied to the study of multinational corporations and how they influence cultural policies across the world. A future case study within this field could be S.M. Entertainment's commitment to expand the global audience of K-Pop through the use of K-Pop groups that communicate in languages other than Korean. In addition, examining the adoption of HYBE Entertainment's BTS-themed Korean language textbook series could prove an interesting study about how the goals of pop culture organizations and states align. Looking beyond South Korea, it would be interesting to examine how Bollywood production houses expand their products' reach beyond India. In addition, like BTS, Bollywood actors have previously worked on various UNICEF campaigns. By examining the process of how celebrities partner with international organizations, scholars could better understand the implications of idol-driven interactions.

While on the surface, the use of K-Pop idols during diplomatic meetings might seem strange, this paper has shown that idol-state interactions can be used as a relationship and audience building tool, as well as a method of cultural exchange. In order for research in this field to continue to develop, scholars must acknowledge their own biases and perceptions towards certain pop cultural products. Only by looking at pop culture through an objective lens,

will we be able to understand the mechanisms states use to harness soft power resources. Finally, by creating a framework to analyze how these products are currently used, scholars will be able to utilize new technologies and research methodologies to gauge the long-term effectiveness of pop cultural diplomacy.

Appendix A: Photo Gallery



United States First Lady Melania Trump and K-Pop idol Choi Min-ho from SHINee pose with one another during the launch of “Girls Play 2” initiative at the U.S. Embassy in South Korea on Nov. 7, 2017. The purpose of the event was to create awareness about a campaign to promote girls’ participation in sports ahead of the 2018 Winter Olympic Games in South Korea. However, media coverage of the event mostly discussed a viral video of a teenage girl screaming after meeting Choi. This event signals the ability for pop cultural figures to increase the audience for diplomatic events that would otherwise garner less media coverage. However, future research that utilizes media monitoring methodologies must be conducted. Photos from *Yonhap News Agency*.



(From left to right) The constitutional North Korean head of state Kim Yong-nam and the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, Kim Yo-jong sit beside South Korean President Moon Jae-in and his wife during a performance by the Samjiyon Orchestra on Feb. 11, 2018. The event marked the first time such high-level North Korean officials have visited South Korea. Photo from Cheong Wa Dae.



North Korean Hyon Song-wol [right] and South Korean Lee Yoon-sang [left] meet to discuss the logistics of the South Korean art troupe’s Pyongyang performance on March 20, 2018. Lee, a South Korean singer and composer, was appointed as the chief delegate for the South Korean art troupe to North Korea. His appointment marked the first time an entertainer has represented South Korea during Inter-Korean talks. Similarly, Hyon is the leader of the North Korean Moranbong Band. The appointment of the two artists potentially helped the ‘Spring is Coming’ concert to be perceived as an artist-to-artist exchange versus a political strategy. Photo from the South Korean Ministry of Unification.



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un poses alongside members of the South Korean art troupe on April 2, 2018. The art troupe included several famous Korean singers along with the K-Pop idol group, Red Velvet. Photo from *Yonhap News Agency*.



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un speaks to the members of Red Velvet and other South Korean performers following their performance in Pyongyang on April 2, 2018. Photo from *The Associated Press*.



White House advisor Ivanka Trump poses alongside South Korean President Moon Jae-in and his wife, as well as the members of the K-Pop group EXO and CL, a former member of the group 2NE1 on Feb. 25, 2018. The photo following EXO and CL's performance at the closing ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympic Games. Photo from *Yonhap News Agency*. Trump can also be seen using the popular Korean heart hand gesture, a popular gesture for K-Pop idols to make with their fans.



United States President Donald Trump meets with members of EXO on June 29, 2019, at Cheong Wa Dae before a dinner with South Korean President Moon Jae-in. The K-Pop group was invited to greet Trump in South Korea after they had met Ivanka Trump after the closing ceremony at the 2018 Winter Olympics. Photo from Cheong Wa Dae.



President Trump, President Moon, First Lady Kim, Ivanka Trump, Jared Kushner, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin, and additional members of the Moon administration pose alongside five members from K-Pop group EXO. Photo from Cheong Wa Dae.

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