



From Traditional Korean Culture to the Global Public: Reframing K-Culture through Spiritual Heritage and the Public Value of Cultureⁱ

Park Kwangsoo¹ and Thapakorn Kamnerdsiri^{2*}

¹ Academy of Korean Thought and Culture, Korea

² Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, Thailand

Article Info

Research Article

Article History:

Received 10 April 2026

Revised 8 June 2026

Accepted 11 June 2026

Keywords:

K-Culture,
cultural hybridity,
Cheonson,
Hongik Ingan,
Buddha Nature

* Corresponding author

E-mail address:

dr.tony.tao@hotmail.com

Abstract

Korean popular culture (K-culture) has attained exceptional global visibility under Hallyu (the Korean Wave), yet persistent critiques—commercial overreach, superficiality, and cultural insensitivity—signal limits to its appeal. This article asks what sustains K-culture's resonance beyond platform scale and how it might address the emerging backlash. Using recent survey evidence and three foundational concepts—Cheonson (the view of humans as "Heaven's descendants") and Jecheon (rites venerating Heaven) and the important Mahayana Buddhist concept of Buddha-nature, which holds that all humans and living beings equally possess the potential to realize the highest state of perfection, the study theorizes how spiritual heritage can ground a shift toward public-minded cultural practice. Bringing together cultural-hybridity analysis, soft-power scholarship and its critiques, and research on emotional economies in media, the study reads K-culture as both a commercial pop industry that constitutes the nation's economic interests and at the same time it can serve as a carrier of ethical orientations for conveying ethical concepts and values that contribute to the overall well-being of humankind. This research article argues that re-centering production and reception on universalistic values and the public value of culture can convert friction points into opportunities for dialogue, co-creation, and ethical stewardship. The proposed framework offers a concise roadmap for evolving Hallyu from a high-performing export model into a culture of hope and coexistence-globally legible yet heritage-anchored, commercially viable yet publicly accountable. K-Culture can transcend its current limitations and evolve into a "culture of hope and coexistence" that engages the global public more equitably and imaginatively.

ⁱ This work was supported by the *Seed Program for Korean Studies* of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2022-INC-2230012).

1. Introduction

Korean popular culture (“K-Culture”) has in recent decades captured worldwide attention through the phenomenon known as Hallyu (the Korean Wave). This global uptake invites an analytical question: what underlies K-Culture’s resonance beyond production value, platform scale, and marketing logistics? Critical reception and emerging scholarship point to a recurrent complex of affective and ethical signatures - pathos inflected by communal responsibility, narrative commitments to moral repair, and carefully modulated emotional intensity—that traverse music, cinema, and serial drama. These signatures are not incidental epiphenomena of export strategy; they are historically sedimented within Korea’s living repertoire of spiritual–philosophical concepts and communal rites.

In particular, Cheonson (天孫, the idea of humans as “Heaven’s descendants”), Buddha Nature (佛性, the affirmation of the inherent and equal potential of all living beings to attain the state of perfection) and Jechon (祭天, communal ceremonies venerating Heaven) articulate a cosmological moral horizon against which individual striving is oriented to collective flourishing. Within this horizon, the civic–educational ideal of Hongik Ingan (弘益人間, “to broadly benefit humankind”) functions as a public-ethical telos that shapes aesthetic choices and value orientations. When refracted through contemporary media grammars—global pop idioms, transnational narrative templates, and platform-optimized visibility—these inheritances yield works that are formally innovative yet heritage-anchored.

The present study terms this configuration “heritage-led hybridity”. This concept has become an important foundation for demonstrating that the development of the ‘essential core’ of K-Culture, under such philosophical and ethical notions, reflects its role as a path for transmitting Korea’s virtuous cultural heritage. This notion significantly contributes to shaping a humanistic community in the Confucian perspective, or a compassionate society based on the principle of compassion in the Buddhist view within society amid the currents of global change. This conceptual framework, therefore, provides a crucial examination of how it structures K-Culture’s transnational appeal without reducing the phenomenon to diffusion models or cultural policy instruments alone.

Understanding the meaning of K-Culture from the perspective of the foundational body of knowledge of Korean culture not only highlights the limitations of a “one-sided perspective” that views K-Culture or K-Content merely as instruments for generating national economic wealth, but also emphasizes an awareness of the value and significance of Korea’s living culture. Such culture possesses the potential to sustain the cultural security of Korean civilization and to further develop

into the creation of an ethically rich society—an image of a good society that supports the complete and harmonious coexistence of all humanity. This, in essence, represents the true meaning of the cultural globalization of Korean culture.

1.1 Research Objectives.

1) To examine how K-culture mobilizes indigenous intellectual and ritual inheritances in cultivating a globally resonant ethos of hope, peace, and shared affect.

2) To consider the ways in which K-culture engages with perceived liabilities, including hyper-commercialism, cultural insensitivity, and media fatigue.

3) To investigate how these liabilities may be mitigated through re-centering creative practices on deeper value commitments and a shared moral imagination

1.2 Scope of the Research and Methodology.

This study is a qualitative research project that collects data using qualitative methods, including documentary research, that involves the study and analysis of theories and academic concepts from books or scholarly research on Korean culture, society, religion, and philosophy by scholars in the field of Korean studies. The main structure of the research methodology consists of the following components:

First, it delineates key theoretical frameworks for analyzing K-culture's globalization from a critical media perspective.

Second, it analyzes the spiritual, philosophical and aesthetic foundations of K-culture and traces their manifestation in contemporary cultural products.

Third, it turns to issues of global reception, including the emergence of “anti-Hallyu” backlash. Building on this, the article proposes a reframing of K-culture through the paradigm of cultural publicness (public cultural value) as a means to address these criticisms and to amplify K-culture's capacity as a medium for global ethical dialogue.

The research methodology is based on descriptive analysis, focusing on the explanation of the research content and the interpretation of the study's findings.

1.3 Expected Contributions

1) This project contributes to understanding the role of K-Culture within the context of contemporary Korean society, particularly in relation to social change and cultural dynamics in modern Korea.

2) Furthermore, it contributes to understanding the relationship between Korean culture and the intellectual and philosophical foundations that have shaped Korean thought.

3) Finally, it contributes to the understanding the role of Korean culture in the context of global ethical dialogue and its potential contributions to cross-cultural understanding at the global level.

2. Cultural Hybridity in Contemporary Korea: Heritage-Led Innovation

A defining driver of K-culture's global traction is heritage-led hybridity—the intentional synthesis of Korean aesthetic lineages with internationally legible genres across music, film, and transmedia. In K-pop, for instance, production teams routinely combine hooks, rhythmic schemes, and timbral palettes traceable to Western pop, hip-hop, and R&B with Korean-language lyricism, traditional motifs, and East Asian visual idioms, yielding forms that register as “simultaneously familiar and novel to global audiences” Although such an attitude cannot be denied as being one of the key marketing strategies of K-Culture, it rests upon an awareness of three essential aspects.

First is the recognition of the value of Korea's intellectual and cultural traditions. Second is the awareness of the potential of K-Culture to serve as a vehicle for transmitting Korean cultural identity to the outside world, reflecting the image of a highly cultivated civilization shaped through a long historical development. Third is the awareness of the need to cultivate harmony within a multicultural and pluralistic social system grounded in diverse cultural foundations. In this regard, This is not incidental but strategic orchestration: entertainment agencies curate global genre conventions to optimize transnational reception while embedding local textures, symbols, and storyworlds that differentiate Korean content in crowded markets.

At the same time, critical scholarship reminds us that hybridity, as an industrial design choice, does not by itself unsettle prevailing power relations; it can reproduce “Americanization” or broader capitalist logics beneath a cosmopolitan veneer (Jin, 2016, pp. 35-38). Early 2000's waves of export-oriented dramas and idol music already prompted debate in parts of Asia over whether Korean successes risked soft forms of cultural dominance, rekindling questions familiar from cultural-imperialism discussions—even though Korea is not a traditional imperial power.

Consequently, the normative task is not to abandon hybridity but to govern it: to sustain authentic, heritage-anchored differentiation while mitigating homogenizing pressures and avoiding dependency effects in recipient markets (Oh, 2017). In this view, the Korean Wave's durability

depends on a dynamic equilibrium—hybridity as a vehicle for innovation rooted in living traditions, coupled with ethical attention to cultural plurality at home and abroad.

2.1 Korean Wave and Its Critique

South Korea has successfully developed a culture for all genders and ages through media and platforms and has become a cultural superpower through the government's clear vision, goals, policies, and active support. This includes implementing policies directed at the private sector and relevant agencies, as well as creating a governance system conducive to consumer participation. This is to support cultural growth, especially by creating cultural trends to drive and expand the growth of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) in Thailand. (Butsaban & Thinbang, 2024)

The meteoric rise of K-Culture has frequently been interpreted through the lens of soft power. South Korea's government actively embraced Hallyu as a form of cultural diplomacy in the 2010s, viewing the global popularity of K-dramas, K-pop, and K-beauty as enhancing the country's national image and influence (Nye, 2004, pp. 31-36). By the mid-2020s, South Korea's overall soft power ranking had climbed into the 12th globally, with analysts attributing this in part to Hallyu's international resonance (Brand Finance, 2025).

Korean cultural exports have been heralded as a key pillar of national “brand power” and a driver of tourism, foreign interest in Korea, and diplomatic goodwill. This is supported by the perspectives of leading global scholars, including Michael E. Porter and Joseph S. Nye Jr., as well as the Korean scholar Lee Geun, who recognized the importance of national culture in driving the economy. The key takeaways are summarized as follows: Soft Power is a Diverse “Lure”: South Korea does not use “coercion” but employs “persuasion” by presenting the country's “appeal” through various media, such as games, films, language, and food. (Butsaban, 2022). The strategy of Hallyu is centered on the concept of universalization, making Korean culture widely known, accepted, and famous globally. And the effective use of sales and marketing promotion strategies is also crucial, for example, featuring K-Pop artists in significant roles within K-Dramas to attract a wider international audience. (Butsaban, 2024)

Nevertheless, understanding K-Culture within such a dimension reflects a perspective that views K-Culture merely as a ‘tool’ or a ‘pathway’ toward certain significant ends that lie beyond K-Culture itself. In other words, the soft power narrative invites critical scrutiny which reflects a strong emphasis on the “end” or an “outcome” of that process while lacking sufficient contemplation of the essential substance or intrinsic value of K-Culture itself.

Some scholars argue that framing culture as an instrument of national power can commodify and instrumentalize art, risking the authenticity that made it attractive in the first place (M.-S. Kim, 2021). In the Hallyu case, government policy has provided an enabling environment—marketing platforms, export promotion, and film-industry funds—but the most visible global breakouts have been led primarily by private studios, agencies, and fandom infrastructures rather than by direct state orchestration. *Parasite* was financed and distributed through CJ ENM's commercial apparatus and achieved its historic Oscars sweep as a privately driven production (J.-Y. Moon, 2020; S. T. Lee, 2021).

Likewise, BTS emerged from Big Hit (HYBE), at the time a small agency competing against the “Big 3,” with global scale achieved through digital platforms and transnational fan labor rather than government programming (J. Kim, 2022; Jin, 2024; Mercuri, 2019). More recently, *K-Pop Demon Hunters* has been produced through a Sony Pictures Animation–Netflix partnership and monetized via international distribution and merchandising deals—again outside a state-led pipeline (Hatchett, 2025; Netflix, 2025). In addition to becoming Netflix's most popular film, *K-Pop Demon Hunters* was reported as the most-streamed movie of 2025, generating 20.5 billion viewing minutes in Nielsen's year-end data (Shanfeld, 2026).

Scholarly syntheses emphasize that Hallyu's growth has depended on public–private complementarities and platform ecologies, not a state-centric developmental script (Jin, 2018, 2024). At the same time, claims of “propaganda” or over-commercialization should be distinguished from geopolitical pushback: China's widely reported, largely unofficial restrictions on Korean entertainment after the THAAD decision in 2016 were instruments of cultural-security policy, not evidence of Korean state manufacture of content (Frater, 2016; Hankyoreh, 2025; The Diplomat, 2024). The tension in regional reception is therefore better characterized as a friction between market-led Korean cultural presence and host-country cultural-security or protectionist responses, rather than as the inevitable outcome of heavy Korean government management.

2.2. Emotional Capitalism and K-Culture Fandom

A review of the current academic landscape indicates that scholarly proposals addressing the relationship between emotion and the development of K-Culture have increasingly come to the forefront of research interest. Within the domain of Western philosophy—exemplified by the thought of Plato—*emotion* is commonly conceptualized through a dualistic framework in opposition to *reason* like two horses pulling a carriage in opposing directions. Reason is associated with processes of thinking and analysis grounded in rational principles, whereas emotion is understood

as a psychological phenomenon related to affective states that vary according to shifting perceptual orientations. (Chung & Oh, 2022), Conversely, in Eastern philosophy—such as Korean Confucianism or, in the case of Korean Buddhist philosophy exemplified by Wonhyo (617-686) and Jinul (1158-1210)—do not take a stance of completely separating reason from emotion. Instead, they emphasize acknowledging “emotion” as a mental phenomenon intimately linked to the essence of human selfhood (Chung & Oh, 2022).

In this sense, emotion is not something detached from human existence in the empirical world, as reflected in debates within the Korean Neo-Confucian tradition, such as the Four-Seven Debate in the 16th century (H. Kim, 2017). Under the philosophical debates of Yi Hwang Toegye (Yi Hwang: 퇴계, 1501-1570) and Yi I (Yulgok: 율곡, 1536-1584), and further developed in the eighteenth century through the philosophical perspective of Jeong Yak-yong (Dasan: 다산, 1762-1836), these arguments reveal that, although Korean philosophy contains disputes regarding the status or relationship between emotions and the original nature of human beings, from another perspective these debates affirm that emotions are manifestations of mental phenomena that express the human condition as it emerges within the network of relationships that humans maintain with all things in the empirical world.

At the same time, the philosophical perspective of Korean Seon Buddhism such as Bojo Jinul (1158-1210) which indicates that although, in ontological terms, emotions are manifestations of the perceptual qualities of the original mind in response to external factors or stimuli, this mode of understanding the world is grounded in a dualistic or discriminative viewpoint, as understood in Korean Buddhism (Kamnerdsiri, 2020).

Jinul pointed out that even though emotions or discriminative thoughts possess an ontological status that is ultimately insubstantial, considering human beings within the context of lived experience in the empirical world reveals that the “existential reality” of emotions—as contents of life experience—is essential for understanding the meaning of the relationship between the principles of awakening and practice. Emotions or discriminative thoughts, once arisen, continue to exert influence on human existence, and such effects cannot be extinguished instantaneously after awakening. In other words, emotions still retain a mode of “reality” in an existential sense, binding human beings to the cycle of samsara (Kamnerdsiri, 2020).

Although in the present era the philosophical debates surrounding emotions may appear out of step with the changing conditions of the world and society under capitalism, it is nevertheless noteworthy that if emotions remain an integral part of human life—and if humans continue to be

the primary agents within society and the economic system—then the existence of emotions, as well as their role in the contemporary world, cannot be denied.

In this regard, scholars have pointed out that the intellectual foundations concerning the role and significance of “emotion” in the history of Korean thought have been continuously developed, eventually becoming a crucial basis for understanding the importance of emotion in relation to issues of K-Culture, within the context of modern global culture, as interpreted through the concept of emotional capitalism – the idea that emotions and affective connections have become deeply entangled with capitalist modes of production and consumption (Illouz, 2007). The K-Culture phenomenon, particularly K-pop fandom, exemplifies this affective economy. K-pop idols and their agencies cultivate intense emotional bonds with fans worldwide through social media interaction, reality shows, and fan-meetings, effectively turning fandom into a transnational community.

K-pop’s affective communities are intensified by platformed communication and a useful proxy for the scale and persistence of transnational fandom interaction. These interactions frequently crystallize into “fandom publics” oriented toward collective action: during June 2020, BTS and HYBE donated US \$1 million to Black Lives Matter, and the BTS ARMY organized the #MatchAMillion campaign that raised a further US \$1 million in roughly 24-25 hours (Cha, 2020). Media-studies scholarship situates such mobilizations within a broader repertoire of networked civic practices, in which participatory fan infrastructures enable rapid coordination around shared values as well as entertainment interests (Jenkins et al., 2016). The relationship of emotion to life and society, particularly within the context of commerce-driven trends, not only serves as an important foundation for the economic development of K-Culture, but conversely, the “awareness of the sensitivity of emotions” arising under diverse social conditions has become a significant issue that profoundly impacts economic structures reliant on the fluid dynamics of these emotions.

A critical work on emotional capitalism cautions that the same infrastructures translate affect into monetizable attention and spending, aligning corporate logics with fans’ identifications in ways that can blur the boundary between community and consumption (Illouz, 2007). Both dynamics—civic activation and affective commodification—are therefore integral to understanding contemporary K-pop fandoms as transnational, digitally mediated publics.

For K-Culture’s global presence, the implication is that success rests not just on producing high-quality content, but on nurturing a participatory culture where audiences feel emotionally involved and “seen.” The risk, on the other hand, is that if the industry oversteps – for instance, through scandals that betray fans’ trust or by pushing commercialism too transparently – the

emotional resonance could sour into backlash. K-Culture's globalization is propelled by a potent fusion of profit and sentiment, which requires careful management of authenticity, trust, and ethical responsibility on the part of cultural producers.

Korean television and cinema similarly embed ethical reflection within popular narrative forms. *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021) circulated globally as a high-velocity survival thriller, yet its reception also foregrounded a precise critique of economic precarity and competitive social logics—concerns that exceeded the Korean setting and traveled transnationally through genre legibility. *Parasite* (Bong, 2019) advanced this trajectory: while locally situated in language, humor, and *mise-en-scène*, Bong Joon-ho's film articulated a universally intelligible meditation on class stratification, dignity, and deprivation, securing recognition across diverse markets from the United States to India.

Taken together, these works exemplify a recurrent pattern in contemporary Korean screen media: audience-captivating storytelling braided with ethical and social inquiry. Rather than relying on a postcolonial lexicon, this aesthetic can be read as a locally grounded, globally conversant mode—an approach that “speaks out” on systemic inequalities through forms calibrated for broad accessibility (J.-b. Choi & Maliangkay, 2014).

The significant role of Korean mass media reflects an awareness of the importance of intellectual culture in terms of philosophy, religion, morality, and ethics—foundational elements of Korean civilization. Interestingly, this awareness is not merely conceptual—that is, it is not limited to the abstract recognition or understanding of “ideas or teachings”. Rather, the positioning of this intellectual culture as the “core of the narrative” and as the “main guiding principle” in the storytelling of films has created a new image of K-Culture, presenting it as a culture that seamlessly integrates feeling, emotion, and moral reflection.

2.3 Prominent Forms of K-Culture in Thailand and the Region

Amid the intensified circulation of popular culture across Asia, Korean cultural forms have achieved sustained resonance in Thailand and across South and Southeast Asia, propelled by youthful demographics, platform-centric media ecologies, and expanding linkages through cultural tourism and education. The reception extends beyond entertainment consumption to include lifestyle adoption, language study, and values-oriented fandom practices, positioning K-culture as a salient vector of soft power and intercultural exchange (H. Park, 2024).

Thailand has emerged as a regional hotspot of the Korean Wave: global surveys of Hallyu communities identify Thailand as the single country with the largest number of registered fan clubs

(123), indicating unusually dense and organized fandom infrastructures (H. Park, 2024; M. Kim, 2024). This infrastructure interacts with star systems and touring circuits; major K-pop acts attract large audiences in Bangkok, with recent stadium engagements reported as sold out (“Blackpink set for record-breaking return to Bangkok,” 2025; Chaiyong, 2023). Distribution has also shifted decisively toward streaming, with Korean content securing prominent positions in regional viewing and serving as a primary conduit for K-dramas to Thai audiences (D. Lee, 2025).

Spillover effects are visible in education. Korean language education has scaled rapidly: more than 130 secondary schools offer Korean as a foreign language and over 40,000 Thai high-school students study Korean—approximately one-quarter of global secondary learners—while Korean has ranked as the second most selected foreign language on Thailand’s college entrance examination (J. Lee, 2023; Larprunrueng, 2022). Together, these dynamics suggest that K-culture functions not only as entertainment but also as an interface for lifestyle practices, educational aspirations, and cross-cultural value formation in Thailand and the wider region.

3. Global Reception of K-Culture: Popularity and Backlash

The strategic idea of supporting K-culture in this manner reflects the role of emotion and shared experience that people develop toward the content and forms of K-culture. However, it is noteworthy that such cultural products cannot be regarded as the sole condition that generates emotional responses or feelings toward them. This is because the emotions or sentiments associated with these cultural products are also shaped by internal conditions—namely, the personal experiences of individuals or the collective experiences of a society, which express the unique patterns of thought and belief within different cultural contexts. These internal conditions have become another crucial factor contributing to both the positive and negative reactions toward the Hallyu phenomenon, at least in two dimensions: positive reception and negative reception.

An example of the positive reception became clearly visible in mid-2020s, when K-culture had attained a degree of transnational penetration rare for a non-Western popular culture. Government–industry surveys conducted in late 2024 across 28 regions ($n = 26,400$) report that 70.3% of respondents who had experienced Korean cultural content expressed favorable views; K-pop remains the single most salient association with “Korea,” ahead of food and drama (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism [MCST] & Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange [KOFICE], 2025). Independent media coverage in 2025 likewise confirms that K-pop is the most recognized global symbol of Korea among those with Hallyu experience (Jung, 2025).

Alongside these favorable indicators, measured “negative perceptions” toward Hallyu have also risen. In the same 2024 fieldwork, 37.5% of respondents agreed with negative statements about the Korean Wave (up 4.9 percentage points year-over-year), with especially high agreement in India (52.7%) and the United Arab Emirates (52.0%) (MCST & KOFICE, 2025). Earlier qualitative work in Southeast Asia had already documented emergent backlash among consumers in Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines, including resentment toward perceived market saturation of Korean content and concerns about cultural dominance (Ainslie et al., 2017). These findings suggest a polarized reception: broad enthusiasm coexists with geographically concentrated fatigue or resistance.

Several recurrent grievances drive unfavorable views. First, critics point to excessive commercialism and format uniformity, describing K-pop and some K-drama story architectures as industrially standardized and overly product-placed. Government survey commentary corroborates a perception that Hallyu’s popularity grows through platformized exposure while also eliciting rising skepticism about commercial motives (MCST & KOFICE, 2025).

Second, episodes of cultural insensitivity or appropriation—for example, misuses of religious symbols or racialized styling—have periodically inflamed opinion in Muslim-majority and South Asian contexts, amplifying reputational risk via social media and prompting calls for stronger cultural-impact due diligence (Korean Culture and Information Service [KOCIS], 2023a).

Third, national-industry protectionism frames Korean content as a threat to local creative sectors; research on Japan’s media discourse surrounding the “Korea Boom” and subsequent anti-Korean sentiment illustrates how soft-power gains can provoke defensive narratives and quota-style remedies (Hayashi & Lee, 2007).

Fourth, industry ethics remain under scrutiny. International reporting on artist mental-health crises and high-profile scandals—such as the 2019 “Burning Sun” case, revisited by a 2024 BBC documentary—has fueled moral ambivalence among casual audiences beyond core fandoms (J.-h. Park, 2024; McCurry, 2019).

However, current academic perspectives tend to highlight that understanding the issues and the positive and negative impacts arising from the development of Korea’s K-Culture through a strictly dialectical lens—that is, viewing these positive and negative effects as entirely opposing and contradictory forces—may not provide a fully effective strategic approach for addressing the challenges involved in advancing K-Culture. These dynamics underscore a strategic inflection point. K-culture’s durability will depend on coupling heritage-led innovation (distinctive moral–affective

registers grounded in Korean intellectual and ritual inheritances) with public-value governance that addresses commercialization pressures, strengthens intercultural consultation, expands co-creation with local partners, and codifies artist-care and labor standards. Such measures would shift perceptions from one-way export to collaborative cultural exchange, aligning soft-power reach with ethical legitimacy (Jin, 2016, pp. 35-38; MCST & KOFICE, 2025). The conceptual foundation for reconciling the tension between Korea's beautiful cultural heritage of the past and the country's economic development within a competitive society has become an important milestone in shaping ideas aimed at promoting and supporting Korea's cultural and intellectual values. These ideas are grounded in philosophical and religious traditions that emphasize public benefit and the recognition of the equal worth and meaning of all forms of life. The goal is to transform these principles into the core "content" of K-Culture, positioning it as a form of "intercultural dialogue." This serves as a crucial starting point for shifting the image and meaning of K-Culture from being merely a commercialized cultural "product" toward becoming a "medium" for cultivating a "shared ethical experience." In doing so, K-Culture can evolve into a culture and civilization of humanity—one that contributes to the collective well-being of humankind.

For this reason, Hallyu has transitioned from commodity value to spiritual and public value, moving beyond the polished export of cultural products toward the shared cultivation of meaningful experiences and ethical commitments. For the Korean Wave's long-term vitality, K-culture should be understood not merely as an instrument of national influence or a consumable good, but as a conduit for genuine cultural conversation and mutual enrichment. This stance also clarifies a persistent risk in soft-power logics: when pursued too instrumentally, they can provoke cynicism and backlash; culture attains durability when it carries intrinsic meaning and sincerity rather than being treated primarily as export merchandise or propaganda.

4. From Backlash to Public Value: Toward a Cultural Publicness

The dual reality of global acclaim and localized backlash poses a strategic (and ethical) question: what would it take for K-Culture to mature into a universally embraced public culture, one robust against such frictions? In this respect, the proposal to cultivate a sense of cultural publicness within *K-Culture*—as a response to rising backlash under the broader context of commercial resistance and identity adaptation in a culturally diverse world—has led to an important idea: the concept of a "Reverse K-Culture Strategy." The notion of "reversal" here does not imply opposing or rejecting existing forms of K-Culture that cater to modern consumer demands, such as

pop music or film. Rather, “reversal” refers to re-centering the foundational elements of Korean cultural thought—those that resonate with the concept of cultural publicness—as the core substance and essential content of K-Culture. The central aim of this approach is to transform K-Culture into a *global cultural commons* in the contemporary world.

An important example of the Reverse K-Culture Strategy, which has emerged as a significant phenomenon in Korean society, is temple food. Temple food constitutes one aspect of the monastic practices of the Korean Buddhist sangha and has long been aligned with the philosophical principles of Korean Mahayana Buddhism.

Moon points out that Korean temple food is not merely an affirmation of identity and cultural selfhood, but also a *cultural publicness strategy* employed to compete in the global market, which includes targeting the health-conscious consumer segment through its image as cuisine that promotes healthy living, thereby meeting the demands of the contemporary global marketplace. (S. Moon, 2008) J.-h. Park (2025) reports that the strong public interest in temple food was reflected in the return of the *Korean Temple Food Festival* for the first time in ten years, which attracted significant attention from the public. This is where the earlier concept of *cultural publicness* becomes pertinent. The present analysis can envision a scenario where K-Culture’s stakeholders (artists, producers, policymakers, and fans) actively work to embed public value into the creation and dissemination of cultural content. By doing so, many of the drivers of backlash could be converted into opportunities for positive change.

Instead of measuring success purely in market terms, the industry could adopt metrics of cultural impact, diversity, and community engagement. For example, diversifying the types of stories and music – to avoid the “all K-pop sounds the same” complaint – and investing in indie or socially conscious projects could alleviate the sense of commercial monotony. In policy terms, South Korea’s Ministry of Culture has indeed started supporting projects that integrate intangible cultural heritage (traditional music, crafts, local folklore) with modern pop formats, aiming to “add depth” and differentiate Hallyu content (KOCIS, 2023b).

Developing the concept of cultural publicness is essential, as it reconceptualizes cultural production as oriented toward public value and the common good rather than constrained by private interests or instrumentalized for national gain. Drawing on Habermasian ideas of the public sphere and on Ostrom’s theory of commons governance, cultural publicness envisions popular culture as a kind of shared commons where creators and audiences engage in dialogue over values and social issues (Habermas, 1989; Ostrom, 1990). In practical terms, this might mean cultural content

that invites reflection and participation on matters of common concern, industry governance that involves diverse stakeholders and communities, and an emphasis on inclusivity and mutual respect across cultural differences.

Viewed through publicness, the pertinent question for K-culture is whether Hallyu can move beyond commercial circulation to function as a *global cultural commons* that advances intercultural understanding and solidarity. This perspective aligns with postcolonial calls for more equitable cultural exchange and also with critiques of soft power. Instead of one-way “Korea-centric” promotion, K-Culture in a publicness paradigm would serve as a platform for mutual sharing – for co-creation with local partners abroad and for sensitivity to local norms and needs.

Korea’s cultural influence should strive to “benefit all humanity” in line with the old ideal of Hongik Ingan, and become a “world-universal public culture” rather than a nationalist enterprise. The remainder of this article will apply these frameworks as the analysis explore K-Culture’s roots, its current global reception, and its potential paths forward. These ideas of benefiting all humanity and becoming a universal world culture can be explained through an examination of Korean intellectual and philosophical traditions, particularly two core principles: the concept of *Cheonson*, or the doctrine of being descended from Heaven, and the concept of *Buddha-nature*, which represents the intrinsic potential within all human beings, which is a central principle of Korean Mahayana Buddhism.

The concept of Cheonson Sasang (천손사상) is the ancient belief that the Korean people (and by extension all humans) are “descendants of Heaven.” According to Korea’s founding myth, the progenitor Hwanung descended from the sky god (Hwanin) to live among humans and establish the first kingdom, symbolizing that the divine is present in humankind. This *Cheonson* idea, recorded in texts like the *Samguk Yusa* and *Jewang Un’gi*, imbued Koreans with a sense of sacred dignity without the exclusivism seen in some other “chosen people” narratives. Unlike, for example, certain interpretations of Japan’s imperial mythology which claimed divine status only for the emperor’s lineage, the Korean Cheonson ethos was, at its core, inclusive: it could be extended to say that *all* people have a heavenly origin and innate worth. The 19th-century Donghak (Eastern Learning) movement captured a similar idea in the maxim “Innaecheon” (인내천), meaning “Each person is Heaven.” (K. Park, 2012) This egalitarian spiritual principle motivated peasants and patriots, suggesting that to oppress any human being is to offend Heaven itself.

Understanding the value and meaning of human beings from this perspective reflects the foundational ideas of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy regarding Buddha-nature. In the context of

Korean Seon (Zen) Buddhism, this concept refers to the “True Mind” (Ch. 真心: *Zhen xin*, Kr. 진심: *Jinsim*), understood as non-discriminating flow of human awareness which is void (from any defilement) and always calm. This represents the “true self” that exists within the “empirical self” of human experience. According to Korean Buddhist philosophers such as Bojo Jinul (1158-1210), this capacity of human awareness embodies a potential for liberation (*vimutti*) and constitutes a critical “starting point” for the human practice of Dharma. (Buswell, 1983)

The goal is to *adapt* this perception of original nature into a “process of responding” to the phenomenal world—or a process of “affirming” the true meaning of the phenomenal world—from the perspective of the true mind. This process must unfold continuously and dynamically, serving as the essence of human experience in understanding the world and all beings. (Kamnerdsiri, 2020)

The intellectual foundations of Korean philosophy emphasize embracing and acknowledging the value and meaning of all human life and recognizing the potential for individuals to achieve their goals, reflect a belief in and acceptance of human dignity and equality. Implicitly, this perspective is an openness to acknowledging the value and significance of diverse cultural and civilizational traditions—a crucial social concern in the context of an increasingly pluralistic world, encompassing intellectual, economic, and socio-political dimensions. This line of thought has been articulated as a crucial basis for strategies aimed at cultivating *cultural publicness* within K-Culture. This orientation is reflected in the concept of *Hongik Ingan*. (홍익인간), first articulated in the Dangun myth as the purpose of Korea’s founding: “to broadly benefit humankind.” This principle envisions societal development not for domination or glory, but for the welfare of all people. It is a fundamentally humanistic ideal – one that modern Korean cultural thought often references as a guiding light for the nation’s role in the world (M.-H. Choi, 2009). Kim Gu, in his memoir *Baekbeomilji*, famously longed for Korea to become a nation that “spreads a culture of love and peace” so that all of humanity can live joyously together, rather than seeking military or economic dominance (G. Kim, 1949/2019). This quote, often invoked by cultural figures like Park, highlights a vision of cultural influence rooted in ethical and peaceful contribution, not in zero-sum power. It frames Korea’s true mission as *cultural* rather than political or economic – to share beauty and hope with the world.

Korea’s spiritual traditions also manifest through ritual aesthetics and communal practices. In ancient times, Koreans held regular *Jecheon* (제천) rites – grand ceremonies to honor Heaven and various spirits – which served not only religious purposes but also social ones, reinforcing community bonds and collective identity. In the proto-historic Mahan confederacy (1st century

BCE–CE), for example, the *sodo* (소도) was a sacred grove or ceremonial enclosure set apart from ordinary settlements, where a priest-king (*cheongun*, 천군) would conduct rituals for Heaven. These sites, often marked by totemic poles (*sotdae*, 솟대) and ringing drums or gongs, became festive gathering places for the people: during the rites, villagers would assemble, offer sacrifices, then celebrate with communal song, dance, and feasting. The *Samguk Sagi* and ancient Chinese chronicles describe how such ceremonies (under various names like *Yeonggo*, *Dongmaeng*, *Mucheon* in different kingdoms) were state-level festivals of unity. Even after the Confucian-oriented Joseon dynasty discontinued the old Heaven-worship rites (deeming them the sole prerogative of the Chinese emperor), the impulse went “underground” and persisted in folk practices and new religious movements. Korean shamanic *gut* rituals, syncretic religions like Daejonggyo and Won-Buddhism, and local village festivals all kept alive the notion that communal spiritual gatherings are vital to social harmony and cosmic order.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights that the transformation of *HUNTR/X*’s members from idols to demon hunters reflects the latent potential inherent in all human beings—a potential that requires cultivation and disciplined practice. Like the narrative of *HUNTR/X*, this transformation emphasizes perseverance and continuous effort toward achieving significant goals. Moreover, a closer examination of the storyline and plot development reveals that the true underlying objective, hidden beneath the colorful and thrilling narrative, is to prompt viewers to recognize that human potential should be exercised for the well-being of humanity and society, rather than for personal fame or the indulgence of one’s own desires. This notion resonates with the Mahayana Buddhist principle of compassion, which constitutes a fundamental pillar of its philosophical framework.

Interpreted through the lens of Buddha Nature, Cheonson Sasang, Innaecheon and Hongik Ingan (“to broadly benefit humankind”), the film *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (K. Park, 2025) rearticulates Korea’s founding ethical ideal as a contemporary mandate of collective service: the belief in the equal potential of all human beings to achieve their goals, coupled with the emphasis on fostering awareness of the true essence of moral values—which is often obscured beneath a superficial veneer of beauty. Also, the *HUNTR/X* team’s mission is framed not as the pursuit of personal glory but as the protection of communal well-being. This orientation is made explicit in Rumi’s saying, “What we do is not for ourselves. We have a bigger mission. To make sure everyone can live peacefully.” *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (K. Park, 2025) and anchors the action-fantasy plot in a public-ethical telos. The film’s integration of folk emblems and *gut* ritual aesthetics with an arc of atonement and psychic protection thereby functions as a modern reinterpretation of Hongik Ingan,

aligning genre entertainment with a heritage-led moral imagination. Read alongside current discourse on cultivating a “K-Spiritual Culture” in tandem with commercial success, the work exemplifies how contemporary Korean screen media can convert mythic–ritual inheritances into globally legible narratives of service to humanity.

K-Culture’s spiritual-aesthetic foundations lie in a humanistic, community-centered worldview. By drawing on Cheonson ideology, Buddha Nature and its modern interpretations, K-Culture carries an implicit claim to universality with a moral core. By inheriting the Jecheon and communal festivity tradition, it carries a penchant for emotionally resonant, participatory cultural forms. In effect, K-Culture can strive to be cosmopolitan in spirit: proudly Korean yet eager to honor and learn from other traditions. This addresses the soft power critique by moving toward mutual power – a shared cultural space rather than a unidirectional influence. Recent examples include K-pop groups releasing multilingual songs and K-dramas set partly overseas with diverse casts – small steps toward a more globally inclusive K-Culture.

5. Conclusion

K-Culture’s journey from the margins of global entertainment to the mainstream has been both remarkable and instructive. It reminds the present analysis that cultural influence need not flow only from West to East; a once-colonized nation can become a cultural trendsetter on its own terms. Yet the Korean Wave’s experience also illustrates that sheer popularity is not the final goal of culture, especially in a connected and plural world. As Hallyu enters a more mature phase, a critical lens drawn from cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and media ethics reveals a path toward what the present analysis have called a universally public K-Culture. This path involves re-grounding Korea’s cultural production in the very values that historically sustained it: community, spirituality, empathy, and justice.

The creation of a “culture of publicness” within Hallyu may need to begin with an awareness of the existence of Korea’s intellectual and cultural foundations, alongside efforts to adapt and translate these foundational ideas into practical applications in the contemporary world. This process also requires sustained innovation and openness to deeper storytelling, greater inclusivity, broader cross-cultural collaboration, and heightened ethical transparency. It will also demand patience, because gains such as improved international perceptions and a more durable reputation for cultural leadership are likely to materialize only over time. The stakes are high. If K-culture achieves this transformation, it could establish a new paradigm for twenty-first-century popular culture—one that

operates not as an instrument of dominance or a conduit for commerce alone, but as a shared space of imagination and solidarity.

K-culture, oriented by the tradition of Hongik Ingan and by Kim Gu's vision of a culture of love and peace, should evolve as a universally shareable art that speaks across borders while remaining accountable to its ethical roots. These ideals, grounded in Korea's intellectual and ritual heritage, align with the demands of the contemporary global moment, in which divisiveness and cynicism often prevail. Through Hallyu, Korea possesses a medium for communicating such values at scale; the coming years will show whether this potential is realized. If so, the Korean Wave will stand not as a transient entertainment cycle but as a current that helps steer global culture toward a more empathetic and ethically attentive future which serves to create a sense of "*depth*" within K-Culture, presenting it as an expression of Korean intellectual and cultural thought, while simultaneously establishing a space for cultural ideas as an inspiring and "*delightful*" ideal amid the confusion and turmoil of the contemporary world.

References

- Ainslie, M. J., Lipura, S. J., & Lim, J. B. Y. (2017). Understanding the potential for a Hallyu “backlash” in Southeast Asia: A case study of consumers in Thailand, Malaysia and Philippines. *Kritika Kultura*, 28, 63–91. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315465057>
- An Analysis of the Korean Wave as Transnational Popular Culture: North American Youth Engage Through Social Media as TV Becomes Obsolete
- Blackpink set for record-breaking return to Bangkok. (2025, June 18). *Bangkok Post*. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/arts-and-entertainment/3052221/>
- Bong, J.-h. (Director). (2019). *Parasite* [Film]. Barunson E&A.
- Brand Finance. (2025, February 25). *Hallyu wave lifts South Korea in global soft power index 2025*. <https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/hallyu-wave-lifts-south-korea-in-global-soft-power-index-2025>
- Buswell, R. E., Jr. (Trans.). (1983). *The collected works of Chinul*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Butsaban, K. (2022). The Hallyu policies of the Korean government. *Journal of Language and Culture*, 41(2), 1–24.
- Butsaban, K. (2024). Cultural imperialism of the Korean wave and its impact on Thai society. *Journal of Ecohumanism*, 3(7), 907–912.
- Butsaban, K., & Thinbang, J. (2024). Cooperation between South Korea and Thailand in developing the Korean wave in Thailand. *Journal of Thai Parliament*, 72(2), 194–227.
- Cha, S. (2020, June 8). *K-pop BTS fans match group's \$1 million donation to Black Lives Matter*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/lifestyle/k-pop-boyband-bts-fans-match-groups-1-million-donation-to-black-lives-matter-idUSKBN23E08U/>
- Chaiyong, S. (2023, December 26). A year of K-pop. *Bangkok Post*. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/arts-and-entertainment/2713086/>
- Choi, J.-b., & Maliangkay, R. (Eds.). (2014). *Korean wave: Korean popular culture in global context*. Cornell University East Asia Program.
- Choi, M.-H. (2009). The concept of God in the idea of Hongik ingan. *The Review of Korean Studies*, 12(3), 177–196. <https://doi.org/10.25024/review.2009.12.3.008>
- Chua, B. H., & Iwabuchi, K. (Eds.). (2008). *East Asian pop culture: Analysing the Korean wave*. Hong Kong University Press.
- Chung, E. Y. J., & Oh, J. S. (2022). Introduction: Emotion (Jeong/Qing 情) in Korean philosophy and religion. In E. Y. J. Chung & J. S. Oh (Eds.), *Emotion in Korean philosophy and religion* (pp. 1–93). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94747-7_1

- CosmeticsDesign-Asia. (2023, June 6). *Thailand beauty market analysis: How to win over the bold Thai consumer*. <https://www.cosmeticsdesign-asia.com/>
- Frater, P. (2016, August 4). China reportedly bans Korean TV content, talent. *Variety*. <https://variety.com/2016/biz/asia/china-confirms-ban-on-korean-content-talent-1201830391/>
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere*. MIT Press.
- Hankyoreh. (2025, January 12). *How China used Korean pop culture for 'cultural security,' both before and after banning it*". https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/1177434.html
- Hatchett, K. (2025, August 26). KPop demon hunters reaches a golden milestone: Most popular Netflix film ever. *Tudum by Netflix*. <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/kpop-demon-hunters-most-popular-netflix-film>
- Hayashi, K., & Lee, E.-J. (2007). The potential of fandom and the limits of soft power: Media representations on the popularity of a Korean melodrama in Japan. *Social Science Japan Journal*, 10(2), 197–216. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ssjj/jym049>
- Hwang, D.-h. (Executive Producer). (2021). *Squid Game* [TV series]. Siren Pictures. Netflix.
- Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism*. Polity.
- Jenkins, H., Ito, M., & Boyd, d. (2016). *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*. Polity Press.
- Jin, D. Y. (2016). *New Korean wave: Transnational cultural power in the age of social media*. University of Illinois Press.
- Jin, D. Y. (2018). An analysis of the Korean Wave as transnational popular culture: North American youth engage through social media as TV becomes obsolete. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 404-422. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/7973>
- Jin, D. Y. (2024). The rise of digital platforms as a soft power apparatus in the new Korean wave era. *Global Media and China*, 9(2), 375-393. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20570473241234204>
- Jung, S.-N. (2025, April 7). *K-pop most popular aspect of Korea globally*, survey finds. <https://www.koreajoongangdaily.com/entertainment/k-pop-most-popular-aspect-of-korea-globally-survey-finds/12077455>
- Kamnerdsiri, T. (2020). *The soteriology of sudden awakening and gradual cultivation of Bojo Jinul* [Doctoral dissertation, Chulalongkorn University]. Chulalongkorn University Theses and Dissertations (Chula ETD). <https://doi.org/10.58837/CHULA.THE.2020.876>
- Kim, G. (2019). *Baekbeomilji: The autobiography of Kim Gu* (B. C. Lee, Trans.). University of Hawaii Press. (Original work published 1949).

- Kim, H. (2017). The Li-Qi structure of the four beginnings and the seven emotions and the aim of the four-seven debate. In Y. Back & J. P. Ivanhoe (Eds.), *Traditional Korean philosophy: Problems and debates* (pp. 49-67). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kim, J., & Kwon, S.-H. (2022). K-pop's global success and its innovative production system. *Sustainability*, 14(17), Article 11101. <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/14/17/11101>
- Kim, M. (2024, March 15). Hallyu fans reach 200 million threshold worldwide. *The Dong-A Ilbo*. <https://www.donga.com/en/article/all/20240315/4814959/1>
- Kim, M.-S. (2021). Revisiting soft power: The case of Hallyu in a changing Asia. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 27(6), 818–833. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2020.1772893>
- Korean Culture and Information Service. (2023a). *Hallyu white paper 2022–2023*. Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.
- Korean Culture and Information Service. (2023b). *Government to spend KRW 6.74 trillion to promote K-culture in 2023*. <https://www.kocis.go.kr/>
- Larprunrueng, S. (2022). *Teaching Korean culture in Thai universities*. Academy of Korean Studies. https://www.aks.ac.kr/cefia/webzine/2209/column_eng.html
- Lee, D. (2025, April 16). *Korean content on Netflix in 2024 ranked 2nd in global views*. Korea.net. <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=269924>
- Lee, J. (2023, May 24). *Korean is No. 2 secondary foreign language on Thai college entrance exam*. Korea.net. <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=233208>
- Lee, S. T. (2021). Film as cultural diplomacy: South Korea's nation branding after *Parasite* (2019). *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 17(4), 393–406. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-020-00192-1>
- McCurry, J. (2019, December 1). Deaths of K-pop stars put focus on mental health taboos in South Korea. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/02/deaths-of-k-pop-stars-put-focus-on-mental-health-taboos-in-south-korea>
- Mercuri, M. (2019, July 10). *BTS is the world's highest-paid boy band and K-pop act*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/monicamercuri/2019/07/10/bts-is-the-worlds-highest-paid-boy-band-and-k-pop-act/>
- Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, & Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange. (2025, April 8). The growing popularity and diversification of Hallyu. <https://www.mcst.go.kr/english/policy/pressView.jsp?pSeq=511>
- Moon, J.-Y. (2020, March 1). *Debriefing: Financing of a masterpiece—Who paid for Parasite?* *Korea JoongAng Daily*. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/03/01/business/industry/Parasite-CJ-ENM-film-industry/20200301184500517.html>

- Moon, S. (2008). Buddhist temple food in South Korea: Interests and agency in the reinvention of tradition in the age of globalization. *Korea Journal*, 48(4), 147–180.
- Muhammad, K., & Valeriano, B. (2024, April 24). *When China banned Korean boy bands*. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/when-china-banned-korean-boy-bands/>
- Netflix. (2025, October 21). *For the fans! Netflix forges master toy partnerships for “KPop demon hunters”*. https://about.netflix.com/en/news/netflix-kpop-demon-hunters-forge-master-toy-partnership-with-mattel-and-hasbro?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs.
- Oh, I. (2017). From cultural colonialism to dialogic transnationalism: Reimagining Asia through K-pop. *Korea Journal*, 57(4), 5–32. <https://doi.org/10.25024/kj.2017.57.4.5>
- Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press.
- Park, H. (2024, March 15). *No. of global Hallyu fans last year broke 200M mark: Survey*. Korea.net. <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Society/view?articleId=248349>
- Park, J.-h. (2024, May 21). Burning Sun scandal in K-pop industry resurfaces after BBC documentary. *Korea Times*. <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/entertainment/k-pop/20240521/burning-sun-scandal-in-k-pop-industry-resurfaces-after-bbc-documentary>
- Park, J.-h. (2025, June 9). Korean temple food festival returns after 10 years. *Arirang News*. <https://www.arirang.com/news/view?id=284164>
- Park, K. (2012). *Hanguk sinjonggyo-ui sasang gwa jonggyo munhwa* [The Thought and Religious Culture of Korea's New Religions]. Jipmundang.
- Park, K. (2025, August 27). *K-pop demon hunters: A vision of a K-cultural power that moved the world*. Saejeonbuk Ilbo.
- Shanfeld, E. (2026, January 28). 'KPop Demon Hunters' is most-streamed movie of 2025 with 20.5 billion minutes watched. *Variety*. <https://variety.com/2026/film/news/kpop-demon-hunters-most-streamed-movie-2025-1236643334/>