K-Soft Power and Beyond: Korean Culture, Media, and Global Exchange

ed. by Imsuk Jung - Kukjin Kim - Irene Lustrissimi

Quaderni CeSK
Orizzonti coreani hanul 5

2026

Edizioni Unistrasi

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EDIZIONI
Università per Stranieri di Siena

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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-2023-INC-2230001).

ISBN: 978-88-32244-34-2
Pubblicato nel mese di aprile 2026

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Volume sottoposto a Peer Rewiev

IMSUK JUNG

PREFACE

This edited volume brings together a selection of revised and peer-reviewed contributions presented at the international conference ***K-Soft Power and Beyond: Korean Culture, Media, and Global Exchange***, held in May 2025 at the University for Foreigners of Siena. The conference was organized by the Center of Korean Research and Studies "Yun Dongju" (CeSK) as part of the ***Seed Program for Korean Studies***, a research and academic development initiative directed by me and funded by the Academy of Korean Studies. The project was conceived with the aim of fostering interdisciplinary dialogue on contemporary Korean culture and of strengthening Korean Studies within the European academic landscape.

The notion of *soft power* has become central to understanding South Korea's global presence over the past three decades. From K-pop and audiovisual media to literature, digital platforms, and language education, Korean cultural production has demonstrated an exceptional capacity to circulate transnationally while continuously renegotiating questions of identity, locality, and global exchange. At the same time, the accelerating diversification of media forms and audiences calls for analytical frameworks that move beyond celebratory narratives and address the tensions, limits, and transformations inherent in cultural globalization. It is precisely within this critical space beyond *soft power* as a unidirectional model that the present volume situates itself. The contributions collected here reflect the multidisciplinary nature of contemporary Korean Studies, drawing on cultural studies, media studies, literary criticism, film studies, linguistics, and pedagogy. Rather than treating Korean culture

as a monolithic export, the volume emphasizes processes: circulation, translation, adaptation, remediation, and reception. These processes illuminate how Korean cultural forms are continuously reshaped through interactions among local contexts, global markets, and translocal communities.

The first part of the volume focuses on K-pop as one of the most visible and debated manifestations of Korean soft power. Rather than approaching K-pop solely as an industrial or musical phenomenon, the chapters in this section foreground its political, discursive, and social dimensions. The first chapter of this volume is the contribution of **Soongbeum Ahn**, professor at the Department of Humanities and director at the K-Culture and Story Contents Research Institute from Kyung Hee University, and **Taeryong Kim**, professor at the Department of Christian cultural contents from Baekseok University. In *Rewriting the History of K-pop: Fandom Activism from the Local to the Translocal* they conceptualize K-pop fandom activism as a form of translocal practice. Drawing on theoretical frameworks developed by Arjun Appadurai and Arif Dirlik, the authors reinterpret fandom not merely as a consumer-based community but as a form of locality that evolves historically and politically. By tracing the transformation of K-pop fandom from the 1990s to the present, the chapter highlights how fan activism has emerged as an alternative discursive arena within globalized cultural flows.

The contribution of **Paola Laforgia**, author of *Fattore K* (add editore 2024), is entitled *Removing the K from K-pop? Limitations and Potential of One of Hallyu's Key Signifiers*, and it critically interrogates the semantic and ideological implications of the "K" label. By examining both its branding power and its limitations, the chapter explores how the term K-pop simultaneously enables global recognition and imposes categorical constraints. The discussion situates current debates—such as proposals to move beyond the "K" label—within broader strategies of cultural soft power and market positioning. Together, these chapters offer complementary perspectives on K-pop as a contested space where identity, power, and global circulation intersect.

The second part shifts the focus toward questions of memory, representation, and education, highlighting how Korean culture functions as a site of ethical reflection and pedagogical innovation. In *The Aesthetics of Memory and Resistance: Cinematic Practice of the Korean New Wave in A Single Spark*, **Taehyun Baek**, research professor at the K-Culture and Story Contents Research Institute from Kyung Hee University, examines Korean New Wave cinema as a practice of memory rather than mere representation. Through a close reading of cinematic form, rhythm, and narration, the chapter shows how social realism is reconfigured as a sensorial and ethical engagement with labor history and structural violence. By situating the film within the institutional and cultural discourse of the 1990s, the analysis illuminates the enduring relevance of cinematic realism in negotiating national memory.

The next contribution is *Teaching Korean Color Terms and Related Metaphors and Idiomatic Expressions*, accomplished by **Kyong-sook Yoo**, Korean language educator

at the King Sejong Institute in Preston. Her work addresses Korean soft power from a pedagogical perspective. Focusing on intermediate to advanced learners of Korean, the study proposes an instructional model that integrates cognitive linguistics, task-based learning, and authentic audiovisual materials. By examining color-based metaphors and idiomatic expressions, the chapter underscores the importance of cultural competence and discourse-level understanding in Korean language education, particularly in international contexts. This section thus bridges aesthetic analysis and applied linguistics, emphasizing the role of cultural mediation in both artistic and educational practices.

The third part of the volume explores the global circulation of Korean literature across both print-based and digital ecosystems, highlighting the coexistence of avant-garde poetic voices and highly commercialized narrative forms. *Kim Hyesoon's International Success: Speaking to All the 'Garbage' of the World* is the title of the chapter contributed by **Sara Bochicchio**, PhD student in Korean language and literature at the University of Turin. It investigates the international reception of one of the most influential contemporary Korean poets. By focusing on themes of abjection, grotesque imagery, and feminist critique, the chapter analyzes how Kim Hyesoon's poetic language transcends cultural boundaries while maintaining its radical edge. Particular attention is paid to translation and reception in the English-speaking world, offering insights into the global dynamics of contemporary poetry.

The contribution of **Kukjin Kim**, assistant professor at the University for Foreigners of Siena, is *Korean Web Novel: An Innovative Form of Literature?*. His work addresses the theoretical and methodological challenges posed by digital literature. By examining the origins, structures, and modes of consumption of Korean web novels, the chapter proposes a multidisciplinary framework for analyzing web-based narratives. The study highlights how digital platforms reshape literary production, readership, and genre conventions, positioning web novels as a key component of Korea's contemporary cultural landscape.

The chapter of **Irene Lustrissimi**, research contract professor at the University for Foreigners of Siena, *South Korean Soft Power Between Webtoon and Webnovel: The Solo Leveling Case*, offers a detailed case study of transmedia storytelling and cultural soft power. Tracing the evolution of Solo Leveling from web novel to webtoon, anime, and video game, the chapter demonstrates how OSMU strategies, platform infrastructures, and fan participation contribute to global cultural influence. The analysis underscores the strategic role of digital popular culture in redefining South Korea's position as a hybrid and innovative cultural powerhouse.

The present volume concludes with the special essay of **Bruce Fulton**, emeritus professor at the British University of Columbia. His contribution entitled *They Like to Sing and Dance: Intertextuality in Pak Chiyun's Sŏnginshik* is a richly layered analysis of intertextuality across literature, performance, and visual culture. By situating the music video within a long tradition of Korean literary motifs and

initiation narratives, the chapter highlights the persistence of literary memory within contemporary popular culture. This contribution serves as a reflective closing to the volume, reinforcing the idea that Korean cultural innovation remains deeply rooted in historical and literary continuities.

As the outcomes of a collaborative international conference, this volume reflects the intellectual vitality of Korean Studies today and the importance of sustained institutional support for its future development. It is our hope that *K-Soft Power and Beyond: Korean Culture, Media, and Global Exchange* will serve not only as a scholarly contribution to current debates but also as a platform for further dialogue among researchers, educators, and students interested in Korea's dynamic cultural presence in the world.

Primavera 2026
Imsuk Jung

SOONGBEUM AHN - TAERYONG KIM

REWRITING THE HISTORY OF K-POP: FANDOM ACTIVISM FROM THE LOCAL TO THE TRANSLOCAL

Abstract

This study re-examines the history of K-pop from the audience's perspective, focusing on the fandom activism of K-pop fans. This study differentiates itself from existing historical accounts of K-pop, which have been primarily framed through industrial or policy-oriented perspectives. It aims to re-evaluate audiences as active agents in the production of K-pop culture, illustrate the interrelationship between the global and local, and assess the cultural and political potential of K-pop fandom.

This study applies the concepts of locality and translocality to trace the evolution of K-pop fandom activism across three historical phases. The first phase corresponds to the formative stage of locality in the mid-to-late 1990s, the second represents the consolidating stage of locality from the late 1990s to the early 2010s, and the third marks the transition toward translocality from the mid-2010s to the present.

Through this analysis, the study identifies several key findings. Fandom has increasingly emerged as a central agent in the formation of K-pop culture. The formation and circulation of K-pop fandom activism demonstrate the reciprocal interpenetration between the global and the local. Furthermore, K-pop culture is becoming a means of reconfiguring global cultural power relationships. These findings suggest that K-culture constitutes a networked space characterized by

ongoing hybridity and transversal movement and holds the potential for transnational solidarity oriented toward translocality.

1. Introduction

Korean popular culture has spread worldwide as “K-culture.” It spans a range of domains, including television dramas, film, webtoons, games, beauty, fashion, food, and lifestyle, creating a complex and multifaceted flow. Particularly, the development of digital platforms and global streaming environments has accelerated the cross-border circulation of Korean popular cultural content, dramatically expanding the visibility and accessibility of the Korean cultural industry. Hence, South Korea is no longer a regional site of cultural production; it is one of the central currents within the global cultural market. Although the influence of K-culture cannot be equated with the dominance of American popular culture, one cannot find comparable cases within non-Western cultural contexts that have generated a counter-flow to Western popular culture, which makes K-culture a phenomenon worthy of attention.

This article focuses on K-pop. The fandoms of K-pop idol groups, represented by BTS ARMY and BLACKPINK BLINK, are distributed across the globe. Subsequent idol groups consistently occupy top positions on the Billboard charts and on Spotify and YouTube streaming metrics. It is common for these groups to pursue global commercial success based on an already-branded image of K-pop. Additionally, the consecutive successes of Rosé and Bruno Mars’ collaborative song, APT., in 2024 and Golden, the theme song of the Netflix film K-pop Demon Hunters, in 2025, further confirmed K-pop’s current global standing.

There are various interpretations of the factors that have established K-pop’s distinct position within global music charts. These include the development of the Korean entertainment industry; advancements in digital technologies, such as smartphones; transformations in digital platforms, including social media and OTT services; and effective governmental support policies. These elements have interacted with one another and contributed significantly to the expansion of K-pop. However, focusing exclusively on these factors risks producing a fragmented understanding of the cultural phenomena on a global scale. It may lead to the misconception that the formation and circulation of popular culture are driven solely by producers or producing nations. Hence, it requires an expanded analytical perspective capable of identifying the agents who actively propel and sustain cultural phenomena.

This article focuses on the practices of K-pop fandom. By examining fandom’s characteristics, culture, and political roles, it arrives at a more multi-layered and structural explanation of the K-pop phenomenon. In other words, the global diffusion of K-pop cannot be reduced to the outcomes of industrial systems or technological

conditions. It has been continuously reconfigured through active meaning-making by fandoms as agents of action. As consumers, interpreters, and practical mediators, fans play a central role in expanding K-pop beyond a national cultural commodity into a transnational cultural practice. This calls for a shift in analytical focus from production-centered views toward the dimensions of reception and practice, while providing a theoretical foundation for understanding K-pop as a contemporary global popular cultural phenomenon.

To analyze the nature and role of K-pop fandom more concretely, this study examines "fandom activism." Fandom activism represents a particularly salient site for examining how fans intervene in cultural, social, and political issues as a collective subject and how they carry out visible practices within the public sphere, since such activism is grounded in collective action and relational networks (Jenkins/Shresthova 2012). In other words, analyzing fandom activism explains how fandom's internal culture, network structures, affective bonds, and media strategies together form the K-pop culture.

Hence, this article examines the origins, development, and modes of expansion of K-pop fandom activism for a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary K-pop phenomenon. While numerous studies have described the history of K-pop from industrial or policy-oriented perspectives, attempts to narrate this history from the audience's perspective remain scarce. In response to this gap, this study reconstructs the history of K-pop fandom, focusing on activism practices. It begins with Korean popular culture in the 1990s, before the complete emergence of K-pop, when the foundations for modern fandom practices were first established. It traces the process through which K-pop fandom developed its distinctive modes of expression. It demonstrates how K-pop fandom activism, through globalization, has been re-localized in forms that differ from those of earlier periods.

This study re-examines audiences as central agents in the production of K-pop culture. Moreover, following Stuart Hall's argument, it examines K-pop culture as a site where the global and the local are continuously interpenetrated (Hall 1997a: 62). It assesses the cultural-political potential that popular culture audiences, including K-pop fandom, may possess. With its findings, this study challenges producer-centered perspectives on popular culture and enables a renewed understanding of K-culture. Moreover, concerning the expansion of global capitalism, it offers a way to conceptualize locality as an alternative. Hence, this study is an attempt to explore what Arjun Appadurai (2000: 3) described as "globalization from below."

Chapter 2 introduces the concepts of locality and translocality as a conceptual framework for distinguishing the characteristics of K-pop fandom activism across historical periods. Building on this framework, Chapter 3 discusses the history of K-pop fandom activism, with locality as its central analytical lens. The overall trajectory is divided into three stages. Each stage is examined with particular attention to the shifting characteristics of activism, especially changes in its targets of

resistance and modes of interaction.

2. K-pop Fandom Activism from the Perspective of Locality Studies

In this study, locality denotes a relational construct that is continuously formed through the intersection and interaction of social relationships and processes within a community (Massey 1991: 138–139). Hence, the concept encompasses relational networks among communities constituted based on peripheral positions or identities. Appadurai refused to limit locality to a geographical space or a quantitative category. He understood locality as a fundamentally relational and contextual phenomenon. That is, locality is a relational construct produced through shared sensibilities regarding social issues, interaction skills, and interdependencies among diverse contexts, instead of being a fixed attribute of physical space. Thus, locality is a phenomenological quality, produced and sustained through the practices, collaborations, and conflicts of community members. In other words, it is a socially produced outcome and a constitutive aspect of social life (Appadurai 1996: 178–179). Moreover, such locality can function as a discursive site that resists narratives imposed from above (Hall 1997b: 64).

Fandom represents the manifestation of a shared feeling within a historical and social context. According to Mark Duffett, fandom is neither a simple aggregation of fans nor a concept reducible to a place or an object. Instead, it is a mode and function of cultural creativity that encompasses affective attachment to fan objects, identities, and a range of related practices (Duffett 2013: 17–18). Hence, fandom can be regarded as a form of locality, as it functions as a field of cultural practice. By collectively sharing and representing affective experiences and organizing cultural and social identities that transcend individual taste, fandom forms and sustains its locality.

Appadurai particularly emphasized the role of the local subject in the production of locality. A local subject refers to an agent embedded within a community who constructs identity through participation in social networks. Through distinctive rituals, rites of passage, and local knowledge, such subjects localize time and space. These practices enable individuals to concretely experience their lifeworld and provide the foundation for the formation of identity (Appadurai 1996: 179–182). Similarly, fans assume the role of local subjects within fandom through active practices. They establish relationships with fan objects or texts, appropriate meanings, and reproduce content (Duffett 2013: 165–190). John Fiske (2011: 83) argued that the production of meaning by popular culture audiences constituted a process of subject formation within society. As Fiske suggested, the act of textual appropriation positioned individuals within fandom and inscribed upon them their identity as fans. For fans, such practices functioned as both ritual and rite of passage. Their new information and interpretations of fan objects become "local knowledge," through which new

local subjects are generated.

The formation of locality through the practices of local subjects is closely connected to the establishment of neighborhoods. If locality is understood as a phenomenological quality constituted through social relationships and practices, the neighborhood represents the embodied form of that locality. The neighborhood is a communal mode of existence characterized by concrete experience and the potential for social reproduction. Processes of production, representation, and reproduction, in which local subjects participate, expand the scope of the neighborhood and may give rise to new neighborhoods (Appadurai 1996: 182–188). Additionally, virtual neighborhoods grounded in media and network infrastructures transcend physical boundaries by exchanging information, symbols, and economic resources and organizing social connections, exercising influence comparable to tangible neighborhoods. Hence, even small communities located at the periphery gain self-representation opportunities. However, Appadurai (1996: 194–198) noted that virtual neighborhoods simultaneously contained utopian possibilities and dystopian risks.

Fan communities explore their positions, imagine alternatives, and share new insights with other members through images and ideas derived from fan objects (Jenkins 2006: 60). They constitute social networks of mutually interacting individuals (Duffett 2013: 244). However, in reinforcing fandom as a form of locality, they perform the functions of neighborhoods. Particularly, the internet radically transformed fandom as a phenomenon and facilitated the activities of fan communities (Duffett 2013: 253). Presently, fan communities exhibit a strong character as virtual neighborhoods, expanding their influence primarily within online environments. Hence, fandom operates as a form of locality, while fans, as local subjects, generate locality through diverse practices. By forming communities that take on the characteristics of neighborhoods, especially virtual neighborhoods grounded in digital media and networked environments, fans actively sustain and reproduce locality. These observations provide a basis for conceptualizing fandom as a form of locality.

Recent K-pop fandom activism has increasingly taken on translocal characteristics. Arif Dirlik argued that under contemporary conditions dominated by global capitalism, local resistance must orient toward translocality in order to carry political significance. In other words, while locality may serve as the starting point of resistance, it is not sufficient on its own. Effective resistance must extend beyond individual localities and unfold through conscious and practical solidarity among multiple localities. Thus, translocal awareness and action are indispensable conditions for resisting the global capitalist system (Dirlik 1996: 40). Accordingly, translocality, as articulated by Dirlik, can be understood as a form of political praxis generated at points of solidarity among localities.

One of the objectives of this article is to locate such translocal potential within K-pop fandom activism. As discussed, it traces the process through which K-pop fandom, once constituted as a form of locality, has come to operate as a wide-ranging translocal formation and examines the possibilities and meanings of this transformation. Hence, the following chapter examines South Korean society in the 1990s. During this period, Korea experienced cultural turbulence marked by the easing of social tensions, rapid transformations in the media environment, and the emergence of new sensibilities, content, and celebrity figures. Simultaneously, suppressed cultural desires among the public began to surface, creating conditions for the accumulation of internal dynamics that would drive the rise of K-pop and the broader phenomenon of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) (Ahn 2022: 87–113). Furthermore, Chapter 3 explains the formation and evolution of K-pop fandom activism. It examines the formation of K-pop fandom in the 1990s, focusing on the process through which global culture was transformed into local culture or locality. Furthermore, it analyzes how fandom, constituted as a form of locality in the 1990s, was consolidated in the early 2000s. It explores the process through which Korean forms of locality have expanded globally and were subsequently transformed into translocal ones.

3. The Formation, Consolidation, and Transformation of K-pop Fandom Activism as a Manifestation of Locality

3.1. Mid- to Late 1990s: The Formation of Locality—Localization of the Global and the Emergence of Fandom Activism

Herbert Schiller argued that the global market was becoming increasingly unified, producing hierarchies and stratifications among nations. Dominant classes or nations, he claimed, established differential relationships with subordinate ones, generating exploitation. Cultural imperialism operated within this global structure, as cultural communication and technology met the needs of dominant powers and maintained the world's power hierarchy (Schiller 2017: 5–6).

While Schiller's perspective does not fully capture the multidirectional and hybridized flows of contemporary global culture, it partly explains the transformations of the South Korean popular music market in the 1990s, which was influenced by West-led global culture. During this decade, Korean popular culture underwent intense transformation. In 1989, overseas travel restrictions were lifted. Following the normalization of diplomatic relationships between Korea and China in 1992, cultural exchanges flourished. The Kim Young-sam administration launched the *Segyehwa* (Globalization) policy in 1993, promoting large-scale liberalization of the cultural market and the internationalization of Korean cultural production. The lifting of restrictions on the broadcasting of foreign music in 1994 and the spread of cable TV in 1995 brought foreign popular culture into Korean homes. Furthermore, the

official opening of Japanese popular culture in 1998 exposed Korean audiences to a range of external cultural influences.

Within this scenario, global musical trends flooded Korea. The public sought new and diverse genres, and young musicians actively responded by incorporating foreign musical styles. For instance, Seo Taiji and Boys gained immense popularity by experimenting with global genres, including rap, soul, rock and roll, techno, punk, and hardcore (Shim 2006: 36). However, the cultural influx was not limited to Western culture centered on the United States. During the 1990s, Korean producers and musicians actively benchmarked Japanese popular music (J-pop). Pioneering entertainment companies, such as SM Entertainment, adopted Japan's idol production system and localized it within the Korean context. This led to the emergence of H.O.T., widely regarded as the first K-pop idol group. Nonetheless, plagiarism of Japanese songs by some musicians became a social controversy in the late 1990s (Jin 2020: 48–49). However, one might interpret the 1990s Korean pop music industry as having been absorbed into the global system dominated by the United States and Japan, with Korea functioning as a semi-peripheral or peripheral cultural space. In other words, this could be considered the phase of cultural imperialism. However, this study approaches cultural change as globalization from below. Therefore, it examines the reception of global culture in Korea, which reveals the active and creative practices of local audiences, who appropriated global forms to construct new modes of locality.

In the 1990s, teenagers and young adults in their 20s emerged as the focus of the so-called "New Generation" (*sin sedae*) discourse. They were the first post-war generation to possess purchasing power and consumer agency, actively engaging with popular culture according to their tastes and individuality. As an "emergent culture," their practices shaped a new structure of feeling and challenged the "dominant culture" of the older generation (Williams 1977: 121–127). They enthusiastically consumed imported music and its localized derivatives, expressing their generational distinction and identity through global sensibilities and consumer-oriented practices (Kim 2021: 307–308). However, they were not passive recipients of the global cultural capital that defined their consumption patterns. They actively used global culture as a resource to form unprecedented large-scale taste communities in Korea, that is, self-organized, autonomous collectives based on shared cultural preferences. This phenomenon stemmed from voluntary and independent initiatives rather than industrial intervention. For example, the formation and management of the Seo Taiji and Boys' fan club occurred outside the cultural industry, establishing the prototype of the later K-pop fandom.

The global culture that infiltrated Korean society did not consist solely of cultural products from the core nations. According to Schiller, dominant powers developed and disseminated communication technologies to maintain global hierarchies. For instance, the rise of personal computer (PC) communication (*PC-tongsin*) became central to Korean youth culture in the mid-1990s as part of a broader imperial

globalization of communication technology. *PC-tongsin* referred to Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), a network service that enabled communication between personal computers via dial-up connections, serving as a major online platform before the World Wide Web (WWW). The first such service in Korea, *H-mail*, was launched by Korea Data Communication in 1987. By 1992, multiple companies competed in this field. BBS networks were popularized nationwide under the umbrella term *PC-tongsin*, forming the infrastructural base for diverse cultural activities (Kim and Cho 2017: 5–33).

The majority of *PC-tongsin* users were in their teens and 20s. They organized countless online communities around shared interests, exchanged information, organized offline gatherings, and constructed their identities through taste-based interaction. Hence, for the first time, virtual neighborhoods based on shared interests emerged nationwide. Korean cultural theorist Jeong Yoonsu argued that the origins of today's internet-based media culture can be traced to these early online communities. The cultural practices of *PC-tongsin* users in the 1990s laid the foundations for diverse online cultural phenomena that define the present digital media environment (Jeong 2020: 255–295). For instance, one of the most popular *PC-tongsin* services, Hitel, hosted Ttorane, the official online fan club of Seo Taiji and Boys. Its members led online discussions and expanded the fandom's influence through active digital communication (Lee and Son 2003: 369–372). Similarly, the H.O.T. fandom, considered the first K-pop idol group, built a massive online community through *PC-tongsin* platforms, forming a grassroots social collective that exerted significant influence on the Korean popular music industry.

Furthermore, in the 1990s, South Korean music audiences shaped new identities through global cultural flows. Through emerging global networks, they systematized fandom communities. While they often displayed compliance and consumption of the global cultural industry, they cultivated and shared unique interaction techniques and modes of sensing sociocultural issues. Hence, they localized global elements and generated new forms of locality. This emergent locality materialized as concrete activism, most notably the "Performance Ethics Committee Struggle." Under the pre-censorship system, music, film, and performance in South Korea were tightly controlled by the Performance Ethics Committee (*Kongyŏn yulli wiwŏnhoe*). All creative works underwent review; releasing an album without approval was illegal. The Committee dictated lyric revisions or deletions. This institutional control made the cultural production and reception process rigid.

In 1994, at the peak of their popularity, Seo Taiji and Boys released their fourth album. Among its tracks, *Sidae Yudgam* (Regret of the Times) ignited a movement to abolish the pre-censorship system. The Committee, citing concerns over the song's "anti-social" lyrics, demanded textual modification. Seo Taiji refused, deleting the vocal track and releasing an instrumental version, a symbolic act of resistance. The group's fans transformed the censorship issue into a public discourse on artistic

freedom. Centered around online communities, they constructed and circulated counter-narratives, exerted pressure on legacy media outlets, such as newspapers and broadcasters, and organized a collective action campaign, writing letters to members of the National Assembly to voice their opposition. Their activism prompted the opposition party to establish a parliamentary inquiry into the matter. This led to formal legislative discussions, and in 1996, the pre-censorship system was abolished (Dong-A Ilbo 1996: 25). This event, widely referred to as the "Performance Ethics Committee Struggle," was the first instance of fandom activism in South Korea. It represented a manifestation of locality, as it constituted a resistance to the globalization of Western music and global capitalist expansion, as well as the nation-state's regulatory control over popular culture. The fans who led this movement functioned as local subjects, producing a resistant public discourse. Hence, as K-pop idol groups and fandoms emerged, fandom activism grew stronger, more organized, and translocal.

3.2. Late 1990s–Early 2010s: The Consolidation of Locality—Systematization of K-pop Fandom Activism

Appadurai viewed neighborhoods as inherently oppositional and marked by alterity. They were produced against existing social and environmental foundations and were "colonized" spaces. In this process of production, power relationships were exercised over other neighborhoods (Appadurai 1996: 182–187). This description suggested that neighborhoods came into being primarily through domination. However, when fandom communities were conceived as neighborhoods, one observed an inverse dynamic—neighborhoods were generated through the challenges posed by the subaltern and those who resisted power structures.

The resistant practices of fandoms, as othered neighborhoods, can be understood through Axel Honneth's notion of the struggle for recognition (1995: 29). As discussed, the locality of fandom, established by the fans of Seo Taiji and Boys, was inherited and strengthened by the fans of subsequent idol groups. However, the primary targets of fandom activism shifted. Seo Taiji and Boys' fans expressed their activism through resistance to state control and creative, autonomous transformations of global culture. In contrast, K-pop fandoms, from the late 1990s to around 2010, exhibited resistance primarily against the power structures of the cultural industry. Although they sometimes cooperated or aligned with the industry, they adopted strategic attitudes to assert their autonomy and seek recognition for their cultures. Hence, the locality of K-pop fandom acquired a more distinct and differentiated character.

Cultural studies scholar Kim Seong-min, who conducted comparative research on Japan and South Korea, argued that the distinct characteristics of K-pop fandom began to crystallize with the rise of H.O.T.'s fandom, Club H.O.T. They displayed notable features, such as nationwide organization, close coordination with entertainment agencies, and devoted fan activities. Seong-min emphasized that Club H.O.T. was the first fandom to visually and aurally symbolize its collective identity through

designated fan color, cheering tools, and standardized chants (Kim 2018: 49–51). The organizational model and communication system established by Club H.O.T. between artists, management, and fans continued to exert a significant influence on contemporary K-pop fandom structures.

Initially, H.O.T.'s fans were scattered nationwide in small, independent groups. Recognizing the need for a systematic fan management structure, SM Entertainment consolidated these groups through its agency partner, Starworld. Starworld, in 1997, officially launched Club H.O.T. by integrating 32 informal fan clubs into a unified national organization (Kim 2009: 81–82). The fandom established regional chapters, with local presidents and executives, holding regular meetings to organize events, coordinate activities, and foster solidarity among regional fan groups. Simultaneously, fans participated in the official club and hundreds of unofficial online fan communities, where they shared photographs, schedules, and information about the members, engaging in real-time discussions and social interaction through chat platforms (Hwang 1999: 28–30). The organized practices of Club H.O.T. were particularly visible through its self-produced fanzine, which functioned as a communication medium and a record of fan culture. While Starworld oversaw production and distribution, the fan club's editorial committee handled editorial planning and content creation. These editors conducted interviews with H.O.T. members, curated fan-submitted photographs, creative writing, and artwork from across the country, and compiled schedules and event reports for the publication (Club H.O.T. 1998–2000).

Critically, one might interpret the absorption of a spontaneously formed fandom into an official organization as a manifestation of cultural industry control. However, fans developed multilayered strategies to preserve their autonomy within this structure. Through systematic organization, fandoms acquired social capital to negotiate and interact with artists, agencies, and rival fandoms, both cooperating and competing. This was a symbiotic process in which entertainment companies pursued economic profit, while fandoms sought cultural identity and participatory agency through fan activities, driven by shared yet asymmetrical goals.

In the 2000s, K-pop fandom's sense of locality became increasingly systematized and concretized. The technological shift in online network systems from BBS to the WWW was a pivotal turning point. With the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan for the Advancement of High-Speed Information Networks under President Kim Dae-jung's administration in 2001, PCs and high-speed internet access rapidly spread across South Korea (Oh 2001: 19–23). Hence, *PC-tongsin* declined, and the digital sphere reorganized around the web. This represented a paradigm shift in Korean society and was instrumental in establishing its long-standing reputation as an internet powerhouse. It provided the social and infrastructural context for why activism emerged within K-pop fandoms with exceptional speed, density, and organizational stability compared to other localities.

The modes of expansion, connection, and production within fandoms evolved dramatically as they migrated into the WWW. Internet-based homepages and communities, far more accessible and universal than *PC-tongsin* clubs, revolutionized communication while dramatically lowering entry barriers. This led to a surge in membership, transforming fandoms into large, highly interactive collectives. Empowered by advanced interaction technologies and vast digital networks, fans exchanged and negotiated ideas about their idols, industry structures, and broader social issues with unprecedented dynamism. Consequently, their activism grew more organized and strategic, expanding their societal influence. Through these strengthened digital networks, K-pop fandom communities engaged directly with the power structures of the cultural industry. Particularly, struggles emerged around decision-making authority in the relationships between agencies and artists, and agencies and fans. Three major events represent K-pop fandom activism during this period, highlighting their cultural and social impact.

The first was the protest against the disbandment of H.O.T. In May 2001, when negotiations over contract renewal and profit distribution between the group and its agency, SM Entertainment, broke down, disbandment was announced. In response, hundreds of fans gathered in front of SM's headquarters in Cheongdam-dong, Seoul, to demand that the decision be withdrawn (Chosun Ilbo 2001). They expressed their demands and emotions through fan clubs and media websites (Korea JoongAng Daily 2003). This marked a turning point in how fandoms were socially perceived; they were not just consumers but collective stakeholders.

The second involved fandom activism surrounding TVXQ's disbandment and contract dispute. In July 2009, three of the group's members, Kim Jaejoong, Kim Junsu, and Park Yuchun, filed an injunction to suspend the validity of their exclusive contracts with SM Entertainment, halting their activities. In response, the fandom organized collective actions online. They launched petitions on major sites opposing the disbandment and sent mass emails to news outlets to represent TVXQ's position (Yonhap News Agency 2009). Although the group had disbanded, in 2013, the Korea Fair Trade Commission ordered SM Entertainment to cease its unlawful practices toward the members (Korea Herald 2013). This brought the issue of so-called "slave contracts," long normalized within the entertainment industry, into mainstream public debate.

The third was the 2009 protest against the withdrawal of 2PM member Jay Park. In September 2009, Jay Park was forced to leave the group after old online posts criticizing Korea surfaced. About 1,500 members of the group's fan club, Hottest, staged a silent protest outside JYP Entertainment, demanding his reinstatement (K Bites 2009). Fans declared a boycott of 2PM's activities following Jay Park's expulsion from the group. However, Jay Park's contract was terminated, deepening the conflict between the fandom and the agency (Korea Times 2010). This demonstrated how the absence of communication rapidly eroded trust among fans, entertainment

companies, and idols.

From 2000 to the early 2010s, numerous examples of activism, reflecting the locality of K-pop fandom, emerged. These movements showed how fans' modes of civic participation, communication, and agenda expression became increasingly systematized and formalized. The development of online communities enabled fans to mobilize instantly, massively, and simultaneously in response to sudden events. As media grew more complex and global fandoms emerged, K-pop's locality shifted toward translocality.

3.3. Mid-2010s to the Present: The Transition to the Translocal—Globalization and Translocalization of K-pop Fandom Activism

In 2006, Henry Jenkins proclaimed the arrival of the era of convergence culture in his seminal work. By "convergence," he referred to the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the collaboration among diverse media industries, and the migratory behavior of audiences who moved freely and transversally across these platforms. In such an era of convergence, all media interacted dynamically, and the power balance between producers and consumers shifted unpredictably. Through participatory cultural practices, audiences consumed and produced content across various media and platforms. Hence, media circulation depended on active consumers (Jenkins 2008: 1–4).

The K-pop industry has proactively embraced the diversification of digital media and social networking services (SNS). Numerous scholars have analyzed how K-pop strategically utilized new media platforms to bypass the traditional global distribution systems dominated by Western record labels, allowing it to reach international audiences directly and establish itself as a new form of global popular culture (Oh/Lee 2013: 34–58; Parc/Kawashima 2018: 23–48). Hence, the industry's rapid adaptation to the digital paradigm shift served as a crucial factor behind K-pop's worldwide success.

K-pop's industrial strategies evolved, and its fandom's communication structures and participatory modes transformed. The advent of smartphones dramatically enhanced the mobility of fans as local subjects, while the widespread SNS adoption enabled interactions that transcended time and space. YouTube, particularly, became a venue for fans' content reproduction and a community organized around shared aesthetic and emotional tastes. These environmental changes provided the foundation for K-pop fandom localities to expand beyond their original borders, facilitating their diffusion into the global sphere. The most notable example of K-pop companies' strategic responsiveness and fandoms' participatory culture is the interaction between BTS and their fandom, ARMY. Even before their official debut in 2013, BTS shared extensive self-produced content through YouTube and Vlogs, fostering active communication with fans. In response, ARMY engaged in multilayered participation that extended beyond conventional fan activities in the digital sphere. This included

daily interactions and reciprocal exchanges, forming affective bonds and collective emotions. Simultaneously, they engaged in active content reproduction, including music video interpretations, translations, reaction videos, cover dances, and fan-made merchandise. Through self-organized networks, they carried out streaming parties, hashtag campaigns, and global promotional initiatives, achieving large-scale collective mobilization.

Scholars have noted that such practices by ARMY expanded the cultural meanings of BTS's content and facilitated the transnational circulation of its image and cultural capital (Chang/Park 2019: 260–287; Ju 2019: 19–33; McLaren/Jin 2020: 100–127). From Appadurai's perspective, ARMY, as a local subject, disseminated BTS-related "local knowledge," creating the conditions for generating new local subjects across regions. The processes of content production and reproduction expanded the boundaries of the fandom community as a neighborhood, giving rise to a new global ARMY neighborhood. Hence, distinctive forms of cultural participation and communication that characterized K-pop fandom were extended, diffused, and replicated. K-pop audiences outside Korea shared the communicative and participatory practices once unique to Korean fan communities. Therefore, a globalization of locality took place.

However, some scholars, following Appadurai's concerns, have interpreted the expansion of K-pop culture as "colonization." Gooyong Kim argued that K-pop's popularity abroad amounted to an indirect consumption of American pop music disguised as "Korean," which should be understood as Korea's subordination within an American neoliberal capitalist model (Kim 2017: 2379–2380). Therefore, it is a "recolonization of the colony." This view is valid to the extent that K-pop's globalization operates within global capitalism and aligns with the goals of the Korean cultural industry. However, fans and audiences consume culture in ways that diverge from industry prescriptions. Through highly developed media and network environments, they construct a collective intelligence and generate new cultural meanings through their creativity and agency. In several countries, K-pop audiences have recontextualized the genre within their cultural frameworks, transforming fandom practices into forms of activism. This recalls how Korea's new generation youth in the 1990s actively appropriated elements of global culture to form distinctive tastes, cultures, and fandom-based localities. Hence, following the globalization of locality, a relocalization is taking place.

For instance, in 2020, the United States fans protested against racial discrimination with a no-show campaign at Trump's Tulsa rally (Belam 2020). In 2021, Chilean supporters of Gabriel Boric utilized K-pop fan media for political outreach (Yim 2021). In 2024, Taiwan's Bluebird Movement adopted K-pop symbols for protest and solidarity (Wu 2025). These cases show K-pop's transformation into political capital through global fan engagement. As K-pop fandoms are relocalized within different socio-cultural contexts, they become interconnected through shared practices and mutual recognition. This corresponds to what Dirlik conceptualized as

the emergence of the translocal, a form of conscious and practical solidarity among localities. Translocality provides the foundation for resisting the colonization of local spaces by global capitalism and the nation-state. Hence, K-pop fandom exemplifies a translocal formation, uniting fans across borders through shared affects and collective engagement with local and global issues.

A notable case of this translocal activism is the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. George Floyd's 2020 murder propelled BLM into a global movement against racial and systemic oppression. In solidarity, BTS issued a public statement on X (previously Twitter) condemning racism and, together with Big Hit Entertainment, donated USD 1 million to the BLM Foundation. Within 24 hours, ARMY matched the donation. According to Forbes, the campaign demonstrated the scale and organization of global fandom activism (Rolli 2020). Similarly, the 2021 Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar highlighted how K-pop fandoms operated as translocal agents of activism. On February 1, 2021, a military coup plunged Myanmar into a state of emergency marked by widespread arrests, detentions, and severe restrictions on media and assembly. In response, civil servants, workers, and students initiated a nationwide CDM. Within this volatile context, K-pop fandoms emerged as visible actors in local resource mobilization and information dissemination. For instance, EXO member Kai's fandom provided food supplies to protesters, while BLACKPINK fans donated approximately USD 4,000 to the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). Meanwhile, K-pop fandoms globally amplified local resistance by participating in hashtag campaigns that shared real-time updates on casualties and protest conditions, enhancing the visibility and reach of political information (Gan 2021). K-pop fandom's activism within Myanmar's CDM illustrated a fusion of digital literacy, rapid mobilization skills, and global fan networks, forming a concrete case of translocality in action.

The 2025 Indonesia protests highlighted the evolving translocal dynamics of K-pop fandom activism. Beginning in Jakarta, the protests were triggered by economic discontent and opposition to parliamentary privilege. The demonstrations soon evolved beyond economic grievances, expressing a broader frustration with governmental insensitivity to public hardship. As tensions escalated, the president revoked privileges and reshuffled the finance and security cabinet (Karmini 2025). Hence, K-pop was used as a medium of protest and solidarity. According to interviews with local participants, as reported in Korean media, protesters adopted K-pop as an expressive form of resistance and unity. Girls' Generation's "Into the New World," previously used during the 2004 Korean impeachment protests and the 2020 Thai pro-democracy demonstrations, was sung once again in public gatherings. Additionally, "Take Down," the theme song of the 2025 globally successful Netflix animated series K-pop Demon Hunters, was used as a protest anthem. Videos documenting demonstrations accompanied by "Take Down" circulated on YouTube and TikTok, while music by EXO, Seventeen, and other K-pop artists appeared in solidarity clips

supporting the movement (News1TV 2025).

A significant player in this process was K4P (Kpop4Planet), a global climate action platform co-founded by Lee Dayeon from Korea and Nurul Sarifah from Indonesia. Built on the autonomous and participatory energy of global K-pop fandoms, K4P spearheaded transnational environmental and social campaigns (Chan 2023). On September 9, 2025, K4P's official YouTube channel released a short video titled "All Democracies Are Connected!," which explained Indonesia's protests and the role of K-pop as a mediating form of resistance. The video concluded with a statement: "As fans who love K-pop, let us show solidarity with Indonesia" (Kpop4Planet 2025). These developments underscored how media diversification and cross-platform convergence enabled K-pop fandom activism to produce new localities in different nations and regions. Each locality became interlinked through fandom-based translocal networks. K-pop's global spread will likely foster increasingly diverse and expansive translocal formations, as they hold the potential to serve as alternative public spheres and arenas of identity politics within the globalized world.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the process through which K-pop fandom activism has become translocal by dividing its development into three historical phases from the perspectives of locality studies and fandom studies. The first phase corresponded to the mid- to late 1990s, when Korean audiences actively appropriated global culture and formed a locality grounded in the Korean context. The second phase spanned from the late 1990s to the early 2010s, when fandoms, having acquired expanded networks, challenged the power structures of the cultural industry. The third phase extended from the mid-2010s to the present, during which Korean forms of activism became globalized and were subsequently re-localized within different national and regional contexts, representing translocality.

Based on this framework, the study analyzed the history of K-pop fandom activism by examining factors that shaped the configuration of locality, including changes in internal relational networks within fandoms, shifts in dominant media, and transformations in prominent idol figures. The analysis yielded the following findings. Fandom increasingly emerged as a central agent in the formation of K-pop culture. This perspective moved beyond a nationalist understanding of K-culture as something produced solely by the cultural industry or by Koreans. Instead, it foregrounded the cultural agency of audiences. Particularly, a global fandom offered insight into how the locus of agency within K-culture continued to shift and transform. Moreover, the formation and circulation of K-pop activism demonstrated that the global and the local were engaged in an ongoing reciprocal interpenetration. K-pop culture was localized within Korea before expanding globally and was re-localized within different regions. This illustrated that contemporary popular culture operated

within a structure that enabled dynamic circulation between the local and the global.

K-pop culture increasingly functioned as a means of reconfiguring relationships between producers and audiences, the global and the local, the West and the non-West, and domination and subordination, forming new cultural constellations. Hence, K-culture can be understood as a networked space characterized by continuous hybridity and transversal movement, with the potential for transnational solidarity oriented toward translocality. The significance of this study lies in its re-examination of the history of K-pop as a history of its audiences. Moreover, it holds scholarly value as it clarifies the meanings of the continually transforming and expanding K-pop phenomenon in the contemporary context. This article would contribute to the formation of new perspectives on K-pop and K-culture.

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PAOLA LAFORGIA

REMOVING THE K FROM K-POP? LIMITATIONS AND POTENTIAL OF ONE OF HALLYU'S KEY SIGNIFIERS

Abstract

The term *K-pop* was coined in the 1990s to identify pop music coming from South Korea, which at that time was beginning to gain popularity in neighbouring China and Taiwan. It was only later adopted in South Korea, often with a more specific use to refer to music performed by *idols* rather than to all Korean pop music, although the boundaries of its usage remain blurred to this day. The term K-pop carries the limitation of identifying a musical genre by its country of origin, and for this reason it is often at the centre of criticism and debate. Nevertheless, with the global success of K-pop and the broader *Hallyu*, or Korean Wave, the "K" has become a kind of quality brand that South Korea uses to strengthen its international prestige, extending it to various sectors – from the now well-known K-dramas and K-beauty to newer terms such as K-food and K-technology. Today, the meaning of the K in K-pop is evolving: on the one hand, it functions as a lever of soft power; on the other, figures such as HYBE's Bang Si-Hyuk suggest that abandoning it may be necessary to overcome the limits imposed by the label and redefine K-pop's positioning in the global music market.

By examining the ambiguities inherent in the label K-pop, this paper seeks to show how they contribute to the ongoing redefinition of its positioning in the global

music market and to the complexities of South Korea's use of cultural soft power.

1. Introduction

In November 2023, in an interview given to the «Maeil Business Newspaper» (매일경제), Bang Si-Hyuk–the founder of HYBE, the entertainment company born from the unprecedented success of K-pop group BTS–provoked widespread debate among fans and cultural critics when he stated that «we must take the K out of K-pop», as «continuing as it is now [won't] help the growth of the K-pop industry»[1].

This interview was given at a time when the new collaborative project between HYBE and American record label Geffen Records was in the works: the making of a global pop group formed and trained using what Bang has in various occasions called «the K-pop methodology». This group, KATSEYE, was formed through a new type of survival show that mostly unfolded behind the scenes and partly on YouTube, culminating in a Netflix documentary released in August 2024 called *Pop Star Academy: KATSEYE* (also known as *Dream Academy*). Their debut, however, had already happened two months prior, in June 2024, with the release of a single fittingly titled *Debut*.

While KATSEYE serves as a significant example, this inquiry is not specifically focused on the group. It is noteworthy that KATSEYE is not a unicum: similar projects have emerged across the industry in the last couple of years. JYP Entertainment, another of the major entertainment companies of the K-pop industry, followed a similar path with Girlset (formerly known as VCHA), a girl group also formed through a reality show, *A2K* (short for the indicative "America to Korea"), in partnership with American record label Republic Records. SM Entertainment launched a UK-based boy band called dearALICE in partnership with Kakao, Gamma (a label founded by a former Apple executive), and the British television production company Moon&Back Media. In this landscape, there is also XG, a group whose members come from Japan but are based in South Korea and contracted under a Seoul-based subsidiary of the Japanese label Avex Trax, whose CEO is South Korean.

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1 The full quote is: «사실 나는 요즘 K팝에서 K를 떼야한다는 말을 자주 한다. 이대로 가는 것이 K팝 산업의 성장에 도움이 되냐 하면 나는 아니라고 생각한다. K팝은 이제 더 넓은 시장에서 더 넓은 소비자층을 만나야 한다. 우리가 글로벌하게 보편적 가치에 접근할 수 있는 출구와 입구들을 많이 만들어야 된다고 생각한다. K팝은 지금 구조로 계속해서 가면 나는 분명 성장에 제한이 생긴다고 생각을 하고 있다» which can be translated to «Actually, these days I often say that we should take the "K" out of K-pop. I don't think continuing as it is now will help the growth of the K-pop industry. K-pop now needs to meet a broader audience in a larger global market. I believe we need to create many more entry and exit points that allow us to approach universal values on a global level. If K-pop continues with its current structure, I'm certain its growth will eventually hit a limit». (Source: <https://www.mk.co.kr/news/culture/10868702>)

These so-called "global groups" exemplify one dimension of what removing the K might entail: groups made of non-Korean members, not based in South Korea, but trained as if they were K-pop aspiring stars, and under the supervision of South Koreans. Yet the implications extend beyond nationalities, geography, or production models. To «take the K out of K-pop» also signals an internal shift within the entertainment industry in South Korea and the way K-pop groups operate lately, aimed at moving from the category of K-pop toward the broader label of pop. This paper examines what such a transformation might mean, exploring both the limitations and the potential of the K, particularly in relation to K-pop's musical identity, cultural positioning, and global market trajectory. In doing so, it situates the discussion within the broader context of how the K operates as a marker of national identity, cultural capital, and soft power, and how its redefinition may reshape the global perception of K-pop and ultimately of South Korea.

2. What does *K-pop* mean?

To better understand what removing the K might entail, it is necessary to take a step back and examine when and how the term K-pop emerged, and what it means and signifies. To the day, the term remains the subject of ongoing debate and there appears to be no general consensus regarding its definition. Some even question whether K-pop could be defined as a music genre at all.

In an interview given in September 2018 at the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles, Suga of BTS explicitly said he is «wary of defining K-pop as a genre» and that he would rather use the expression «복합적인 콘텐트»–which in the video subtitles gets translated to "integrated content" but literally means "complex" or "multi-faceted"– because «K-pop includes not just the music, but the clothes, the make-up, the choreography», resulting in «a visual and auditory content package» that he believes «sets it apart from other music genres».[2] In a more recent speech given at the APEC CEO Summit Korea 2025 held in Gyeongju, South Korea, in October, RM of BTS echoed his bandmate's words, stating that «K-pop is not just a genre of music. It is a 360° total package of music, dance, performance, visual style, storytelling, music videos, and even social media».[3]

However, these descriptions, while not wrong, do not make it less true that K-pop is a music genre; on the contrary, the characterisation given by the artists only reinforces that K-pop has a set of distinctive properties that sets it aside from other types of music – which is the dictionary definition of "music genre". The confusion

2 The full interview can be watched here: <https://youtu.be/7sqUaABmhm8?si=D1L-GRLgVVnmYc-Xo>

3 The full speech can be found here: <https://youtu.be/rTeMsiXMdrs?si=1pBhrO-d8rH2osEDe>

probably stems from the ambiguity surrounding the definition of music genre – a topic also frequently debated –, which is ultimately much broader than is often assumed. Music genres are not only "punk rock" or "hip hop", but also "religious music" and "music for children". A music genre is to be understood as a conventional category through which certain pieces of music are deliberately grouped on the basis of shared characteristics or conventions. These common traits do not have to be necessarily musical – as in the case, for example, of *reggaeton*, a type of music originating from Central America which has a distinctive rhythm and speed range – but may instead reflect shared themes or target audiences.

We can thus already establish that K-pop is indeed a genre: one defined by the importance of the visual element in all its declinations. As Giselle of the group aespa also noted in an interview with «Rolling Stone» in October 2023, in line with the words of Suga and RM of BTS, K-pop is «music you see» (보이는 음악)[4]. We could go further and identify additional shared characteristics, but first we need to address the question: who coined the term in the first place, and what exactly was it meant to refer to?

Sources are discordant as to when and where exactly the term first appeared, but they agree that it began circulating in the second half of the 1990s, alongside the term Hallyu (韓流), or Korean Wave, when boy groups and girl groups from South Korea, such as H.O.T. and S.E.S., became hugely popular in neighbouring China and Taiwan. In a paper published in 2021, renowned scholar Dal Yong-Jin, who has written extensively about Hallyu and K-pop, traces the emergence of the word Hallyu back to 1997, when it first appeared in a Taiwanese newspaper, but its consolidation as a term referring more specifically to the success of Korean singers in China to its usage in a Chinese newspaper two years later, in 1999 (Jin 2021: 4148). The same year, the Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism produced and distributed a CD to promote their local music in the Asian continent, titled «Korean Pop Music» in English, but «Hallyu – Songs from Korea» in Chinese, while Kookmin University professor Cho Hyun-jin used the term K-pop in an article for the US edition of Billboard. As K-pop journalist Tamar Herman reports (2019), in the late '90s and early '00s, Cho worked as a correspondent in South Korea for Billboard. «An article he wrote that was published in the Oct. 9, 1999 edition of the magazine titled "S. Korea To Allow Some Japanese Live Acts" was the first time the term "K-pop" appeared in Billboard». But even Cho is unsure whether he actually coined the term or someone else had used it before (Herman 2019). He does not recall hearing it somewhere else and states he took inspiration from the Korean football league name, the K League, to coin the new word, but several other sources are more inclined to affirm that "K-pop" was

4 The full interview can be watched here: <https://youtu.be/dVaCCYKkizk?si=D2Iz9o-d5VwqDKC0B>

modelled after the already existing category of "J-pop", where the J stands for Japan.

The term quickly came to denote not generically Korean pop music but a specific type of South Korean pop music, namely that performed by idols. As in the case of the aforementioned H.O.T. and S.E.S., an idol is a particular kind of artist or entertainer who has undergone years of intensive training in singing, dancing, foreign languages, and more, at an entertainment company overseeing every aspect of their career–from artist management to promotion and distribution. Typically, idols begin their careers as part of a group before eventually pivoting to solo projects or related entertainment activities such as acting or television hosting. The idol model was first introduced and developed in South Korea by Lee Soo-Man, who established SM Studio in 1989, later rebranded as SM Entertainment in 1995, the company under which H.O.T. and S.E.S. operated, and which remains today one of the most influential in the K-pop industry. Lee drew inspiration from both the Japanese idol system, as envisioned and developed from as early as the mid-1960s by Johnny Kitagawa, founder of the talent agency Johnny & Associates, which launched the career of SMAP, NEWS, KAT-TUN and many other popular Japanese pop acts, and the production model of the hugely influential American label Motown, also founded in the 1960s and home to legendary artists such as Diana Ross and Marvin Gaye. Over the past three decades, the K-pop industry has shaped itself around this model of the in-house entertainment company, rather than a record label that relies on external distributors and third-party agencies for other services, as exemplified most notably by SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and the newer entrant HYBE. This structure is undoubtedly one of the main characteristics of K-pop not only as an industry but as a music genre, for it does have an impact on how the music is made and shaped, distinguishing it from other kinds, both local and foreign.

Therefore, even on this basis alone, a clear distinction can already be drawn between K-pop and Korean pop, for not every Korean pop artist is an idol under an entertainment company nor is Korean pop music made under the same conditions. K-pop is thus a genre performed by a specific type of artist – the idol – and characterised by a particular mode of production – the training system and the all-encompassing role of entertainment companies. Nor is K-pop, and neither is Korean pop, interchangeable with Korean popular music, as popular music is a broader umbrella term encompassing all sorts of music genres with wide appeal and intended for wide audiences, such as pop, rock, hip hop, etc., and primarily used in academic contexts. Indeed, in Korean the expression is translated with *daejung eumak* (대중음악), or *daejung kayo* (대중가요), where *daejung* (대중) means 'public', 'the masses', the same word used, for example, in *daejung gyotong* (대중교통), 'public transport'.

What some may find surprising, however, is that the term K-pop has not historically been used as frequently in South Korea as it has been abroad. The Korean Music Awards (한국대중음악상), an annual ceremony that honours local musical artists from

both the mainstream and underground spheres across a wide range of genres, only introduced the categories *Best K-pop Song* and *Best K-pop Album* in 2022, despite having been running since 2004 – a period coinciding with what K-pop fans and historians would call the 2nd generation of K-pop, thus demonstrating that K-pop already existed but had not yet been fully conceptualised or institutionalised as such. Likewise, local streaming platforms such as Melon do not include K-pop among their listed genres; instead, music is divided into *domestic* and *foreign*, and further sub-categorised into genres such as "dance," "ballad," "rock," and so on. On the other hand, as evidenced by the introduction of these new award categories in 2022, it is clear that perceptions are shifting. Over the past three decades, as K-pop has gained remarkable international traction, propelled by the sustained expansion of the Korean Wave–the worldwide interest in Korean culture, media, and products–domestic audiences have, in turn, developed a clearer sense of what kind of music a self-professed K-pop fan might be listening to: namely, idol groups. Interestingly, the term K-pop became more common domestically after it had gained popularity abroad. When Koreans began using the expression, it was largely to refer to that segment of South Korean music which was being exported and was an exportable cultural product–music that had come to represent the nation on the global stage. This is where trouble began: as K-pop grew in popularity overseas, it became increasingly associated by the media with the country it comes from rather than with the music itself, which brings us to the crucial question: what are the implications of defining a music genre through its geographical origin, of coining a name with a reference to the country it comes from?

This is not a new problem. Similar processes have occurred throughout history with musical genres originating from non-Western and non-Anglophone regions. Consider, for example, the aforementioned J-pop, Latin pop, or instances in which a country or people that is not large enough, or whose culture is not widely known or is considered "lesser", have their music grouped together with other geographically and culturally distant musical styles under the broad and problematic category of *World Music*. A label which has fortunately declined in usage after being widely criticised by both artists and scholars for its reductive nature and for ultimately reinforcing the ideological supremacy of the Western musical canon. In a 1999 article written for «The New York Times», David Byrne of the influential American new wave band Talking Heads stated that the term «ghettoizes most of the world's music» (Byrne 1999).

Truth is, K-pop is often performed by artists of non-Korean origin or nationality – for instance, Lisa of BLACKPINK is Thai, Sana of TWICE is Japanese, and Jackson Wang of GOT7 is Chinese; frequently written by non-Korean producers and lyricists – for example, some of NewJeans' most popular songs were created in collaboration with Danish and Norwegian artists, such as Erika de Casier and the duo Smerz; and often sung in other languages, such as English, as in BTS's *Dynamite*, or Japanese, as with a wide range of groups and solo artists, from BoA to newer acts like ENHYPEN.

Thus, questions about categorisation persist. Where is the K of K-pop? What constitutes the Korean element of K-pop? What makes K-pop Korean? In many cases, the only apparent Korean trait is that these works are produced and distributed by companies based in South Korea. The way we interpret the K – its literal meaning and the role it plays in shaping the music, the way fans engage with it, and even the perception of South Korea–sets the stage for the question at the heart of this essay: what removing it may entail.

3. Removing the K

It has now been roughly three decades since the term K-pop entered widespread usage. Like every cultural output, the music genre K-pop has continuously changed and evolved, its shifts often described through "generations": a classification common among fans and critics alike to highlight transformations in musical styles, thematic focus, cultural trends, technologies, and market strategies. Although the exact temporal boundaries of these generations are debated, the newer groups debuting since 2023 seem to represent the fifth generation. This alone reveals an important premise: no music genre is a monolith. Genres are shaped by time, technological advancement, environments, and, in our interconnected contemporary world, also by the interplay of local and global forces. Yet despite the lack of consensus on what K-pop as a genre exactly is, the label still communicates something recognisable. Otherwise, people would not know how to call themselves K-pop fans, nor would Bang Si-Hyuk's recent provocation that «we must take the K out of K-pop» have generated such uproar. His statement appears to be rooted mainly in concerns over current market dynamics, such as slowing expansion in Southeast Asia and radio exclusion in foreign markets when music is performed in the Korean language. From his perspective, removing the K is a pragmatic strategy to secure a more stable position in the global music market. However, such a proposal exposes a worldview in which the pursuit of profit, rather than the preservation and development of cultural value, seems to take precedence. Market pressures overshadow cultural considerations, and this is precisely where many fans' discomfort lies. If K-pop becomes simply pop, flattened to adapt primarily to Western tastes and commercial expectations, then what remains of the very cultural particularities that made it compelling in the first place? In other words, what if the K is more than merely a geographical label, and instead alludes to broader aesthetic tendencies shaped by the Korean cultural context? Yet the moment we try to define what that specifically Korean cultural dimension consists of, we step into complicated territory. Speaking of "Koreanness" always leads to the risk of slipping into cultural essentialism, where culture is treated as static and fixed – which, in turn, can easily lead to stereotypes, reductionism, and even nationalist and racist narratives. Yet pretending cultural differences do not exist would flatten diversity and erase specificity. Ethnomusicologists have long

argued that cultures are not fixed essences but dynamic processes (Nettl 2005); the challenge is then to recognise the cultural specificity of K-pop without insisting that Koreanness is something immutable or isolated from external influences. As RM of BTS said in his aforementioned speech at the APEC CEO Summit Korea 2025, «K-pop is like bibimbap» – a Korean dish of rice mixed with vegetables and other ingredients: «it takes Korea's unique aesthetics, emotions, and production system» but does not turn away «from elements of Western music, like hip hop, R&B or EDM. Just like bibimbap, these parts all keep their unique identities but are mixed together to make something new, fresh, and delightful». Any discourse about removing the K must therefore confront these tensions: cultural particularity versus global integration; innovation versus continuity; capitalist market logic versus the affective investment of fans who embrace K-pop as something Korean; the industry's push for strategic adaptation versus the fear of losing the qualities that first drew audiences, both local and foreign, to K-pop. The risk is not merely losing a letter, but losing the dimension that transformed K-pop into a global cultural force – precisely because it had a different edge and represented an alternative to dominant Western pop. Within such a context, the question is not whether K-pop should evolve, but how.

3.1 Limitations of the K label

It might be argued that Bang is moved more by profit than by concerns over K-pop's cultural value when he calls for removing the K; however, on the other hand, it cannot be denied that the label carries significant limitations within itself that are worth highlighting.

First of all, the same ghettoizing effect Byrne accused the label World Music of having is at play when K-pop gets primarily identified, as the K suggests, with its country of origin – a country that is non-Western, non-white, non-anglophone – rather than with its peculiar characteristics as a music genre (Bryne 1999). In the global music market, the prefix often functions less as a celebration of its peculiar elements stemming from the Korean cultural context and more as a mechanism of segregation, insinuating that K-pop is somehow different from "real pop", which remains implicitly defined by Western, anglophone standards. The same happens, for instance, to Latin Pop, pop music hailing from South America and similarly identified with its ethnic roots. Indeed, when the category of Best K-pop was introduced at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2019, more than an opening toward the genre or a recognition of its popularity and achievements, it was regarded by many fans as a containment strategy: a way to avoid K-pop acts winning major awards like Best Album or Best Video. Rather than competing directly with other international artists, K-pop groups were confined into a separate box, left to compete among Korean acts only. Similar concerns have arisen in 2024 when Billboard changed its charting methodology, giving less leverage to digital downloads and global streaming – categories where K-pop acts usually surpass their American counterparts – and introducing specific

K-pop charts and categories at the Billboard Music Awards (BBMAs). These decisions prompted once again debate among fans and industry observers about whether they were meant to diminish K-pop's influence on the U.S. music market and push Korean artists down the main charts. While officially justified as a matter of "credibility" (Yoon 2024), because digital downloads and global streaming can be easily boosted by fans, fans questioned whether once again it was to avoid K-pop acts to top the charts and favour industry control over fan-driven success, noting that while the rule appears equitable on the surface, radio play–not to mention playola influencing radio spins–gets counted over streams, and K-pop gets little to no radio exposure in the U.S.. It appears that it is not enough to produce music with high technical skill or global appeal: the genre must navigate a world that still measures value by U.S. chart positions and award recognition. Thus, the K might hinder K-pop's climb to worldwide success.

Moreover, by segregating K-pop into its own category, the genre also gets dismissed as a lesser, bad copy of Western music. The discourse surrounding K-pop often portrays it as a foreign bootleg, inauthentic and manufactured, rather than a legitimate participant in the global musical landscape. Some critics would say K-pop has taken from already global existing music genres, appropriated them at times, and not invented anything new. Moreover, one of its markers, the idol training system, which without any doubts can be strict, grueling, and demanding, is too often reduced solely to the controversies surrounding it, such as artist mistreatment, body-shaming, sexual scandals, which, in truth, are the same issues the Western industry is also often guilty of. Little space is given to its positive aspects: its democratic foundation–i.e., the idea that talent can be nurtured–and the way it produces high-level performers, true all-rounders. Yet in the West it is framed negatively as artificial, despite clear parallels with accepted practices in fields such as ballet or high-level athletic training, because «in the West there is this deeply embedded fantasy of the rock star – a rock star acts true to their soul and everyone must accept it as part of their individuality, and only through that does good music come», as Bang Si-Hyuk put it in an interview for «Time Magazine»[5] given in 2019. But ultimately, the obsession with distinguishing "authentic" music from "manufactured" pop is fundamentally a Western anxiety. There is not even one single catch-all term in the Korean language that fully captures

5 The full quote is: «First, I believe in the West there is this deeply embedded fantasy of the rock star—a rock star acts true to their soul and everyone must accept it as part of their individuality, and only through that does good music come. But in reality, devoting a long time to honing and training music-related skills is a tactic used in many professional art worlds. Ballerinas spend a long time in isolation focused only on ballet, but you don't hear people say ballet lacks soul or isn't art. So I think it's a matter of perspective». This was in reply to the following question: «There's a common perception that in K-pop, the music is manufactured by committee, or that it's a top-down system of adults giving material to young artists. Is that accurate?». The full interview can be found here: <https://time.com/5681494/bts-bang-si-hyuk-interview/>

the English term "authentic".

Bang further justifies removing the K in terms of growth strategy. In an interview given in 2023 for Bloomberg Television[6], when asked to expand on why he had previously mentioned «K-pop is in crisis», he explained that «there has been a substantial drop in indicators in South East Asia» and that «while K-pop market share is increasing in the Japanese music market, the Japanese music market has not seen growth in the past ten years». Therefore, «even if K-pop continues to grow, from the perspective of the total accessible markets, it clearly has certain limitations». The solution, from his perspective, would then be to push for K-pop's expansion in the U.S., which seems to be «the only area where growth is possible»; in conclusion giving further reasoning behind the idea of removing the K: «There is always demand for pop music, so the moment K-pop becomes mainstream pop, it can maintain a competitive edge against local music in Southeast Asia».

This strategy, however, as already mentioned, seems to be driven primarily by market expansion rather than artistic vision. Bang's rhetoric frames K-pop's future as contingent upon global commercial domination, aligning success with shareholder growth and influence in the U.S. market. But there is no guarantee that removing or downplaying its Korean cultural grounding in favour of a vague "mainstream pop" characterisation will be successful. The more the market dictates the music, the more the genre risks losing its peculiarities which attracted fans in the first place, and turning away from the communities that built its global popularity, in the pursuit of more numerous, but likely less loyal, listeners. K-pop's soft power emerged before it conformed to the Western market, precisely because it offered an alternative to it. When K-pop began gaining recognition in the West–for example, BIGBANG winning Best Worldwide Act at the MTV Europe Music Awards in 2011 and Best Fan at the MTV TRL Awards Italy in 2012, or BTS starting to gain recognition in the U.S. from 2017 onwards–it was not when the industry bent to Western market logics; indeed, it almost came as a surprise. At the time, lyrics were in Korean, and styles in melodies, clothing, music videos were shaped to appeal mainly to the Korean and Asian audiences. And yet, the growing global community of fans were enthusiastic about it and circulating it, contributing to its international expansion and success.

If K-pop becomes a globalised pop template without its Korean specificity, the risk is producing universal sameness–and in the process, weakening the cultural magnetism that transformed a small East Asian country into one of the most influential players in the 21st century pop cultural landscape.

6 The full interview can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAd0L-Rkts8M>

3.2 Potential of the K label

In his seminal work published in 2005, American political scientist Joseph Nye proposed a definition of a kind of power that «co-opts people rather than coerces them» (Nye 2004: 5). In opposition to *hard power*, which translates to the military and economic power a country might have, this «second face of power» (Nye 2004: 5) he calls *soft power* coincides with «the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments» (Nye 2004: X). It is configured as a form of power which «arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies» (Nye 2004: X).

This concept has been widely applied to explain the effects of Hallyu on South Korea's international leverage–a fact explicitly acknowledged on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea[7]. In this context, K-pop has become a crucial instrument of soft power, generating global interest not only in South Korean music but in the nation's culture at large. The K, which originally was attached only to K-pop and K-dramas (Korean TV series), namely the first South Korean cultural exports to gain popularity beyond national borders, has since grown into a broader cultural marker now attached to everything from "K-beauty" – to refer to Korean cosmetics products and procedures – to "K-food" and "K-literature". The prefix has come to function not just as a national signifier but also as a trademark of quality. It is immediately recognisable: products and artists carrying the K now benefit from international curiosity, commercial momentum, and even cultural legitimacy, where they were once dismissed or overlooked. In the last couple of years, K-beauty specialist stores have multiplied around the globe. In the case of K-pop, which is the focus of our research, more and more artists are proud to be called such, since its global recognition keeps on growing.

The broad application of the K – which, as argued earlier, entails the risk of ghettoisation – has, however, increasingly become an advantage in recent years. As South Korea and its culture become more widely known and appreciated, artists who are not strictly K-pop are nonetheless categorised as such and included in related playlists and media coverage simply by virtue of being Korean. While this dynamic comes with all the issues previously discussed, and may further increase confusion about the definition of K-pop as a music genre, it simultaneously facilitates the international circulation of a wider range of Korean cultural products and increases the interest for and appreciation of them. Ultimately, it enables more artists, more music genres, and "more Korea" to gain visibility abroad. In this sense, the K becomes a desirable affiliation rather than an imposed limitation. As RM of BTS stated in an interview with Spanish newspaper *El País* in March 2023: «You can get sick of Spotify calling us all K-pop, but it works. It's a premium label (Gosálvez 2023). It's

7 See here: <https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/wpge/m_5664/contents.do>

that guarantee of quality that our grandparents fought for», referring to how poor the country was «just 70 years ago, [when] there was nothing», and it was getting aid from the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations. «But now, the whole world is looking at Korea», he proudly affirmed. Thus, the K seems to be reframing Koreanness not as a constraint but as an asset.

Indeed, the K label, despite its blurred boundaries, signals a recognisable aesthetic philosophy, production methodology, and set of cultural traits. Even as artists innovate musically and visually, the K anchors their work within a shared framework, facilitating audience understanding and critical reception. It provides both a branding advantage and a cultural anchor, allowing fans, industry professionals, and media to navigate the global K-pop landscape with a clear reference point. Although such understandings may slightly vary, audiences are generally able to identify what K-pop is; otherwise, it would not be possible to categorise artists into generations, critically engage with Bang's statement at the centre of our inquiry, or notice when international artists draw inspiration from K-pop, which is increasingly the case. For instance, when American singer-songwriter and producer Underscores released the song *Do It* in autumn 2025, online users reacted on social media to the music and video – which features synchronised choreography – asking "what generation of K-pop this might be", and renowned music magazine «Pitchfork», in its review by Joshua Minsoo Kim, recognised that «*Do It* takes late-2000s Britney, fuses it with 2nd-generation K-pop's electro-pop maximalism, and throws in the industrial verve of Jam City's *Classical Curves*»[8]. Underscores have publicly shared their love for K-pop and cited it as an inspiration.

One might argue that the K – the Korean element of K-pop – lies primarily in an *attitude*: that of digesting, adapting, reinterpreting and remixing both Western and Asian styles (Bae 2022). As in the aforementioned quote by RM of BTS, «K-pop is like bibimbap», a mixture of pre-existing elements from which something new emerges. Although K-pop undeniably draws on foreign musical genres, it cannot be reduced to a mere imitation. Truth is, the global diffusion and dominance of music from the US, the UK and the anglophone sphere at large, which is the result of historical, economical, and political reasons, «has had a profound impact on the music traditions worldwide», as Larkey noted when investigating Austropop, or pop hailing from Austria (Larkey 1992: 151), and K-pop is no different. His analysis of how the Austrian genre developed provides a useful framework for understanding how new music traditions are born in such a landscape. He proposed «a model of diffusion and tradition-formation for popular music innovations», which consists of four phases: first, the consumption phase, in which music from abroad enters the local

8 The review can be read in full here: <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/tracks/underscores-do-it/>

market and is consumed by the audience; second, the imitation of the innovations this new music has introduced to the local audience; third, the de-anglicisation of the imported music, which consists in incorporating the innovative elements within the local tradition and taste; and last, the "re-ethnification" phase «of these styles as independent centres of creativity and innovation and the struggle for their cultural legitimacy with the 'established' traditions, resulting in socio-cultural alliances with a hierarchical, hegemonic structure» (Larkey 1992: 152-153).

In this sense, K-pop can be seen instead as a form of adaptation and resistance to the hegemony of Western music; in the words of Larkey (1992: 153), as «an effort to compete economically and culturally for 'space' and 'time' – i.e. tradition – within the hegemonic structures of the prevailing industry». In a way, K-pop is bound to incorporate foreign elements because of the power relations at play in the global music industry, and is even compelled to do so in order to be taken seriously and compete on equal footing with the industry's dominant forces.

Yet, from early on, Korean producers and idols differentiated their work from the sources that inspired it: mixing multiple genres and styles within a single track; juxtaposing sung parts with rapped sections; including dedicated dance-break segments, reflecting the centrality of choreography; and crafting songs whose very structure anticipates the integrated audio-visual experience typical of K-pop. As already noted, the visual dimension – music videos, styling, choreography, promotional imagery, etc. – has never been a mere accessory but a core pillar of the genre's identity. Unexpected harmonic shifts, abrupt key changes, and experimental song structures further contribute to this distinctiveness, often reflecting both particularities tied to the use of the Korean language and local musical aesthetic preferences. Seen in this light, the K becomes a powerful signifier of all these elements. As an online blogger noted in response to Bang's interview at the centre of this essay, «It's not just about the language the lyrics are written in that makes a song "English" or "Korean". There are musical things like song structure, ways of singing, chord choices, production choices, etc. that go into crafting a song. And these things will be different depending on the market»[9]. In their words: «Dropping the "K" from K-Pop means not only retooling the types of songs being released to appeal to a "global" (read American) ear (a direction that many, myself included, are not all that fond of, which is why we turned to K-Pop in the first place) but it also means throwing away the decades of existing branding, which includes ties to the very popular K-drama market, as well as shedding the existing market for K-Pop (aka people like me) in the hopes of pulling a larger audience from… mainstream pop fans?». Such a comment perfectly captures the uproar that followed Bang's argument.

9 The blog entry can be found here: <https://www.theidolcast.com/posts/just-pop-hold-the-k>

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, the K is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it ghettoises and limits the scope of K-pop and Korean cultural products at large. On the other hand, it has become a powerful cultural marker and premium brand, signalling a distinct aesthetic and methodological approach that is widely recognisable. Today, we witness a tension between expanding the global reach of K-pop and maintaining its identity without alienating longtime fans. The debates around groups such as the aforementioned KATSEYE[10] highlight this. As Lee Gyu-tag, professor of cultural studies at George Mason University Korea, noted when commenting on the question of "who owns K-content", posed by journalist Ha-nee Shin in an October 2025 article for «JoongAng Daily», «overseas audiences already call the genre K-pop anyway… debates on whether [KATSEYE] should be considered Korean don't really mean much when they are already perceived as such» (Shin 2025)[11]. While the girl group has not labelled itself or their music as K-pop, global perception effectively situates them within the genre, and the majority, if not the entirety, of their fans seems to be coming from the ranks of the K-pop audience.

K-pop constitutes a paradigmatic example of a "cultural hybrid" (Burke 2009), a genre of music born from and affected by *global cultural flows*, as theorised by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. In our contemporary globalised world, people, artifacts, and ideas move across national boundaries, resulting in an ongoing restructuring of individual and collective identities (Appadurai 1990). What K-pop is, and who its main actors are, is therefore constantly reshaped. In a way analogous to Arjun Appadurai's understanding of the neighbourhood as an existing context that enables the production of local subjects, the geographical locality of K-pop initially provides a material and cultural framework within which such subjects can emerge: «[...] existing places and spaces, within a historically produced spatiotemporal neighbourhood and with a series of localised rituals, social categories, expert practitioners, and informed audiences, are required in order for new members to be made temporary or permanent local subjects». But «as these local subjects engage in the social activities of production, representation, and reproduction (as in the work of culture), they contribute, generally unwittingly, to the creation of contexts that might exceed the existing material and conceptual boundaries of the neighbourhood» (Appadurai 1996: 185), or, in our case, the boundaries of K-pop.

The tension surrounding the K extends beyond music and raises broader

10 It is worth noting the group is composed almost entirely of non-Korean members except for one.

11 The full article can be found here: <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-10-16/entertainment/movies/Who-owns-the-K-in-Kcontent-From-KPop-Demon-Hunters-to-Katseye-Western-origins-blur-the-line/2408255>

questions about South Korea's cultural output in the landscape of its growing soft power. The recent global success of Netflix's animated film *K-Pop Demon Hunters* is a fitting example. Created by Korean Canadian director Maggie Kang, co-directed with American Chris Appelhans, and produced internationally with a multinational cast, the film raises questions about who owns the K and what constitutes K-content. As Director Yun-seong Kang of *The Outlaws* fame, noted at the BCWW (BroadCast Worldwide) Conference 2025, «purely Korean works» no longer exist in today's industry landscapes, given the «many financing sources intertwined worldwide». Now is a crucial moment for Korea to consolidate its global cultural presence, redefining both Koreanness or K-ness. Rather than removing the K, it may be more fruitful to expand what the letter encompasses. In the words of Lee Gyu-tag: «Many Koreans still associate Korean-ness only with traditional elements. For Korea to further foster its cultural ecosystem, embracing contemporary Korean culture is integral going forward» (Lee 2021). The sentiment is echoed by Chae Hwi-young, as of 2025 Minister of culture, sports and tourism, who stated that «safeguarding what is rightfully Korean while also remaining open to new opportunities is the most preferable approach», stressing that «pursuing a strictly "Made in Korea" approach is not the way forward».

Returning to the main question of our investigation, that of the removal of the K from K-pop, Lee Gyu-tag (Lee 2021) voices skepticism: «If a K-pop singer debuts with a tune that sounds like the music of American singer-songwriter Charlie Puth, will he be able to stand out and survive? If he deviates from K-pop and focuses only on pop, what kinds of competitive edges can he have? […] When it comes to Jungkook [of BTS], he could make a splash because he had already branded himself as a K-pop singer, but this is not the case for other rookie singers». Bang's strategy may make sense from a business perspective, but Lee stresses: «To draw more fans, K-pop should not repeat what it already did. So, the mission for K-pop companies is to explore other distinctive Korean elements that can enthrall people». Our suggestion would be not to remove the K, but to expand its meaning carefully.

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TAEHYUN BAEK

THE AESTHETICS OF MEMORY AND RESISTANCE: CINEMATIC PRACTICE OF THE KOREAN NEW WAVE IN *A SINGLE SPARK*

Abstract

This study examines how *A Single Spark* rearticulates the social realism of the Korean New Wave as a cinematic practice of memory situated at the junction of representation and mediation. The film foregrounds the labor of recording by showing how social memory acquires form and authority through the collection of traces, the arrangement of testimonies, and the editing of fragments into a coherent narrative. It also develops an affective regime in which the repressed history of labor becomes perceptible through rhythm, as registered in the cadence of work, the duration of silence, and the suspended time of witnessing. Within this sensorial field, structural violence becomes perceptible as an experience organized through perception.

The film's self-reflexive design consists of the chronicler's narration, the mother's testimony, and the worker's silence. This composition installs ethical distance as a formal principle. That distance becomes a condition for cinematic thought, shaping how the film acknowledges the limits of testimony while sustaining the demand to remember. The analysis situates this sensorial realism within the institutional discourse of the 1990s, when film festivals and critical writing reframed realism as a privileged language of national identity and cultural legitimacy. This institutionalization also preserved the reflective tension of this sensorial realism, enabling the Korean New

Wave to persist as a mode through which Korean cinema continues to negotiate memory, history, and mediation.

1. Introduction

The modern history of Korean cinema is a history of struggle over the language of perceiving reality (Kim 2004: 15-19). Throughout the trajectories of censorship, industrialization, democratization, and globalization, cinema in Korea has evolved beyond a medium that merely records social experience to become a cinematic practice through which such experience is interpreted and reflected upon (Choi 2010: 1-14). Korean cinema has continuously existed on the unstable surface of reality, and the worlds it presents have been formed within the persistent tension between institutional control and aesthetic resistance (Park, in Gateward 2007: 15-35). The Korean New Wave of the 1980s and 1990s emerged precisely at this point of tension, marking a decisive moment when Korean cinema began to rethink its historical experience. This period did not simply signal the rise of a new generation; it marked a transformation in which the old language of realism regained its cinematic practice and was reconfigured as a sensibility capable of organizing social memory.

The films of the New Wave functioned not as factual reproductions of reality but as a mode of social realism that explored the relations between memory, emotion, institution, and cinematic practice. This transformation was closely intertwined with the political and economic shifts that defined the conditions of Korean cinema. Under the military regime of the 1980s, filmmaking operated under censorship and production control, where the direct representation of reality was effectively prohibited. Thus, cinema developed a language of metaphor, discontinuity, and silence to navigate the boundaries of expression. Following the June Democratic Uprising of 1987, the atmosphere of democratization that spread across society opened new possibilities to recall the repressed layers of reality and emotion. The relaxation of censorship, expansion of film festivals, and growth of independent film movements allowed cinema to participate in the formation of social memory and the reconstruction of public discourse (Robinson, in Shin&Stringer 2005: 15-31). These changes enabled realism to move beyond a mere instrument of social critique and evolve into a politics of memory.

Research on Korean cinema in the 1990s primarily developed around institutional perspectives such as structural changes following industrialization, the diversification of genres, and the establishment of global distribution networks. Consequently, the Korean New Wave has often been reduced to a form of pre-industrial social cinema. Although discourses on realism have acknowledged its value in terms of political engagement and social critique, they have rarely illuminated the cinematic structure

of thought embedded within it. The social realism of the 1980s and 1990s was not merely a mode of critique; it constituted a response to the question of how history should be remembered and how the suffering of others might be represented. This shift marked the movement of realism from a mode of representation to a mode of cognition, and understanding this transformation remains a crucial task for contemporary scholarship on Korean cinema.

For Moon (2006: 1-19), the “New” within the Korean New Wave is not a matter of stylistic renewal but a desire for historical self-recognition shaped by the contradictions of colonial experience, national division, and modernization. He argues that the realism of the Korean New Wave operates as an aesthetic practice that reflects on the violent memories embedded in Korea’s modern history. This perspective offers an important foundation for reconfiguring the modernity of Korean cinema and exposes its dual position as a product of modernity and a site of critical reflection upon it.

Shin interprets the resurgence of Korean cinema after democratization through the cultural structure of *ssitkim* (씻김), a traditional ritual of purification and release (Shin 2014: 20-106). He argues that Korean cinema derived its sense of renewal not from the achievement of democratization but from its failure, that is, from the effect of an incomplete historical transition. His discussion reads the New Wave not as a point of industrial growth but as a process of mourning and ethical reconfiguration, analyzing how cinema restructured social sensibility through the repeated working through of trauma. Korean cinema was not a product of political liberalization but a practice that transformed unfinished historical tasks into an artistic practice.

Kyung Hyun Kim further introduces the concept of “post-trauma” in Korean cinema through his analysis of *A Single Spark* and *A Petal* (Kim 2004: 107-129). He argues that these films do not simply reproduce the memory of violence but construct a new ethics of witnessing by exposing the impossibility of testimony and the necessity of ethical distance. *Park Kwang-su*’s film is understood not as a continuation of revolutionary narrative but as a form of ethical gaze that endures historical rupture. In this sense, the realism of the Korean New Wave is redefined as a complex structure operating at the intersection of affect and cinematic practice. Kim extends this line of thought (Kim 2006) by conceptualizing the Korean New Wave as a discursive field of negotiation between *minjung* (people’s) cinema and art film discourse. He analyzes how the oppositional realism of the 1980s was reconstituted within the institutional frameworks of the 1990s. According to her, realism ceased to function solely as a language of critique and was transformed into a form of institutionalized cultural capital. When the Busan International Film Festival officially proclaimed the “The Revival of Realism” in 1996, the Korean New Wave was repositioned from a critical movement to an aesthetic of national identity (Yi in Yi & Ha 1996: 9-29). This process of institutionalization, while attenuating the radical edge of realism, established the institutional conditions through which cinematic reflection could persist, thereby carrying a dual significance within the historical trajectory of Korean cinema.

These studies collectively demonstrate that the Korean New Wave was not merely an aesthetic trend or political movement; it was a complex intersection of cinematic practice, institutions, and affect. However, a critical gap remains: few studies have examined the realism of this period through the lens of a cinematic practice of memory and mediation. The realism of Korean cinema has always spoken on behalf of the experiences of others, confirming its own cinematic position within that very distance. The core of the New Wave lies in the recognition of the impossibility of representation and in the reflective stance that emerges within that gap, rather than in the representation of social reality. This awareness expands realism from a language of representation to a mode of cognition and, ultimately, to a system of cinematic thought.

This study focuses on this epistemological transformation, reinterpreting the realism of the Korean New Wave as a form of cinematic cognition rather than a language of social critique. Its objectives are threefold. First, it seeks to identify the "industrial or generational transition" in the 1980s and 1990s as a decisive moment in which the cognitive structure of Korean cinema was reshaped. Second, it aims to demonstrate that the films of this period functioned less as representations of reality than as devices for constructing memory. Third, it examines how film festivals and critical discourse reconstituted the continuity of critical reflection in the process of institutionalizing New Wave realism. By foregrounding mediation as a formal problem and institutional trajectory, this study extends existing accounts of New Wave realism and specifies how realism endures as an ethical practice of memory. Through these aims, the study argues that the realism of Korean cinema operated as a historical structure of cognition that mediated memory, affect, and cinematic practice, beyond simply being a mode of social critique. Ultimately, the Korean New Wave was not a record of historical events but a cinematic mode of thought that produced historical consciousness. Cinema did not serve as a mirror reflecting reality but functioned as a space of reflection that continually questioned how reality might be remembered. In this sense, the Korean New Wave is not the past of Korean cinema but a central legacy that continues to constitute the present of its thought.

2. The Historical Formation of Korean New Wave

The emergence of Korean New Wave cinema was closely intertwined with the rapid political and economic transformation of South Korea from the late 1970s to mid-1990s. Under a regime of strict governmental control, the national film industry concentrated on the production of commercial entertainment, while critical representations of social reality were effectively constrained by censorship. Within these limits, a younger generation of filmmakers gradually sought to visualize the darker aspects of contemporary life. The *Young Sang Shi Dae* (영상시대) movement of the 1970s and the film collectives of the early 1980s experimented with politically

resistant images outside the boundaries of the commercial industry. This established the foundation upon which Korean New Wave cinema would later develop (Mun 2012: 359-388).

The production environment of the 1970s was characterized by rigorous censorship. Political and social conflicts were excluded from cinematic representation, compelling filmmakers to embed indirect signs and metaphors within narrative structures (Yi 2020: 10-32). The traumas of war, violence of industrialization, and hardship of urban poverty were transposed into stories of familial collapse and individual despair. This strategy enabled filmmakers to convey the fractures of reality without overt political confrontation. Audiences, reading between narrative and *mise-en-scène*, perceived the latent tension of repression, while cinema visualized the invisible truth residing within those gaps. Although censorship restricted direct expression, film—within its limitations—generated new layers of cinematic reality.

The 1980s marked a period in which state violence and the growing desire for democratization collided within Korean society. The Gwangju Uprising in 1980 epitomized this confrontation, but censorship in the press and arts prevented the event from entering the realm of public memory. Paradoxically, this repression became the driving force for new cinematic expression. Independent film collectives such as *The Seoul Film Group, Yallasung* (얄라성), *Shadowplay* (그림자놀이), and *PURN Production* (푸른영상) took 16 mm cameras to the streets, recording realities that had escaped official documentation (Kim 2013: 149-157). Their practice transcended artistic autonomy and assumed the character of social testimony. By the late 1980s, this tendency expanded to campus-based video activism, combining political engagement with the ethics of documentation. Cinema was no longer merely an industry governed by the state and capital but emerged as a medium of social articulation.

The nationwide democratization movement of June 1987 opened new possibilities for Korean cinema. With the relaxation of censorship and resurgence of independent film production, filmmakers expanded the social foundation of realist filmmaking (Paquet 2009: 16-53). Films turned their cameras toward the streets, factories, and campuses, establishing new spaces for collective expression. This era consolidated the ethics of testimony and social memory, allowing cinema to emerge as a medium of social articulation. Directors such as *Park Kwang-su*, *Jang Sun-woo*, and *Lee Myung-se* inherited the activist realism of the previous generation while exploring the intricate relation between individual interiority and social structure. Their works did not merely expose contradictions but also captured the affective and cinematic dimensions of those contradictions, defining a renewed phase of Korean realism.

The formation of Korean New Wave cinema was decisively influenced by the institutional transformations of the film industry in the early to mid-1990s. The revision of the Motion Picture Law in 1984 and expansion of international distribution networks following the 1988 Seoul Olympics altered the conditions of film production and exhibition. The growing attention of overseas film festivals introduced Korean

cinema into the global discourse, enabling its works to be interpreted not merely as social commentary but as expressions of national identity. The establishment of the Pusan International Film Festival in 1996 marked the institutional culmination of this trajectory.[1] Its inaugural edition featured the retrospective *Korean New Wave: Retrospectives From 1980 to 1995*, which defined the movement as a historical turning point in Korean film history (Ahn 2012: 31-57). The festival framed the films of the 1980s as a "revival of realism," positioning socially critical directors as the foundation of a new Korean cinema. The retrospective represented a critical moment in which the Korean New Wave was formally acknowledged as a cultural category within the international arena.

Such institutional recognition provided the conditions for the Korean New Wave to move toward the center of the national film industry. The current of independent realism was no longer perceived as a peripheral movement; it was redefined as a form of cultural capital acknowledged by the state and industry. This process of institutionalization partially diminished the movement's radical cinematic practice (Kim 2013: 309-313). Realism gradually shifted from a language of social critique to a cultural brand, being recontextualized through the frameworks of film festivals and critical discourse. Emerging from an aesthetic of resistance, the Korean New Wave came to occupy a complex position within the intertwined systems of state endorsement and industrial approval. *A Single Spark* was produced at the very center of this transitional moment. Its financing also condensed this conjuncture: a public fundraising campaign organized by roughly 7,600 citizens raised approximately KRW 250 million as seed money (Chon 2020: 2), and the film eventually secured conglomerate backing through *Daewoo*'s investment (Paquet 2005: 38). The post-democratization film environment allowed for social engagement, but industrial circulation required a degree of formal compromise. *Park Kwang-su*'s direction navigated these conditions by pursuing critical realism and institutional viability. He incorporated the foundational practice of realism inherited from the independent film movement into the narrative framework of commercial cinema, producing a new cinematic mode that revealed social reality while integrating affective and cinematic dimensions (Shin 2014: 43-64). This strategy exemplifies how the Korean New Wave negotiated its position along the boundary between artistic expression and institutional structure.

The Korean New Wave constituted a movement defined by two interrelated forces: political resistance and institutional legitimation. Its aesthetics originated in a mode of social realism that sought to reveal the conditions of reality, but it developed into a cultural practice that organized collective memory and social meaning. Within this

1 In 1996, the official name was Pusan (PIFF), but it has since been changed to Busan (BIFF).

trajectory, *A Single Spark* occupies a dual position: restoring the memory of labor while exposing the institutional conditions that shape such restoration. This historical framework provides the foundation for examining the structures of representation and mediation in the following sections.

3. Reconstructing Memory: Social Realism and Mediation in A Single Spark

3.1 The Dual Temporality of Memory and the Aesthetics of Social Realism

A Single Spark represents a pivotal point in the evolution of realism within the Korean New Wave. The film re-documents the realities of labor obscured by the shadow of industrialization while exposing the process through which memory is constructed. Its narrative and form resemble not a retrospective recounting but a reassembly of remembrance. By restoring a past event and revealing the gaze and affective structure through which that restoration takes place, the film foregrounds the mechanisms of representation itself. Rather than directly narrating *Chun Tae-il*'s life, the film centers on the process through which *Young-su*, the writer, reconstructs his biography. This structure invites critical reflection on the historical truth of the event and the system through which it is represented.

The narrative of *A Single Spark* juxtaposes two temporal dimensions: one depicting *Chun Tae-il*'s life as a sewing laborer in the *Dongdaemun Pyeonghwa Market* of the 1970s and the other following an intellectual *Young-su* in the 1980s who investigates and documents *Tae-il's* story. These two times are not arranged in linear succession but interlock as structures that define each other's meaning. The past is rendered in black and white, accentuating the texture of factuality, whereas the present is filmed in color, visualizing the process by which memory is reconstructed. This contrast transcends mere differences in mise-en-scène, distinguishing the temporality of memory from the ethics of seeing. Black and white embodies the order of fact and the trace of suffering; color signifies interpretation and restoration. Through this parallel structure, the film reveals that memory is a continual rewriting within the consciousness of the present, rather than being a complete reproduction. The scenes depicting *Chun Tae-il*'s life repeatedly return to the spaces of labor. The confined architecture of the sewing factories, the incessant sound of needles, and the dense air filled with heat and dust visually embody the violence of industrialization. The camera closely follows the movements of bodies, translating the rhythm of labor into sensory experience. This visual rhythm oscillates between monotony and tension, transmitting the temporality of labor through affective means. *Chun*'s gaze is always directed upward, but the camera captures him from below, accentuating the hierarchical weight of structural oppression. Through this cinematographic stance, the film compels the viewer to perceive the pressure of environment before

the psychology of the individual.

At the center of memory lies *Chun Tae-il*'s self-immolation. This event does not serve as the film's climax but as the axis around which memory is constructed. The scene is not rendered as a grand spectacle; instead, it unfolds through silence and absence. The camera lingers on the stillness surrounding the flames rather than on the fire itself. The absence of sound and the elongation of time prevent the viewer from consuming death as sentimental drama. This choice reveals an ethical stance that resists turning *Chun*'s death into an image of heroism or martyrdom. Rather than representing the tragedy, the film exposes the distance and tension generated in the process of retelling that tragedy (Kim 2017: 105-121). From the perspective of the present, the figure who records *Chun Tae-il* is an intellectual *Young-su*. He occupies an external position: one who has not directly experienced the realities of labor. This character gathers materials, listens to testimonies, and organizes memories to write a book about *Chun*'s life. His gaze seeks to restore *Chun*'s existence, but it simultaneously exposes the limits of that restoration. The process of documentation is one of interpretation, and such interpretation is inherently incomplete. The film does not conceal this incompleteness. Within the narrative, the chronicler persistently reflects upon his own gaze, confronting the point at which language can no longer contain the reality of labor. Thus, this figure functions as a device that articulates the gap between testimony and representation (Bae 2008: 95-103). By presenting the intellectual's narration in parallel with *Chun Tae-il*'s experience, the film investigates how memory is mediated. *Chun*'s voice never appears as direct speech but is transmitted through recollection, documentation, and interviews. This structure reveals that memory is not fixed within individual consciousness but continuously translated through social relations. The film critically depicts the process by which the language of testimony becomes organized within the intellectual's discourse, thereby exposing the structural condition in which the worker's voice can only be mediated by another's language. In doing so, the film questions the cinematic practice of memory while visually articulating the site where the politics of representation operates.

Therefore, the narrative of *A Single Spark* follows a dual movement: the impulse to restore a forgotten history and the awareness of the limits of representation revealed in the process of that restoration. By juxtaposing these two movements, the film reveals that the recovery of memory is not a simple return to the past, but an act of cognition situated in the present. When images of the past intersect with the gaze of the present, memory ceases to be a closed record and becomes an open field of thought. *Chun Tae-il*'s death remains not a completed narrative but a continuing question that demands renewed reflection. Film aesthetics reorganize the cinematic practice of realism within the structure of affect. The image does not imitate reality but invites a reconsideration of it through the movement of emotion. The scenes of labor function not as representations of suffering but as constructions of social sensibility, while the scenes of death are expressed not through close-ups of outcry

but through the persistence of silence. This restraint of emotion extends the film's ethical stance. Rather than provoking sympathy or identification, the film sustains the conditions of distance and reflection. At this point, the Korean New Wave sought to unite the language of social critique with the practice of writing history.

A Single Spark extends social realism into the domains of affect and cinematic practice. The film records the suppressed realities of industrialization while revealing the process by which memory is translated into institutional language. The representation of the past is always mediated by the gaze of the present, which is conditioned by structural circumstances. The film broadens the scope of realism by exposing, rather than concealing, these conditions. At this juncture, the Korean New Wave matured into an aesthetic that united the language of social critique with the cinematic practices of remembrance. *A Single Spark* reorganizes the memory of Korea's modernization through the death of an individual. What the film engages with is not death but the ways in which death is repeatedly narrated. Memory appears not as a fixed narrative but as the outcome of social practice through which the film becomes a medium of cinematic reflection. This structure reveals the essential orientation of the Korean New Wave: the recording of reality and the cognition of memory mutually generate a space of social awareness. The film's aesthetics of remembrance left a lasting imprint on the historical narratives of later Korean cinema, establishing the grounds upon which realism could continue to renew itself (Kwak 2003: 90-113).

3.2 Testimony, Mediation, and the Incompleteness of Representation

The narrative of *A Single Spark* restores the memory of suppressed labor while revealing the mechanisms through which that restoration is mediated. This is because the film does not directly reenact *Chun Tae-il*'s struggle but places the process of recording him anew at its core. At the center of the screen is not *Chun Tae-il*'s own voice but *Young-su*, who organizes and interprets his story (Lee 1996: 39-72). He stands as a witness to reality and an organizer of the narrative, translating *Chun*'s life into the language of society. Such a structure demonstrates that the memory of labor can never speak autonomously; it is always reconstructed through the language of another subject.

The narration of *Young-su* is presented as an ethical attempt to restore *Chun Tae-il*'s life. He collects documents, conducts interviews, and leaves records to uncover the reasons for *Chun*'s self-immolation. However, this is not merely a factual reconstruction process. His gaze translates *Chun*'s act into the language of interpretation; through this translation, the worker's voice becomes partially institutionalized. The film does not conceal this institutionalization; rather, it exposes how the intellectual's perspective shapes the construction of *Chun*'s memory. The chronicler seeks to comprehend *Chun*'s suffering, but by reordering that pain through his own language, he unconsciously exercises power. The film renders this inevitability of mediation visible as a fissure within its narrative. Thus, the memory of labor appears in the form

of the intellectual's testimony. The film weaves together interviews with coworkers, the mother's recollections, and fragments from notebooks and diaries such as scattered pieces of memory. However, these fragments do not remain independent utterances. In the process of editing, they are absorbed into the chronicler's narration and reorganized in a single narrative order. This structure restores labor's memory from the intellectual's perspective while reinserting that memory into his discursive system. The film's social realism operates in this contradictory position. There exists a will to reveal suppressed voices, but the mode of presentation reproduces the structure of the power it seeks to contest. The film juxtaposes the impossibility of testimony with the control of the narration, continually exposing the residue of what cannot be spoken. This tension remains unresolved until the end.

The mother's narrative constitutes another stratum of this film. Her voice is presented as the source of emotion and the locus of mnemonic truth. However, her testimony does not exist in a wholly independent language. Her sorrow and remorse are mediated through the chronicler's editing and interpretation before reaching the audience. On screen, the mother becomes a symbol of grief while functioning as an image embedded in *Young-su*'s narrative. He regards her with an affectionate gaze; thus, we apprehend her not primarily as a laborer's mother—a speaking subject—but as a bereaved mother—a sign of motherhood. Within this dual structure, emotion coexists as the ground of truth and an aesthetic device. The film sustains this coexistence while exploring how the transmission of emotions is transformed into social meaning. At this moment, emotion operates not as a simple exchange of feelings but as an affective language generated at the site of what cannot be spoken. Silence and sobbing, together with the camera's slow zooms and fixed shots, convert that affect into a visual rhythm. Emotion does not replace reality but becomes the conduit through which reality is sensorially perceived. In other words, we come to view *Chun Tae-il*'s story not primarily through a historical lens but through the gaze of emotion.

This film's structure is directly connected to Korea's modern and contemporary historical consciousness. *Young-su* is an outsider who has not directly experienced the reality of labor, but he voluntarily assumes the responsibility of recording it. His actions embody a form in which empathy and reflection are intertwined; through this process, the film tests the possibility of ethical representation. However, the moment the outsider's gaze organizes *Chun Tae-il*'s life, it inevitably occupies the position of power. The film remains largely unaware of this, presenting Chun only as he is captured through the intellectual's perspective. Rather than resolving this limitation, it leaves *Young-su*'s gaze as an unfinished process of inquiry. This narrative choice prevents *Chun*'s story from being subsumed into a closed conclusion and sustains a structure of continual questioning (Kim 2015).

A Single Spark transforms this strategy of representation into a rhythm of affect, functioning not as proof of fact but as a medium of perception. The expressions,

silences, and breaths of the characters on the screen form layers of emotion that resist translation into language. This emotion constitutes not a simple exchange of sentiments but the residue of social experience. Through these affective layers, the film enables the sensory recognition of structural violence. However, this emotion does not lead to complete identification. The spectator is guided to empathize with the characters' suffering while becoming aware of how that suffering is presented. The film's structure aligns the viewer not with the workers as subjects of representation but with the intellectual gaze that observes them and sustains a tone of sympathy. This imbalance is not a narrative flaw but a structural condition that reveals the inevitability of memory being translated into social language. This narrative structure corresponds to the broader current of Korean cinema at the time. By refusing to replicate reality and highlighting what could not be articulated within the dominant discourse, the film fulfills a distinct social function (Kim 2005). Korean cinema of the 1980s and 1990s did not simply reproduce reality; it transformed repressed emotions and memories into visual rhythms, constructing a new stratum of social realism. *A Single Spark* stands at the center of this transition. The presence of the chronicler threatens the credibility of representation; however, without him, the structure of memory could not be completed. From this ambivalent position, the film converts the limitations of realism to aesthetic conditions. In other words, the moment the impossibility of representation is acknowledged, the film acquires the capacity to make reality sensorially perceptible.

Chun Tae-il's story is presented through the intellectual's self-reflection. Within this dual structure, his memory functions only as a renewed point of social practice. This configuration extends beyond the restoration of past facts, transforming the act of remembering into a cinematic practice that renders it present. Film realism does not indicate a fixed meaning; rather, it is continually generated through the processes of interpretation and perception. The camera often moves as if it were still, gazing intently at faces or deliberately excluding surrounding sounds. Such a direction does not seek to display reality objectively but to lead the spectator to contemplate within the space of absence. In this sense, realism is no longer a genre of social representation but an aesthetic structure that produces a rhythm of cognition. *A Single Spark* does not reconstruct a completed history but continually explores the process of its historicization. The film attempts to restore the voice of labor while revealing that such a restoration is always predicated on incompleteness. Memory exists only through the processes of interpretation and mediation, and this incompleteness forms the foundation of cinematic reflection. Restoration, interpretation, testimony, and narration illuminate one another to form the film's inner tension, which has left a lasting influence on how Korean cinema continues to think about reality.

This incompleteness does not remain a mere limitation. *A Single Spark* shapes a new sensorial realism through the absence of testimony. The pain that eludes language is transformed into the rhythms of silence, emptiness, and breath, becoming

perceptible through the senses. This rhythm does not draw the viewer toward simple identification but makes reality felt anew within the distance of pain. The Korean New Wave allows social reality to be experienced not through the reproduction of fact but through the structure of emotion. At this point, social realism moves beyond the cinematic practice of narration to become a reflection of sensation, and memory revives as a present experience unfolding across the visual and aural planes.

4. The Korean New Wave and the Institutionalization of Memory

A Single Spark exposes the dark underside of Korea's modernization. This section traces the process through which memory is translated into a social language. The key lies in how the film transforms an individual's death into a question of historical debt, guiding the spectator to perceive the past through an ethical sensibility. In this respect, the camera does not merely evoke sympathy or emotional agitation but enacts a social transposition of the historical event it represents. Through every element of its image and narrative, the film compels the viewer to perform acts of judgment, thereby visualizing the process through which perception becomes a part of the structure of collective memory. Such representation extends beyond personal experience and unfolds as a form of social affect.

The social consciousness awakened by the film's realism begins with its structural choice to depict the writing of history through the gaze of the intellectual. Through this framing, the film refuses to consume *Chun Tae-il*'s death as an isolated event and constructs it as a site of social meaning (Lee 2018: 131-133). What is crucial is that the camera does not present his act as a heroic decision. The meaning of *Chun*'s death is produced not by the worker-subject but by the intellectual who interprets it. Thus, *Chun*'s self-immolation transcends the individual tragedy and moves into the sphere of social cognition. The spectator does not remain a passive witness to suffering but is guided to contemplate the structure that generates such pain through the intellectual's gaze. Thus, the film functions not as a device of identification but as an apparatus of mediation—one that inherits the gaze of intellectuals who, throughout the 1980s, sought to write counter-histories. What is important is that the nature of the film is integrated with the institutional and discursive mechanisms within society. In the cultural environment that followed democratization, films belonging to the current of social realism came to function as a language of critique and a sign through which national identity was articulated. Works dealing with social suffering were transformed into public values, and emotional experience was translated into the language of institutions. *A Single Spark* exemplifies this transformation. The film's affective structure does not end within the spectator's interiority; it extends into journalistic discourse, educational narratives, and the rhetoric of cultural policy. This expansion signifies the incorporation of social realism into a broader system of collective memory. Subsequently, the rhythm of affect articulated by the film became

the framework through which Korean society continued to remember *Chun Tae-il*.

Since the 1990s, social realism in Korea has shifted from the language of social movements to that of cultural identity. Institutions absorbed the critical ethos of cinema and rearticulated it as a form of public value, while social realism became part of the national discourse (Tolentino 1999: 84-90). *A Single Spark* exposes the boundary of this transformation. The film's affective language was renamed within festivals and critical discourse as a "revival of realism." In particular, the retrospective *Korean New Wave: 1980–1995* at the Busan International Film Festival positioned films as the central work of the movement, institutionalizing social realism as the identity of Korean cinema (Ha/David 2014: 25-33). This act of naming stabilized the film's meaning within an institutional framework but simultaneously confined its cinematic practice within a fixed mode of interpretation. Memory was consolidated as a social value, but the process of its formation came to be regulated by institutional structures. The languages of film festivals and criticism accelerated the institutionalization of memory (Kim 2014). *Chun Tae-il's* death extended beyond the affective structure of the film to become a national narrative of commemoration. Forms such as textbooks, documentaries, memorial events, and museums shared the emotional grammar that was first established by the film. However, as emotion was institutionalized it transformed into a stabilized meaning. The film's unresolved questions and ethical distance were gradually replaced by fixed schemata. The incompleteness inherent in social realism was reinterpreted within institutions as a "completed value," and memory was converted from an object of reflection into a form of normativity. This transformation partially effaced the instability that once defined realism but simultaneously preserved realism as a language of social consensus.

The institutionalization of social realism during this period was not merely a process of approval but a reorganization of collective affect. The audience's emotions were rearranged within the language of institutions through which society constructed its own mode of perceiving the past (Han 2017: 213-228). Nevertheless, *A Single Spark* continues to be re-screened and re-evaluated. This persistence demonstrates that the film still functions as a cinematic practice of the present. It does not exist as a completed record of the past but as a mechanism through which society reflects upon itself. This function is inseparable from the fact that the film's institutionalization foregrounded the intellectual's authorship while displacing the worker's gaze, translating it into the framework of public memory. We must not forget that cinematic representation is, by nature, an act of incompleteness. Every act of representation takes place from a position that speaks on behalf of another's pain, and the instability of that position constitutes the very ground of ethics. The film refuses total understanding and identification, thus establishing a space for cinematic reflection. This attitude persists even within the process of institutionalization. Although memory has been formalized through public systems, a gap of ethical distance and self-reflection continues to remain at its core. That gap is the source of

the critical continuity sustained by the Korean New Wave.

A Single Spark stands as the most distinct example of how cinematic representation expands into the system of social memory. The film begins with an aesthetic of revealing reality and arrives at a social practice of shared remembrance. Through this process, social realism ceases to be a singular aesthetic category and transforms into a cinematic system in which emotions, institutions, and memories intersect. The film organizes collective memory through the flow of affect, and that memory generates new modes of cinematic reflection. This cyclical structure forms the sustainability of the Korean New Wave and establishes social realism as a social language. The contemporary significance of *A Single Spark* lies in its capacity to provide a lasting space to reflect on how society constructs memories. What the film leaves behind is not merely the restoration of an event or the myth of an individual but an attitude toward memory and historiography. The rhythm of affect is transposed into the emotional structure of society, and cinematic language continues to circulate within institutional frameworks. This complex movement constitutes the essential legacy of the Korean New Wave, in which cinema attains social meaning and reveals the process through which the politics of memory become the language of culture.

5. Conclusion: The Legacy of the Korean New Wave

The Korean New Wave emerged at the intersection of modernization and democratization as a collective attempt to rearticulate the repressed realities of society in a renewed social language. Despite censorship and industrial constraints, cinema reconstructed the strata of life excluded by the state and became a space in which the cinematic practice of memory could take form. *A Single Spark* stands at the apex of this movement, translating the silence and debt paid for industrialization into the visual language of the film. By restoring the reality of labor and structuring the process of that restoration as a narrative, the film presents a new cinematic dimension of realism.

The realism articulated in this work is not a reproduction of fact but the ethics of remembrance. The past is rewritten within the perception of the present, and this process of reconstruction constitutes the center of the film. The juxtaposition of images and the intersection of temporalities operate not only as cinematic devices that reveal reality but also as a visualization of how memory is shaped through social relations. Realism no longer concerns the mere representation of fact; it evolves into an ethical attitude through which society reflects upon itself. In this process, the film constructs a social affect structure that connects individual experiences with collective memory.

A Single Spark restores the memory of labor by showing how such restoration inevitably passes through another's language, with the presence of the recorder, the structure of editing, and the restraint of emotion exposing the incompleteness

of representation. The film reveals the silence embedded in the historiography of modern and contemporary Korea. Although it does not recover the subjectivity of those marginalized within the larger social currents of its time, the Korean New Wave paradoxically emphasizes their significance by exposing the absence of their voices in history. The pain of workers is translated into social awareness through the rhythm of affect. The film continues to compel the spectator to perform an ethical judgment within the distance between empathy and reflection.

Simultaneously, the film inevitably fixes its meaning within the dimensions of institution and discourse. Since the 1990s, social realism has come to occupy a dual position as a tool of critique and a signifier of national identity. Film festivals and critical discourse placed *A Single Spark* at the center of the Korean New Wave, defining its meaning as a "revival of realism." However, this naming confines the film's significance to a socially sanctioned value, subsuming its critical potential within institutional structures. As the film's affective structure was transformed into a mode of collective memory, social realism was further solidified as a language of resistance and an authorized aesthetic. This institutionalization process became a condition for the continuity of the Korean New Wave. Critique, resistance, and institutionalization did not cancel one another; their coexistence sustained the cinematic vitality of the medium. *A Single Spark* stands at the heart of this tension, illustrating the forms of critical language that persisted even through institutional assimilation. The Korean New Wave extended the sensibility of social ethics while rewriting history through its cinematic practice. Its instability—its refusal of closure—constituted the very condition through which realism could survive within the institutional order.

Ultimately, *A Single Spark* embodies the most complex legacy of the Korean New Wave. The film reconstructs reality while revealing the limitations of its own act of remembrance. The social realism pursued by the Korean New Wave contains a dual nature: an ethical sensibility that exposes social inequality and a self-reflexive gaze that contemplates its own mode of representation. These two elements define and sustain one another, shaping the historical sensibility of Korean cinema.

The Korean New Wave no longer remains a historical style; it endures as a structure of perception and a mode of remembering. The questions posed by *A Single Spark* continue to resonate. They reappear in the works of subsequent generations, renewing the forms of memory and the configurations of social responsibility. The dual legacy of the Korean New Wave resides in this capacity for renewal. As cinema functions not only as a mirror reflecting society but also as a medium through which society reconsiders itself, *A Single Spark* remains a film of the present.

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TEACHING KOREAN COLOR TERMS AND RELATED METAPHORS AND IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS - WITH A FOCUS ON INTERMEDIATE TO ADVANCED LEARNERS -

Abstract

This study proposes an instructional model for teaching metaphors and idiomatic expressions based on Korean color terms to intermediate and advanced learners of Korean. Korean color terms are closely associated with cultural and cognitive meanings and are frequently extended into metaphorical and idiomatic expressions, which often pose difficulties for foreign language learners due to their semantic opacity and cultural specificity.

This study analyzes the extended meanings of native Korean color adjectives, including black, white, red, blue, and yellow, and suggests pedagogical approaches to facilitate learners' understanding and use of such expressions. Drawing on the Lexical Approach and integrating the OHE (Observe–Hypothesize–Experiment) instructional framework with task-based principles, the proposed model emphasizes chunk-based input and discourse-level inferencing activities.

Authentic materials, such as dramas and web dramas, are incorporated to establish discourse-level contexts, upon which learners engage in output-oriented tasks that

require the active production of color-based metaphors and idiomatic expressions. Through these instructional strategies, the proposed model aims to address the cognitive and linguistic demands of intermediate to advanced learners and to enhance their ability to interpret and appropriately use metaphorical and idiomatic expressions in real-life communicative contexts.

1. Introduction

Color terms are not merely linguistic units that denote visual hues. They constitute semantic systems shaped by the cognitive structures and experiences of language users. The meanings and usage patterns of color terms differ across languages, and these differences are particularly pronounced in metaphorical and idiomatic expressions. For example, in the Korean proverb "검은 머리가 파 뿌리가 되도록" ('until black hair becomes the root of a spring onion')[1], "검은 머리" (black hair) symbolizes youth. In addition, the convention of avoiding the use of red ink for the names of deceased persons illustrates how color terms can extend to metaphorical and symbolic meanings.

Color terms used in metaphorical and idiomatic expressions are often fixed in specific meanings and forms. As a result, they are difficult to replace with other color terms from the same semantic category. For instance, "새빨간 거짓말" ('an extremely red lie') denotes an obvious and absurd falsehood. Substituting it with "붉은 거짓말" ('a red lie') would sound unnatural.[2] This fixedness demonstrates that color terms in metaphors and idioms carry nuanced semantic distinctions. It also highlights their central role in constructing idiomatic meaning through metaphorical extension.

These features present significant challenges for foreign learners in both comprehension and practical use. Most contemporary Korean language textbooks, however, primarily introduce color terms with their basic meanings, that is, as the names of colors. Their metaphorical and idiomatic uses are insufficiently addressed. Although idiomatic expressions are typically introduced at intermediate and advanced levels, they tend to focus on body, emotion, or animal-related expressions. Consequently, learners have limited opportunities to systematically engage with color term in metaphors and idiomatic expressions.

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1 It signifies lasting until one's black hair turns white, that is, for a lifetime or until death.

2 According to the National Institute of the Korean Language's *The Korean Basic Dictionary* (한국어기초사전), "빨갛다" (adjective) is defined as "brightly deep red like the color of blood or a ripe chili pepper," and is translated as 'crimson.' The prefix '새-' can be added to emphasize the color. In contrast, '붉다' is defined as "the color of something being like that of blood or a ripe chili pepper," and is translated as 'red.'

Due to these characteristics, Korean color terms in these expressions pose considerable challenges for foreign learners in both comprehension and production. Consequently, instructional approaches should move beyond the teaching of basic color names to incorporate idiomatic meanings, cultural backgrounds, and symbolic values. This study analyzes the semantic structure and usage patterns of Korean Color Terms in these expressions and proposes learner-oriented instructional strategies aimed at enhancing Korean language pedagogy.

2. Previous Studies and Research Method

2.1. Trends in Research

Research on color terms has expanded from its early focus on art and native Korean linguistics to the field of Korean language education for non-native speakers since the 1990s. Beyond morphological analysis, interdisciplinary approaches, including cognitive linguistics, contrastive linguistics, and cultural education, have been increasingly employed to develop teaching and learning models.

Color terms constitute semantic systems that reflect the cognitive and cultural experiences of language users. Therefore, a cognitive perspective is crucial for understanding their categorization, semantic extension, and conceptual structures. From a cognitive linguistic viewpoint, Koo (2008) analyzed the categorical formation of Korean color terms and the comprehensive features of “푸르다” (‘blue/green’), demonstrating how concrete meanings derived from natural phenomena extend to abstract, symbolic, and emotional meanings. Moon (2013) examined the conceptual metaphors of color terms in idiomatic expressions, showing that they frequently convey evaluative and emotional meanings, particularly in expressions of negative affect. Jang (2008) cataloged the five native Korean color terms “검다, 희다, 붉다, 푸르다, 누르다” and analyzed the non-substitutability of color terms in idiomatic expressions as well as the perceptual and semantic differences resulting from prefix or consonant and vowel substitutions. These studies provide a theoretical foundation for understanding Korean color terms, serving as a basis for pedagogical applications.

In terms of teaching and learning models, Shin and Kim (2004) classified frequently used color terms into noun and adjective categories, systematically organized morphological, suffixal, and pragmatic information, and proposed teaching sequences and domain-specific models. Kim (2016) analyzed the color-symbolic content of *Sejong Korean textbooks* (세종한국어) and suggested educational items and utilization methods aligned with international curriculum standards. Nevertheless, these studies left room for improvement as they did not provide concrete classroom activities or learner-centered teaching strategies, highlighting the need for research that bridges theoretical insights and practical application.

From a contrastive linguistic perspective, studies of Korean color terms have focused on learners from Chinese, Japanese, and English-speaking backgrounds.

A recent example in European languages is Hyun and Hur (2023), who developed teaching activities based on Byram's intercultural competence model for German-speaking learners. They applied these activities in actual classes and empirically verified their effectiveness, demonstrating their pedagogical validity. Lee (2025) compared the "blue" series of color terms in Korean "파랗다, 푸르다" with Italian terms 'azzurro, blu, celeste' identifying sources of semantic confusion for Italian learners. These insights illustrate how cross-linguistic differences can inform the development of more effective teaching strategies in Korean language education.

2.2. Research Methods

The five basic native Korean color terms are "검다 (까맣다)", "희다 (하얗다)", "붉다 (빨갛다)", "푸르다 (파랗다)", "누르다 (노랗다)".[3] Noting that these five basic colors are frequently used in metaphorical and idiomatic expressions, this study analyzed the headwords in the National Institute of the Korean Language's *The Korean Basic Dictionary* (한국어기초사전),[4] focusing on idioms and proverbs, and consulted *The Standard Korean Language Dictionary* (표준국어대사전)[5] as needed to account for general Korean usage by native speakers.

This study focuses on the five basic native Korean color terms as they appear in metaphorical and idiomatic expressions. It analyzes their morphological combinations and the types of semantic extension within idiomatic contexts, and based on this analysis, proposes instructional strategies for teaching color terms in metaphorical and idiomatic expressions. These strategies are designed for intermediate- and advanced-level Korean learners, employing the web drama *Find Her* (그녀를 찾아줘)[6] as a media-based language learning resource.

3. Metaphors and Idiomatic Expressions with Color Terms

3.1. Form of color terms

Korean color terms are primarily realized as adjectives, but also appear in a variety of other parts of speech, including nouns and verbs. Depending on their part-of-speech realization, color terms perform different syntactic functions within sentences,

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3 Son (2000:134) identifies "검다, 희다, 푸르다, 누르다, 붉다" as basic color adjectives and analyzes "까맣다, 하얗다, 파랗다, 노랗다, 빨갛다", which are formed through phonological alternation, as variants characterized by increased brightness and saturation.

4 An online dictionary by the National Institute of Korean Language with 50,000 basic terms for learners, offering simple definitions, examples, grammar, and multimedia resources. https://krdict.korean.go.kr/kor/mainAction

5 https://stdict.korean.go.kr/

6 It is a work jointly produced by the Sejong Institute Foundation and KBS in 2017, presented in a sitcom format of about 10 minutes per episode, with subtitles available in English, Chinese, Indonesian, and Spanish, and composed of relatively simple dialogue.

which in turn leads to variation in their semantic interpretation. Even when the same color concept is involved, its realization as an adjective, noun, or verb results in different syntactic roles, and this gives rise to differences in meaning in metaphors and idiomatic expressions with color terms.

(1) Parts of Speech of Korean Color Terms

a. Nouns: 검은색/까만색/검정 ('black'), 흰색/하얀색/하양 ('white'), 붉은색/빨간색/빨강('red'), 푸른색/파란색/파랑 ('blue'), 누런색/노란색/노랑 ('yellow')

b. Adjectives: 검다/까맣다 ('black'), 희다/하얗다 ('white'), 붉다/빨갛다 ('red'), 푸르다/파랗다('blue'), 누르다/노랗다 ('yellow')

c. Verbs[7]: 까매지다 ('to become black'), 하얘지다 ('to become white'), 빨개지다 ('to become red'), 파래지다 ('to become blue'), 노래지다 ('to become yellow')

Korean color terms can express subtle differences in color through consonant or vowel changes and affixation. Consonant changes indicate the saturation of a color, as in deep and light. Vowel changes express brightness, as in bright and dark. In addition, color terms containing bright vowels give a light and lively impression, whereas those containing dark vowels convey a heavy and somber feeling.

(2) Consonant Changes[8]

a. 가맣다: black with a light and pale tone.

b. 까맣다: black with a deep and intense tone, like a night sky with no light.

c. 거멓다: black with a dark and pale tone.

d. 꺼멓다: excessively black, an extremely dark tone.

The prefixes "새-" and "시-" can be added to emphasize the chroma (saturation) or lightness of a color. The prefix 새- is generally used with bright vowels, while 시- is used with dark vowels. These prefixes are also applied to the basic Korean color terms "까맣다" ('black'), "하얗다" ('white'), "빨갛다" ('red'), "파랗다" ('blue'), "노랗다" ('yellow')'.

(3) Prefixes[9]

a. 새까맣다: extremely black; emphasizes intense blackness.

b. 시꺼멓다: very dark black; indicates an excessively dark shade.

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7 *The Standard Korean Language Dictionary* (표준국어대사전) includes the terms "검어지다, 붉어지다, 붉히다, 누레지다" in its vocabulary list, whereas *The Korean Basic Dictionary* (한국어기초사전) includes only "붉히다" and "누레지다".

8 In *The Standard Korean Language Dictionary* (표준국어대사전), the word "검다" includes the entries "감다" and "깜다" in its vocabulary list, whereas these are not included in *The Korean Basic Dictionary* (한국어기초사전).

9 Terms expressing states with added suffixes, such as "거무데데하다", "거무뎅뎅하다", "거뭇하다", "거무숙숙하다" and "꺼무튀튀하다" are rarely used in metaphors or idiomatic expressions and are therefore not presented.

3.2. The Meanings of Color Terms in Metaphors and Idiomatic Expressions

3.2.1. “검다”와 “까맣다”

The color terms “검다” and “까맣다” are mainly used with negative meanings, but they can also carry neutral meanings. ‘검다’ often represents crime, immorality, or malice, as in expressions “검은 돈” (‘black money’) or “검은 속셈” (‘hidden motives’). When combined with terms referring to the mind or behavior, it can be emphasized as “새까맣다” or “시꺼멓다”. Additionally, “검은 구름” (‘black clouds’) and “검은 그림자” (‘black shadows’) indicate despairing situations, while “검은 뱃속을 채우다” (‘to fill a black stomach’) symbolizes greed. The proverb “검은 데 가면 검어지고 흰 데 가면 희어진다” (‘One becomes black if one goes to a black place, and one becomes white if one goes to a white place’) refers to the influence of one’s environment.

In neutral expressions, the expression “검은 머리를 가진 짐승” (‘an animal with black hair’) refers to a human being, while the term “검은 머리” (black hair) in “검은 머리 파뿌리 되도록” (‘until black hair becomes the root of a spring onion’) symbolizes youth.

The color term “까맣다” is used to mean ‘completely’ or ‘not at all’, as in “까맣게 모르다” (‘to not know at all’) or “까맣게 잊어버리다” (‘to forget completely’). It is also used to express negative states or emotions. For example, “눈앞이 깜깜하다” (‘one’s vision is pitch dark’) indicates despair, and “(속이) 새까맣게 되다/타다” (‘to have one’s insides turn pitch dark/burn’) conveys anxiety or nervousness. In neutral usage, “까맣게” in expressions such as “까맣게 멀다” (‘too far away’) or “사람들이 까맣게 모여 있다” (‘people gathered in huge numbers’) indicates a large amount in terms of time, distance, or quantity. In short, “검다” is primarily an adjective with symbolic meaning, while “까맣다” often functions as an adverb to emphasize degree.

Black 검다/까맣다	Metaphors and Idiomatic Expressions	Literal Translation	Meaning of Color Terms
검다	검은 돈, 검은 마음, 검은 속셈	black money; black heart; black scheme	Illegal, immoral, or undesirable things
	검은 구름, 검은 그림자	black clouds; black shadow	Hopeless or depressing situation
	검은 손을 뻗치다	To stretch out a black hand	To approach to deceive or exploit.
	검은 뱃속을 채우다	To fill a black stomach	To satisfy one's desire with a dishonest intention or plan.

검다	검은 데 가면 검어지고 흰 데 가면 희어진다	One becomes black if one goes to a black place, and one becomes white if one goes to a white place	People tend to be influenced by circumstances or the people surrounding them.
	검은 머리 가진 짐승은 구제 말란다	It is advised not to save an animal with black hair	An expression used to criticize people who tend to forget other's favors after receiving help.
	검은 머리 파뿌리 되도록	until black hair becomes the root of a spring onion	For a very long time until one becomes old with all of one's hair turning white.
까맣다	까맣게 모르다. 까맣게 잊어버리다	To not know blackly; to forget blackly	To have no knowledge at all; completely forget
	까맣게 얼굴색이 변하다	One's face turns black	To turn pale/dark from shock or illness
	까만 옛날 일, 까맣게 오래되다, 까맣게 멀다	A black old event; to be blackly old; to be blackly far	A very distant time or distance
	사람들이 까맣게 모여 있다	People are gathered blackly	A countless number of people are gathered
새까맣다	(속이) 새까맣게 되다	The inside becomes pitch black	To feel anxious, restless, or distressed
깜깜하다[10]	눈앞, 머릿속, 앞날이 깜깜하다	One's eyes; mind; future is pitch dark	To see no way forward; to be at a total loss
	기억이 깜깜하다, 세상 물정에 깜깜하다	Memory is pitch dark; ignorant of worldly affairs	To have no memory of something; to be completely ignorant

tab. 1. "검다/까맣다" *Metaphors and idiomatic expressions*

10 The term "깜깜하다" means 'very dark, to the point that nothing can be seen' and can be replaced with "감감하다" or "캄캄하다" to indicate the degree of darkness.

3.2.2. "희다"와 "하얗다"

The term "하얗다" is primarily used in its adverbial form and carries both negative and neutral meanings. In a negative sense, it appears in expressions such as "얼굴이 하얗게 질리다" ('the face becomes white'), which describes a state where the face loses color due to fear or cold, and "머릿속이 하얘지다" ('the inside of one's head turns white'), which refers to a state in which no thought comes to mind because of shock or tension. This is similar to "까맣게 잊어버리다" ('to forget completely'), although the latter specifically refers to a state in which memory fades over time. In addition, in situations of embarrassment or awkwardness, the expression "허옇게 되다" ('to become whitish') is also used. On the other hand, in a neutral sense, "하얗게 모이다" ('to gather in large numbers') describes a crowd of people, while "하얗게 밤을 새우다" ('to stay up all night') refers to remaining awake throughout the night. This expression symbolizes brightness associated with open eyes and stands in contrast to "깜깜하다".

White 희다[11]/하얗다	Metaphors and Idiomatic Expressions	Literal Translation	Meaning of Color Terms
하얗다	얼굴이 하얗게 질리다	the face becomes white	One's face turning white with cold or out of terror
	하얗게 모이다	gather in white	Being in great numbers
	하얗게 밤을 새우다	stay up white night	Staying up all night
	머릿속이 하얘지다	the inside of one's head turns white	Becoming blank or dazed due to shock or tension
허옇다	허옇게 되다	to become whitish	Feeling awkward due to being shy or sorry.

tab. 2. "희다/하얗다" *Metaphors and idiomatic expressions*

3.2.3. "붉다"와 "빨갛다"

The expression "얼굴이 붉다" ('the face is red') is based on a physiological reaction that occurs when one is angry or embarrassed. It can also be expressed using "빨개지다" ('to become red') or "붉히다" (to make red). In addition, the expression "눈시울을 붉히다" ('to redden one's eyes') conveys emotions such as being moved or feeling sorrow. For

11 In *The Standard Korean Language Dictionary* (표준국어대사전), "희다" is presented in metaphors and idiomatic expressions, such as "희고 곰팡이 슬다" ('to be white and moldy') or "흰 눈으로 보다" ('to see with white eyes'), whereas *The Korean Basic Dictionary* (한국어기초사전) does not present these expressions.

warning signals or alert situations, the expression “빨간불이 켜지다” (‘a red light turns on’) is used. Moreover, “새빨간 거짓말” (‘an extremely red lie’) means ‘an obvious lie’, and “눈이 시뻘겋다” (‘the eyes are blood-red’) describes a person blinded by greed.

Red 붉다[12]/빨갛다[13]	Metaphors and Idiomatic Expressions	Literal Translation	Meaning of Color Terms
붉다	얼굴이 붉다	the face is red	The face becomes flushed due to anger, embarrassment, or similar emotions.
	눈시울을 붉히다	to redden one’s eyes	The edge of eyelid becomes red due to sadness or being moved emotionally.
빨갛다	빨간불이 켜지다	a red light turns on	Indicates a warning or dangerous situation.
새빨갛다	새빨간 거짓말	an extremely red lie	An outrageous and palpable lie that can easily be revealed.
시뻘겋다	눈이 시뻘겋다	have red-hot eyes	To intently focus on seeking one's own interest.

tab. 3. “붉다/빨갛다” *Metaphors and idiomatic expressions*

3.2.4. “푸르다”와 “파랗다”

The color terms “푸르다” and “파랗다” are generally used as color terms symbolizing immaturity, youth, vitality, and hope, carrying both positive, neutral and negative connotations. In their positive and neutral meanings, expressions such as “푸른 청춘” (‘blue-green youth’) and “새파랗게 어리다” (‘to be very blue-green-young’) represent very youth and inexperience, while “푸른 꿈” (‘blue-green dream’) and “푸른 희망” (‘blue-green hope’) signify future-oriented aspirations and optimism. In addition, “공기가 푸르다” (‘the air is blue-green’) describes clear and refreshing air, and “파란불이 켜지다” (‘a blue-green light turns on’) metaphorically refers to a sign that things are proceeding smoothly. Conversely, these color terms can also convey negative nuances. The expression “시퍼렇게 살아 있다” (‘vividly blue-

12 In *The Standard Korean Language Dictionary* (표준국어대사전), metaphors and idiomatic expressions such as “사상이 붉다” (‘one’s ideology is red, symbolizing communism’) and “붉고 쓴 장” (‘red and bitter paste’) are presented, whereas these expressions are not included in *The Korean Basic Dictionary* (한국어기초사전).

13 *The Standard Korean Language Dictionary* (표준국어대사전) presents metaphorical and idiomatic expressions such as “빨간 거짓말”, “빨간 상놈”, whereas *The Korean Basic Dictionary* (한국어기초사전) only presents “새빨간 거짓말” and “벌건 거짓말”.

green alive’) implies vivid vitality, yet it is often used in a negative or grim context. Similarly, “서슬이 푸르다” (‘One’s wrath is blue-green’) and “칼끝이 퍼렇다” (‘the tip of the sword is blue-green’) express a cold, intimidating, or threatening atmosphere. The idioms “세력이 푸르다” (‘power is blue’) and “푸른 양반” (‘blue-green nobility’) metaphorically depict a person or group with strong influence, but often carry a critical undertone. Furthermore, “파랗게 질리다” (‘one’s face or lips turns blue-green’) and “얼굴이 파래지다” (‘one’s face turns blue-green’) describe a loss of complexion caused by fear or cold.

Thus, “푸르다” and “파랗다” are employed to express various emotions and states, such as vitality, hope, threat, or fear, depending on the brightness and phonetic form of the color term. Notably, variants containing dark vowels, such as “퍼렇다” and “ 시퍼렇다”, tend to intensify negative connotations, reflecting the phonetic symbolism inherent in Korean color expressions.

Blue/Green 푸르다/파랗다	Metaphors and Idiomatic Expressions	Literal Translation	Meaning of Color Terms
푸르다	푸른 양반, 세력이 푸르다	blue-green nobility, power is blue-green	A power being strong.
	푸른 청춘	blue-green youth	Being full of youth and livelihood.
	푸른 꿈, 푸른 희망	blue-green dream, blue-green hope	A hope, dream, etc., being big and beautiful.
	공기가 푸르다	the air is blue-green	Air, etc., being clear and fresh.
	서슬이 푸르다	One's wrath is blue-green	For one's force or attitude to be threatening and ferocious to such an extent that no one dares to defy it.
파랗다	파랗게 질리다	(one’s face/lips) turns blue-green	One's face, lips, etc., being blue because one is cold or scared.
	파란불이 켜지다	a blue-green light turns on	A sign of hope that a certain situation will become better in the future.
새파랗다	새파랗게 어리다/젊다	to be very blue-green-young	Very young
퍼렇다	칼끝이 퍼렇다	the tip of the sword is blue-green	A knife or the blade of a tool being very keen.

시퍼렇다	시퍼렇게 살아 있다	vividly blue-green alive	Living without any problems or very fresh.

tab. 4. "푸르다/파랗다" *Metaphors and idiomatic expressions*

3.2.5. "누르다"와 "노랗다"

When a health problem affects the complexion, the expression "얼굴이 누렇게 뜨다" ('the face turns yellow') is used. When the likelihood of success for a business or a person is low, expressions such as "싹수가 노랗다" ('one's sprout is yellow) or "싹이 노랗다" ('one's sprout is yellow') are used. Here, "싹" refers to a young leaf or stem, and a sprout that is yellow from the beginning metaphorically indicates low growth potential. Meanwhile, "하늘이 노랗다" ('the sky is yellow') is used to describe a situation in which one feels weak or dizzy, and "하늘이 노래지다" ('the sky turns yellow') conveys a state of mental dizziness caused by shock.

누르다/노랗다	Metaphors and Idiomatic Expressions	Literal Translation	Meaning of Color Terms
누르다	얼굴이 누렇게 뜨다	the face turns yellow	One's face looking pale and yellowish due to malnutrition or a disease.
노랗다	싹수가 노랗다	one's sprout is yellow	For a business or person to have no chance of success.
	하늘이 노랗다	the sky is yellow	For one's energy to substantially weaken.
	하늘이 노래지다	the sky turns yellow	To feel dizzy and stunned by a sudden shock.

tab. 5. '누르다/노랗다' *Metaphors and idiomatic expressions*

4. Teaching Methods

Most Korean learners acquire color terms in their literal sense at the beginner level, but this study aims to teach the metaphors and idiomatic meanings of color terms to intermediate and advanced learners[14], enabling them to use these expressions

14 According to the official CEFR–TOPIK comparison by the National Institute for International Education (국립국제교육원, NIIED), intermediate- and advanced-level learners correspond to CEFR levels B1–C1 (approximately TOPIK levels 3–5). Learners at this level have fully established knowledge of core grammar and vocabulary, as well as well-developed abil-

naturally in real-life contexts.

The instruction is based on a lexical approach[15] and integrates the OHE (Observation-Hypothesis-Experiment) teaching method[16] with Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)[17], focusing on simultaneously enhancing learners' cognitive engagement and practical language skills. Metaphorical and idiomatic expressions involving color terms are presented as lexical chunks rather than individual words, enabling learners to infer their meanings from discourse, consolidate them in memory, and apply them effectively in communicative contexts.

Distinct from the traditional PPP (Presentation-Practice-Production) method, the OHE method minimizes teacher intervention, emphasizing cognitively oriented learning in which learners independently identify and conceptualize lexical patterns through the observation-hypothesis-experiment cycle.[18]

In the Observe stage, learners recognize the language-use context through color term expressions in the drama *Queen of Tears* (눈물의 여왕)[19]. In the Hypothesize stage, they infer the meanings of color terms and engage in activities comparing them with their native language. During the Experiment stage, worksheets are used to check comprehension and allow learners to practice using the expressions. Finally, in the TBLT stage, learners write scripts, perform role-plays, and complete plot-based tasks using color terms from metaphorical and idiomatic expressions in conjunction with the web drama *Find Her* (그녀를 찾아줘), enabling them to internalize these expressions in authentic language-use situations.

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ities to infer meaning from context and understand cultural nuances. Such competencies are essential for learning metaphorical and idiomatic color expressions, making these learners an appropriate target group for the present study.

15 Michael Lewis's (1993) Lexical Approach. This approach understands language as a collection of lexical chunks rather than grammatical rules and facilitates natural acquisition by repeatedly exposing learners to these chunks and encouraging their use.

16 The OHE (Observation-Hypothesis-Experiment) model is a core instructional method derived from Michael Lewis's lexical approach, emphasizing learner-centered inductive inquiry over teacher-directed instruction. Lee (2005) expanded Lewis's lexical concept to include proverbs, idiomatic expressions, collocations, and conceptual metaphors, providing a theoretical foundation for teaching metaphorical and idiomatic expressions involving color terms as part of a lexical approach.

17 Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), systematized by Willis (1996) and Nunan (2004), is an instructional method that centers on authentic tasks, guiding learners to naturally use the target language while acquiring it.

18 Lee (2005) empirically demonstrated that, compared to the PPP method, applying the OHE method in Korean vocabulary instruction enhanced learners' ability to autonomously discover lexical patterns by 47%, reduced teacher dependency by 62%, and increased performance scores combining accuracy and fluency by 35% (2005:94, Table 34).

19 It is a drama broadcast on tvN in 2024.

Stage	Teaching–Learning Activities	Teaching Methods
Observe	Watch the video of the drama *Queen of Tears*[20] and introduce the learning topic Present color term expressions: "까맣게 잊다", "속이 새까맣게 타다", "머리가 새하얘지다", "하얗게 밤을 새우다", "새빨간 거짓말을 하다", "얼굴을 붉히다", "새파랗게 어리다", "얼굴이 새파랗게 질리다", "싹수가 노랗다" Guide learners to recognize the topic	Use of video materials (to arouse interest) Presentation of Lexical Input[21]
Hypothesize	Guiding learners to infer the meanings of color term expressions Comparison with the mother tongue	Presentation of Lexical Chunks Meaning Inference–Centered Activities
Experiment	Provide explanations of meanings and usage examples Check comprehension through activity sheets	Lexical Approach + Context-Based Activities
TBLT	Watch the web drama *Find Her* Create and perform role-play scripts Complete a storyline reconstruction task	TBLT Task Performance Stage Role-Play-Based Speaking/Writing Tasks

tab. 6. *Teaching-Learning Model*

<Example 1>
유진: 어제 발표는 어땠어?
안나: 나 발표 전에 머리가 새하얘져서 무슨 말을 해야 할지 생각이 안 났어.
유진: 너무 긴장했구나!

Question: '머리가 새하얘지다'의 의미는 무엇인가요?
화가 나서 아무 생각이 없다
놀라거나 긴장해서 아무 생각이 안 난다
머리를 염색해서 하얗게 됐다

< Example 2>
어제 나는 밤새 과제를 하느라 하얗게 밤을 새웠다. 점심에 친구와 약속이 있었지만 너무 피곤해서 까맣게 잊어버렸다. 친구는 나를 기다리다 화가 나서 얼굴을 붉히며 나에게 화를 냈다. 나는 너무 미안해서 말도 제대로 못 했다.

20 In episode 11 of *Queen of Tears*, in the scene where Baek Hyun-woo dries Hong Hae-in's hair, Hong Hae-in says: «나 어제 수철이 얼굴 보고 5초쯤 '누구지?' 생각했어. 내 담당 교수 이름이 까맣게 생각이 안 났고... » ('Yesterday, I looked at Suchul's face for about five seconds and thought, 'Who is this?' I completely couldn't remember the name of my supervising professor…').

21 As a core element of the Lexical Approach, collocations, lexical chunks, and idioms are presented to enable learners to acquire them naturally.

Question: 이 글에서 '하얗게 밤을 새우다'는 무슨 뜻인가요?
새벽에 산책을 했다
불을 켜 놓고 잠을 잤다
잠을 자지 않고 밤을 지냈다

tab. 7. *Example of an activity sheets for the Experiment Stage*

웹 드라마 <그녀를 찾아줘> 4화
얀과 고하영은 야외 술집에서 술을 마시다가 예비군 군복을 입은 김정남과 고규필을 발견하다. 순간 얀은 전쟁을 하는 줄 알고 놀라서 얼굴이 새파랗게 질린다. 한편 김정남은 휴식 시간에 총을 옆에 놓고 쉬다가 휴식 시간이 끝나고 총을 챙기는 것을 새까맣게 잊고 다른 장소로 이동한다. 총을 잃어버린 것을 안 순간 머리가 새하얘진다. 고규필은 김정남에게 총값이 400달러인데 그것을 배상해야 한다고 했다. 김정남은 속이 새까맣게 탔다.
그러던 중 김정남은 나무 아래 앉아 쉬고 있던 전익수의 총을 몰래 훔친다. 그 사실을 안 전익수는 김정남에게 불 같이 화를 낸다. 김정남은 그 총이 자기 총이라고 새빨간 거짓말을 한다. 그때 얀이 총을 발견해서 김정남에게 주면서 김정남은 얼굴이 새빨개진다.

tab. 8. *Application and Tasks (TBLT)*

4. Conclusion

This study systematically cataloged metaphorical and idiomatic expressions with color terms that include the five basic native Korean colors, based on the *Korean Basic Dictionary* developed by the National Institute of the Korean Language. It examined how color terms are realized in terms of form and meaning within these expressions. On this basis, the study designed a teaching–learning model for intermediate- and advanced-level learners of Korean. The proposed instructional model integrates the Lexical Approach with the OHE (Observation–Hypothesis–Experiment) teaching method and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). In particular, it seeks to promote active vocabulary learning by presenting expressions as lexical chunks and engaging learners in discourse-based inferencing activities. In addition, by incorporating authentic drama and web drama materials, the model enhances learners' motivation and enables indirect exposure to the sociocultural contexts of the Korean language, which constitutes a key contribution of this study.

In Korean language education, metaphorical and idiomatic expressions with color terms have largely been limited to the presentation of basic lexical meanings at the beginner level. Consequently, systematic advanced instruction reflecting the cognitive and linguistic needs of intermediate- and advanced-level learners has been relatively insufficient. These needs include the ability to infer abstract semantic extensions, to interpret meaning based on context, and to use idiomatic expressions

appropriately at the discourse level. By learning the metaphorical and idiomatic expressions addressed in this study, learners are expected to move beyond simple lexical knowledge to develop a deeper understanding of the implicit meanings and sociocultural significance embedded in Korean discourse, as well as the ability to flexibly employ these expressions in actual communicative situations.

Meanwhile, the instructional model proposed in this study has limitations in that it represents a relatively general pedagogical approach designed with educational contexts such as domestic Korean language institutes in mind, where learners of diverse nationalities and linguistic backgrounds are typically mixed. Specifically, the model does not account in detail for individual learner variables such as first language, language typology, length of Korean language study, or age group. Moreover, it does not present teaching strategies based on contrastive analyses of metaphorical and idiomatic color expressions targeted at learners from specific linguistic backgrounds, which remains a limitation. Furthermore, another limitation of this study is that the proposed instructional model was not empirically tested through application in actual classroom settings. Future research should therefore design more fine-grained teaching–learning models based on contrastive analyses of metaphorical and idiomatic color expressions for specific learner groups or linguistic backgrounds and empirically verify their educational effectiveness through experimental studies.

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SARA BOCHICCHIO

KIM HYESOON'S INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS: SPEAKING TO ALL THE 'GARBAGE' OF THE WORLD

«Therefore as woman, as poet, I dance and rescue the things that have fallen into the coil of magnificent silence; I wake the present, and let the dead things be dead».
- Kim Hyesoon (in *All the Garbage of the World, Unite!* translated by Don Mee Choi)

Abstract

In the field of literature, poetry is perhaps the genre that, in our contemporary age – where everything tends to be reduced to mere consumption – seems to be most neglected. Yet within this field, a Korean poet has been gaining international recognition, winning prestigious awards in nearly every country where her work has been translated. This essay aims to understand the elements that have enabled Kim Hyesoon's poetic language to resonate internationally, with particular attention to its reception in the English-speaking market. Debuting in 1979, Kim challenged prevailing norms of what was deemed acceptable for female writers. Employing abject, grotesque imagery and a polyphony of voices, she articulates the suffering of

women under patriarchy, the exploitation of people under dictatorial regimes, and the destruction of nature and animals in consumerist society. Through her subversive and provocative language, Kim's poetry forcefully critiques and exposes the injustices and contradictions of the world we inhabit.

1. Introduction

Kim Hyesoon was born on 26 October 1955 in Uljin County, North Gyeongsang Province. She graduated from Kŏnguk University in Korean literature and received a doctorate from the same university, with a dissertation on the poetry of Kim Suyŏng, in 1993. She has been called by professor Bruce Fulton, Young-Bin Min Chair in Korean Literature and Literary Translation at the University of British Columbia, as «Korea's most important living poet and by far its most imaginative writer». For the recent publication of her *Chugŭm T'ŭrilloji* (죽음 트릴로지 / 'Trilogy of Death') – which contains three poetry collections themed on death: *Chukŭm-ŭi Chasŏjŏn* (죽음의 자서전 / 'Autobiography of Death'), *Nalgae Hwansangt'ong* (날개 환상통 'Phantom Pain Wings'), and *Chiguga chugŭmyŏn tarŭn nugŭl tolji?* (지구가 죽으면 달은 누굴 돌지? / 'When the Earth Dies, Who Will the Moon Revolve Around?') – she was presented by the publisher as «a poet now read by the whole world» (이제는 세계가 함께 읽는 시인이다[1]). She was the first woman-identifying poet to win the Midang Literature Award in 2006. She has also been honoured with the Kim Suyŏng Literary Award, Sowŏl Poetry Award, and Daesan Poetry Award[2]. Her works have been translated into numerous languages, including English, Swedish, French, German, Polish, Persian, Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, and Danish, significantly contributing to her global recognition[3]. In addition to her national accolades, Kim Hyesoon has received several international awards, such as the UK Royal Society of Literature International Writer Award, the Cikada Prize, and the Griffin Poetry Prize[4]. Her poetry collection *Chukŭm-ŭi Chasŏjŏn* (죽음의 자서전), translated into German as *Autobiographie des Todes* by Uljana Wolf and Sool Park, garnered the 2025 Internationale Literaturpreis

1 Merchandise Director Kim Hyo-sun (July 11, 2025).
<https://www.aladin.co.kr/shop/wproduct.aspx?ItemId=367050479&srsltid=AfmBOorT-TroMjy5Bs2QrV4SilyFoQmwp9G0cz5jSlocNJkmSj0aX3EbB>

2 Poet Kim Hyesoon Official Site: "Awards and Recognition", Poet Kim Hyesoon Official Website.
<https://www.poetkimhyesoon.com/awards> (accessed October 18, 2025).

3 Griffin Poetry Prize: "Kim Hyesoon," Griffin Poetry Prize.
<https://griffinpoetryprize.com/poet/kim-hyesoon/> (accessed October 18, 2025).

4 Poetry Foundation: "Kim Hyesoon," Poetry Foundation.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/kim-hyesoon> (accessed October 18, 2025).

– Haus der Kulturen der Welt, marking the first time in the award's history that a poetry collection was honoured[5]. Kim Hyesoon's contributions to literature have been further acknowledged with the 2023 National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry, making her the first foreign poet laureate to receive this distinction in the United States.

This essay aims to identify the elements that allow Kim Hyesoon's poetry to resonate with international readers and render her work highly relevant to the contemporary literary landscape. In the following section, Breaking the Rules of the Male Canon, background information is provided on the rise of feminist consciousness among Korean writers and the poetic experimentation of the late 1970s in the search for an *écriture féminine*. Section 3, *From Korea to the U.S.: Kim Hyesoon's Reception among English-speaking Audiences*, examines how U.S. based poets, readers, and critics engage with Kim Hyesoon's poetry through online magazines, forums, and blogs. Section 4, *Abjection and the Grotesque as Stylistic Means for the Critical Representation of Reality*, explains the concepts of abjection and the grotesque, which emerged in the previous sections as key elements characterizing Kim Hyesoon's poetry as a language with international resonance. Section 5, *To All the Garbage of the World: Illustrative Cases of Abject and Grotesque Poetry*, presents examples of how the imaginary of the grotesque and the abject functions in Kim Hyesoon's work. Finally, Section 6 offers the conclusion.

2. Breaking the Rules of the Male Canon

> I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write *her self*: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (Cixous *et. al.* 1976)

These opening lines from Hélène Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa* encapsulate the feminist manifesto of the seminal French writer who, in 1975, reimagined Medusa as a smiling, subversive figure capable of undermining Western patriarchal culture. At that time, the second wave of feminism (1960s ~ 70s) was calling for the liberation and reappropriation of the female body. For centuries, Cartesian dualism – which established an «unbridgeable gulf between mind and matter» (Gorsz 1994: 7) – legitimized male authority by associating it with reason and rationality, while relegating women to irrationality and instinct. As in all colonial dynamics,

5 Korea Herald: "Kim Hyesoon's Autobiography of Death wins 2025 Internationale Literaturpreis", Korea Herald, 18 October 2025.
<https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10534505> (accessed October 18, 2025).

domination was justified by portraying the other as less human, closer to the animal realm (several scholars have demonstrated this thesis; my main references are Homi Bhabha and David L. Eng). A comparable logic shaped Korea under the austere Neo-Confucian order of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392 ~ 1910), which suppressed instinct in favour of rational control to ensure social harmony. Central to the Confucian ideology was the belief that men must govern over women. This hierarchical gender structure was codified in *sam-chong-chi-do* (삼종지도, 三從之道), or 'The Way of Three Obedience', which dictated that a woman must obey her father in youth, her husband after marriage, and her son in widowhood. Women's self-realization was confined to becoming a *hyŏnmo-yangch'ŏ* (현모양처, 賢母良妻) – 'wise mother and good wife'. Any deviation from this ideal led to marginalization, with only liminal roles (like *kisaeng* or *mudang*) available beyond it. Public education was closed to women; as Kim Hyesoon notes, «Korean women did not write publicly before the early 1900s» (in Choi 2003: 537). With women finally gaining access to public education, the early 20th century saw pioneers such as Na Hyesŏk and Kim Wŏnju challenge these norms through *Sinjoja* (신여자, 'The New Woman'), a journal placing women's issues at the centre of public debate. In the novel *Chagak* (자각, 'Awakening'), published in 1926, Kim Wŏnju openly criticized *sam-chong-chi-do*, causing scandal before retreating into monastic life. Na Hyesŏk, a celebrated painter and writer, published in 1934 *Ihon kobaek* (이혼 고백, 'My Divorce Statement') in the magazine *Samchŏlli* (삼천리), denouncing the hypocrisy that tolerated male infidelity but condemned women's. The resulting ostracism destroyed her career; she too sought refuge in a Buddhist temple, later succumbing to profound psychological suffering. In her own words: «I was a tiny bird that was shot down by the society… Finally, the bird became soundless and motionless» (Ch'oe 2006: 8).

As Kim Chŏngnan notes in *Echoing Song: Contemporary Korean Women Poets*, these women, along with Kim Myŏngsun, pioneered modern Korean women's poetry, though their works now seem «naïve and not very prolific» (Lee 2005: 15). Women poets of the 1930s wrote more prolifically, yet they lost much of their independence. Their work was produced under male supervision, and their gender was underscored by the label *yŏryu si-in* (여류 시인, 'female poet'), in contrast to the neutral *si-in* (시인, 'poet') reserved for men. The genre of *yŏryu si* (여류 시, 'feminine poetry') demanded delicacy, sentimentality, and grace, echoing the associations of *ryu* with kisaeng. As Kim Hyesoon have observed: «*ryu* was a word traditionally associated to kisaeng… - women who 'drifted around'… imposing the term *yŏryu si-in* on women poets means that women's poetry is regulated and defined as sentimental and gentle» (Choi 2023: 533).

It was only in the late 1970s that poets such as Mun Chŏnghŭi, Kang Ŭn'gyo, and Ch'oe Sŭngja rejected these constraints, embracing what Kim Chŏngnan calls the «invasion of flesh» (Lee 2005: 16). Their work foregrounded the body – particularly through images of flesh (*sal*, 살) – in concrete, existential terms that defied both

patriarchal and authoritarian control. Don Mee Choi links these corporeal images to resistance against President Park's military rule (Choi 2006: xix). According to Choi, Ch'oe Sŭngja's grotesque yet vital imagery erupted from accumulated oppression, while Ruth Williams sees her «grotesque protrusions» (2010, p. 401) as metaphors for the violent suppression of a woman's real self. The result was that this new *écriture féminine* placed the body at its centre, subverting the rationalist language of male-dominated discourse.

Like Ch'oe Sŭngja, Kim Hyesoon also made her debut in 1979 in the literary journal *Munhak-kwa chisŏng* (문학과 지성, 'Literature and Intellect'). She invented a poetic language to articulate the structural violence and social inequalities of postwar South Korea. Male critics often dismissed her corporeal imagery as grotesque or incomprehensible, echoing the Neo-Confucian association of women with the irrational – as with the shamanic practices of predominantly female mudangs. She counters: «I am just writing this reality as it is but people call that grotesque… I am just following the traces of what I see» (Kim Hyesoon's words in Een Yi 2020: 376). As she points out, the fundamental difference between men's and women's poetry in Korea lies in their distinct approaches to writing and language – particularly in the relationship between the body and the act of writing:

> One of the characteristics of Korean men's poetry is that the poets don't handle their subject matters with their bodies. They handle their subjects only with their eyes. (…) Women, in general, let nature and their own natures be, so that both entities continue to exist on their own. And from this perspective they speak about the meetings and interactions between both through the object of their bodies. Women poets oppose and resist their conditions, using unconventional forms of language because their resistance has led them to a language that is unreal, surreal, and even fantastical. The language of women's poetry is internal, yet defiant and revolutionary. (in "Korean Women - Poetry, Identity, Place: A Conversation with Kim Hye-sun [Hyesoon]". (Choi 2023)

Here, the male gaze is detached and observational, while women's poetry emerges from embodied experience. The surreal and fantastical qualities of their language are not lapses into irrationality, but deliberate acts of rebellion – against patriarchy and against the very structures of language that have sought to silence them.

3. From Korea to the U.S.: Kim Hyesoon's Reception among English-speaking Audience

On June 23, 2016, a series of articles by American authors on Kim Hyesoon's poetry were published on the Asian American Writers' Workshop website, a platform that for over thirty years has been dedicated to publishing and amplifying Asian diasporic literary culture. At the time, her works had not yet received the major international awards discussed in the introduction, yet these articles already present her as an influential figure within the U.S. literary landscape. In this collection, titled *The*

Vanishing Point: Writers Speak to Kim Hyesoon's Poetry in Translation[6], contributors reflect on how Kim Hyesoon's poetry, as rendered in English by Don Mee Choi, challenges and transforms readers' perspectives. Joyelle McSweeney notes that engaging with Kim's work involves a «radical re-positioning» from the «imperial center to the vanishing point», suggesting a shift from dominant cultural narratives to marginalized voices. This repositioning draws readers into a space where Kim's poetry, exemplified by the figure of Paridegi – the abandoned princess of Korean folklore, attuned to the cries of lost souls – reveals how vulnerability and marginality can coexist with a powerful presence, reshaping the way we understand both. Jake Levine emphasizes that encountering Kim's poems requires a departure from American identity, advocating for a transgressive openness that allows for a «new illness» to emerge: a metaphor for the transformative experience of engaging with her poetry. Conversely, Ji Yoon Lee describes Kim's work as presenting a «jarring and destabilizing force», with a non-human speaker that manifests in ways that unsettle conventional understandings. These reflections collectively highlight how Kim Hyesoon's poetry, through its unique voice and themes, offers a profound and transformative experience for readers, prompting a re-evaluation of identity, power, and perception. Even before, in 2014, an article by Christine Shan Shan Hou on *Hyperallergic*, an online forum founded in 2009 and headquartered in Brooklyn, New York, published a review of Kim Hyesoon's collection *Sorrowtoothpaste Mirrorcream* (2011). Hou writes:

> *Sorrowtoothpaste Mirrorcream* may end on this bleak note, but there is something liberating about reading poetry this unapologetically vile and disturbed. Hyesoon's fearless poetics suggests a grossly visceral alternative to the capitalist world. These poems conjure both feelings of desire and disgust, awe and repulsion. I want to read more. I need it. Please stop. Don't stop. You make me sick. (Shan Shan Hou 2016)[7]

Hou's review underscores the disruptive potential of Kim Hyesoon's poetry, highlighting its capacity to elicit intense emotional responses while simultaneously opening an imaginative space beyond the constraints of conventional societal structures. Similarly, in *Asymptote Journal* Matt Reeck notes that her work evokes emotionally and imaginatively charged images rather than strictly logical reasoning, creating a sense of prolonged maternal and violent nightmares in collections such

6 Joyelle McSweeney e Johannes Göransson, "The Vanishing Point: Writers Speak to Kim Hyesoon's Poetry in Translation", in «Asian American Writers' Workshop», 23 June 2016. <https://aaww.org/kim-hyesoon-vanishing-point/> (accessed October 18, 2025).

7 Christine Shan Shan Hou, "The Sick World of Kim Hyesoon", in «Hyperallergic», April 13, 2014. <https://hyperallergic.com/120043/the-sick-world-of-kim-hyesoon/> (accessed October 18, 2025).

as *A Drink of Red Mirror*[8]. Reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and the Griffin Prize Judges highlight how her poetry addresses death and collective tragedy through structured elegiac forms that intertwine structural horror, individual loss, and their interconnections[9]. In *The Kenyon Review*, her collection *Autobiography of Death* is praised for giving voice to the mass of unjustly ended lives, linking personal experiences to broader historical and political events in South Korea[10]. Elisa Gabbert, writing for the *New York Times*, describes her poetry as «obsessive and grotesque, without future», emphasizing its capacity to work across both large-scale and minute emotional and formal registers[11]. Pam Brown, featured in *Poetry Foundation*'s *Doing Poetry*, characterizes Kim's work as visceral, theatrical, disturbing, and feminist-surrealist, highlighting the uniqueness of her poetic voice[12]. Even when some mainstream critics in the U.S. have not fully embraced her, numerous blog and webzine reviews have analyzed her formal and thematic breadth, paying close attention to her grotesque imagery and the politics of her language[13]. Finally, in *The White Review*, Joanna Lee observes that Kim's work resists being simplified into a form of cultural explanation of "Koreaness" for Western readers (what some might call poetic "ethnography"), maintaining instead a challenging, autonomous presence within the literary landscape[14].

In conclusion, the critical reception of Kim Hyesoon in the United States positions her as a poet of profound disruptive power. Across multiple reviews, her work is consistently recognized for its ability to provoke intense emotional responses, destabilize conventional expectations, and create imaginative spaces that transcend societal and cultural norms. The analysis frames Kim's poetry as a radical intervention, confronting readers with both aesthetic and ethical challenges, while simultaneously providing a form of catharsis for those who cannot identify with hegemonic or

8 Matt Reeck reviews *A Drink of Red Mirror* by Kim Hyesoon, *Asymptote Journal*. <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/kim-hyesoon-a-drink-of-red-mirror/> (accessed January 10, 2026).

9 *And Other Stories*. <https://www.andotherstories.org/authors/kim-hyesoon/> (accessed January 10, 2026).

10 Ibidem.

11 Ibidem.

12 Don Mee Choi & Kim Hyesoon, *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/159850/doing-poetry> (accessed January 10, 2026).

13 Mia You, *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/featured-blogger/73760/context-decontext-a-conversation-with-johannes-goransson> (accessed January 10, 2026).

14 Joanna Lee, *The White view*. <https://www.thewhitereview.org/reviews/scrutiny-consumption-korean-womens-poetry-literary-inheritance/> (accessed January 10, 2026).

pre-given images. Her work gives voice to nonconforming identities and employs grotesque and abject imagery that generates both repulsion and release, opening a space of infinite possibilities. In this space, boundaries dissolve: male and female, life and death, human and non-human, nature and artifact, Koreanness and otherness. Given this, scholarly, journalistic, and web-based commentary underscores the innovative, feminist-surrealist, and politically aware dimensions of Kim Hyesoon voice, as well as its resistance to cultural homogenization and Western expectations. Overall, Kim Hyesoon's work emerges as a sustained intervention in contemporary poetry, one that expands the boundaries of poetic form, emotional engagement, sociopolitical critique, and the conceptual exploration of identity and otherness. The next section examines the concepts of the abject and the grotesque in greater depth, arguing that this aesthetic language is capable of resonating across cultural boundaries, particularly between Korea and the West.

4. Abjection and the Grotesque as Stylistic Means for the Critical Representation of Reality

Starting from his analysis of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988), David L. Eng, in *Racial Castration* (2001), examines the feminization of Asian American men and, more broadly, Asian subjects in U.S. culture. He demonstrates the inseparability of racial and sexual discourse, showing how both shape stereotypes and constrain identities outside the *given-to-be-seen* (Lacan). Eng extends Lacan's concept of the screen, where ideologically coded images in visual media construct and regulate identity, producing both recognition and misrecognition, with the latter generating anxiety, fragmentation, and marginalization. Building on this framework, Kaja Silverman's use of Freud's body ego and Lacan's mirror stage highlights how the self is formed through external images. When subjects cannot identify with hegemonic images – those privileging whiteness, heteronormativity, or masculinity – they risk experiencing themselves as socially devalued or even abject. This raises a crucial question: *in what forms can minorities express themselves when they are unable to identify with hegemonic images?* This question applies both to women in patriarchal societies – whether Western or Korean – and also to ethnic and racial minorities within contemporary multicultural contexts. As I will argue, one such expressive strategy is the use of abjection and grotesque representation. While abjection has been widely theorized as a tool through which many women articulate their *écriture féminine*, it is also increasingly employed by ethnic minorities to expose and denounce the racism embedded in contemporary society. Through abject representations, marginalized subjects make visible the violence, exclusion, and dehumanization that hegemonic discourses seek to naturalize or conceal. In this sense, abjection in contemporary culture functions not only as a critique of patriarchy, but also as a powerful means of challenging capitalist, racist, and hyper-materialistic structures on a broader level. Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject (*Powers of Horror*, 1982) is central here: the

abject is what disturbs identity and order, encompassing what is rejected to protect both the self and the social order. In South Korean cultural productions, including films, K-dramas, and webtoons, the abject monster is often depicted as the product of social injustice, corruption, and the failures of those in power. A notable example is Bong Joon Ho's *The Host* (2006). In this film, the monster emerges not only as a consequence of chemical contamination in the Han River, but also as a vehicle for exposing institutional inefficiency in managing crises and the readiness of authorities to sacrifice the expendable. The monster attacks Gangseo, a district west of the Han River, rather than the affluent Gangnam area; in other words, it is ordinary people who are sacrificed. As the narrative unfolds, viewers feel anger toward the Korean and U.S. military, while sympathy for the monster grows: it becomes evident that it is itself a victim of human recklessness, acting solely in the interest of survival. Other examples of this genre of monstrous cinema and K-drama include the popular film *Train to Busan* (2016) and webtoon-based series such as *Sweet Home* (2020) and *Hellbound* (2021). A particularly striking case is the premise of the K-drama *All of Us Are Dead* (2022). Set in a high school overrun by a zombie epidemic, the series first foregrounds acts of bullying, rendering the school itself monstrous in the viewer's eyes even before the appearance of literal monsters. More broadly, not only monsters but also grotesque imagery are widely employed to critique corrupt social systems, as seen in globally influential works such as *Squid Game* (2021) and *Parasite* (2019). Park Chan-wook's recent film *No Other Choice* (2025) offers another example of this tendency. After losing his job, the protagonist, in a desperate attempt to secure new employment and restore his former social status, gradually transforms into a monstrous figure: a grotesque and clumsy killer. Here, social critique takes the form of grotesque parody. Moving from the cinematic screen to visual art, in *Korean Feminist Artists* (2024) Kim Hong-hee demonstrates how contemporary female artists such as Lee Bul, Fi Jae Lee, and Mire Lee employ abjection to represent the body, and in particular the female body. These bodies are frequently rendered through a grotesque aesthetic because, in their works, «the monster is conceptualized as a liminal presence akin to a cyborg, liberating itself from every sort of boundary that constrains the human being – be it class, ethnicity, gender, or age» (Kim 2024: 62). This conception of the monstrous body closely resonates with Donna Haraway's theorization of the cyborg as a hybrid, transgressive figure that destabilizes binary oppositions such as human/machine, nature/culture, and male/female. As Haraway argues in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), the cyborg rejects essentialist identities and fixed origins, opening up possibilities for new forms of subjectivity and political resistance. In the works analysed by Kim, abjection thus becomes not merely a strategy of negation or provocation, but a productive space in which the female body – reimagined as monstrous and cyborgian – can escape patriarchal, heteronormative, and anthropocentric regimes of representation. This framework can be further illuminated through Mary Russo's theorization of the female grotesque, which conceptualizes the grotesque female

body as excessive, open, and in constant transformation, in opposition to classical ideals of closure, harmony, and decorum. In *The Female Grotesque* (1994), Russo highlights how the grotesque destabilizes normative constructions of femininity by foregrounding bodily excess, permeability, and spectacle. Read through Russo's lens, the abject and monstrous bodies in contemporary Korean feminist art and poetry do not signify degradation or marginality, but rather function as sites of visibility, agency, and subversion. Interestingly, the period in which many Korean women poets were debuting corresponds to the emergence of the *gurlesque* poetic movement in the United States, as documented by Arielle Greenberg in Gurlesque in *The New Grrly, Grotesque, Burlesque Poetics* (2010). Greenberg defines the *gurlesque* as a feminist aesthetic that combines elements of the grotesque, the burlesque, and a deliberately exaggerated "girly" sensibility in order to challenge patriarchal norms and explore female desire, horror, and embodied experience. In this sense, there are striking affinities between the *gurlesque* and the work of poets such as Kim Hyesoon: both mobilize grotesque and abject imagery to destabilize hegemonic representations of gender and the body, amplify marginalized voices, and create poetic spaces in which the boundaries between pleasure and disgust, life and death, and the human and the non-human become fluid. Whether consciously or not, Kim Hyesoon's poetry resonates strongly with the *gurlesque*'s language of rebellion and bodily transgression, a resonance that may have contributed to the reception and circulation of her work within the U.S. poetic field. In this sense, the language of abjection emerges as a shared expressive strategy among Korean and Western feminist authors and artists.

Across different cultural and historical contexts, abjection and the grotesque operate as a transnational grammar through which marginalized subjects articulate resistance to patriarchal norms, racialized hierarchies, and capitalist regimes of control. This is due to the ability of abjection to destabilize existing symbolic and social orders, challenge hegemonic norms, and open up spaces for imagining alternative forms of agency and social justice. In both Western and South Korean contexts, the abject exposes the tensions between cultural norms and marginalized or excluded subjects, offering audiences and readers a means to confront and rethink entrenched systems of power.

The next section examines, through selected examples, how the abject and grotesque imaginary takes shape in Kim Hyesoon's verse.

5. *To All the Garbage of the World*: Illustrative Cases of Abject and Grotesque Poetry

In the interview with the translator Don Mee Choi, published in the appendix of *Autobiography of Death* (2018), Kim Hyesoon states:

> Women's language is a language of death. The body of a woman poet is a form of text. But it's the text of the deaf, mute, and blind. That's because the mother tongue sits on men's tongue (...) At the place

> where the body becomes anonymous, disenfranchised, and expelled, is where the language of death, women's language, is born – language that grapples with the language of anonymity, negativity, non-gender specific language. The kind of writing that has definite subjects and objects, that depicts its objects in detail, objectifying them, then adding grandiose aphorisms to them is, of course, masculine writing that has been preserved in Korea by History. But the feminine writing of death begins from a place of emptiness/nothingness, a place that's full with the presence of absence. In that place, there are sounds that are considered embarrassing to the world of meaning, but not at all to the world of body (sound) (Kim 2018: 100).

The sounds she refers to are hiccups, coughs, and phlegm. By foregrounding bodily sounds and functions, her work disrupts the normative, sanitized expectations of language and literature, insisting on the materiality of the body as a locus of expression. In this framework, the abject becomes a generative force: it is not merely expelled or denied, but employed to interrogate social hierarchies, gender norms, and the epistemic authority of masculine discourse. The «language of death» she invokes is thus inseparable from corporeal experience, creating a space where marginalized voices, previously rendered inaudible within the patriarchal linguistic order, can finally emerge. Kim's emphasis on the bodily, visceral, and abject resists traditional aesthetics of refinement and order, privileging instead intensity, excess, and the disruptive potential inherent in what society deems repulsive or shameful. Her approach starts from the very idea that we are made of flesh and bones, that our bodies are in a continuous act of becoming as our organs work tirelessly to keep us alive.

In *Bird Rider: An Essay*, the poet asserts that when she writes, her intelligence diminishes, she experiences a breakdown, and her body transforms into an *WomanAnimalAsia*[15]. Through performing *WomanAnimalAsia*, Kim enacts a form of embodied language in which the poetic subject becomes hybrid and porous, collapsing the boundaries between woman, animal, and Asia: the historically colonized and subaltern body. Performing *WomanAnimalAsia* thus constitutes an act of resistance against hegemonic culture: it is the colonized subject that speaks back, reclaiming agency through linguistic and corporeal transformation. Also, Kim's poetry frequently invokes pivotal historical events such as the Gwangju Massacre, the Sewol ferry disaster, the legacy of Japanese colonialism, and the period of military dictatorship, grounding her verses in a collective memory of violence, loss, and mourning. Yet these historically situated references are articulated through imagery that speaks an international language. Kim's poetic voice can be read as that of the former colony reclaiming its place in the world, a voice that overlaps with that of the woman demanding articulation and visibility, as well as with the voices of nature and

15 Kim Hyesoon translated by Anton Hur, "[Writer's Notes] I Do WomanAnimalAsia", in «Korean Literature Now».
<https://klwave.or.kr/klw/magazines/650/articleView.do> (accessed January 10, 2026).

animals subjected to exploitation under an unrestrained materialism that is rapidly exhausting the planet's resources. The themes Kim engages – oppression, grief, exploitation, and resistance – are fundamentally universal, and they are expressed through an equally universal aesthetic, as shown in a previous sections of this essay: that of abjection and the grotesque. Within this poetic register, readers who fail to identify with the *given-to-be-seen*, and who instead recognize themselves as the «garbage of the world» (to cite the title of another of Kim's poetry collections, *All the Garbage of the World Unite*), find a space of recognition and catharsis, generating a compulsive desire for «reading more», as Christine Shan Shan Hou has observed. In her poems, one can also trace ecofeminist issues that resonate with contemporary debates. For example, in *Anxiety of Words* (2006) – one of the earliest collections through which Don Mee Choi introduced Kim Hyesoon's work to English readers – the poem Song of Skin dramatizes the porous boundary between the maternal body and the natural world. «The open lips find my breasts/Though they weren't told where mine were,/Draining sweet water from my body. […] Trees and plants collapse,/The Naktong River dries up» (Ch'oe 2006).

In this poem, the speaker's body, described as being drained of sweet water, becomes indistinguishable from the Nakdong River, whose drying and eventual explosion mirror the depletion of the mother's life force under the demand of an insatiable child. Kim's imagery collapses the maternal and the ecological, establishing a parallel between the exhaustion of the female body and the desiccation of the natural world. Both the maternal and the environmental are figured as sources of nourishment violently consumed by their own offspring. This conflation of the body with landscape and cosmos – the drying of veins, the cracking of the riverbed, the shattering of the Milky Way – evokes the total collapse of the boundaries that separate self from other, subject from environment. Kim's language, dense with verbs of depletion, enacts the very process it describes: a draining of vitality that becomes a poetic gesture of exposure and resistance. The drained body, stripped of everything but dry bones and skin, is not merely a figure of suffering but a vessel through which the abject – what patriarchal and anthropocentric discourses expel – returns to speak. The poet does not explicitly name the army, yet the image of the ravaged river inevitably evokes (for those familiar with history) the fierce battles fought along the Naktong River front during the Korean War. The water itself became a battlefield, and the surrounding geography was consumed by fire, death, and devastation. On one level, the poem critiques the exploitation of motherhood within the patriarchal system; on a broader level, it indicts humanity as a whole for its cruelty, both in war, toward other humans, and against the natural world in which we live.

When reflecting on some of the characteristics that distinguish Kim Hyesoon's poetic voice, I cannot help but recall Walt Whitman's famous words from *Song of Myself*: «Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)». Indeed, in many of Kim Hyesoon's poems, the unified and

monolithic identity of the "I" is strikingly absent. Instead, a polyphony of voices shapes the poetic image, allowing multiple perspectives, experiences, and temporalities to coexist within a single work. Like the shaman – whose honorific title *manshin* (만신) literally means 'ten thousand spirits', referring to the multitude of deities that can inhabit the shaman's body, which becomes a mausoleum for the voices she invokes – the poet speaks through and with a multiplicity that is both internal and external. At times, it is the voice of her female ancestors or of other women that overlaps with hers; at others, it is the voices of the pigs buried alive during the 2019 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak that echo those of the civilians massacred during the 1980 Gwangju Uprising. In the collection *Sorrowtoothpaste Mirrorcream* (2014), translated by Don Mee Choi, this multiplicity takes the form of *Kitchen Confidential*, a poem where domestic space, flesh, and violence converge into a grotesque performance of abjection and survival. The title evokes Anthony Bourdain's famous memoir, hinting at a behind-the-scenes exposure – but here, the revelation concerns the hidden violence and oppression embedded in women's domestic labor. The opening line, «The end of summer is always the kitchen of every house!», initially suggests the celebratory preparations for *Ch'usŏk* (추석), conjuring a fleeting sense of festivity. Indeed, the refrain «how could I possibly forget this place?» functions as an ironic intertextual echo of Chŏng Chi-yong's colonial-era poem *Hyang-su* (향수, *Homesickness*), in which the poet nostalgically recalls the bucolic beauty of his homeland. Kim's repetition of the phrase inverts its meaning: the unforgettable place is not a pastoral idyll but a site of abject horror. In this poem, the mother is depicted as worn out by her labor in the kitchen, while the child is constantly asking for more food. This dynamic creates a correspondence with the image of piglets, who are likewise perpetually demanding to be fed («The piglet keeps demanding food, food all day long»). Where we would normally expect to find a baby, a piglet appears once again, as in the line: «So a piglet inside a tummy would fall asleep». At this point, the poem raises an unsettling question: is the piglet the child she has given birth to, or does it refer to the pig she has consumed? Or, even worse, is it still an unborn piglet, waiting to be born into life, destined to consume (restlessly demanding food) and then to be consumed? In this sense, the boundaries constructed by civilization to separate humans from non-humans, and the consumer from the consumed, are blurred. There is also a sense of claustrophobia when the baby asks her mother, «Where is the farthest place in the world?» and she replies, «A place where there is nothing to eat!» The mother feels doomed to feed her children and the other family members who depend on her, while the world outside seems no different: everywhere, people rely on women to bear children and prepare food. As she feels herself rotting away, consumed by this system, the environment around her is also described as decaying, which I read as a parallel to the natural resources exploited by humankind for its own sustenance. For instance, in the following lines, the river seems to plead for mercy, resisting the devouring of its creatures: «The river flowed whispering to my teeth/Don't swallow

that bird/Don't chew that waterfowl» (Ch'oe *et. al.* 2006).

If the river is indeed whispering to the woman's teeth, it positions her squarely within the same consumerist system. She embodies both the consumed and the consumer, reflecting the unsettling logic of abjection, in which the boundaries between what is devoured and what devours become porous and ambiguous. This duality underscores the poem's critique of a world in which all life – human and nonhuman – is caught in cycles of consumption and exploitation. At the very end, the poem moves behind the walls of the kitchen. In the line «The place where teeth line up inside the boiling river beneath the blue knife», the image of a boiling river evokes a boiling pot, while the «blue knife» recalls a kitchen knife superimposed onto the sky, as if the instrument of consumerism is threatening the creatures of the Earth, and the teeth lining up echo this same predatory force. Also, in *I'm Ok, I'm Pig!* Kim Hyesoon claim that the pig operates as a synecdoche for «all the weak in the world in its lone body» (214: 153). Here, the pig's endless hunger mirrors the insatiability of the social order itself, which feeds on women's bodies and labour while masking that violence beneath the veneer of tradition and domesticity. In this all-encompassing voracity one can also read a radical critique of contemporary consumerism and of the human species' predatory attitude, which harbours no moral qualms about devouring anything – living beings or not – both in a literal sense, eating animals, and in a figurative one, exploiting the ecosystem to the point of collapse. In this sense, *Kitchen Confidential* is also an allegory of the global economy, which consumes resources, lives, and habitats with the same blind voracity that reigns over Kim's infernal kitchen.

Reading Kim Hyesoon's poetry is far from simple. The challenge lies not only in her complex and experimental grammar or her grotesque imagery, but also in the dense web of cultural references that shape her work: from the myth of the shamanic princess Paridegi, to her use of elements drawn from Korean folk songs such as *p'ansori*, or even from much older forms like the *hyangga*, as well as allusions to Buddhist thought. Kim's poetry is deeply layered, interweaving myth, history, and contemporary critique. As for the English translations of her works, they are thoughtfully enriched with introductory notes or afterwords written by Kim Hyesoon herself. In some volumes, dialogues between the poet and her translator are included, offering valuable insight into Kim's creative process and poetic vision. Moreover, each collection is consistently accompanied by reflective essays by the translator, Don Mee Choi, whose interpretative writings provide a critical framework through which readers can better understand the political, linguistic, and emotional complexities of Kim's poetry.

In *Bird Rider*, the essay that concludes *Phantom Pain Wings* – the poetry collection that won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry in 2023 – Kim Hyesoon explains that the poems were written after the death of her parents. She recounts dreaming of birds that seemed to foretell their passing. The image of the bird carries deep symbolic resonance in Korean culture: it is a noble creature, once venerated

in ancient Korea for its capacity to bridge heaven and earth (De Benedittis, 2016: 138). The very title of Kim's essay, *Bird Rider*[16], refers to a spiritual entity: a spirit that a shaman may host within her body. This particular spirit is said to be that of a dead baby, rejected by its mother, who takes the form of a bird and communicates through chirping. In this context, Kim's poetic act becomes an act of mediation and transformation: she decides to give voice to the visiting birds through her poetry. As she writes, «Bird returns, carrying the essence of the between in its beak, to build its house in the terrain of dislocation, between the imaginary and the real, between language and reality». For Kim, «literary ventriloquy is not about imitation, but entanglement, impregnation of one another» (2023: 168). Through this metaphor of the bird, Kim articulates her poetics of interconnection – between the living and the dead, the human and the nonhuman, the real and the imaginary – a space where grief, memory, and creation coexist in the act of poetic utterance. *Bird's Poetry Book*, the first poem of the collection *Phantom Pain Wings* (2023), epitomizes Kim Hyesoon's aesthetics of transformation and excess. Here, the act of becoming a bird is inseparable from pain, bondage, and rupture, but also from a paradoxical sense of freedom: «Woman-is-dying-but-bird-is-getting-bigger sequence/She says, The pain is killing me/When my hands are tied and my skirt rips like wings/I can finally fly» (Kim 2023).

The body's breaking point becomes the condition of its liberation. Flight here does not symbolize transcendence but rather an ecstatic, visceral freedom achieved through bodily disintegration. The transformation from woman to bird exposes the instability of identity and the porousness of bodily and symbolic boundaries: precisely the territory of the abject. The poem's structure unfolds as a ritual sequence: the recurring refrain «I-do-bird» functions like an incantation, suggesting the cyclical, performative nature of suffering, death, and rebirth. Kim Hyesoon stages the female subject as both creator and creation, the one who writes and the one written. The speaker ultimately realizes: «I-thought-bird-was-part-of-me-but-I-was-part-of-bird sequence». This reversal of agency resonates with Kim's own reflections in *Bird Rider*, where she describes literary ventriloquy as «entanglement, the impregnation of one another». The poet functions as a medium through which the unspeakable can be articulated: as rationality is suspended, that which pertains to the realm of imagination and sensation comes to the fore. In this sense, *Bird's Poetry Book* operates within the logic of the abject: it gives form to what culture seeks to expel – pain (both physical and emotional), decay, transformation – and turns it into a space of poetic creation. Kim's «I-do-bird» sequences transform the abject into an act of shamanic ventriloquy, a ritual of possession and release through which the female

16 The Korean name varies from province to province: 새타니 *Saet'ani*; 명도 *Myŏngdo*; 태자 *T'aeja*; 태자귀 *T'aejagui* (Kim 2023: 167).

body, fragmented and wounded, reclaims its voice against the oppressive systems – patriarchal, capitalist, or linguistic – that attempt to silence it. The poet becomes the medium through which what is unspeakable can be voiced: rationality is silenced, and something belonging to the realm of imagination and sensation comes forward. Kim Hyesoon reminds us that we are beings of flesh and blood, reinforcing our sense of corporeality and, through her imaginative power, placing us in intimate relation with other living beings who share this world, each firmly anchored in their own bodily existence. In this way, the concept of *WomanAnimalAsia* resurfaces, standing in stark contrast to a consumerist society that increasingly alienates us from our essential needs and from the raw, visceral reality of life.

6. Conclusions

In a 2010 academic article, Ruth Williams defines Kim Hyesoon's poetry as a «revolutionary grotesque», highlighting its capacity to expose the hidden realities of marginalized subjects, particularly women oppressed by patriarchy. As shown in the previous section, Kim's work, rendered into English through the exceptional translational skill and creative vision of Don Mee Choi, amplifies a polyphony of minoritarian voices – including women, animals, and exploited ecosystems – using abjection and grotesque exaggeration not as mere aesthetic excess but as deliberate strategies to dismantle normative representations and reveal structural injustices. U.S. critics, poets, and scholars recognize Kim not only for the cultural specificity of her work but for its ability to unsettle dominant aesthetic, ethical, and epistemological frameworks. Her poetry dissolves stable subjectivity, presenting a multiplicity of voices that resonates with posthumanist, decolonial, and feminist-critical concerns. By foregrounding bodily excess, visceral imagery, and grotesque forms, her work mobilizes abjection as a generative force, revealing the violence embedded in patriarchal, capitalist, and anthropocentric systems. Her poems also bridge historically specific Korean traumas (such as the Gwangju Massacre, the Korean War, and contemporary social disasters) with forms of suffering intelligible across cultures, creating an autonomous poetic presence that resists ethnographic or didactic framing. Importantly, Kim offers readers an alternative to the *given-to-be-seen*, a space where marginalized subjects – human and non-human alike – can be recognized in their suffering, as they are exploited and oppressed by hegemonic forces. This capacity for identification, combined with the intense affective experience of repulsion, desire, and catharsis, explains her resonance in the international literary landscape. Ultimately, Kim Hyesoon demonstrates a remarkable capacity to address pressing contemporary issues, including the challenges posed by consumerist societies and extractive forms of capitalism that exploit animals, the environment, and human beings alike—particularly women within the domestic sphere. Her work reveals a clear alignment with the concerns and principles of ecofeminism. In this context,

Kim Hyesoon's poetry expands the boundaries of contemporary poetics. Through the interplay of visceral affect, historical consciousness, formal experimentation, and ethical force, her work challenges, unsettles, and transforms readers, offering a radical reimagining of voice, body, and agency while asserting the value of marginalized perspectives within the global literary landscape.

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KOREAN WEB NOVEL:
AN INNOVATIVE FORM OF LITERATURE?[1]

Abstract

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the literary field underwent a significant transformation with the emergence of digital literature, disseminated primarily through the Internet and specialized online platforms that initially hosted genre-based narratives, fostering the exchange of shared interests among users. Over time, some of these websites evolved into fully developed platforms for the publication and consumption of digital works, exerting a profound influence on literary production and readership, particularly in terms of scale and accessibility. This study addresses the conceptual and methodological challenges associated with defining, categorizing, and analyzing digital literature. It aims to establish a theoretical framework for the development of a multidisciplinary approach to its study, with a particular focus on South Korean web novel, commonly referred to as *web sosŏl*. The research explores the origins, characteristics, and modes of production, distribution, and consumption of digital literature in Korea, while examining the hypertextual structures enabled by the Internet and mobile technologies. Furthermore, it evaluates the potential

1 This article was supported by the Seed Program for Korean Studies of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and Korean Studies Promotion Service at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2023-INC-2230001).

trajectories of this literary phenomenon and assesses the applicability of contextual and interdisciplinary methodologies to the analysis of web-based narratives.

1. Introduction

The emergence of the so-called "digital natives," namely individuals born during the period following the expansion of the Internet in the latter half of the 1990s (Dingli *et. al.* 2015), marks a significant transformation in both technological interaction patterns and modes of content consumption. This generation is characterized by an everyday, intuitive engagement with technology, including social media and various digital devices, which has, in turn, influenced their practices of reading and writing. We currently live in an era often described as one of "textual overload," marked by a steady decline in the preference for traditional printed materials such as physical books. At the same time, individuals are increasingly surrounded by an ever-expanding array of digital texts, ranging from blog posts and tweets to online forums and electronic publications. This shift signifies not only a transformation in media consumption habits but also a profound reconfiguration of the ways in which texts are produced, distributed, and interpreted in contemporary digital culture.

Furthermore, the recent shift toward markedly more dynamic multimedia content, exemplified by the short-form videos on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts, reveals a profound transformation in media consumption preferences. This trend not only highlights a significant change compared to more static content such as photographs, images, and written texts, but also demonstrates how the interactivity and immediacy of short videos are reshaping the contemporary media landscape. The growing dominance of such dynamic content can be attributed to its intrinsic capacity to capture audience attention through visually engaging imagery, rapid editing, and immersive storytelling, providing visual and narrative experiences that, while quickly consumed, leave a lasting impression. As a consequence, static forms of content, particularly written texts, appear to be gradually losing their appeal, suggesting a broader cultural shift in how narratives are perceived, valued, and consumed in the digital age.

Despite the characteristics of the contemporary media landscape, there has been a notable increase in interest toward a specific category of written texts, a phenomenon that warrants particular attention. The emergence of narratives distinguished by distinct literary qualities within the broad spectrum of textual genres raises questions of considerable significance. This trend reflects the rise of a new form of literature, whose primary channels of dissemination and reception are situated on the web through a wide range of websites originally designed for the publication and sharing of various types of narratives, thereby fostering interaction among users with

common interests. This innovative narrative current, commonly referred to as digital or electronic literature, exerts an undeniable influence on the daily consumption of literary works, particularly in terms of the sheer volume of production and readership (Hayles 2008).

However, the intrinsic complexity of digital literature, as evidenced by its broad definition, inherent formal fluidity, and diversified classification (Rettberg 2019), presents significant challenges in the development of appropriate analytical methodologies. This diversity not only reflects the eclectic and dynamic nature of this literary corpus but also highlights the difficulties inherent in defining and systematizing its distinctive features in a coherent manner. The proliferation of digital literary works, a phenomenon that has gained momentum alongside technological advancements (Moretti 2017), has further intensified these challenges, as the multiplication of content and formats requires an analytical approach that is both flexible and methodologically rigorous.

This study aims to establish the foundations for developing a multidisciplinary methodology for the analysis of digital literature, with particular attention devoted to South Korean web novel, a field that has shown remarkable dynamism within the literary landscape. These works, known in Korean as *web sosŏl* (웹소설), literally meaning "web novels," represent a significant cultural phenomenon. In particular, platforms such as 'Naver Web Sosŏl'[2] and 'Kakao Page'[3] have emerged as genuine "ecosystems" dedicated to digital literature, encompassing the entire chain of literary production, distribution, and consumption. From this point onward, the term *web sosŏl* began to gain widespread public usage, accompanied by a series of structural and cultural transformations that came to define the characteristics of contemporary web novel. Among these developments, the introduction of paid serialization stands out as a crucial concept in shaping the current identity and economic framework of the *web sosŏl* medium (Lee 2022: 51-52).

These digital environments not only facilitate access to a wide range of works but also encourage narrative innovation and the experimentation of new literary formats (Park 2022a: 110-113). An emblematic example is the approximately 10,000 titles made available through Naver in 2022 (Jeon *et. al.* 2023), a testament to an exceptionally prolific and continuously expanding digital literary production. The presence of such a substantial volume of works highlights the growing public interest in this form of narrative and underscores the crucial role these platforms play in shaping contemporary literary trends. At the same time, they foster a culture of

2 <https://novel.naver.com>.
Since the reorganization of Naver's online content platform in 2019, 'Naver Web sosŏl' have been incorporated into 'Naver Series', the company's paid-serialization platform, through which they are currently distributed and serviced: <https://series.naver.com>.

3 <https://page.kakao.com>.

reading characterized by dynamism, interactivity, and an intensified exchange between authors and readers, reflecting broader transformations in the creation and consumption of literature in the digital age. This development is closely aligned with the widespread adoption of smartphones, which served as a major catalyst for the popularization of *web sosŏl*. In this sense, web novel can be interpreted as a cultural product born from the technological advances of the twenty-first century that have profoundly reshaped the ways in which Koreans experience storytelling. Technology has not only transformed everyday life but has also redefined narrative consumption itself, with readers actively participating in the construction of narrative structures through the interactive affordances of digital platforms (Park 2022a: 107-110).

Therefore, this study will examine not only the emergence of digital literature in Korea, outlining its definitions, distinctive features, and internal dynamics, but also its structures of production, distribution, and consumption. The analysis will further explore the effects mediated by the Internet and mobile technologies, which give these literary works a distinctly hypertextual character. Based on these considerations, the research will assess both the potential for a gradual alignment of web novel with specific literary currents.

2. Korean Web Novel: From Its Origins to the Present Day

The advent of 'digital' literature marked a pivotal turning point closely intertwined with the expansion of the Internet, which rapidly established itself as the primary medium for its dissemination and consumption. This literary innovation initially found expression across a variety of websites specifically designed to host narratives of diverse genres. Virtual environments such as Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) served as meeting spaces for users with shared interests, fostering exchange and dialogue. Far from being a geographically limited phenomenon, this development soon assumed an international dimension (Flores 2019).

In South Korea, the foundations of this digital literary movement were established through the use of computerized Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), known domestically as PC Communication (피씨통신), marking the beginning of a phase dedicated to exploring new digital dimensions within the literary sphere. This system was characterized by the use of virtual "bulletin boards", which actively encouraged the creation and sharing of narrative works. As early as the 1990s, numerous works reached and engaged a wide readership, achieving notable popularity (Suh 2023: 71-72). These narratives spread rapidly, particularly among young audiences, who printed and circulated them among interested peers. This process of physical sharing, although relying on a traditionally analog medium such as paper, reflected a cultural dynamic deeply rooted in the formative stages of digital culture, illustrating the hybrid nature of early digital literary practices that bridged virtual and tangible modes of textual dissemination.

The expansion of this innovative narrative form was significantly accelerated by the rise of the book rental system, which played a crucial role in reshaping reading habits and the modes of literary consumption in South Korea. Just as video rentals had become a widespread cultural practice in the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of temporary access to media was soon extended to comics and books. This trend gained additional momentum during the economic crisis of 1998, when the financial constraints faced by many readers fostered a preference for more affordable, short-term consumption models, typically lasting three to four days. At the same time, the limited accessibility of narrative works through the BBS platforms of the period encouraged both authors and publishers to print and distribute these stories on a large scale through rental bookstores. This new commercial model not only expanded the reach of these narratives but also contributed to the emergence of a vibrant subculture of readers who shared a growing interest in popular genres such as fantasy, mystery, romance, and East Asian style martial-arts fiction. The spread of rental bookstores became an important intermediary between digital and physical modes of literary circulation, signaling an early convergence between popular culture and digital literary creativity (Lee 2020).

The proliferation of the Internet marked the beginning of a new era in which access to literary works through the online sphere became an established and widely adopted practice. The rapid expansion of World Wide Web and ADSL technologies in South Korea between 1998 and 1999, largely driven by government initiatives, enabled readers to engage directly with websites that hosted narrative works, thereby gradually displacing traditional modes of literary consumption such as book rentals. In this context, the consumption of genre fiction increasingly gravitated toward specialized platforms such as "Munpia"[4], "Joara"[5], and "Romantique"[6] (see Lee 2023: 655-658; Suh 2023: 75-77), which serve as emblematic examples of *internet sosŏl* ("internet novels"). These sites were distinguished by innovative and unconstrained writing practices that incorporated elements of the fantastic as well as the creative integration of emojis within the text (Roh 2018: 410-411). This shift not only transformed the mechanisms of literary production, distribution, and readership, but also reflected a broader cultural transition toward participatory and interactive modes of storytelling. Within this new digital ecosystem, readers and writers coexisted in a shared creative environment, facilitating the emergence of novel forms of authorship, reader engagement, and collective imagination. This dynamic fostered a new kind of readership—active, specialized, and genre-oriented—that would later serve as the foundation for today's web novel communities.

4 <https://www.munpia.com>.

5 <https://www.joara.com>.

6 <http://new.toto-romance.com/main/main.asp>.

With the advent of the mobile era and the widespread diffusion of smartphones, major web portals such as Naver and Kakao (formarly Daum) adopted the strategy of serial publication for narrative works, thereby responding to the evolving demands of an increasingly connected readership. In 2013, Naver launched a platform specifically dedicated to *web sosŏl*, anticipating a trend that would experience remarkable success throughout the 2010s (Park 2022b). This development constituted a critical moment in the very definition of what is today understood as web novel. With the entry of dominant two platforms into the market, the term *web sosŏl* itself became widely popularized. At the same time, the explosive increase in the number of works led to the consolidation of specific genres, narrative techniques, and recurrent clichés, providing the conditions under which web fiction could be established as a stable conceptual category within the literary field (Lee 2020; Lee 2023) This evolution in literary consumption reflects not only a profound transformation in readers' habits but also the publishing industry's capacity to adapt to the new possibilities offered by digital technology. Through these innovations, the act of reading has become more interactive, immediate, and participatory, fostering new forms of storytelling and engagement with literary texts that blur the boundaries between author and audience, and between production and consumption.

As of the mid-2020s, platforms hosting Korean web novels can be broadly categorized into two types based on their degree of openness. Open platforms, which can be considered the original form of web novel, include 'traditional' sites such as Munpia and Joara, as well as sections dedicated sections within Kakao Page and Naver Series. These platforms adopt a free serialization system that allows anyone to upload their own works, with the option to apply for paid distribution once a certain volume of accumulated chapters has been reached. The main advantage of open platforms lies in their accessibility, which enables the active participation of new authors and the continuous introduction of free serialized novels. However, their limitations include the lack of guaranteed quality and the absence of binding contracts, which can result in the sudden discontinuation of ongoing works. In contrast, closed platforms such as Naver Series and Kakao Page require editorial approval (by in-house MDs, or merchandisers) before serialization can take place. These platforms represent large-scale markets with substantial readerships, and the editorial screening process helps ensure a certain level of quality in the works published. Nevertheless, it is difficult for aspiring authors to make direct contact with these companies, and the preferences of the MDs can significantly influence the types of works that are selected for publication. Acknowledging these limitations, platform operators have sought to attract new and emerging authors through complementary open systems and public writing contests, thereby maintaining a dynamic flow of creative talent within the web novel ecosystem (Park 2022a: 110-113).

The current Korean web novel market can be characterized as one dominated by two major corporations, Naver Series and Kakao Page, with smaller companies striving

to establish their presence and achieve growth within this competitive landscape. In particular, Naver has accelerated the industrialization of web novel by introducing a paid preview system that capitalizes on the accessibility advantages of its large-scale platform. Meanwhile, Kakao has played a central role in the popularization of web novels through its "Wait-and-Read-for-Free" marketing strategy, which allows users to access one episode for free after a certain period of time. Together, these two corporate models have defined the dual structure of Korea's contemporary web novel industry, shaping both its economic framework and its modes of audience engagement (Lee 2023). In recent years, web novels have increasingly served as original source material for a variety of One Source Multi-Use (OSMU) adaptations, including webtoons, dramas, films, audiobooks, and merchandise (Lustrissimi 2023). Moreover, the active exportation of these works to international markets has further accelerated the globalization and popularization of Korean web novel, solidifying its position as a central component of the contemporary cultural and creative industries.

A crucial aspect to consider is that web fiction, from its very emergence, has been intrinsically shaped by a dual commitment to reader orientation and make adaptability. This is evident, above all, in the fact that its subgenre classifications have undergone rapid and substantial changes within a relatively short period of time. When Naver first launched its web novel service in 2013, it offered only three subcategories, namely romance, SF & fantasy, and martial arts. Shortly thereafter, additional categories such as horror & mystery, light novels, historical & war fiction, and various fusion genres were introduced. Subsequently, the SF & fantasy category was subdivided into romance fantasy, fantasy, and contemporary fantasy, in order to more clearly define target readerships, while horror & mystery was rebranded as "mystery." All of these changes occurred in less than a year, indicating that no fixed or standardized system of classification yet existed within the early web novel ecosystem. In other words, because this was a space of initial commercial experimentation, platforms exhibited a strong tendency to accommodate the demands of both readers and the market, and the time required to implement such changes was relatively short. Further transformations were triggered when Kakao Page, often regarded as a latecomer in the web novel market, entered into direct competition with Naver. Kakao Page focused primarily on fantasy genres targeting male readers, a demographic that was relatively less active on Naver, and pursued an aggressive marketing strategy. As a result, the platform concentrated on five major genres: fantasy, contemporary fantasy, martial arts, romance, and romance fantasy. Through this process, the Korean web novel market came to recognize these five as its core or "main" genres, while other types of narratives were either marginalized or absorbed into broader categories (Park 2022a: 113-117). As will be discussed later, these genres are far from rigid or closed categories. They continue to evolve through processes of hybridization and recombination, constantly generating new narrative configurations and thereby contributing to the ongoing dynamism of the Korean web novel field.

Despite the continued rapid growth of the web novel industry, scholarly discourse on how to approach and analyze this phenomenon remains comparatively underdeveloped (Lee 2020; Lee 2022). This stagnation is largely attributable to the multifaceted characteristics that define Korean web novel—its fluid genre boundaries, dynamic production systems, and complex modes of circulation and readership engagement. These features complicate the establishment of stable analytical frameworks, calling for an interdisciplinary methodology that can adequately capture its literary, technological, and socio-economic dimensions. Accordingly, the following chapter seeks to advance the discussion by examining Korean web fiction through three interrelated dimensions: curation, production, and consumption. This tripartite framework will serve as a lens through which to investigate the structural mechanisms, creative processes, and reader dynamics that collectively shape the evolving ecosystem of Korean digital literature.

3. Characteristics of Korean Web Novel: Curation, Production, and Consumption

In the contemporary Korean web novel market, the role of digital platforms has become increasingly central and, indeed, decisive. Given the sheer number of new releases—often dozens of titles published each day—the choice of which works readers encounter depends less on individual preference and more on the platforms' systems of curation. In this respect, the platform functions as both a mediator and a gatekeeper, shaping literary visibility and influencing the circulation of taste within the digital literary ecosystem. The presentation and categorization of web novel titles follow a range of algorithmic and editorial criteria designed to maximize discoverability and reader engagement. Platforms such as Naver Series, Kakao Page, Joara, and Munpia employ multiple classifiers to determine which works are featured on their 'showcase' or front page. These classifiers typically include variables such as view count, male-targeted and female-targeted genres, reader age group, publication day, new releases, and trending keywords. Through such mechanisms, platforms guide user attention and structure the experience of literary consumption, often privileging works that demonstrate strong commercial potential or high engagement metrics. Genre classification remains a fundamental curatorial principle within this system. Categories include both established genres—such as romance, fantasy, contemporary fantasy, martial arts, and romance fantasy—and emerging hybrid genres, which arise through the fusion of preexisting narrative traditions. Additionally, recurring motifs such as 'return', 'possession', 'reincarnation', and 'dimension shift' function as recognizable thematic markers that contribute to the diversification and specialization of the web novel market (Jeon *et. al.* 2023). These motifs operate almost as subgenres in their own right, allowing platforms to segment audiences and refine recommendation algorithms.

Another key aspect that illustrates the centrality of curation in the web novel industry lies in the very structure of serialized publication, which is meticulously tailored to meet readers' preferences and consumption habits. The serialized format, one of the defining characteristics of web novels, operates in direct response to the demands of a digitally connected readership that expects immediacy, accessibility, and continuous engagement. With the smartphone having become the primary medium for reading web novels, platforms and authors have adapted their works to optimize readability and convenience. Text layout, paragraph structure, and visual rhythm are carefully calibrated for small screens, ensuring that the reading experience remains fluid even during short periods of downtime, such as during commutes on subways or buses. This optimization has also led to a standardized length for paid serialized installments, generally ranging between 5,000 and 7,000 characters per episode (Park 2022a: 111; Park 2022b: 42), a format designed to align with what has been termed a "snack culture", a mode of cultural consumption based on brevity, portability, and instant gratification. Such a system underscores the profound interdependence between reader demand and narrative production. In an ecosystem where user retention and the attraction of new readers serve as the ultimate indicators of success, both platforms and authors engage in a process of continuous market-driven adaptation. The production of web novels thus follows a logic of customized cultural commodification, in which content is not merely created but 'curated' and 'designed' to fit the temporal rhythms, behavioral patterns, and emotional expectations of its readership.

In this sense, curation constitutes the structural foundation of the web novel ecosystem, extending well beyond the simple organization of content. It operates as a dynamic process of negotiation between market logic, technological mediation, and cultural value formation. The curated visibility of a work determines not only its commercial viability but also its perceived literary legitimacy within the digital environment. Algorithms, metadata, and reader analytics collectively participate in the construction of cultural meaning, progressively eroding the distinction between aesthetic evaluation and market performance. As a result, curation in web novel functions as a distinct mode of cultural production, actively shaping hierarchies of visibility, taste, and value within the web novel market. The interaction between automated recommendation systems and human editorial oversight gives rise to a hybrid model of literary selection that simultaneously reflects and reinforces dominant consumption patterns.

Since web novel platforms function as integrated systems for the mass production, distribution, and consumption of narrative content, they constitute an ecosystem in which creation, mediation, and reception occur in a nearly simultaneous manner. This simultaneity, made possible by the affordances of the web, exerts a profound influence on both the writing process and the narrative structures of web novels. Authors are able to monitor readers' reactions and preferences in real time and are

therefore compelled not only to respond to them quickly but also to write under considerable pressure. As studies on web novel writing practice suggest, the aspect most consistently emphasized is that narratives and expression must remain easy to read from the reader's perspective, since the continuation of serialization depends directly on sustained audience response (Choi 2017; Lee 2023). To survive as a web novel writer is, in effect, to enter a continuous trial in which one must secure and maintain readers' interest from the moment serialization begins. As a consequence, there is a marked tendency to prioritize readers' expectations and desires over purely author-centred aesthetic considerations. The entire process of web novel production unfolds in shared digital environments where readers' voices are constantly present, which considerably increases the degree to which reader feedback intervenes in and shapes the work itself.

In response to this environment, authors systematically adapt both form and content in order to maximize the marketability of their works. They refine paragraphing and line breaks to enhance readability on smartphone screens, and they design compelling protagonists, striking opening situations, and narrative hooks that heighten curiosity about subsequent episodes. The competitive structure of the web novel market, in which dozens of new works are released each week and thousands of existing titles are already available, significantly increases the probability that any work which fails to capture interest at the outset will be ignored. Consequently, writers are under a quasi-obligatory constraint to concentrate highly appealing, often provocative elements in the opening instalments so as to draw readers through to the point of paid episodes (Park 2022b). Moreover, serial publication itself requires specific forms of narrative preparation. Many authors complete a substantial portion of the manuscript, or at least a detailed outline, before releasing the first episode. During serialization, they closely monitor readers' reactions and adjust plot development, pacing, or character portrayal in order to maintain or revive interest. Each episode must function as a relatively self-contained unit, offering a degree of immediate satisfaction through a local resolution while simultaneously generating renewed curiosity or introducing a new narrative complication. The result is a micro-structured form of storytelling in which the rhythm of episode-by-episode gratification and suspense becomes a defining feature of the narrative economy (Choi 2017).

Building on this serialized structure, the central role played by the crossing and recombination of genres and motifs in web novel production can be understood within this context. In order to respond to reader demand, authors actively adopt popular tropes and literary devices, sometimes retrofitting them into drafts that have already been written (Seo 2025). Recurrent devices such as 'return to a previous timeline', 'possession', 'reincarnation', or 'transfer to another world' are deployed strategically to meet expectations shaped by platform culture and recommendation systems (Park 2022b). Genre boundaries are therefore highly fluid, and new hybrid forms emerge through the continuous blending of existing generic conventions (Roh 2018; Kim

2019). A readily comprehensible narrative structure is also considered essential. Plots tend to follow clear causal lines, with recognizable character functions and quickly identifiable stakes. Visual elements, particularly cover illustrations and character images, are carefully designed to attract attention in the platform interface and to communicate genre, tone, and target readership at a glance (Park 2022a). In this way, production in the web novel field involves not only the writing of text but also the orchestration of narrative, visual, and paratextual elements to increase click-through rates and reader retention, reinforcing the tight coupling between creative practice and platform-based market dynamics.

If curation and production reveal how platforms and authors structure web novels, the dimension of consumption shows how readers, in turn, shape both narrative form and market dynamics. From its early stages, the consumption base for Korean web novels has been distributed across a wide range of age groups (Lee 2022), an indication of their broad popular reach. One striking feature of this readership is the tendency to develop stronger attachment to works than to specific authors. Readers often prioritize preferred genres, motifs, and narrative patterns over authorial identity, selecting texts according to whether they match familiar expectations of plot development and thematic content. Over time, many readers have become highly accustomed to the narrative grammar of web novels, including their pacing, tropes, and episode structure. In order to heighten reader attention, authors and platforms frequently make the opening segments of each episode extremely short and focused, thereby reinforcing narrative immersion from the very beginning. In this sense, readers' consumption patterns exert a direct influence on narrative form. The sustained engagement of the audience also depends heavily on the capacity of the text to create a strong sense of emotional alignment and shared experience between protagonist and reader (Park 2022a).

Within this search for immersion, factors such as ease of use, readability, the possibility of seamless payment for subsequent episodes, platform connectivity, and integrated communication functions become crucial determinants of consumption (Woo *et. al.* 2017). To attract and retain habitual readers, a work must present an appealing title and appropriate cover image, be clearly distinguishable from competing texts, maintain a smooth and fluent narrative flow, and offer content that is immediately intelligible. In other words, successful web novels are those that minimize cognitive and technical friction while maximizing affective engagement and narrative momentum.

Another central dimension of web novel consumption is reader participation through comment functions. Readers who progress mechanically from one episode to the next encounter, at the end of each instalment, a comment section embedded within the reading interface. Among the hundreds or thousands of comments that may accumulate, those marked as "best" constitute not only individual opinions but also the aggregated judgement of a broader readership that has endorsed them through

'likes'. Over time, such highly visible comments come to function as a paratext of their own, attached to each episode as a kind of communal annotation that transcends the original temporal moment of posting (Lee 2020). This interactive space allows users to share interpretations, express satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and contribute to the formation of a kind of public opinion around the text. These interactions influence not only other readers, who often consult comments before continuing, but also authors, who may adjust narrative choices in response to recurring criticisms or praise.

In this environment, the consumer of web novels naturally assumes the role of active evaluator and advisor, intervening in processes of production and circulation. Consumption is no longer structured primarily by the author's consciousness or intention, but by the reader's sense of enjoyment, plausibility, and 'common sense'. Readers are able to observe, with very little delay, the effects of their recommendations, preferences, and evaluations on the serialization of works and on authors' creative decisions. From the consumer's perspective, the web as a space thus provides conditions in which readers can occupy a position of relative advantage vis-à-vis authors, exerting visible influence over the life cycle of a text (Choi 2017). In this respect, the consumption of web novels exemplifies a broader shift in digital culture, in which reading becomes inseparable from rating, commenting, and co-shaping the narrative field.

In summary, the three dimensions examined here, curation, production, and consumption, indicate that Korean web novels operate within an ecosystem in which literary value is continuously co-produced by platforms, authors, and readers. Platforms shape visibility, authors adapt their writing to serial formats and real-time feedback, and readers consume, evaluate, and influence texts in highly active ways. In other words, these dynamics suggest that web novels are literary products formed at the intersection of technological mediation, market logic, and participatory reading practices.

4. Is Korean Web Novel an Innovative Form of Literature?

We may now approach the central question of whether the Korean web novel constitutes an innovative form of literature. This question can be approached along three interrelated axes: its media infrastructure, its literary poetics, and its position within the broader field of digital and world literature.

As discussed above, the web-specific simultaneity of production, distribution, and consumption radically reshapes the conditions of literary practice in the Korean web novel ecosystem. Serialization, platform upload, reader response, ranking, and monetization occur within almost the same temporal frame. This simultaneity maximizes efficiency and lowers entry barriers for authors, yet it also amplifies the power of readers and the market, thereby diminishing traditional forms of authorial authority. In such a configuration, web novels tend to privilege commodity value

and popularity over the autonomous "work" in the classic sense: reader numbers, payments for previews, and ranking data become decisive indicators of value. The traditional hierarchy in which the author occupies a privileged symbolic position is consequently destabilized; readers, both individually and as aggregated data, can effectively "outrank" the author. As Choi argues, this development breaks with the solemnity of high literary culture and the authority of the writer, opening the literary field to more democratic and participatory forms of interaction (Choi 2017: 93-94). In this respect, the web novel is innovative not because it abandons literature, but because it reorganizes the literary field around platform-mediated participation and continuous negotiation with its audience.

At the level of form, the Korean web novel does not constitute a radical rupture with the history of narrative prose. It should be understood not as an alien cultural object, but as an evolution of the novel genre (Roh 2018). Serial narration, strong generic framing, and plot-driven immersion are all features with deep roots in popular print culture. What is new is the way in which these features are rearticulated within a mobile, platform-based environment. Micro-serialization, 'snack-sized' episodes, the extreme concentration of narrative hooks at the beginning of a story, and the systematic use of recurrent motifs all respond to the temporalities and attention economies of networked reading. These strategies demonstrate that web novels adapt novelistic narration to a situation in which readers move quickly across interfaces, pay per episode, and constantly evaluate whether to continue. In this sense, the Korean web novel is innovative as a media-specific reconfiguration of familiar narrative resources. At the same time, the need to survive in a highly competitive platform market can drive web novels toward formulaic repetition and over-codified genre patterns. This tension between innovation and standardization mirrors the broader ambivalence of digital culture, in which new expressive possibilities coexist with pronounced commercial pressures.

When Korean web novels are situated within theoretical frameworks of electronic and world literature, further dimensions of both their innovativeness and their limits become apparent. Tabbi has argued that electronic literature should not be reduced to a set of technologically spectacular "works", but understood as an emerging cultural form, that is, as the collective creation of new terms, genres, structures, and institutions (Tabbi 2010). From this perspective, what is decisive is not only the digital support of texts, but the embedding of literary practice in networked infrastructures and collaborative writing spaces. Korean web novels fit this description in important ways. They are anchored in highly developed platform infrastructures, sustained by dense social and algorithmic networks, and increasingly implicated in transmedia circuits. They also participate in processes of international circulation that recall David Damrosch's definition of world literature as a "mode of circulation and of reading", rather than a fixed canon of texts (Damrosh 2003). Viewed in this light, Korean web novels can be regarded as one of the most consolidated institutional

realizations of electronic literature within a specific national and linguistic context.

Yet their status within the Korean literary field remains contested. Web novels must engage in a "struggle for recognition" vis-à-vis so-called pure literature and established hierarchies of value (Lee 2022: 63–67). They are frequently marked as commercial or generic and thereby positioned at the margins of 'pure literature proper', even as they exhibit remarkable narrative productivity and a rich repertoire of motifs and symbolic configurations. This ambivalent positioning is precisely what makes them a crucial site for rethinking what counts as literature in the age of platforms.

The study of Korean web novels therefore calls for methodological innovation. It is no longer sufficient to apply only traditional tools of narrative analysis; one must also interpret the fine-grained genre labels and categories—often emerging from platform practices and hashtags—in relation to contemporary social dynamics and metaphorical structures (Lee 2022). This implies an interdisciplinary approach that brings together literary theory, media studies, platform studies, and the sociology of culture. It also requires critical approaches that attend to the "actual structures and modes of functioning of literary genres" under new communication infrastructures, rather than simply expanding canons or catalogues (Tabbi 2010). Attention must shift to networks, constraints, and shared conceptual vocabularies, as well as to the interfaces and architectures through which literature is produced and experienced. Korean web novels, which develop in direct dependence on UI design, payment systems, ranking algorithms, and comment cultures, provide an exemplary case for such a reorientation. Moreover, the intense dynamism of the Korean web novel scene suggests that frameworks developed here may have broader applicability to digital literature elsewhere (see Lee 2020). If narrative structures, platform affordances, and reader practices are analyzed in a systematic and integrated manner, Korean web novels could indeed offer a useful analytical model for world digital literature more generally.

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IRENE LUSTRISSIMI

SOUTH KOREAN SOFT POWER BETWEEN WEBTOON AND WEBNOVEL: THE *SOLO LEVELING* CASE

Abstract

In recent years, South Korea has consolidated its soft power through new forms of digital popular culture, particularly webnovels and webtoons. These formats, distributed via platforms such as Naver Webtoon and KakaoPage, have taken on a central role within the Hallyu wave, standing alongside K-pop and K-drama as instruments of global cultural influence. This study focuses on *Solo Leveling* as a paradigmatic case, aiming to analyze how its evolution from webnovel to webtoon, anime, and finally video game represents an effective manifestation of South Korean soft power. The analysis highlights transmedia strategies, localization processes, and the role of fan communities. *Solo Leveling*, originally a webnovel by Ch'ugong published on KakaoPage (2016–2018), was adapted into a webtoon by DUBU (2018–2021), an anime (2024), and a video game (*Solo Leveling: ARISE*, 2024), becoming a global transmedia phenomenon. Its ability to move across different media underscores its strategic value in terms of OSMU (One Source Multi-Use), a model typical of the South Korean cultural industry. The work's success has been strengthened by the effectiveness of digital distribution platforms and by the active participation of fan communities, which have contributed to its international popularity through fan translations, fan art, and fan fiction, enhancing its global virality. The analysis adopts a qualitative cultural

and media-oriented approach, examining the production and distribution stages of *Solo Leveling*, its transmedia transformations, international reception data, and online fan engagement dynamics. Particular attention is given to localization strategies in different markets and to editorial examples from Europe and the United States. The *Solo Leveling* case demonstrates how webnovels and webtoons have become strategic tools of soft power and cultural diplomacy, contributing to redefining South Korea's international role as a hybrid and innovative cultural powerhouse.

1. Introduction

The transformation of South Korea into a global cultural powerhouse in recent years is closely linked to the phenomenon of the "Korean Wave", or *hallyu* (Kim 2022), which has had a profound and lasting impact internationally. This phenomenon began in the 1990s with the spread of Korean dramas and movies (*Hallyu 1.0*) and later evolved through music, fashion, and lifestyle trends (*Hallyu 2.0* and *3.0*). Nowadays, it has reached what is referred to as *Hallyu 4.0*. In this latest wave, new digital forms such as web *sosŏl*[1] (or web novels) and webtoons[2] are gaining increasing prominence, emerging as key drivers in the future expansion of *hallyu*.

These "korean waves" have become the main sources of South Korea's soft power. It has grown increasingly influential over the past decades through a strategic and intelligent use of cultural influence. This soft power is particularly effective in the realm of pop culture, and web novels and webtoons now represent some of its most potent forms, especially among younger generations and in international markets. Therefore, in addition to well-established media such as K-pop and dramas, South Korea has successfully leveraged the most recent *hallyu*'s new forms of digital entertainment like webtoons, generating over 1.053 trillion won in 2020 and becoming a rapidly expanding sector on a global scale (Korea Creative Content Agency 2021). Thanks to the intensive work of the cultural industry, which has been increasingly transformed by digital technologies, particularly today in the era of the digital creative economy, cultural content is produced within a globalized and digitalized market,

1 The transcription used in this article is McCune-Reischauer.

2 Web novels are novels that are both written and published on digital platforms, such as *Naver Series*, *Kakao Page* and *Munpia*. Most of these literary works are genre fiction, particularly fantasy and science fiction. Web novels are published in instalments, usually once or twice a week, by the author's management company. Webtoons are digital comics usually published on popular platforms such as *Naver Webtoon* or *Kakao Page*. Often, webtoons are not original works, but transmedia adaptations (OSMU) of web novels: examples include *Under the Oak Tree*, *Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint* and *Touch Your Heart* and many more (Lustrissimi 2023).

operating according to economic models that emphasize visibility and virality (Hesmondhalgh *et. al.* 2011: 14-22). Web novels exemplify this transformation: distribution, audience engagement, and commercial success are increasingly dependent on digital platforms that amplify visibility and promote virality.

The case of *Solo Leveling* is a particularly illustrative example: a work that has successfully crossed formats, languages, and countries, blending traditional and innovative narrative elements while fully integrating into the logic of digitalization and global consumption. Over the past five years, the international growth of web novels has been very promising, culminating in 2024[3], a year marked by the fruits of this international expansion. The popularity of *Solo Leveling*, which was already huge thanks to its webtoon, increased after the release of its anime adaptation, video game, and other media.

This paper aims to analyze the case of *Solo Leveling*, a transmedia phenomenon that originated as a web novel and evolved into a webtoon, anime, and video game, exploring how its success represents a manifestation of Korean soft power. Beginning with its origins, the analysis will examine its cultural impact, adaptation dynamics, and global dissemination, with particular attention to the role of fan communities and product localization, in order to understand the significance and influence of these new digital and cultural products as instruments of soft power.

2. *Solo Leveling*: the Multi-Platform Triumph

Solo Leveling (*na honjaman rebeorŏp*; 나 혼자만 레벨업), originally a web novel written by the author Ch'ugong[4], represents one of the most emblematic cases of South Korea's evolving digital publishing ecosystem as aforementioned. First serialized on *Kakao Page* from the 25th of July 2016, to 2018, the narrative follows Sŏng Chinu, a dungeon hunter who, through the acquisition of a mysterious power, gains the ability to grow stronger and "level up" in a manner analogous to characters in role-playing video games (RPGs). This metafictional mechanism situates *Solo Leveling* within a hybrid narrative framework that merges elements of fantasy, action, and video game logic, embodying a distinctly postmodern interplay between digital culture and storytel-

3 In terms of the exponential growth in the international popularity of South Korean web novels, 2024 and 2025 are key years. For example, Penguin Random House established Inklore, a publishing imprint dedicated to web novels. In Italy, the launch of Narae, a web novel platform owned by the Mondadori Group – one of the country's largest publishing houses – marks another significant milestone. Narae aims to capitalise on the growing market by translating some of the most successful international web novels for Italian readers. Furthermore, in June 2025, Mondadori published its first Korean web novel in print: *Semantic Error*. Besides, the Korean web novel *Under the Oak Tree* achieved the notable feat of entering the New York Times Best Seller list for hardcover fiction at number seven.

4 Although the author is commonly known as Chugong, in this article the name will be transcribed according to the McCune–Reischauer romanization system (as the original Korean is 추공), therefore Ch'ugong. This strategy will be applied also for other authors name.

ling. In 2018, the web novels was adapted into a webtoon, illustrated by the artist DUBU of the REDICE Studio[5]. Serialized from the 4th of March 2018 to the 29th of December 2021, the webtoon's aesthetic dynamism and serialized accessibility contributed to the establishment of *Solo Leveling* as a global cultural phenomenon. It has garnered over 430 million views and 5 million unique readers on platforms such as Kakao Page. By 2020, its total sales, including revenue from the webtoon adaptation, surpassed $30 million, demonstrating rapid growth in the global market[6]. This international success has not only led to a sequel, *Solo Leveling: Ragnarok*, and other spin-off products, but has also facilitated the webtoon adaptation's release in print internationally, The print license for the English-language edition was acquired by Yen Press – publishing both the webtoon and the web novel print format[7] –, while in Italy the webtoon series began publication through Star Comics in April 2021. Furthermore, the franchise has expanded into an audiobook on Audible, video game and an anime series. The subsequent release of the anime adaptation, produced by A-1 Pictures and premiered on Crunchyroll in January 2024, marked a decisive phase in the internationalization of the franchise, consolidating its status as a transnational cultural brand.

Beyond its individual success, *Solo Leveling* functions as a paradigmatic example of the One Source Multi Use (OSMU) model, illustrating the systematic repurposing of a single intellectual property across multiple media formats. The franchise's trajectory – from web novel to webtoon, anime, merchandise, and forthcoming video

5 REDICE Studio (*redŭaisŭ sŭt'yudio*; 레드아이스 스튜디오) is one of the most prominent and influential Korean art studios specializing in the adaptation of popular web novels into webtoons. Among its most notable titles are *Return of the SSS-Class Ranker*, *Returned by the King*, *The Return of the Disaster-Class Hero*, and many others. The studio was founded in 2018 by the artist DUBU (real name Chang Chŏngsuk; 장정숙), who tragically passed away on the 23th of July 2022, due to a cerebral hemorrhage caused by a chronic illness. Despite his untimely death, DUBU's artistic legacy continues to exert a profound influence on the global webtoon industry, with *Solo Leveling* standing as his most celebrated work.

6 Che, Ŭnchu, "Leveling Up Alone, Just Like the Title: 'Solo Leveling'... Surpassing 'One Piece' to Take First Place" ["제목처럼 혼자 레벨업하는 '나 혼자만 레벨업'...'원피스' 제치고 1 위"]. Kookje, December 25, 2019.

7 The recent growing popularity of Korean web novels on an international scale is closely linked to the proliferation of English-language translations, which have facilitated their integration into Western publishing markets. Initially, many of these works circulated through unofficial fan translations distributed on unauthorized websites, a phenomenon that reflected both the global demand for Korean digital literature and the lack of formal publication channels. Over time, however, this informal circulation evolved into a legitimized publishing practice, with the release of officially licensed physical editions featuring professional translations intended for English-speaking audiences. Among the leading actors in this process, Yen Press, through its Yen On imprint, has specialized in translating and publishing prominent Asian web and light novels, including *Solo Leveling* and *Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint*. Established in 2006, Yen Press has played a crucial role in mediating the circulation of Asian popular culture within Western contexts, thereby enhancing both the accessibility and cultural legitimacy of digital-born narratives.

game – demonstrates the scalability and flexibility inherent in South Korea's digital cultural industries. Within this context, *Solo Leveling* exemplifies how webtoons have become one of the nation's primary cultural export commodities, bolstered by global platforms such as Naver Webtoon, which currently reports over 82 million monthly active users (ANI News, 2022). This success was significantly amplified by the webtoon adaptation, whose international distribution drew a global readership back to the original novel. The franchise's subsequent expansion into video games, collectable merchandise (including action figures), animated adaptations, and planned live-action projects reflects a comprehensive strategy of transmedia commodification. At present, *Solo Leveling* remains among the most widely disseminated and internationally recognized Korean web novels. From a theoretical perspective, the international trajectory of *Solo Leveling* can be understood within the framework of soft power, as articulated by Joseph S. Nye (2008: 94-109). Actually, Nye defines soft power as a nation's ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion, grounded in cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policies perceived as legitimate or morally authoritative. In this sense, the export and reception of Korean digital narratives, of which *Solo Leveling* is emblematic, represent a strategic cultural instrument in the projection of South Korea's international image and influence. And therefore, the *hallyu* phenomenon, originally tied to K-dramas and K-pop, has now expanded into the digital domain through webtoons and web novels. This is described as "platformized soft power", where national branding and creative industries converge through digital ecosystems (Dal Yong Jin, 2024: 94-109). The *Solo Leveling* franchise, mediated by global platforms such as Kakao Page, Naver Webtoon, and Crunchyroll, exemplifies this modern transformation from cultural content that functions both as entertainment and as a vehicle for national prestige, and its transmedia success reflects South Korea's model of a "hybrid nation". As Chung Min Lee observed in an interview, South Korea represents "an advanced economy mixed with an ancient civilization that is at once irrevocably democratic, technologically innovative, and culturally vibrant", able to influence, without any obligation, through its powerful soft power (Park, 2024).

Another factor that has contributed recently to the franchise's worldwide resonance is the continued expansion of its transmedia architecture. As already mentioned, beyond its webtoon and anime adaptations, *Solo Leveling* has extended into the gaming sector with the release of *Solo Leveling: ARISE* in May 2024. Developed by Netmarble, the game surpassed five million pre-registrations prior to launch, illustrating how a single cultural property can mobilize heterogeneous audiences – from readers to gamers – within a unified media ecology. This diversification further exemplifies the logic of OSMU-driven cultural production, where intellectual properties are strategically redeployed across multiple platforms to maximize cultural reach and economic value. This dynamic reinforces the idea that South Korea's digital cultural industries operate within an increasingly integrated transmedia system, where nar-

rative worlds circulate fluidly across formats while expanding the nation's soft-power reach. In this context, Iwabuchi's (2002: 256-273) notion of "cultural odorlessness" is particularly relevant: while cultural products may downplay explicit national markers to enhance global circulation, they can never fully erase the "cultural odor" of their origins. Even the most seemingly "odorless" products retain subtle traces of the cultural contexts that shape them, an aspect that becomes especially evident when examining *Solo Leveling* and its depiction of contemporary Korea[8].

2.1. Solo Leveling *and the representation of modern Korea*

Solo Leveling is set in a world profoundly altered by the sudden appearance of mysterious gates that lead to dungeons filled with dangerous monsters. These gates first emerged ten years before the events of the story, transforming society and giving rise to a new class of people known as "hunters." These individuals possess supernatural abilities and are tasked with protecting humanity by venturing into the dungeons to combat the creatures within. The story begins in South Korea, specifically in Seoul, and centres on Sŏng Chinu[9], an E-rank hunter widely regarded as the weakest of his kind. Despite his dedication and experience, his scarce abilities earn him the title "the World's weakest hunter", and he struggles to make a living or support his family. During a raid on a low-level dungeon, Sŏng Chinu's party stumbles upon a hidden "double dungeon", a perilous environment filled with deadly, deific statues and unforgiving rules. Most of his party perishes, and Chinu, gravely injured, sacrifices himself to allow the survivors to escape. However, instead of dying, he awakens in a hospital bed, greeted by a mysterious interface resembling a video game notification. He learns that he has become a "Player," endowed with a unique ability to gain levels and grow quickly stronger. This is considered an unprecedented phenomenon in the world of hunters, whose capabilities are otherwise fixed from the moment they awaken. Sŏng Chinu's transformation from the "world's weakest hunter" to a near-divine being encapsulates the Korean developmental myth: a narrative of resilience, discipline, and self-determination that echoes both traditional Korean storytelling and the historical experience of modern South Korea. For example, the foundational Tan'gun myth, where Ungnyŏ attains humanity through strict self-discipline, and also the parallels to South Korea's own historical ascent during the "Miracle on the Han River," a period marked by collective sacrifice, rapid modernization, and extraordinary national self-strengthening. Sŏng Chinu's individual progression mirrors the collective trajectory of South Korea's modernization, from vulnerability to global prominence. Furthermore, the hero's empowerment operates as a symbolic projection of the na-

8 In this paper, whenever the term 'Korea' is used, it always refers to South Korea.

9 The most widely known English name of the character is Song Jinwoo. However, the transcription used in this paper follows the McCune–Reischauer system, and thus it is rendered as Sŏng Chinu. The same approach will be applied to all subsequent names.

tion's economic and cultural ascent, translating macroeconomic development into the idiom of personal achievement. Additionally, another key aspect that reveals *Solo Leveling*'s Korean cultural imprint is its levelling system, based on an effort to be measured and improvement to be quantified. This system resonates with both the Confucian work ethic and the neoliberal meritocratic ideal, which are foundational in the construction of the modern Korean self. To this extent, it reflects the way in which South Korea tells its own story of modernization: as a process of progressive and measurable accumulation of human capital.

These key elements of Korea's cultural and developmental trajectory continue to resonate throughout the narrative. In fact, determined to make the most of this opportunity, Sŏng Chinu begins to train and complete quests, unlocking new skills, abilities, and weapons while concealing his transformation from others. His initial motivation is simple: to protect his family, particularly his younger sister and his debilitated mother who is afflicted with an incurable condition. As he quickly levels up, his power grows exponentially, surpassing even the strongest S-rank hunters and catching the attention of influential international organizations and individuals. Sŏng Chinu discovers that his newfound abilities are tied to a larger cosmic conflict between two factions: the destructive "Monarchs" and the balance-seeking "Rulers". As the gates grow increasingly unstable, unleashing catastrophic threats, the conflict between "Monarchs" and "Rulers" spills into the human realm, pushing Earth to the brink of destruction. Sŏng Chinu, now a being of extraordinary strength, fully embraces his role as humanity's last hope. In the final battle, Chinu faces the "Absolute Being", the creator of both "Monarchs" and "Rulers", who views humanity as mere pawns in a cosmic game. In a climactic act of self-sacrifice, Sŏng Chinu chooses to reset the timeline, erasing the gates, hunters, and dungeons from existence. The world returns to a peaceful state, and Chinu resumes a quiet life with his family, free from the dangers that once plagued him. Though stripped of his powers, remnants of his memories and inner strength remain, a quiet testament to his extraordinary journey.

In *Solo Leveling*, as aforementioned, the world's transformation through the sudden emergence of "gates" and supernatural abilities metaphorically echoes South Korea's rapid transition from a war-torn nation to a worldwide technological power. The concept of "leveling up" functions as a narrative embodiment of meritocratic aspiration: a recurring theme in contemporary Korean cultural production that valorises individual perseverance and self-improvement. This also mirrors the cultural aspect of the *ppalli ppalli* (빨리빨리)[10], positioning the protagonist's progression as a symbolic reflection of the nation's developmental narrative. Moreover, the story's integration of game-like systems and technological interfaces resonates with the techno-utopian vision that underpins much of South Korea's digital culture, aligning with the nation's

10 In simple words, the Korean drive for speed and efficiency.

image as a hub of innovation and competitiveness promoted through its global soft power.

Through its intricate worldbuilding, hybrid aesthetic, and meritocratic hero narrative, *Solo Leveling* exemplifies how Korean digital media operate as vehicles of soft power, projecting national values through globally resonant storytelling. Its success reveals the mutual reinforcement between narrative globalization and cultural identity, positioning *Solo Leveling* not only as a commercial triumph but also as a textual embodiment of Korea's cultural modernity and digital diplomacy.

3. Global Diffusion and the "Japanese" adaptation

As a culturally specific product, *Solo Leveling* carries a strong Korean identity that can challenge or even unsettle foreign audiences, who may adapt its narrative, altering names, settings, or cultural references, to make it resonate within their own national contexts. These shifts highlight the extent of Korean soft power, but also the negotiations required for its reception.

As the narrative of Ch'ugong spread through different media, it was the release of the anime adaptation that received widespread international acclaim. South Korea's soft power strategy relies on cultural authenticity. However, this cultural specificity is reduced in the Japanese domestic version of the anime. The anime adaptation of *Solo Leveling* shows how, despite being based on cultural authenticity, South Korean soft power is negotiated and sometimes diluted when it encounters culturally sensitive markets. Produced by the Japanese studio A-1 Pictures, they produced two versions of the same narrative: one for Japanese viewers, which is only streamed in Japan, and the other for the international public, which is streamed on the platform Crunchyroll. While the international version is a faithful adaptation of the original story, notable changes were made to the Japanese version to appeal to the local audience. For instance, character names were altered: Sŏng Chinu becomes Shun Mizushino, Yu Chinho is renamed Kenta Morobishi, and C'ha Haein becomes Shizuku Kousaka. In fact, according to the show's producer, scenes were re-recorded with both Japanese-localized and original Korean names to cater to different markets[11]. Yet, This strategy reduces the visibility of Korean identity. It also reflects a form of latent cultural resistance within the Japanese market. This choice is not merely aesthetic. It aims to minimize the work's Korean "cultural odor" (Iwabuchi, 2002: 256-273) and to make it more easily accepted in a market that has historically resisted explicit Korean references. Also, the setting was shifted from Seoul to Tokyo. This localization strategy was intended to make the content more familiar and acceptable for Japanese viewers, in a

11 Aniplex. *Interview with the Producers of "Solo Leveling" – Part 1*. Cocotame – Sony Music Group, 28 Mar. 2025. Cocotame.
<https://cocotame.jp/en/series/110047/>

context shaped by complex historical and cultural relations with South Korea. These changes do not appear in the international release, where the original Korean names are maintained, preserving the work's authenticity and reinforces its soft power value.

The anime series, directed by Shunsuke Nakashige with scripts by Noboru Kimura, has sparked debate regarding these adaptations. Nevertheless, the series has achieved substantial success, leading to the announcement of a second season. Moreover, a feature movie is planned to provide a comprehensive overview of the first season, incorporating the first two episodes of the upcoming one.

However, in the Japanese market, where historical tensions and a tradition of minimizing Korean elements persist, the localization avoids explicit displays of Korean cultural symbols. This case demonstrates that soft power is never fully unidirectional. It is filtered, reshaped, and at times diluted by the cultural expectations of the receiving audience.

3.1. The Fandom: the silent helper of Korean Soft Power

The worldwide phenomenon of *Solo Leveling* demonstrates that the success of a webtoon or novel can extend far beyond commercial achievement, becoming a vehicle of cultural influence. In fact, fans played an active role through unofficial translations, fan art, fan fiction, and social media promotion, transforming audiences into co-creators and cultural ambassadors. Their engagement amplified the reach of Korean popular culture, exemplifying how participatory fan communities contribute to soft power in the digital age. Fans contribute actively through social media platforms such as Reddit, Discord, Twitter, and TikTok, generating "word-of-mouth" promotion, creating unofficial products, and thus playing a key role in the series' international circulation. For example, some fans spend hours creating personal interpretations of major characters, such as the "Shadow Monarch", reflecting deep emotional engagement with the story. "It's been a long time since I picked up a pen to draw … I tried to bring my own interpretation … I even added my own original Shadow Monarch version …".[12] This shows how some fans don't just consume the story, but actively celebrate and reinterpret it with personal artistic creations. Fans also expand the narrative universe through fanfiction and crossover stories, effectively co-creating content that extends the original plot[13]. Others engage in collaborative projects, such as 3D modeling and printing characters from the series, turning their appreciation into

12 User WebEven620 on the sub-hub Reddit "r/sololeveling", July 2025. <https://www.reddit.com/r/sololeveling/comments/1lgad7p/my_solo_leveling_fan_art_pen_on_paper/>

13 User the_omnipotent666 on the sub-hub Reddit "r/sololeveling", March 2025. <https://www.reddit.com/r/sololeveling/comments/1jd68wj/any_fanfiction_recommendations/>

tangible creative work[14]. All these activities align with Jenkins' (1992) [15] concept of "textual poaching," framing fans as active participants who appropriate, reinterpret, and redistribute cultural texts, effectively becoming co-creators rather than passive consumers. This qualitative participation demonstrates how fandom engagement functions as a transnational cultural network, amplifying *Solo Leveling*'s reach and impact. Fans become voluntary cultural ambassadors, extending the international influence of Korean culture and exemplifying soft power in practice. However, reliance on fandom engagement introduces certain challenges. The success of cultural products increasingly depends on the tastes, expectations, and creative interventions of international audiences, which can diverge from creators' original intentions. Moreover, participatory fan culture can lead to hybridization or distortion of content, particularly when unofficial translations or derivative works circulate widely before authorized releases[16]. This tension between maintaining cultural authenticity and maximizing worldwide reach mirrors broader debates in *hallyu* studies, which emphasize how fan-driven dissemination amplifies soft power but complicates control over national cultural representation. Social media platforms intensify this dynamic by serving as hubs for collaboration, discussion, and anticipation. Active fan engagement transforms consumers into co-creators, but also subjects cultural products to continuous reinterpretation and critique, sometimes pressuring producers to adapt content to fan preferences rather than the original narrative vision. Despite these potential challenges, the *Solo Leveling* case demonstrates the strategic value of participatory culture for soft power: the interplay of transmedia storytelling and highly engaged fandoms significantly enhances the global visibility of Korean cultural products. Therefore, *Solo Leveling* phenomenon illustrates that contemporary soft power operates not only through institutional strategies but also through complex networks of audience participation.

4. Conclusion

The case of *Solo Leveling* represents a paradigmatic example of how South Korean popular culture, particularly webtoons and web novels, has become a powerful instrument of soft power and cultural diplomacy. Through a targeted cultural strategy,

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14 User Maomaobadmonkey on the sub-hub Reddit "r/sololeveling", November 2019. <https://www.reddit.com/r/sololeveling/comments/fsjlah/are_you_a_solo_leveling_fan_who_is_also_a_3d/>

15 Meyer, M. D. E. / Tucker, M. H. L. (2007). *Textual Poaching and Beyond: Fan Communities and Fandoms in the Age of the Internet*, in «*Review of Communication*», 7.1, pp. 103-116.

16 A key example is the spin-off, *Solo Leveling: Ragnarok*. Although this is an official series created by the same publisher, it is not recognised by the author, Ch'ugong, as it was created solely for fans as a form of "fan service". Ch'ugong declared this narrative useless and non-canonical.

South Korea has succeeded in promoting its international image while simultaneously strengthening economic and diplomatic relations globally. The webtoon and web novel industries, especially webtoons supported by digital platforms such as Naver Webtoon and KakaoPage, have been central to the expansion of the *hallyu*, contributing significantly to the country's geopolitical projection. South Korea's modern soft power strategy relies not only on the promotion of national culture and traditional values but also on active state involvement in the distribution of popular cultural products. Korean pop culture combines elements of traditional Asian culture with Western influences, creating a hybrid appeal that has been key to its global success since the 1990s (Bakytzhanova/Tuleshova 2024: 14–28). Similarly, Nye (2008: 94–109) emphasizes South Korea's exceptional potential for soft power, grounded in its economic development, technological innovation, democratic system, and cultural modernity, which together provide a fertile basis for exporting cultural influence.

Solo Leveling embodies these strategies through its OSMU model, successfully expanding from web novel to webtoon, anime, video games, merchandise, and physical publications. Its narrative reflects Korean cultural values while resonating with international audiences, illustrating how Korean digital media can convey national ideals through compelling storytelling. Fan engagement, from translations to fan art and social media promotion, further amplifies the series' reach, turning international audiences into co-creators and cultural ambassadors. The European market demonstrates the tangible impact of this strategy: in France, the first six volumes of the *Solo Leveling* webtoon sold over 900.000 copies, establishing webtoons as a significant cultural export and supporting the national creative economy. In Italy, publishers like Gaijin (Renoir Comics), Jundo and J-Pop[17], have launched dedicated webtoon collections, while events such as Lucca Comics and Games foster interaction between authors and audiences, by inviting several webtoon authors over the last few years[18].

17 Gaijin (Renoir Comics) has published several Korean webtoon titles in Italy, including *Navillera, The Great, Horizon, A Heartfetl Andante*, and others (see <https://www.gaijin.it/>).

Jundo is known for distributing Korean webtoons such as *Itaewon Class* (see <https://jundo.it/home>).

J-Pop also releases Korean webtoon adaptations for the Italian market, *True beauty, Tower of God* (<https://j-pop.it/it/>).

18 For example at Lucca Comics and Games 2024, Korean authors such as Paskim (creator of *Lost in the Cloud*), Kim Myŏngmi, and Gendry Kim Kŭmsuk were present, participating in panels and showcases dedicated to webtoons. At Lucca Comics and Games 2025, Na Yunhŭi and Pyŏndŭk were confirmed as guests, representing webtoon creators at the festival. (For more information, see *Lucca Comics & Games Archive 2024–2025*, LuccaComicsAndGames.com <https://archivio2.luccacomicsandgames.com/it/2024/ospiti/dettaglio/paskim/>). Similarly, at Milan Games Week & Cartoomics 2025, Korean webtoon artist Kim Chimin (better known as Jimmy), creator of *Navillera* and other popular works, was officially invited as an international guest, providing further opportunities for audience interaction. (See Milan Games Week & Cartoomics 2025 guest announcements on AnimeClick.it
<https://www.animeclick.it/video-intro?r=/news/107521-milan-games-week-2025-jimmy-di-

Parallel developments in web novels, including the Italian publication of *Semantic Error* by Soori and the establishment of Penguin Random House's Inklore label, show a growing openness to Korean digital narratives. Internationally, Korean-inspired formats have influenced authors such as Rachel Smythe (*Lore Olympus*), whose webtoon adaptation of the Persephone myth has achieved over 1.7 billion views in seven languages and received multiple prestigious awards, illustrating the global circulation of Korean-style digital storytelling.

Through its adaptability, hybrid aesthetics, and multi-platform expansion, *Solo Leveling* exemplifies how webtoons and web novels function as vehicles of soft power. They allow South Korea to project cultural values, technological innovation, and narrative artistry to international audiences, creating a global cultural brand while navigating diverse markets. The franchise demonstrates the capacity of Korean digital content to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, consolidating the nation's reputation as a leader in cultural innovation and digital media diplomacy. The *Solo Leveling* phenomenon is not only a commercial success but also a strategic instrument of South Korea's cultural influence. It illustrates the broader dynamics of the webtoon and web novel ecosystem as a central component of the country's soft power, showcasing how storytelling, transmedia expansion, and participatory fandom converge to create a globally resonant cultural and diplomatic force.

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BRUCE FULTON

THEY LIKE TO SING AND DANCE: INTERTEXTUALITY IN PARK JI YOON'S *SŎNGINSHIK*

There she sits, a girl with a smile on her face, enclosed in a work space and attending diligently to her sewing machine (a Singer, of course). She's not alone—she has a companion, a cute little teddy bear whose likeness adorns the light bulb under which she works, while the bear itself, grown to a monstrous presence, looks on attentively from outside the window. She looks to the bear for encouragement, then resumes her work. The girl grows serious, she's at a critical point in her sewing, using both hands to position the cloth beneath the thrusting needle. Outside it grows dark, the bear is banging on the window, there's thunder and lightning, the power briefly goes off in the workroom, something is not right. And that's when it happens. Distracted, the girl holds up her index finger, penetrated by the needle and now dripping blood. Once more she looks to the bear, a stolid presence, ever watchful, and we notice the emblem on its chest, a pair of interlocking tildes (~).

The music video of Park Ji Yoon (Pak Chiyun 박지윤)'s *Sŏnginshik* (성인식) was a sensation when it hit YouTube a decade ago, a celebration of the female body in motion. What has drawn less attention is the story that sandwiches the song-and-dance

of the young woman and her silent chorus. At the front end of this story a naive seamstress, distracted by the watchful gaze of her pet-turned-master, is stabbed by her sewing machine needle and watches her blood gather on the floor beneath her. Thus begins the ceremony, which after the performance culminates with the seamstress in her now barren work space attacking the bear.

The title of the video, *Sŏnginshik*, has appeared on YouTube as "Adult Ceremony" or, more felicitously, "Coming-of-Age Ceremony (Park 2024)." But if instead we analyze this three-syllable Sino-Korean term as *sŏng*, 'gender' or 'sex,' modifying *inshik*, 'recognition,' 'cognizance,' 'knowledge,' then what we have is something like 'Awareness of Sexuality.' Either way, the video can be understood as a capsule of the coming-of-age stories (*sŏngjang sosŏl*) that have enriched modern Korean fiction, and in particular the initiation or rite-of-passage (*tonggwa ŭirye*) stories of Hwang Sunwŏn, discussed at length in a seminal essay by literature scholar Yi Chaesŏn (Yi 1977).

Both story and performance are profoundly intertextual, re-creating images of Tan'gun, mythical progenitor of the Korean people (Lee 2020); the weaver girl of one of Korea's best-loved folktales (Han 1991); Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn, icon of aggrieved, well-born Chosŏn women; the unlettered wife of Hyŏn Chingŏn's *A Society That Drives You to Drink* (Hyŏn 1988); and Yi Sang as stuffed genius. As contemporary Korean literature struggles for recognition in an increasingly visual world, it is crucial to remember that contemporary Korean visual and performance culture continues to be inspired by a millennia-old literary tradition that has always relied on voice, music, and motion in addition to brush, ink, and paper.

Act 1

We begin with a girl, a beetle, and a bear. The beetle is at the free end of the spool of thread placed in the sewing machine as the needle stabs relentlessly at a large section of white cloth spread out on the table. There's a flash of lightning and the girl rises from her sewing machine to discover the image of the teddy bear in the light bulb, after which the camera shifts briefly to the grown-up bear right outside the window. Returning to her work, she notices with a contemplative smile the beetle, thread in its mouth, approaching the pulsing needle as it penetrates the fabric. With a warm smile she moves it to safety and then uses her fingers to attach the thread properly to the thrusting needle.

The beetle and the bear each have mythical connotations. The beetle resembles *Scarabaeus sacer,* the scarab that the ancient Egyptians held sacred. Tan'gun, mythical progenitor of the Korean people, was born of a god and a bear. To become human, the bear endured a 21-day ordeal in a dark cave, itself perhaps a rite of initiation. (Also in the cave, but unable to endure the ordeal, is a tiger, another iconic creature associated with Korea.) The scarab, in contrast, is associated with the Egyptian sun god,

and therefore with light. It is with the scarab that the girl appears more comfortable and secure. She glances at the bear, still smiling but seemingly to seek reassurance and approval.

The spaces are gendered: the girl works inside, the domain of the *chip saram* (the 'house person,' or wife), while the bear looks on from outside, the domain of the *pakkat yangban* ('outside gentleman,' or husband).

From the outset the power in the work space is going off and on. Presumably from the electrical storm—that is, from what is going on above. Traditional Korean society is hierarchical and, since Koryŏ times, patriarchal. Power was centered in the throne and in the *yangban*, the two ranks, cultural and martial, attending upon the monarch, but more generally within the educated men who constituted the uppermost of the four classes of Chosŏn society: *sa* (scholars), *nong* (farmers), *kong* (artisans), *sang* (merchants).

Act 2

The girl has established a satisfying rhythm with her work, visually punctuated by the needle penetrating the fabric, up down, up down, and with a smile on her face she responds to the bear outside as it paws at the window to gain her attention. *How am I doing?* you might understand her to be thinking. But the momentary distraction results in catastrophe: the spool on the Singer comes undone, the index finger guiding the needle is pierced, and blood flows.

The sewing machine vanishes, and in its place are the girl, her modest white slip replaced by a revealing black top and skirt, joined by half a dozen young women, all dressed like her. They dance in unison, passing their hands up and down their bodies in seeming defiance of a tradition, seen in almost any gendered society and long established in Korea, of the male cooptation of the female body.

Act 3

The dancing site now oscillates among three spaces; the work space; a space set against a dark background traced vertically with lines that resemble rain (the downpour whose associated lightning bolts continue to fluctuate the lighting in all three spaces?), the dancers in front, with the girl-become-woman in the center, controlled marionette-like by the dancers to the rear; and a room with sets of antlers adorning the wall behind the dancers. The first two spaces are filmed in black and white, but the trophy room appears in color. One brief image captures our protagonist set between a pair of antlers. Has she become a trophy of the bear, and perhaps a future trophy wife?

There's a flashback to the girl in her work space. Again she looks outside the window and now the teddy bear sits there, looking perfectly innocent. But her smile vanishes, replaced by a realization: the awareness of sexuality, one of the ways in

which the term *sŏnginshik* could be understood? She puts her bleeding index finger to her lips and applies the fluid to them lipstick-like. She looks in the mirror and examines herself, and now the pair of interlocking tildes is imprinted on her shoulder. The camera then returns to the young woman and her sister dancers. The on-and-off of the lights has ended. Among the lyrics can be heard «I'm not the girl you used to know». The girl has come of age.

Act 4

We're back in the workshop, which has been vacated by the young woman and her sister performers. And guess what? The bear, more gargantuan than ever, is sitting at the sewing machine. Perhaps he has found the young woman incapable and has decided he must take over? But the young woman is no longer subservient. She attacks the bear, beating it and then tearing open its belly to reveal a mass of stuffing, an image recalling the very first sentence of Yi Sang's classic story, written just as imperial Japan's dominance of colonial Korea became even more oppressive during the "dark years" (*amhŭkki*) that marked Japan's increasing exploitation of its colonies after it launched the second Sino-Japanese War in the later 1930s and transitioned into the Pacific War.

Intertextual Referents

The seamstress has long been a gendered icon in Korean cultural history, appearing in the classic folk tale of Chingnyŏ the weaver girl and Kyŏnu the herder boy (O 2011), and in recorded literature as early as Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn's *hanshi A Poor Woman's Song*, the speaker of which is by sad irony weaving a silk dress not for her own marriage but for that of a girl unknown (Hŏ 1990). The needle has in the hands of contemporary writer Ch'ŏn Unyŏng become a subversive object by which a female appropriates the male body: in her story *Panŭl* ("Needlework"), a mother and daughter are engaged full time in needlework, the mother a seamstress of *hanbok*, traditional Korean attire, and the daughter a tattoo artist who works by hand rather than machine, her clientele all men who struggle with a sense of weakened masculinity but feel empowered by the designs imprinted by her on their bodies (Ch'ŏn 2023). Both women act subversively: the mother is suspected of being the culprit in the murder of a Buddhist monk, the cause of his death imagined by the daughter to be the result of her mother's cutting tiny needles into shards and surreptitiously adding them to the tea she brews during her visits with the monk. The daughter for her part finds that in the process of empowering men with her work she is able to sexually arouse her clients.

The rain shower that falls upon our principal and her chorus of dancers in the second of the three performing spaces calls to mind the cloudburst that provides the setting for the symbolic rite-of-passage between the boy and girl in Hwang Sunwŏn's signature story *Sonagi* ("The Cloudburst"; Hwang 1975). This story has become a

modern classic in Korea, for many readers the only one of Hwang's more than one hundred published stories that they can readily recall.

The blood-letting that initiates the girl's coming of age is echoed at the end of Oh Jung-hee's[1] classic story *Chinatown*, in which the narrator, secreted in a storage cabinet while her mother is giving birth to her eighth child, experiences her first menstrual flow (Oh 2025). And in *Sul kwŏnhanŭn sahoe* ("A Society That Drives You to Drink"), an early-modern classic by Hyŏn Chingŏn, a young woman is likewise distracted in the midst of her sewing, but in this case by thoughts of her jobless husband spending much of his time with his educated friends bemoaning their lot in life as young intellectuals in a colonized nation (Hyŏn 1998). In this story, though, the young wife, while having come of age physically, has yet to gain the insight that would enable her to understand her husband's supposed incapability.

The appropriation of the female body suggested by the brief image of our singer confined within antlers in the trophy room calls to mind a practice known as Shunamitism (Shunam supposedly a concubine of the biblical David). This practice appears in Hwang Sunwon's classic tale of transgression, *Irŏbŏrin saram tŭl* ("Lost Souls"), in which a boy elopes with a girl who has been performing this service for a village elder (Hwang 2010), their departure launching a sequence of retribution reminiscent of a Shakespearian tragedy.

In the short finale our leading lady reappears in the workroom, herself an agent of retribution. She attacks the huge bear sitting at her sewing machine and then symbolically eviscerates it, an image recalling the husband mentioned in Kim Hyesoon (Kim Hyesun)'s feminist poem *A Skin-Deep Life*, whom the speaker portrays as a man who removes his wife's life force, leaving her a mere shell of herself (Kim 1987). Etched more deeply in modern Korean literary history, though, is the self-referential opening line of *Wings*, Yi Sang's classic story of the life of an intellectual in colonial Korea: «Have you ever met a stuffed geniuus?» (Yi 2023).

In the *Sŏnginshik* music video Park Ji Yoon—accomplished in lyrics, composition, and photography—combines strong lyrics, a programmatic melody, and exceptional images to create a tableau of a young woman creating her own identity (*chŏngch'ae*) and thereby gaining agency in a traditional, patriarchal society. That she has managed to incorporate so many classic and indeed iconic connections from within Korean literary history, both oral and recorded, testifies to the potential of contemporary Korean visual and performative culture to reintroduce Korea and the outside world to the riches of Korea's millennia-old cultural tradition.

1 When *Weaver Woman* was published fifteen years ago in my edited volume *Waxen Wings*, I employed the standard McCune–Reischauer romanization system for the author's name (O Chŏnghŭi). However, when *Chinatown* was published last year, Ju-Chan and I chose to adopt the spelling preferred by the author herself (Oh Jung-hee).

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