

## ARTICLE

### South Korean Soft Power in Mongolia: Focusing on the Survey

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**Abstract:** This article examines the changing dynamics of soft power in Mongolia and explains why South Korean cultural influence is stronger than that of Mongolia's powerful neighbours, namely China and Russia. Given the extensive political, economic, and cultural interactions since the 1990s, one might expect Chinese soft power to be more attractive than that of other great and major powers. However, the results of our public opinion polls challenge this assumption. According to these surveys, after Western cultural influence, South Korean food, movies, music, language, and educational institutions are among the most attractive in Mongolia. Indeed, South Korean chain stores (E-mart, CU, GS25), restaurants, coffee shops, and goods have already become highly visible in the country's service sector. Nevertheless, although Mongolian attitudes toward South Korea are predominantly favourable, this should not be interpreted as evidence that South Korea exerts strong political influence in Mongolia. We argue that current favourable attitudes toward South Korea and the attractiveness of South Korean culture could provide a solid foundation for the emerging strategic partnership between the two countries. This paper briefly introduces the concept and dynamics of soft power in Mongolia, discusses the results of the 2026 public opinion survey in comparison with the youth surveys of 2021 and 2024, explains three factors (overall positive bilateral relations, the role of people-to-people interactions, and perceptions of modernity), and concludes with directions for future research.

**Keywords:** Soft Power, South Korea, Mongolia, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, survey, younger generation



## **Soft Power Dynamics in Mongolia**

Soft power is not clearly defined and remains a debated but widely used concept in the international relations literature. Most scholars and researchers accept Joseph Nye's definition of soft power as the counterpart to hard power: the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment.<sup>1</sup> In the international relations literature, soft power is often examined from the perspective of great and major powers, and scholars have debated how these states competitively use soft power, including the attractiveness of their cultures, to influence the behaviour of small states. Despite disagreements over which elements should be considered part of soft power and how their influence should be assessed, researchers have developed frameworks to measure soft power and rank great and major powers. The most common categories in these rankings include culture (education, arts, ways of living, language, etc.), government (political values, foreign policy, etc.), and business (technology, goods, products, economic models, etc.). Because the concept is fluid and inclusive, it is difficult to present a comprehensive assessment of soft power or determine which great or major power exerts relatively effective influence over the foreign-policy behaviour of small states such as Mongolia. Small states possess limited soft

power to change the behaviour or attitudes of other states. Nor can they easily escape or fend off the projection of soft power by major powers, especially in today's increasingly connected world.

Mongolia is primarily at the receiving end of soft power.<sup>2</sup> Although Mongolia has limited soft power to change the behaviour or attitudes of other states, it has largely been a recipient of external soft power since its weakening in the 16th and 17th centuries. The country was dominated by the cultural influence of the Manchu-led Qing Dynasty until 1900, when Chinese, Manchu, and Tibetan were dominant languages among Mongolian intellectuals, including nobles and monks. There was then a brief opening in the early 1900s, with attempts to reach out to Tsarist Russia and beyond to Western Europe. From 1924, however, the country was largely closed and exposed primarily to Soviet cultural influence, with some connections to Central and Eastern Europe. During the socialist period, Russian was the main foreign language of choice. Studying in Russia or knowing the language was a principal criterion for professional and social advancement. Television programmes, books, journals, and magazines in Russian were considered a luxury for many Mongolians who had little access to other sources of soft power.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph S. Nye (2021). "Soft power: the evolution of concept", *Journal of Political Power*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2021.1879572>

<sup>2</sup> We began our research on soft power in Mongolia in 2021, when we were working on the small project, *Mongolian Geopolitics*, which was supported by the German Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Mongolia. Following the project, we had several roundtables and

workshops to understand the concept and its operationalization. Many experts argue that Mongolia has the capacity to deploy soft power and projects it unintentionally (e.g., through co-ethnics in neighbouring states, diasporas). However, for this article, we will focus on the dynamics from the receiving end perspective.

It should be noted that a significant number of Mongolians studied at various levels of training in Central and Eastern European socialist states and interacted with European specialists working in Mongolia. However, their influence was insignificant. During the brief period between 1949 and 1963, just before Sino-Soviet tensions intensified, Mongolians interacted closely with Chinese nationals, especially Chinese workers constructing roads and buildings. Only one Chinese-language textbook was published, and few Mongolians studied at

newly established Chinese universities following the Chinese Civil War. Following the normalization of great-power relations among China, Russia, and the United States, Mongolians became open to cultural influence and soft-power projection from all countries capable of projecting them. Nevertheless, as the following review shows, the dynamics of soft power in Mongolia remain understudied, and most available public opinion data are either dated or limited to a single country or domain.

### Previous Studies on Soft Power and South Korea in Mongolia

Three bodies of scholarship inform this study. The first concerns the concept itself. Nye<sup>3</sup> introduced soft power as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment, drawing on a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies, and he later identified public diplomacy as the main instrument through which governments seek to mobilise these resource<sup>4</sup>. Nye also stressed that much of a country's soft power is generated by civil society, markets, and popular culture rather than by governments<sup>5</sup>. Critics have questioned whether attraction can be neatly separated from coercion<sup>6</sup> and whether soft power is a usable analytical

category at all, given that the same resources can produce attraction in one setting and indifference or resentment in another<sup>7</sup>. Nye has responded by emphasising that soft power depends on the context and on the perceptions of the target audience<sup>8</sup>. These debates matter for our study because they caution against treating favourable public attitudes as evidence of political influence, a distinction to which we return in the discussion.

A second body of work examines South Korean soft power and the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*). Lee framed soft power as a deliberate national strategy for a middle

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<sup>3</sup> 2004. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs.

<sup>4</sup> 2008. "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616: 94–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699>

<sup>5</sup> 2004. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs.

<sup>6</sup> Mattern, Janice Bially. 2005. "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics."

*Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33 (3): 583–612.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050330031601>

<sup>7</sup> Hall, Todd. 2010. "An Unclear Attraction: A Critical Examination of Soft Power as an Analytical Category." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (2): 189–211. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poq005>

<sup>8</sup> Nye, Joseph S., Jr 2021, "Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept." *Journal of Political Power* 14 (1): 196–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2021.1879572>.

power that cannot rely on hard power alone<sup>9</sup>. Ryoo<sup>10</sup> and Chua<sup>11</sup> explained the regional appeal of Korean popular culture through cultural hybridity and the shared experiences of East Asian audiences, while Jin showed how social media transformed a regional phenomenon into a transnational one<sup>12</sup>. More recent studies continue to treat K-pop, film, and animation as instruments of public diplomacy and national branding<sup>13</sup>. Abdurahmonov traces the stages through which Seoul built soft-power diplomacy in Central Asia, a region that, like Mongolia, lies outside the core markets of *Hallyu*<sup>14</sup>. Most of this literature, however, focuses on cultural content and state strategy rather than on how audiences in receiving countries rank South Korea against competing powers.

A third, smaller body of research addresses soft power in Mongolia directly. Studies of Chinese influence agree that China's economic weight has not translated

into attraction. Bat-Erdene argues that Mongolian social identity limits the reception of Chinese cultural diplomacy<sup>15</sup>, and Zhuravleva, using an index of foreign-policy, economic, social, and cultural components for 2009–2016<sup>16</sup>, finds China's soft-power resources the largest in Mongolia but undermined by widespread Sinophobia. Research on South Korea has come mainly from marketing and tourism studies. Surveying 304 urban consumers, Odmandakh, Lee, and Jin found that favourable attitudes toward Korean television dramas improved perceptions of Korea's national, corporate, and product image and, through trust, raised purchase intentions. Enkhtungalag and Kwon similarly found that the Korean Wave mediates the relationship between Mongolians' image of Korea and their choice of Korea as a travel destination<sup>17</sup>. Comparing surveys conducted in 2011, 2015, and 2019, Oyuntsetseg reports that Mongolians' image of Korea, Koreans,

<sup>9</sup> Lee, Geun. 2009. "A Theory of Soft Power and Korea's Soft Power Strategy." *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 21 (2): 205–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10163270902913962>

<sup>10</sup> Ryoo, Woongjae. 2009. "Globalization, or the Logic of Cultural Hybridization: The Case of the Korean Wave." *Asian Journal of Communication* 19 (2): 137–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292980902826427>

<sup>11</sup> Chua, Beng Huat. 2012. *Structure, Audience and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5790/hongkong/9789888139033.003.0003>

<sup>12</sup> Jin, Dal Yong. 2016. *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. <https://doi.org/10.5406/illinois/9780252039973.001.0001>

<sup>13</sup> Fan, Xin, and Salas Supalakwatchana. 2026. "KPop Demon Hunters: Cultural Representation in Contemporary Korean Animation." *Asian Journal of Arts and Culture* 26 (1): e16. <https://doi.org/10.48048/ajac.2026.16>

<sup>14</sup> Abdurahmonov, Nurbek. 2026. "The Formation Stages of South Korea's Soft Power Diplomacy in Central Asia." *Journal of Interdisciplinary Human Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.57033/mijournals-2026-1-0032>

<sup>15</sup> Bat-Erdene, Erdenekhuyag. 2014. "The Mongolian Social Identity and the Limit of China's Soft Power in Mongolia." *Thai Journal of East Asian Studies* 19 (1): 11–26.

<sup>16</sup> Zhuravleva, Evgenia. 2018. "Applied Analysis of the Soft Power of the PRC, Russia and the U.S. in Mongolia." *International Organisations Research Journal* 13 (1): 171–92. <https://doi.org/10.17323/1996-7845-2018-01-10>

<sup>17</sup> Enkhtungalag, Ganbold, and Haeyoon Kwon. 2018. "Analyzing Structural Relationships among Mongolians' Perception of the Korean Wave, National Image, Tourism Destination Image and Choice-Intention." *Journal of Tourism Management Research* 22 (1): 163–89. <https://doi.org/10.18604/tmro.2018.22.1.8>

and Korean products is generally positive and attributes this mainly to people-to-people exchanges, the reception of Korean cultural content, and demand for Korean goods<sup>18</sup>. Building on this work, our earlier study<sup>19</sup> and the youth surveys<sup>20</sup> mapped shifting preferences among young Mongolians across several powers.

Three gaps follow from this review. First, existing Mongolian studies examine either a single power, usually China, or a single domain, such as dramas, tourism, or consumer goods; they therefore cannot show how South Korea ranks against the United States, China, Russia, and Japan across domains. Second, most rely on small urban samples or on data collected before 2020, that is, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the recent upgrading of Mongolia-South Korea relations. Third, little attention has been paid to the distinction between cultural attraction and political influence that the conceptual critiques highlight. This article addresses these gaps by combining a 2026 survey of all age groups conducted in three cities and several provinces with the 2021 and 2024 youth surveys and focus group discussions, and by comparing South Korea's standing with that of other powers across language, education, migration, travel, media, music,

food, consumer goods, and bilateral perceptions.

To address these gaps, we use three public opinion survey datasets. The first is a survey designed to capture public perceptions and understanding of South Korean soft power in Mongolia. The survey was conducted in the three largest cities (Ulaanbaatar, the capital city, Erdenet, and Darkhan) and six provinces (Selenge, Tuv, Gobi-Sumber, Dornogobi, Dundgobi and Uvs) between April and May 2026. The dataset consists of responses from 1,200 people selected through random sampling, together with findings from focus group discussions conducted before and during the survey. The same research team designed and conducted the 2021 and 2024 youth surveys at the Mongolian Institute for Innovative Policies<sup>21</sup> and, after establishing Global Nomads of Mongolia, carried out the 2026 nationwide survey. The three surveys therefore belong to a series of studies on soft power in Mongolia that the team has conducted since 2021. The youth surveys' findings, particularly the growing appeal of South Korean culture among young Mongolians, prompted the team to examine South Korean soft power more closely in a nationwide survey in 2026. Only the core soft-power questions (preferred foreign

<sup>18</sup> Oyuntsetseg, D. 2021. “Монгол, БНСУ хоорондын олон нийтийн дипломат харилцаа: Монголчуудын Солонгос улс, үндэстний талаарх ижиж, ойлголт” [Public diplomacy between Mongolia and the Republic of Korea: Mongolians' image and perceptions of Korea and Koreans]. *Олон улсын харилцаа* [International Relations] 43 (1). <https://journal.num.edu.mn/jir/article/view/2705>.

<sup>19</sup> Suvdantsetseg, Ts., and J. Mendee. 2022. “Changing Soft Power Dynamics in Mongolia.” In *Mongolian*

*Geopolitics*, 331–45. Ulaanbaatar: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Mongolia.

<sup>20</sup> Mongolian Institute for Innovative Policies and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. 2021. *Foreign Policies & International Relations through the Eyes of Young Mongolians: Young Mongolians and the World in 2021 (National Opinion Poll Results)*. Ulaanbaatar: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Mongolia.

<sup>21</sup> *Young Mongolians and the world in 2024*, (Mongolian Institute for Innovative Policies and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.)

languages, destinations for study, living, and travel, and preferences for films, music, and food) were repeated in the 2026 nationwide survey; its remaining items were designed specifically for South Korea, and comparisons below are therefore limited to these core questions. The youth surveys were conducted in 2021 and 2024, with 1,300 respondents in 2021 and 1,200 in 2024 selected through random sampling. The estimated margins of sampling error are  $\pm 2.7$  and  $\pm 2.8$  percentage points, respectively, at the 95% confidence level. They were conducted in Ulaanbaatar City, Erdenet City, Bulgan, and Tuv provinces. It should be noted that the 2021 survey was conducted immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic but before the Russia-Ukraine war. The 2024

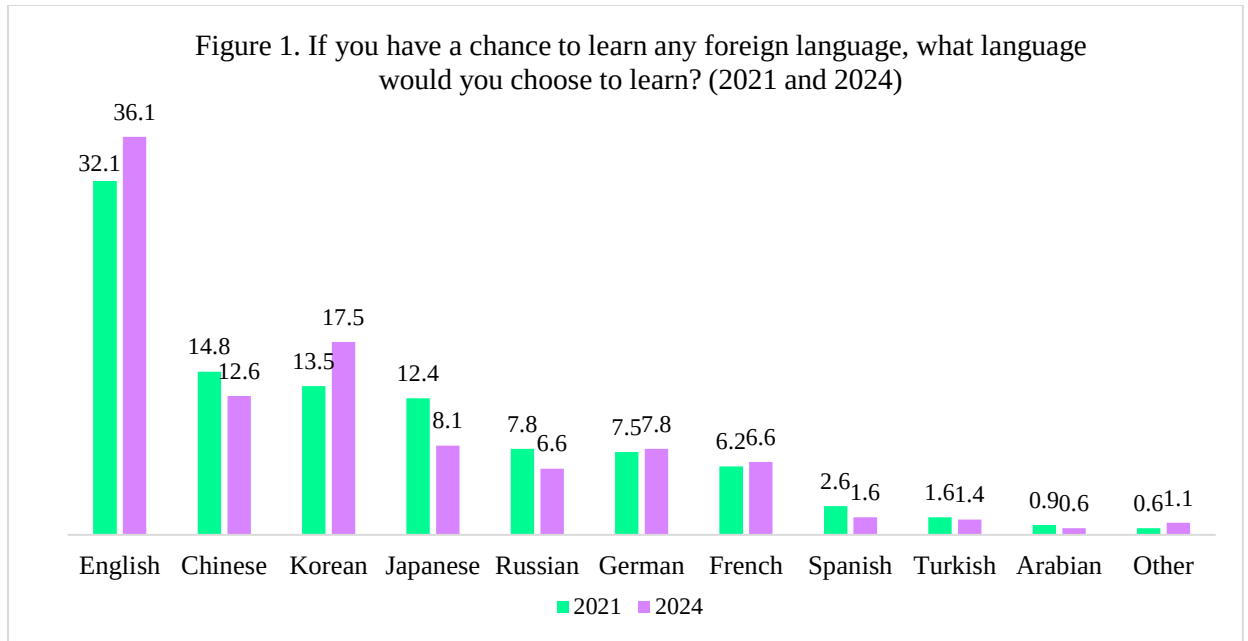
survey repeated the exact same questions; however, geopolitical uncertainty surrounding the war in Europe and the 2024 U.S. presidential election is expected to have had some degree of impact on youth responses. The 2026 survey covered all adult age groups in proportion to national demographic statistics, whereas the youth surveys were limited to people aged 18 to 35. Comparing the findings of the general population survey with those of the youth surveys makes it possible to examine how the perceptions and attitudes of young people differ from those of the broader population. This is why we compare the 2026 general public survey with the 2021 and 2024 youth survey results.

### **Languages and Destinations to Study, Travel, and Live**

Following the socialist period, Russian is no longer a required language at secondary schools, colleges, and universities. According to our survey results, English is the most preferred language, followed by Chinese, Korean, and Russian. English's position is understandable given its global popularity, increased use in Mongolia, and inclusion in some job requirements. The growing interest in learning Chinese is also unsurprising, as China is becoming a tourist

destination in addition to being a key economic lifeline for the country.

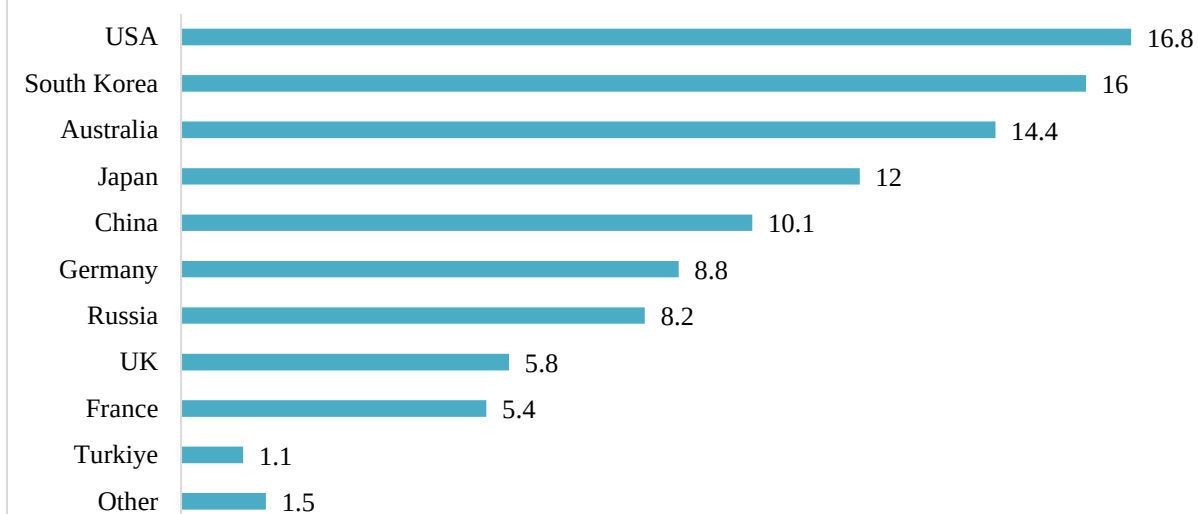
Interestingly, Korean (13.5%) ranked third after English (32.1%) and Chinese (14.8%) in the 2021 youth survey. According to the 2024 youth survey, however, Korean was considered the second most preferred language, while interest in Chinese and Japanese declined substantially (Figure 1).



In terms of study destinations, the United States (16.8%), South Korea (16%), Australia (14.4%), Japan (12%), and China (10.1%) rank higher than European countries, including Russia (Figure 2). The youth surveys present a somewhat different pattern. In 2021, the United States, Japan, and South Korea were the first three choices, but in 2024, preferences for the United States, Japan, and Russia dropped dramatically, whereas South Korea rose to second place,

slightly below the United States. This may indicate declining interest in the United States because of practical challenges ranging from visa requirements and domestic turbulence to anti-immigration policies and increased living costs. In a nutshell, the survey results indicate that the Korean language and South Korean educational institutions are becoming increasingly popular in Mongolia.

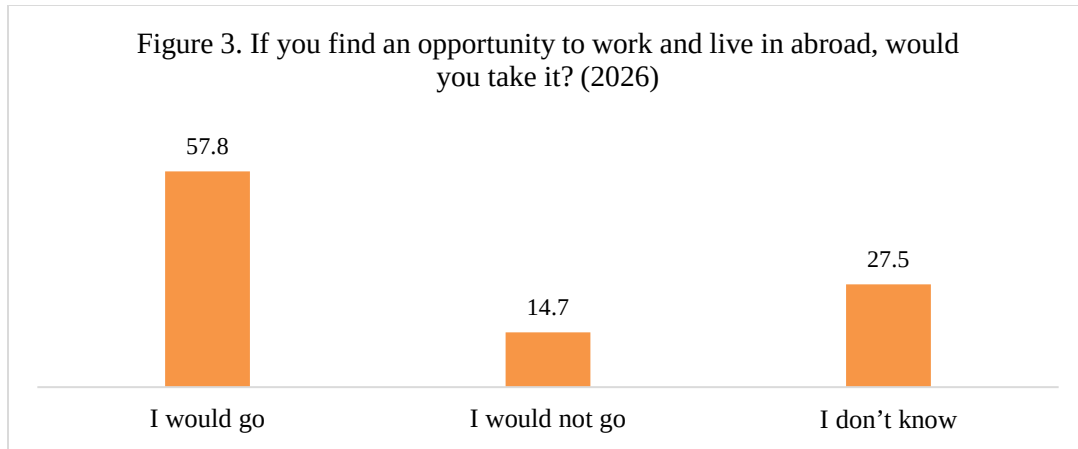
Figure 2. If you have a chance to study abroad, which country would you choose to study? (2026)



In our focus group meetings, participants frequently expressed a desire to live abroad because they perceived the country's overall living conditions as worsening. The most common reasons were poor living conditions (e.g., air pollution and traffic jams), underemployment and unfair treatment in the workplace, and corruption. Participants with children were particularly concerned about their children's health, education, and safety. The most worrying response was to the question: if you found an opportunity to work and live abroad, would you take it? A total of 57.8 percent of respondents answered that they would go, 27.5 percent were unsure, and only 14.7 percent would stay in Mongolia (Figure 3). Among those who would like to live abroad, South Korea (25%) ranked first, followed by

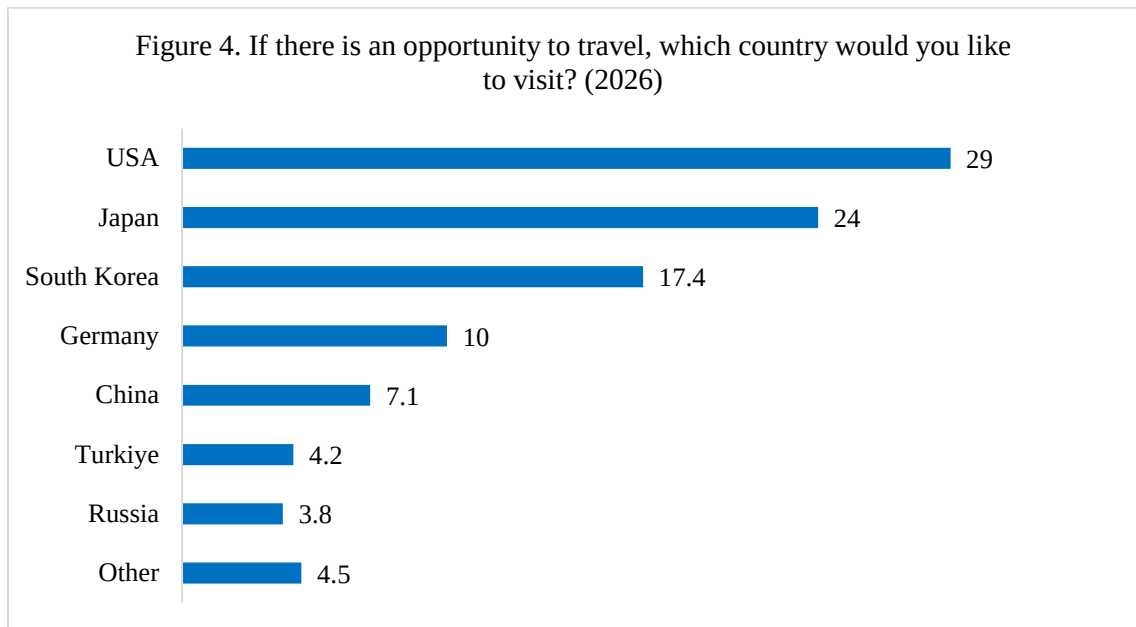
Australia (24.4%), the United States (21.4%), and Germany (9.6%).

The proportion is even higher in the youth survey: 68.7 percent would live abroad, 15 percent do not know, and 16.3 percent would stay in Mongolia. In terms of country preference, 29.5 percent would live in the United States, 19.2 percent in South Korea, and 12.9 percent in Japan. Both results indicate that many Mongolians would like to live abroad and that South Korea is among the most preferred choices, while neither Russia nor China ranked higher than Germany. This indicates a growing attraction among Mongolians to live and work in South Korea because of geographic and cultural proximity. South Korea is therefore regarded as a highly preferred living environment.



Nevertheless, when it comes to travel, the United States (29%), Japan (24%), South Korea (17.4%), Germany (10%), and China (7.1%) were the top five choices among respondents (Figure 4). Interestingly, during winter, many Mongolians travel to Vietnam and China to escape air pollution, traffic

jams, and the frigid cold of the continental winter. This suggests that Vietnam is not necessarily a preferred travel destination overall. Following the Ukraine war, Mongolians have become more reluctant to travel to Russia.



Compared with China, Mongolians complain about Russia's bureaucracy at border control points and unexplained long

delays. As enthusiasm among Mongolian travellers for Russia declines, more Russians

and Mongolian co-ethnics from neighbouring regions travel to and through Mongolia.

## Movies and Music

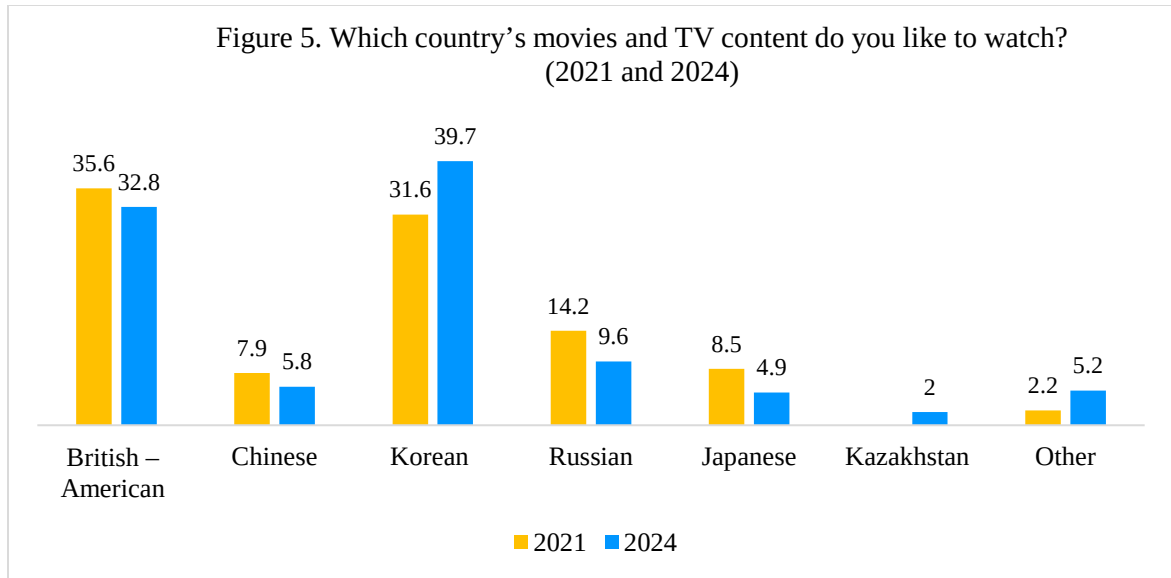
In the 1990s, Mongolian audiences became fascinated with foreign movies shown on videocassette players and television channels. The most popular TV series included the Japanese *Oshin*, the Venezuelan *Cara Sucia*, the South Korean *De Jangum*, and the Chinese *The Diary of a Traveler to the Western Side*. Compared with the period when Mongolian youths lined up to watch the North Korean *Hong Kil-dong* in 1986, South Korean television series have attracted larger audiences than other foreign productions. According to the 2026 survey, 39.7 percent of respondents prefer South Korean movies,<sup>22</sup> followed by American (26.9%), Russian (13.1%), Chinese (8.8%), Japanese (5.5%), and Turkish (2.9%) movies;

3.0 percent prefer movies from other countries. During our focus group discussions, participants could easily name and discuss the plots of South Korean films and series, including *De Jangum*, *Bright Girl Yansun*, *Staircase Paradise*, *The Wife's Trap*, and so forth.

South Korean movies also ranked first in the youth survey. Moreover, preference for South Korean movies increased significantly, from 31.6 percent in 2021 to 39.7 percent in the 2024 survey. In contrast, preference for Chinese movies declined from 7.9 to 5.8 percent, and preference for Russian movies declined from 14.2 to 9.6 percent (Figure 5).

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<sup>22</sup> This figure is identical to the share in the 2024 youth survey (39.7 percent). We double-checked both datasets; the match is coincidental.

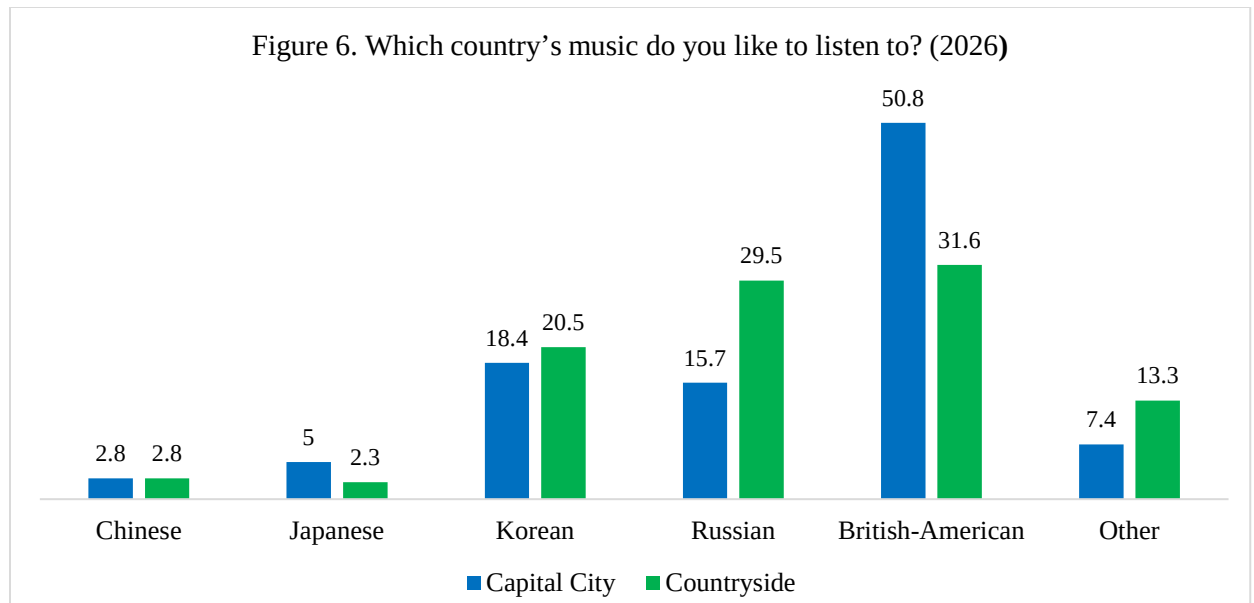


Regarding Korean television content, 25.2 percent watch dramas, 40.1 percent watch movies, and 14.6 percent watch reality shows. Interestingly, a number of joint films and reality shows have been shot in Mongolia, given the country's nomadic settings and vast landscapes.

In the 2026 survey and focus group discussions, we inquired about *Physical Asia*, a South Korean reality competition series on *Netflix*. Mongolian athletes participated in *Physical Asia* in October 2025. The show gained popularity not only in Mongolia but also internationally, as the Mongolian team won second place. This led to a spin-off series, *Physical: Welcome to Mongolia*, in which participating team members visited Mongolia during the cold winter and the summer *Naadam* festival in 2026. When asked about their impressions, 72.4 percent of respondents considered that "it was a very good show introducing Mongolia positively," 14.4 percent answered that "the show was

innovative, but needed some improvement in the content and organization," 7.4 percent regarded the show as useless, and 5.8 percent responded "don't know."

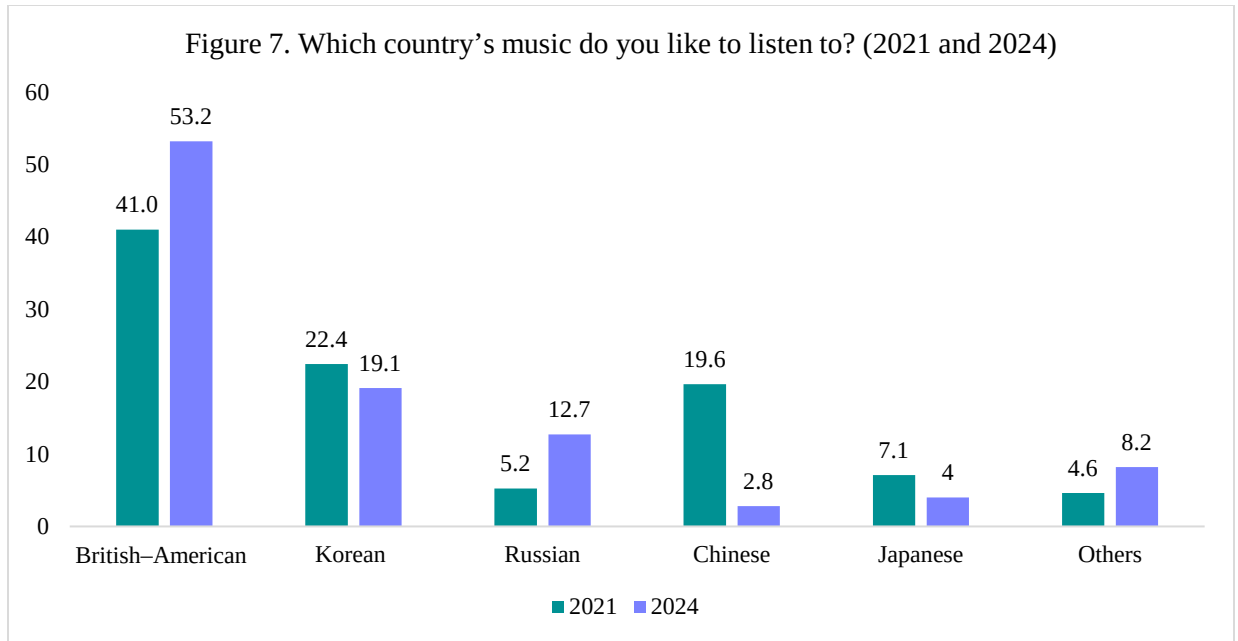
Music is also an important category for evaluating public attitudes toward different cultures. Respondents' music preferences rank as follows: English (41.4%), Russian (22.5%), South Korean (19.4%), and Chinese (2.8%). However, an interesting difference emerges when the results are compared by urban and rural location. Urban respondents prefer English (50.8%), South Korean (18.4%), and Russian (15.7%), whereas rural respondents prefer English (31.6%), Russian (29.5%), and South Korean (20.5%), (Figure 6). Middle-aged and older people are more likely to listen to Russian music, whereas younger generations are more attuned to English and South Korean music.



When we asked about two popular South Korean bands (BTS, a South Korean boy band, and Black Pink, a South Korean girl band), 12 percent responded "know very well," 33.2 percent "know in general," 28.4 percent "know a little bit," and 26.4 percent "don't know."

In the youth survey, preferences for English and Russian music increased, while

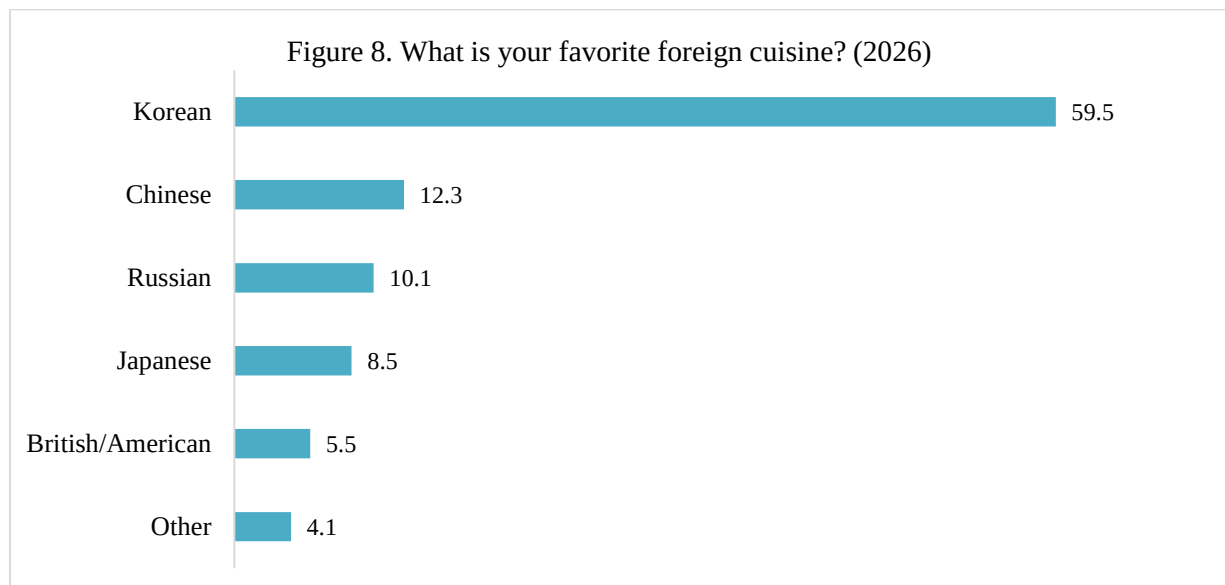
South Korean preference declined slightly and Chinese music preference declined sharply. Nevertheless, young people prefer English (Western) music, followed by South Korean (19.1%) and Russian (12.7%) music (Figure 7). Younger generations, especially urban respondents, appeared to be more knowledgeable about South Korean bands.



### Food, Shops, and Goods

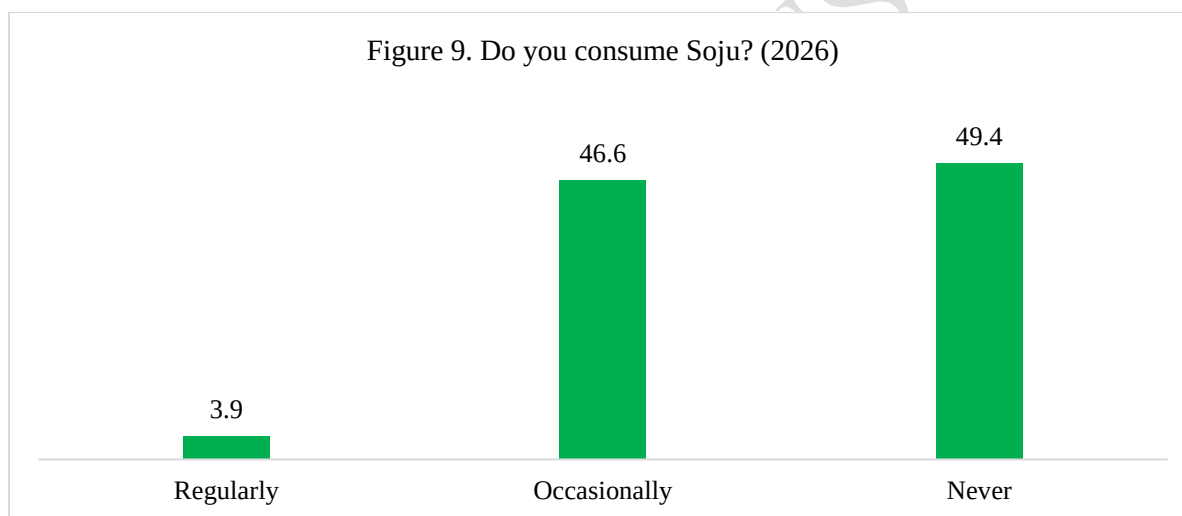
South Korean cuisine has become one of the most popular foreign cuisines in Ulaanbaatar and other major urban centres. More than half of respondents (59.5%) identified South Korean cuisine as their

favourite, while Chinese cuisine (12.3%), Russian (10.1%), and Japanese (8.5%) cuisine received lower preferences (Figure 8).



The high preference for South Korean food is also reflected in the youth survey results. Notably, 80 percent of respondents sometimes cook South Korean food, while 7.2 percent do so all the time. Our focus group discussions suggest that this response should be examined more carefully, as participants may also have counted adding *kimchi* to their diet as cooking Korean food. In support of these polling results, the number of South Korean restaurants is

increasing, and Korean food items, including *soju*, appear on the menus of many restaurants in Mongolia. Indeed, *soju* is widely sold in stores. A total of 46.6 percent of participants consume *soju* sometimes, and 3.9 percent consume it frequently (Figure 9). Our survey did not include questions regarding beer types; however, it was clear that South Korean beer is also commonly served in restaurants and sold in stores.



Relatedly, South Korean chain stores in Mongolia have been quite successful and rank highly in sales among foreign chains. Currently, CU, the first Korean convenience store chain, operates 600 stores, while GS25 runs 299 locations in Mongolia.<sup>23</sup> In our questionnaire, all respondents correctly identified major South Korean chains, including CU, GS25, Emart, Lotteria, and Caffe Bene. A total of 61.2 percent support the operation of South Korean chain

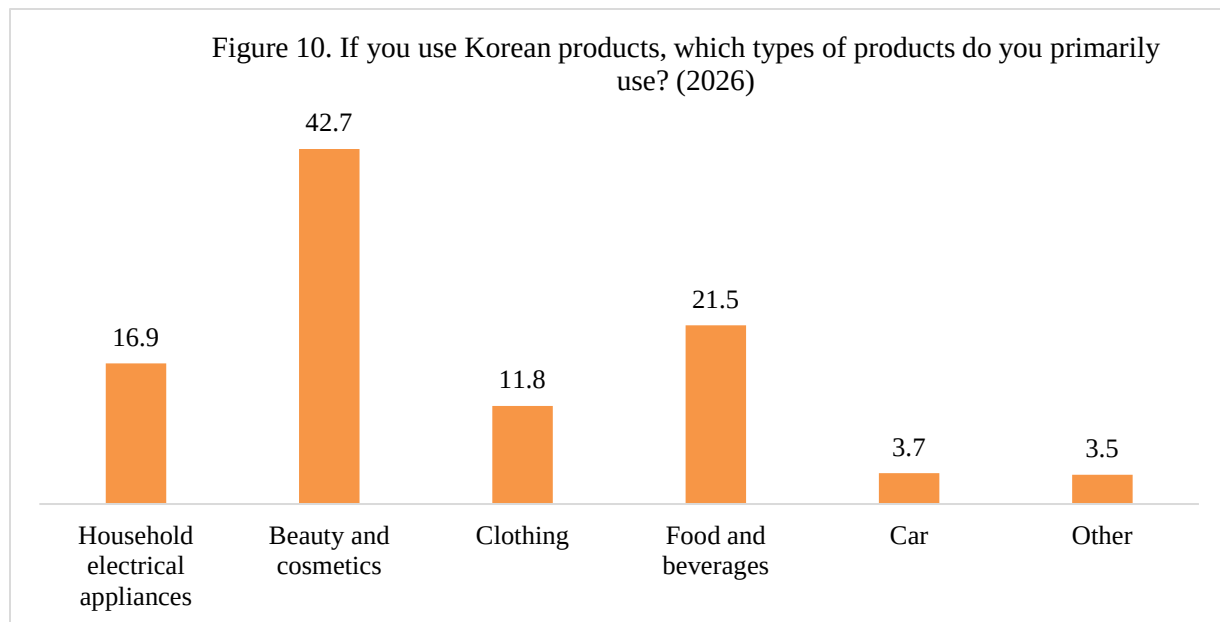
convenience stores (i.e., CU and GS25) because these stores provide a new service culture, a clean environment, and quality products. However, 18.7 percent of participants pointed to negative aspects of these convenience stores, arguing that they dominate the retail sector and marginalize local businesses such as small stores and food stalls. Moreover, several participants in the focus group discussions highlighted the

<sup>23</sup> Nam, Yoon-jung. 2026. "Korean Convenience Stores Draw Lines in Mongolia as Retailers Expand." *Seoul Economic Daily*, July 18, 2026.

availability of restrooms at these convenience stores.

Besides South Korean store chains, there are many other stores and shops labelled as Korean stores. Korean goods are abundant on the shelves of Mongolia's major chains and local stores, demonstrating market demand and the popularity of Korean products. When asked about the frequency of using Korean products, 26.7 percent said they use Korean products always, 69.5 percent sometimes, and only 3.8 percent never. In terms of categories, 42.7 percent purchase cosmetics, 21.5 percent food and grocery products, 16.9 percent electronics, 11.8 percent clothing items, and only 3.7 percent automobile products (Figure 10). Although

our survey did not inquire about car preferences, it also provides interesting insights into changing market dynamics. Immediately after the 1990s, the car market was dominated by South Korean cars of all categories because Mongolia strictly followed right-side traffic, with steering wheels on the left side. However, once the country permitted the import of used cars from Japan, which have steering wheels on the right side, Mongolian streets became dominated by second-hand Japanese cars. Nevertheless, South Korean automobile businesses remain in the market, although they are not in a dominant position vis-a-vis Japanese used-car dealers.



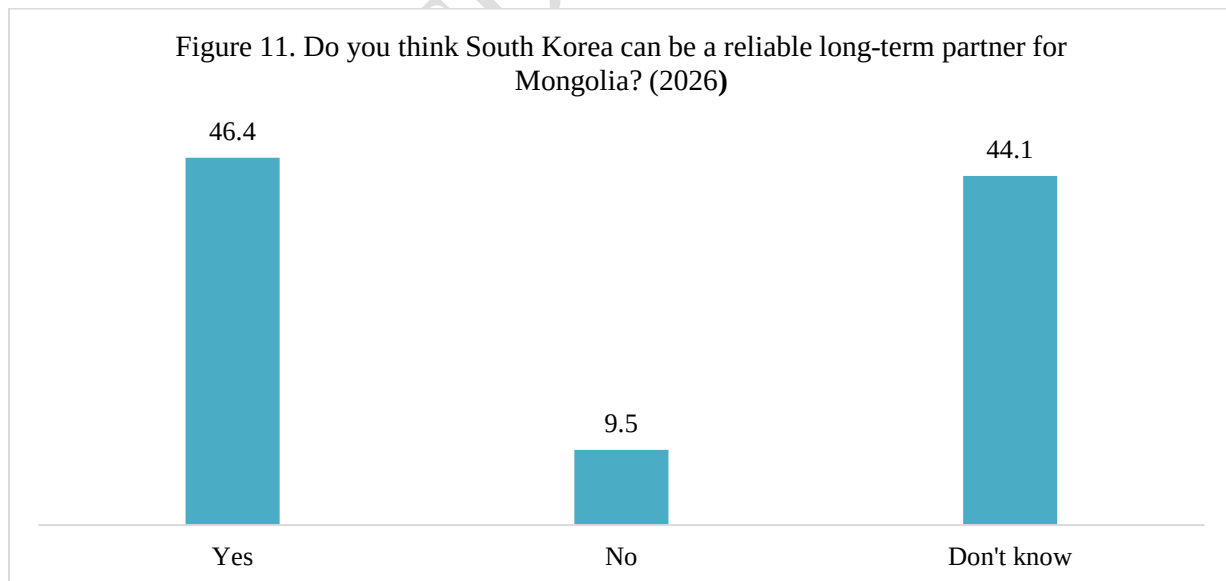
Our interviews and focus group discussions also indicate that South Korean coffee shops have played an important role in spreading coffee culture in Ulaanbaatar. Caffè Bene, Tom n Toms, Mega Coffee, and

Tous les Jour have become key coffee chains in Ulaanbaatar. In addition, many Western fast-food chains in Mongolia have expanded from their operations in South Korea.

## **Bilateral Relations**

In rankings of countries as Mongolia's closest partners, South Korea ranks third after Russia and China. Similarly, Russia, China, and South Korea are regarded as the most important countries for Mongolia's development. Interestingly, in both categories in the 2024 youth survey, South Korea ranked fourth after Russia, China, and Japan. Since 2024, South Korea's ratings have advanced significantly, as Mongolia-Japan relations have remained somewhat stagnant while Mongolia-South Korea relations have become closer and more active. At the individual level, respondents were asked to rank citizens by their degree of understanding and approachability. Russians (35.4%) were in the lead, followed by Americans (24%), Chinese (14.4%), and South Koreans (12.5%). However,

respondents answered differently when asked with whom they would like to do business. They selected Chinese (28.9%), Americans (18.4%), South Koreans (17.6%), and Russians (14.2%). This is an interesting pattern, reflecting the depth of close Sino-Mongolian cooperation over the last three decades and a broadly similar perception of American and South Korean business partners. In fact, 46.4 percent of respondents believe that South Korea is a reliable long-term strategic partner, while 9.5 percent rejected this belief and 44.1 percent answered that they do not know (Figure 11). Overall, these responses show that South Korea is regarded as an important partner and that Mongolians value relations with South Korea.



According to the poll results and focus group discussions, several obstacles

remain. The first is cultural difference, especially in terms of language and customs,

as well as a lack of understanding of these differences. The second involves challenges related to visas and residence permits. The visa process is one of the most complicated issues in bilateral relations, as many Mongolians are refused visas and, in some cases, denied entry at South Korean border points even though they hold official visas. However, Mongolians are fairly divided on this issue. A total of 34 percent consider that South Koreans treat Mongolians harshly regarding visas, especially by not permitting some visa holders to enter, while 40.7 percent blame Mongolians who overstay their visas, violate rules and regulations, or commit crimes. Relatedly, the third obstacle is that some Mongolians violate rules and regulations or commit crimes. Other obstacles identified by respondents include ineffective state policy and coordination, as well as negative views and misunderstandings about each country.

Regarding positive factors in bilateral relations, five stand out. First, the two countries maintain friendly and trusted bilateral relations. Second, they have no history of hostilities, tensions, or disputes. Even though the two countries belonged to different camps (i.e., socialist versus capitalist) during the Cold War, neither designated the other as a hostile nation. Mongolia also maintains friendly relations

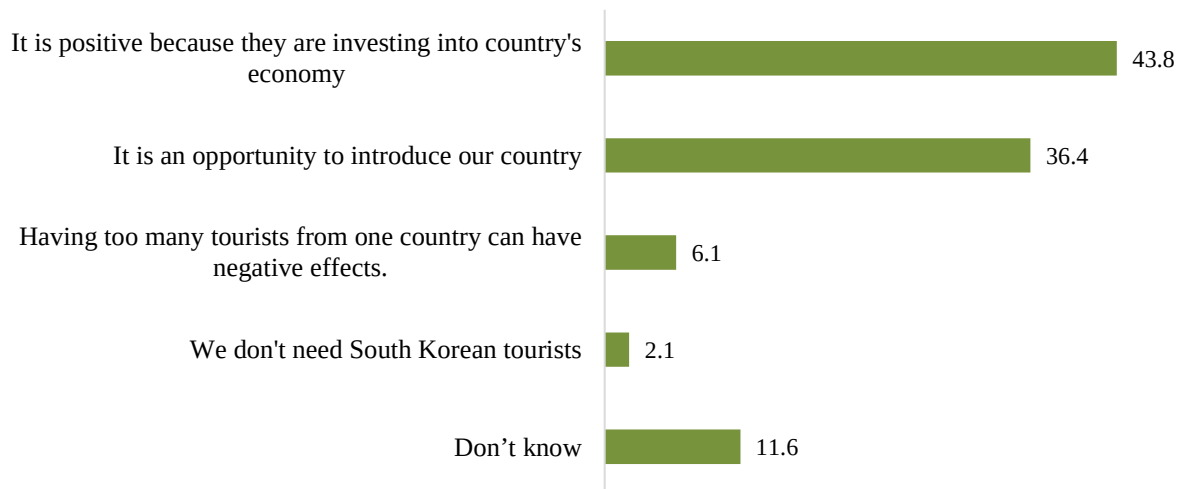
with both North and South Korea. During the socialist period, Mongolians were more familiar with North Korean culture. Third, South Korea provided development and humanitarian assistance to Mongolia from the 1990s and was one of the important donor countries supporting Mongolia's political and economic transitions during that decade. Fourth, citizens are very active in promoting people-to-people relations, especially through study, work, and travel. Finally, cultural proximity between the two countries and their citizens supports closer relations.

In contrast to the challenges Mongolians face when travelling to South Korea, Mongolia has adopted a flexible visa policy to increase the number of South Korean tourists, providing visa-free entry for up to 90 days since June 1, 2022<sup>24</sup>. Although there are several reasons behind the government's decision to allow visa-free travel for South Korean tourists, 43.8 percent supported the decision because of its economic benefits for the country. Another 36.4 percent viewed it as an opportunity to promote tourism and attract more visitors. However, 6.1 percent warned of the negative impacts of too many tourists from one country, while 2.1 percent believed that Mongolia did not need to welcome South Korean tourists (Figure 12).

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<sup>24</sup>Mongolia exempted visa requirements for Korean tourists, May 12, 2022  
<https://www.un.int/mongolia/news/mongolia-exempted-visa-requirements-korean-tourists>

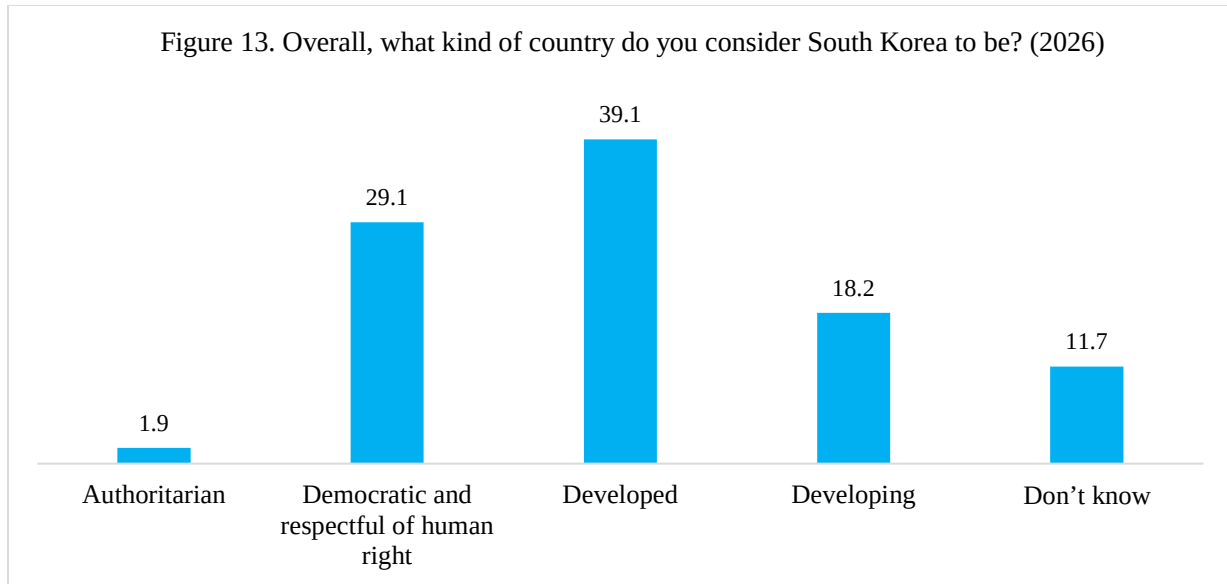
Figure 12. What do you think about South Korean tourists visiting Mongolia?  
(2026)



### Knowledge

According to our survey results, respondents are generally knowledgeable about South Korea. A total of 39.1 percent consider South Korea a highly developed country, and 20.1 percent regard it as a democratic country. Nevertheless, 18.1 percent think of South Korea as a developing nation, and 1.9 percent consider it an authoritarian state (Figure 13). Because

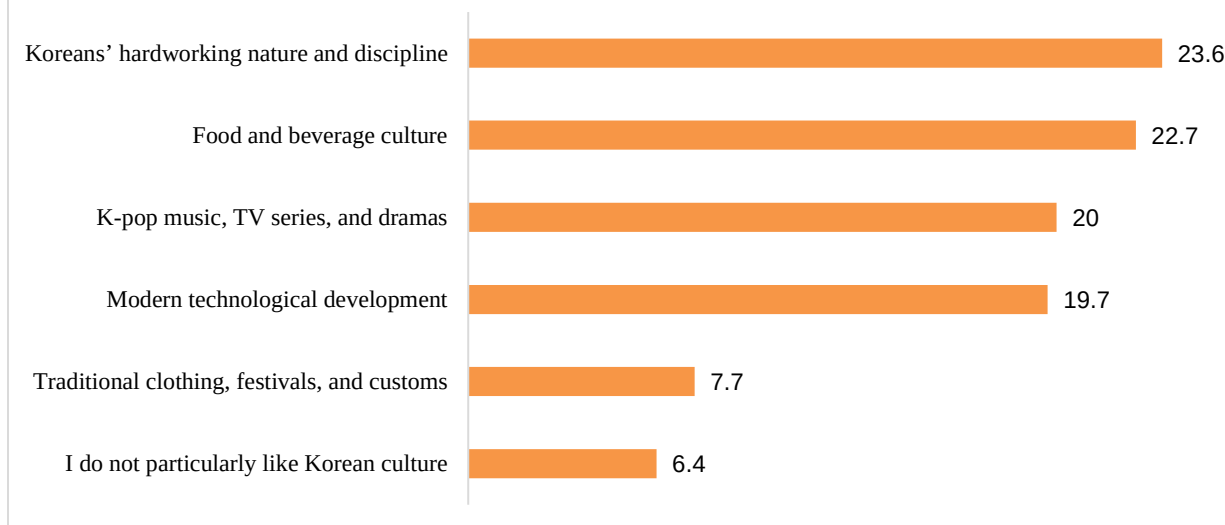
Mongolia maintains good relations with both Koreas and both embassies freely engage with Mongolians, we used focus group discussions to assess whether respondents clearly distinguish between the two Koreas. These discussions suggest that Mongolians have a good understanding of the two Koreas in terms of history, politics, economy, and international standing.



In terms of specific preferences regarding South Korean culture, 23.6 percent admire the hard work and discipline of South Koreans, 22.7 percent like South Korean food and cuisine culture, 20 percent are interested in K-pop music, TV series, and dramas, and 19.7 percent like South Korean high-tech development. In addition, 7.7 percent like South Korean traditional dress, holidays, and traditions (Figure 14). People who have lived in South Korea or have had close interactions through work, study, and daily life are more knowledgeable about

South Korean culture. Although South Korean religious organizations and workers have been quite active in Mongolia, Mongolians appear to be pragmatic and tolerant toward other religions. A total of 6.1 percent of respondents know South Korean religious activities very well, 38.3 percent answered that they had heard about them, and 55.7 percent were unaware of such activities. These results are similar to our focus group discussions and previous research on religion.

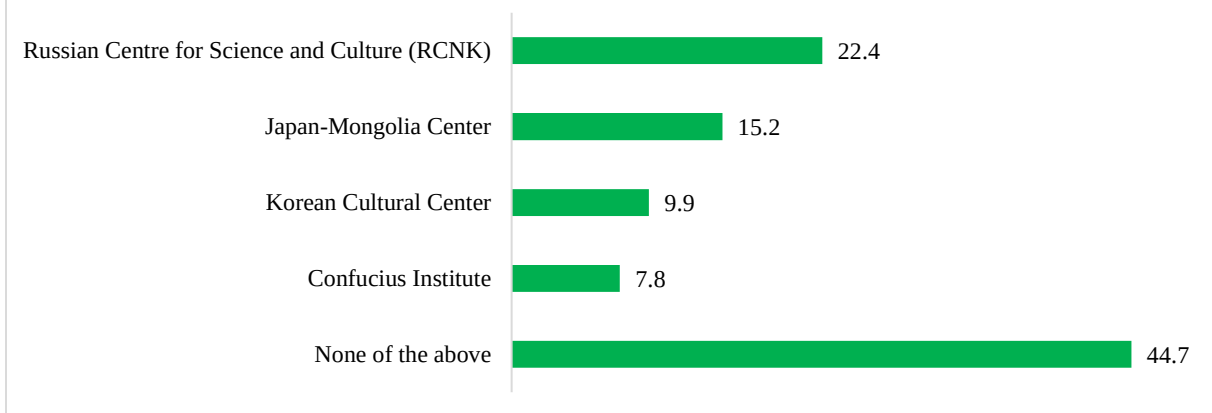
Figure 14. Which aspects of Korean culture do you like the most? (2026)



Regarding knowledge of South Korean history, 3.2 percent knew it very well, 20.6 percent understood it in general, 42.1 percent knew very little, and 34.2 percent answered that they did not know anything about South Korean history. At the same time, we examined whether people are aware of the operations of cultural centres, which

are key organizations for implementing soft power in the country. By degree of awareness, the ranking is as follows: the Russian Cultural Center (22.4%), Japanese Cultural Center (15.2%), South Korean Cultural Center (9.9%), and Chinese Cultural Center (7.8%) see (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Which of the following foreign cultural centers or organizations are you most familiar with? (2026)

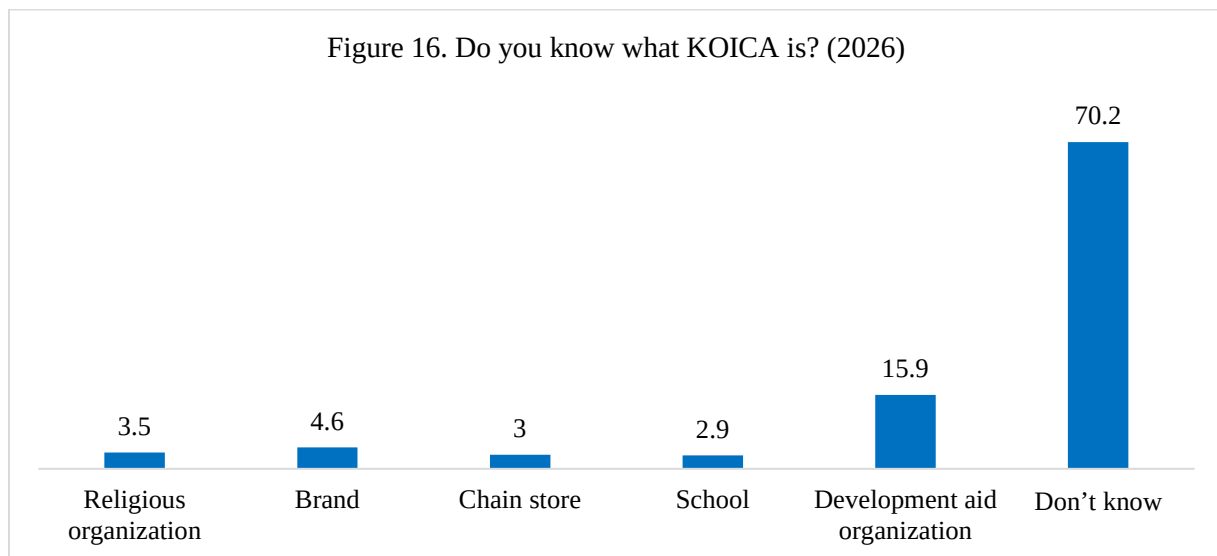


The Russian Cultural Center has become quite active lately as Russia pursues

its pivot to Asia and Greater Eurasian Partnership strategy. The Japanese Cultural

Centre is located at the National University of Mongolia and actively engages with students. The Chinese Cultural Center is the newest, and its activity appears to be quite limited because of its location at the Central Tower. However, this cultural centre runs about five Confucius Institutes in Mongolia, including one in Khovd province in the far west and one in Dornod province in the east. During our expert and focus group discussions, it was noticeable that the

activities of the Japanese Cultural Center are declining, while the Chinese presence is expanding financially and organizationally. In addition, we asked about awareness of KOICA (Korean International Cooperation Agency). Although its activities are quite extensive, only 15.9 percent of participants identified it as a development aid agency, while 70.2 percent answered that they did not know about the organization (Figure 16).



It is clear that there are two main sources of information and knowledge about South Korea in Mongolia. One is social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). The

other is Mongolians who have travelled to, lived, worked, or studied in South Korea.

### Comparison with Previous Studies

These results both confirm and qualify earlier findings. They confirm the generally positive image of South Korea reported by Oyuntsetseg and the link between Korean media, national image, and consumer

behaviour identified by Odmandakh, Lee, and Jin: 96.2 percent of our respondents use South Korean products at least sometimes, with cosmetics and food leading purchases. Our data extend these studies by showing that

South Korea's attraction now reaches well beyond television dramas to food, convenience-store culture, education, and migration, and that it is not confined to Ulaanbaatar; rural respondents, for example, are slightly more likely than urban respondents to prefer South Korean music. With respect to China, our findings are consistent with Bat-Erdene and Zhuravleva: despite three decades of intensive economic interaction and an expanding network of Confucius Institutes, Chinese films, music, and cuisine attract few Mongolians, even though respondents most often choose Chinese partners for business. Compared with our earlier assessment, South Korea's position relative to Russia and China has improved significantly, particularly in preferences for language, study destinations, films, and food. Unlike index-based assessments that rank China first on the strength of its economic and cultural resources (Zhuravleva, Evgenia)<sup>25</sup>, however, attitude-based measures place South Korea above both of Mongolia's neighbours.

Finally, the Mongolian case differs from the state-led pattern emphasised in studies of South Korean soft power elsewhere<sup>26, 27</sup>. Mongolia is not a priority target of *Hallyu* policy, yet South Korean influence is strong, which suggests that societal channels matter more here than deliberate projection.

Taken together, these survey results suggest that U.S. soft power remains stronger than other sources of soft power, especially in preferences for a second language, places to study, live, and travel, and music. South Korea ranks second in these categories and leads in movies and food. Clearly, South Korean culture and soft power are more attractive to Mongolians than those of Mongolia's two immediate neighbours. Yet, if one looks at South Korea's soft-power policy (*Hallyu*, or the Korean Wave), Mongolia is not a target or high-priority country. This raises a central question: why, then, are South Korean soft power and culture so effective in Mongolia?

### Positive Political Relations, People-to-People Interactions, and the Modernity Model

The overall positive bilateral relationship creates a favourable atmosphere. Mongolia's decision to establish bilateral relations with South Korea has been considered its first independent foreign-

policy decision from the Kremlin. Mongolia pursues a neutral policy toward both Koreas while advocating peaceful solutions to the conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Since 1990, political leaders of the two countries have

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<sup>25</sup> Zhuravleva, Evgenia. 2018. "Applied Analysis of the Soft Power of the PRC, Russia and the U.S. in Mongolia." *International Organisations Research Journal* 13 (1): 171–92. <https://doi.org/10.17323/1996-7845-2018-01-10>.

<sup>26</sup> Lee, Geun. 2009. "A Theory of Soft Power and Korea's Soft Power Strategy." *Korean Journal of*

*Defense Analysis* 21 (2): 205–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10163270902913962>

<sup>27</sup> Abdurahmonov, Nurbek. 2026. "The Formation Stages of South Korea's Soft Power Diplomacy in Central Asia." *Journal of Interdisciplinary Human Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.57033/mijournals-2026-1-0032>.

progressively developed relations in all areas of bilateral cooperation. During the recent visit by South Korean President Lee Jae-myung from July 9 to 11, 2026, the leaders of the two countries referred to a "Golden Era of Korea-Mongolia Relations" and concluded over twenty cooperation agreements.<sup>28</sup> In a relatively short period, South Korea has become a key strategic partner for Mongolia in Northeast Asia, and the leaders of the two countries have maintained a very positive partnership. In fact, Mongolia and South Korea have no significant historical baggage or past tensions. Notably, the Cold War divide did not have lasting effects on the two countries' foreign policies toward each other. By contrast, Bat-Erdene (2014) shows that the absence of comparable goodwill and the persistence of negative identity narratives limit the reach of China's cultural diplomacy in Mongolia.

These positive bilateral relations have contributed to extensive people-to-people exchanges at both the official governmental and grassroots levels. South Korea has become one of the leading educational destinations for Mongolians. Since the 1990s, thousands of Mongolians have studied in South Korea. Looking at post-pandemic data, about 15 to 16 thousand Mongolians study in South Korea annually.<sup>29</sup> Many students bring family members with them for short or extended periods. South Korea has now

become home to Mongolia's largest diaspora community. Although official statistics vary, 50-60 thousand Mongolians live and work in South Korea<sup>30</sup>. In contrast, the number of South Korean residents in Mongolia has never exceeded 2 or 3 thousand. In addition, Mongolians travel to South Korea for medical reasons. At the same time, South Korea has become a gateway for Mongolian travellers to North America and the Asia-Pacific region, with 6-8 flights daily between Seoul and Ulaanbaatar. These people-to-people interactions have a strong impact on Mongolian attitudes toward South Korean soft power and culture. This is consistent with Oyuntsetseg, who identifies person-to-person exchanges as the strongest driver of Mongolians' positive image of Korea, and with Nye's observation that much soft power is generated by societies rather than by governments.

Another important factor is that Mongolians perceive South Korea as a successful Asian model of modernization. Within several generations, South Korea transformed itself from a poor post-war country into a highly industrialized, technologically advanced, and culturally influential economy. This can be seen as an alternative reference point to Western development models. Both nations are considered successful democracies, as both underwent democratic transitions within a

<sup>28</sup> Bolor Ikhaajav, South Korea and Mongolia Enter a 'Golden Era' of Partnership, July 13, 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2026/07/south-korea-and-mongolia-enter-a-golden-era-of-partnership/>

<sup>29</sup> Ministry of Education, 봉지은, Korea and Mongolia to Expand Educational Cooperation in School Meal Programs, TVET, and More, July 13, 2026, [https://english.moe.go.kr/boardCnts/viewRenewal.do?boa](https://english.moe.go.kr/boardCnts/viewRenewal.do?boardID=265&boardSeq=106685&lev=0&m=0201&opType=N&page=1&s=english&searchType=null&statusYN=W&utm)

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<sup>30</sup> Kang Min-u, President Lee Meets Mongolian Prime Minister, Urges Cooperation in Minerals and Defense Industry, July 10, 2026, [https://news.sbs.co.kr/english/article.do?news\\_id=N1008652431&utm](https://news.sbs.co.kr/english/article.do?news_id=N1008652431&utm)

similar timeframe in the late 1980s. Mongolia views South Korea as a democratic and development model and is keen to exchange lessons learned. Enkhtungalag and Kwon

reach a similar conclusion from tourism data, recommending that Korea build its national image around globalisation and modernization.

## **Conclusion**

The survey findings demonstrate that South Korean soft power occupies a distinctive position in Mongolia. U.S. soft power remains the strongest overall, particularly in preferences related to language, study, travel, living abroad, and music. South Korea, however, consistently ranks near the top across these categories and leads clearly in movies and food. Its cultural attractiveness also exceeds that of Mongolia's two immediate neighbours, China and Russia. At the same time, the survey cautions against equating cultural popularity with political influence. Favourable attitudes toward South Korea are broad and visible, but they do not automatically mean that South Korea has a correspondingly strong capacity to shape Mongolia's political choices. This finding supports the conceptual caution that attraction does not automatically translate into influence.

The findings also help explain why South Korean soft power has become effective even though Mongolia is not generally treated as a primary target of Hallyu or South Korea's broader soft-power policy. Three mutually reinforcing factors appear especially important. First, consistently positive bilateral relations and the absence of historical disputes create a favourable political environment. Second, dense people-to-people interactions through

education, employment, migration, tourism, medical travel, business, and everyday consumption expose Mongolians directly to South Korean society and culture. Third, many Mongolians perceive South Korea as a successful Asian model of modernization, democratic transition, technological development, and social advancement. Together, these factors make South Korean cultural influence less dependent on formal state-led public diplomacy and more deeply embedded in ordinary social experience. In this respect, the study adds to a literature that has examined South Korean soft power mainly through cultural content and state strategy and Mongolian attitudes mainly through single-domain or urban samples. Using survey data from all age groups across several regions, it shows how South Korea ranks against competing powers across multiple dimensions of soft power.

This distinction has important implications for the developing strategic partnership between Mongolia and South Korea. The existing cultural attraction and public goodwill provide a strong social foundation for deeper cooperation, but this foundation should not be taken for granted. The survey also identifies several sources of friction, including visa and residence-permit difficulties, cultural misunderstandings, concerns about legal and social behaviour,

and relatively low public awareness of institutions such as KOICA and the South Korean Cultural Center. These findings suggest that the future effectiveness of South Korean soft power in Mongolia will depend not only on the continued popularity of Korean culture and products, but also on how effectively both governments manage practical problems arising from increasingly intensive human exchanges.

Future research should therefore examine more closely how cultural attraction is translated, or not translated, into political trust, strategic preference, and support for bilateral cooperation. Longitudinal surveys would be particularly useful for identifying changes across generations and over time,

while comparisons by age, region, and urban-rural location could clarify which social groups are most receptive to different elements of South Korean soft power.

Comparative research involving the United States, China, Russia, and Japan would also help distinguish the effects of cultural consumption, direct personal experience, economic interaction, and political perceptions. In this sense, the Mongolian case suggests that soft power in a small state is best understood not simply as the product of deliberate projection by a major power, but also as an outcome of sustained social interaction, perceived relevance, and accumulated trust.

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