K-Culture Without "K-"? The Paradoxical Nature of Producing Korean Television Toward a Sustainable Korean Wave

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This article examines the changing characteristics in defining the Koreanness of Korean popular culture in the era of the Korean Wave. Based on interviews with cultural bureaucrats and television producers, the study finds that creators emphasize universal values and transcultural characteristics in their cultural products to increase cultural exports. As the Korean Wave becomes an increasingly important agenda in policy contexts, state authorities redefine Koreanness with successful Korean content. Combined with other elements in the production and distribution of Korean cultural products that indicate the globalization of Korean cultural industries, the findings of interviews explain that the meaning of the prefix "K-" is defined by the global popularity of products and the market logic. However, considering cultural products have functioned as a means of promoting national unity and signifying the national identity, such a strategy of producing "Korean-less" content often causes controversies.

Keywords: the Korean Wave, Korean television, Korean cultural industries, Korean cultural industry policy, cultural odor, Koreanness

In the late 1990s, a series of South Korean (henceforth Korean) films, popular music, and television began to gain popularity overseas. Referred to as the Korean Wave (*Hallyu* in Korean), the popularity of Korean cultural products—followed by the development of Korean cultural industries in the early 1990s—has made Korean popular culture an established cultural genre in many Asian countries. Owing to the diffusion of smart devices and the Internet, the popularity spread to remote regions in the late 2000s. Meanwhile, other cultural genres such as animation, mobile and video games, and webtoons (Korean digital comic strips) began to attract audiences in foreign markets.[2] In particular, as the recent global success of

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[2] The Korean Wave is a comprehensive outcome of different factors such as the major cultural forms exported, cultural policies, technological developments, and tastes of audiences (Jin, 2016). The first phase of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu 1.0*, 1997–2007) began with the regional popularity of a few Korean pop idols, television, and films in the neighboring countries in the late 1990s, including China, Japan, Thailand, and Taiwan. Inspired by their successes, the government implemented state-interventionist policies to develop

several Korean streaming television series like *Kingdom* (S.-H. Kim, 2019) and *Squid Game* (Hwang, 2021), as well as a few television formats such as *The Masked Singer* (MBC, 2015) and *I Can See Your Voice* (Lee, 2015) indicates, Korean television has been a key player in the Korean Wave.[3]

As the nation's cultural products have become popular overseas, developing and expanding the Korean Wave has become vital for both cultural bureaucrats and cultural creators. Expecting that the global popularity of Korean cultural products would benefit the nation's soft power—described as "getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opts people rather than coerces them" (Nye, 2008, p. 95)—and contribute to the economy, bureaucrats have endeavored to use the Korean Wave. In the meantime, the small size of the Korean market has made cultural creators look to export their products to recoup the increasing production costs and increase profits.[4] In relation to this, the growing amount of foreign investment being put toward producing Korean content reflects the expectation of producers considering the contributions of foreign investors in their outcomes (Kim, 2021). As long as producers and policymakers prioritize the export of cultural products, producing cultural products in a way that appeals to foreign audiences has become an important task. Such strategies, which many producers adopted to make their cultural products appeal to the global market, resulted in making many of their genre characteristics transcultural and hybrid (Jin, 2016; Ju, 2020; H. Lee, 2017).

That said, the Korean government—which has been a major stakeholder of Korean cultural production—has prioritized the export of cultural products overseas in policy contexts. In this way, examining what globalization means to cultural bureaucrats and how they understand the Koreanness of their cultural products is of great significance. Considering a long history in which the government utilized Korean television and other popular culture genres as political and ideological tools for reinforcing nationalist ideologies, as well as its strong presence in cultural production as a major patron, understanding how cultural bureaucrats reinterpret Korean cultural products with transcultural and hybrid characteristics as "Korean" and how they appropriate this to policy contexts is crucial (Lee, 2019).

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the cultural industries and further instrumentalize their popularity in the mid-2000s. Thanks to social media and smart devices, different cultural genres like video games and animation became popular overseas, and more Korean cultural products gained popularity elsewhere, including in Europe and Latin America. All these elements characterized the second phase of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu 2.0*, 2008–current) (Jin, 2016). This study focuses on the second phase of the Korean Wave when the government implemented more state-interventionist policy measures on promoting the cultural industries.

[3] *I Can See Your Voice* (Lee, 2015) is a television music game show produced and broadcast by MNet, a cable channel owned by CJ ENM. The show premiered in 2015, and the broadcaster signed license deals with more than 10 broadcasters worldwide, including RTL (Germany) and Fox (the United States). *The Masked Singer* (MBC, 2015) is also a music show franchise made by MBC, a Korean terrestrial broadcaster. It was exported to more than 40 broadcasters, including Australia, France, and the United Kingdom.

[4] Indeed, cultural exports continue to become more critical to both the nation's economy and cultural businesses. In 2019, the amount of cultural export became the 13th largest export category among industries, making the nation's cultural sector the largest export among nonmanufacturing businesses (Export-Import Bank of Korea, 2019).

Based on interviews with 15 cultural bureaucrats, this article examines how bureaucrats redefine the Koreanness of cultural products, with a focus on Korean television. Also, this study uses interviews with five producers affiliated with the television industry. Interviews took place between December 2019 and August 2020, and each of them followed a semi-structured format and were, on average, an hour in length. Based on the findings from these interviews, discourse analysis was conducted in tandem with the examination of relevant news coverage and policy documents.

A Retrospect on the Korean Government's Conceptualization of the Koreanness of Korean Popular Culture

In terms of defining and categorizing Koreanness, Lee (2005) explains that the construction of Koreanness assumes "the collective identity of the nation can be defined by its unique cultural experiences and traditions" (p. 67). Given that Koreanness has been defined and developed as a highly ethnocentric and monocultural concept in Korean society that is strongly influenced by nationalist sentiments, it is no surprise that the nation's cultural products have been expected to reflect the national identity, as well as the public opinion (Ahn, 2014).

The Korean government has played a pivotal role in defining the Koreanness of cultural products. In retrospect, cultural production in Korea had been strongly overwhelmed by the logic of preserving traditional cultures and value systems until the 1980s. Under strict censorship directed by state authorities, producers were asked to manufacture content that would edify audiences with nationalist and statist propaganda by highlighting anti-communist ideologies, reinforcing the notion of a one-blooded and monoethnic nation, and safeguarding other traditional virtues—which would legitimize the state's authoritarian rule (Cho, 2013; Lee, 2019). In the meantime, cultural imports were strictly regulated by state authorities if they were believed to offend public morals despite their popularity in society and influence on cultural production (S.-A. Lee, 2017). Under such conditions, the concept of Koreanness in popular culture turned out to be very ethnocentric and nationalist and vital to constructing the national identity—even if many cultural products had been influenced by American popular culture and legacies from the Japanese colonial period (Kim, 2013).

Following the nation's political democratization in the late 1980s, the influx of foreign popular culture became more prominent in the nation's cultural production. Alongside lessening media censorship, the Korean government lowered trade barriers for cultural imports, like allowing the direct distribution of foreign films by foreign distributors in 1988 and lifting the restrictions set on Japanese popular culture in 1998. Furthermore, it lowered the entry barriers to media industries, including newspaper and television businesses, for foreign investors in the mid-1990s (Jin, 2011). Combined with introducing new communication technologies like cable television and satellite broadcasting in the late 1990s, as well as neoliberal reforms in public sectors in the late 1990s that resulted in deregulating cultural production and further liberalizing the cultural industries, such measures encouraged cultural creators to introduce new cultural genres with adopting genre characteristics of foreign popular culture.

Not surprisingly, the approach of the Korean government to recognize traditional culture as "officially Korean" in policy contexts faced a critical challenge (Joo, 2011). The entry of major conglomerates

like Cheiljedang (currently CJ) and Hyundai into the broadcasting industry in collaboration with foreign capital became a major impetus for further industrializing Korean television (Jin, 2011). Expecting its contribution to the national economy, the government began to prioritize Korean television's profitability and further commercialization. This resulted in implementing relevant policy schemes, such as the deregulation of cross-ownership of newspapers and broadcasters in 2009, which led to the birth of four comprehensive pay television networks in 2011 (H. Lee, 2017; Kim, 2018).[5] Inspired by the popularity of Korean television series overseas, many of the government's programs for promoting the broadcasting industry aimed at exporting more television content to foreign markets. This reflects the neoliberalization of the nation's cultural policies toward highlighting the commercial viability of cultural production.

The growing popularity of Korean products in the global market made more Korean creators emphasize universal values of characters and narratives in their content. Regardless of genres, producers became more eager to adopt various genre characteristics widely used in Hollywood, Japan, and global cultural clusters (Jin, 2013; Jin & Ryoo, 2014; H. Lee, 2017; Shim, 2006). In addition, efforts on the part of cultural workers to appeal to global audiences resulted in manufacturing Korean popular culture products with transcultural and hybrid characteristics (Ju, 2020; Min, Jin, & Han, 2019). Indeed, more producers have attempted to highlight universal values and norms in their products that can appeal to broader audiences, such as showing regular people succeeding based on talent and not because of their looks in the singing competition television program *The Masked Singer* (Tait, 2021). By reflecting on the interplay between global and local culture in local cultural production, Korean creators have sought ways of mixing familiarities and differences between their cultural origins and imported cultures to protect the domestic market and pioneer foreign markets (H. Lee, 2017; Ryoo, 2009). As such, hybrid elements that Korean producers strived to highlight in their products were the outcome of their desire to generate profit and satisfy the preferences and interests of the global market—many of which reflected U.S. cultural hegemony (Kim, 2017; Kraidy, 2005).

The adoption of foreign genre characteristics in producing Korean cultural products brought reducing and reinterpreting elements that reflect cultural origins. For example, strategies of removing cultural "odor"—which refers to "cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated positively with a particular product in the consumption process" (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 27)—have been previously adopted by several non-Western cultural businesses to target overseas markets. As mainstream Korean popular culture became more transcultural and Westernized, and as these products became popular overseas, the Korean government—in light of its long history of instrumentalizing popular culture to promote the excellence of Korean culture to its population— had to reconsider its approach.

Despite such cultural shifts, however, the sense of nationhood embedded in cultural products is still significant because the concept formulates the psyche of both producers and audiences of the origin,

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[5] In 2009, the Korean government allowed newspaper-broadcast cross-ownership and foreign direct investment in media companies. The introduction of four nationwide comprehensive pay television networks (Channel A, JTBC, MBN, and TV Chosun) owned by major news outlets fostered a conglomeration of the Korean broadcasting industry (Kim, 2018).

who are the main consumers of cultural products and whose tastes are heavily dependent on local characteristics. Based on an understanding of the nation—which can be defined as "a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (Smith, 1991, p. 14)—culture is vital to conceptualizing notions of homeland, history, and tradition, which are necessary to unite members of this politico-cultural artifact. Indeed, for decades, television has contributed to conceptualizing and reproducing national identity and nationhood (MacDonald, 2019).

Furthermore, even if much of cultural production is highly industrialized and transcultural, many audiences tend to perceive cultural goods and services produced by local creators as signifiers of national identities (Beaty & Sullivan, 2010). Local audiences, who consume cultural products beforehand, expect those products to represent values that both the nation and citizens endorse and are quick to critique if products fail to represent those values. Indeed, despite the growing influx of Western culture and cosmopolitan values in many genres of Korean television, Korean audiences continue to label television products as Korean (Tilland, 2021).[6] Considering that the construction of nationhood involves both top-down and bottom-up processes, it is crucial to understand how people actively engage in redefining nationhood from below, which is why their responses to cultural products that are meant to represent values of "home" are especially relevant (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). All this indicates that the production and distribution of cultural goods and services in popular culture reflect their place of origin.

In this regard, cultural products are still instrumental in constructing nationhood, even if the cultural industries are influenced by market-led globalization. This hinders the Korean government from disclaiming the instrumentality of popular culture as a tool for promoting the excellence of Korean culture. Indeed, its needs for cultural products have become more critical as individuals become increasingly anonymous, atomized, and impersonalized in an industrialized society. In concert with social elites, the state promotes common cultural characteristics as the national culture to hold the population together (Gellner, 1983). Despite how the market primarily leads cultural production, the state often intervenes in underpinning institutionalized support for the production and distribution of popular culture (Nieguth, 2020). In this regard, many cultural products that are deemed to be popular in the market often represent dominant discourses and values implicitly or explicitly, which the state and ruling elites endorse and promote to the population (Philipps, 2020; West, 2020). Hence, considering the state's role in cultural production as an

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[6] At times, the growing dependence on foreign audience consumption of cultural products and the production of "Korean-less" cultural products often provoke public criticism. For instance, *Joseon Exorcist* (Shin, 2021), a fictional historical television drama broadcast by Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS), was canceled after airing the first two episodes because it was criticized for distorting the nation's medieval history and depicting its food culture and attire similar to Chinese food and clothing styles. Such controversies indicate that de-Koreanization does not mean the public's recognition of understanding the nation's cultural production as de-nationalized. Despite criticisms against utilizing the Korean Wave as a political tool of mobilizing national pride, de-nationalizing Korean cultural products to target broader audiences in foreign markets remains a highly volatile issue as first-line consumers in Korea recognize cultural products as a means of reflecting national identity.

important patron, cultural products have functioned as national signifiers made with state engineering (Lee, 2019; Saeji, 2014).

Therefore, it becomes crucial to explore how bureaucrats understand transcultural and hybrid Korean popular culture and how they interpret the success of Korean cultural products in the global market. Based on this explanation, the following analysis of interviews with cultural bureaucrats and producers examines how bureaucrats, as major stakeholders of the nation's cultural production, understand the value of Koreanness in the nation's cultural products and explores various changes to this concept in response to the globalization of cultural industries.

Toward the Sustainable Korean Wave: Making Cultural Products "Less Korean" and "More Universal"

When asked about the most crucial genre encompassed in the Korean Wave, many cultural bureaucrats answered: television. Participant B, a staff worker at a public institution affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism (MCST), emphasized the growing presence of over-the-top (OTT) service, which refers to a media service that provides media content to audiences directly via the Internet without the intervention of traditional distribution controllers: "We are living in the time of OTT, and everybody talks about what happens on OTTs." Also, participant B explained the entry of OTTs as another opportunity for Korean television to expand its market worldwide. Combined with audiovisual elements that represent Korean culture and society, participants expected Korean television to be instrumental in introducing the nation to global audiences, noting the ripple effect toward the sales of Korean manufacturing goods. Indeed, the government highlighted the success of several television series on Netflix as a major element of the Korean Wave (Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, 2021). Participant M, a cultural bureaucrat, explained as follows:

> The rise of OTT in the global media market paved another way for Korean producers to introduce Korean television worldwide. Also, fierce competition between [global] OTT platforms became an impetus to spark an interest in Korean television . . . Of course, television drama was one of the first genres that triggered the Korean Wave [in the 1990s], but changes in the media environment made us reconfirm the importance of television.

In terms of the sustainability of the Korean Wave, many policymakers insist on producing "less-Korean" and "more-universal" products, combined with their compulsion to raise cultural exports as the main impetus to expand the business and maintain the longevity of the Korean Wave. Participant K, a policy analyst who works at an affiliation of the Korea Communications Commission, explained that the key to making the Korean Wave sustainable is "making products in which subjects and themes are universal so that they can appeal to the global market." Participant C, a researcher affiliated with the MCST, explained that there was a change in the government's approach to utilizing the Korean Wave. Arguing that "there will be no Korea in the future Korean Wave, and we should lead companies in that direction," the participant noted that the way the government interprets Koreanness in policy contexts has become more flexible, instead of remaining focused on traditional culture:

Until the Park Geun-hye administration (2013–2017), many people in the Ministry believed that the real Korean Wave would come from traditional culture. Such recognition made [the president] wear traditional costumes [at official ceremonies]. Nowadays, bureaucrats of different ministries use Pengsoo because they have no impetus for preserving traditional culture.[7] Against MCST's longtime emphasis of the globalization of Korean culture [with traditional culture] in the policy discourse, the idea of whichever things we are good at [become Korean culture] has become the dominant discourse in policy contexts.

Indeed, the de-Koreanization of cultural production to expand the market and manage the Korean Wave has become the state's main industry strategy. Many policymakers who participated in this research said that the management of the Korean Wave became the top priority of MCST, and much of current policymaking is now determined by economic logic, mainly focusing on increasing exports. For instance, in 2020, the Korean government announced a pan-governmental master plan for promoting the *K-Culture* (New Korean Wave). Although many policy schemes were related to developing products using cutting-edge technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality, the masterplan clarified that the development of *K-Culture* would be based on globalized content reflecting the interests of both Korea and importing countries and diversification of cultural genres (Republic of Korea Government, 2020). With this, participant A, an executive at an MCST-affiliated agency who has experience managing cultural exchange programs, explains the necessity of developing "Korean-less" cultural products as follows:

When we export cultural products, many eliminate Koreanness from their products. It is because they must consider distribution. Even if they made a great product, it is no use if they fail to find the distributor. We cannot sell off our television programs at a dirt-cheap price to an over-the-top platform without distributing them to terrestrial broadcasters . . . Whether we can hit the jackpot depends on how we distribute our products.

Compared with cultural bureaucrats' emphasis on producing "less-Korean" and more-universal content, responses from television producers were mixed. On the one hand, de-Koreanizing cultural products has been an effective strategy for major broadcasters. They strive to develop original television formats, which refer to "the sum of the essential elements to generate the central characteristics of a program in production—a recipe with all the necessary ingredients to produce a TV program" (Ju, 2019, p. 97), and license them to foreign broadcasters. Considering that format is "rooted in cultural values that transcend the national" (Waisbord, 2004, p. 368) where "global audiences can paradoxically feel at home when watching them" (p. 378), the recent success of licensing deals shows how the nation's cultural creators approach the international market with products that appeal to audiences with universal and transcultural elements. In this regard, participant X, a cartoonist who has experience working with television producers, firmly asserted the need for the de-Koreanization of Korean cultural products:

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[7] Pengsoo is a fictional penguin character made by the Educational Broadcasting System (EBS), a Korean public broadcaster. Since 2019, the character has appeared on YouTube channels and television programs and has become popular nationwide and overseas.

We must discover talents and recruit more artists from foreign markets. I think the Korean Wave should be gone. Amazon and Apple do not introduce or highlight something American. They are just doing their business and providing services. We should dismiss such a compulsion [of promoting cultural products as Korean]. Let's say many K-pop songs performed by idols are composed by foreign composers. Can we call them the Korean Wave? They are not made by us. We only perform them. If we emphasize cultural pureness, then there is no future. We should strive to make it so our genres can be adopted in other markets.

On the other hand, there are criticisms arguing against making culturally odorless products in the field. Given that hybridity presumes extant, unperturbed, and pure conditions of the original types, the removal of national contexts and a deliberate mixture of Western and local characteristics in a controlled way is likely to serve the interests of Western forces considering the power asymmetry between local and Western forces (Galvan, 2010). Based on this argument, there are some anxieties about the competitiveness of "rootless" cultural products, which neglect the nation's sociocultural values and legacies, arguing that they will fail to compete with Western products (Jin, 2016). With this, participant P, an executive producer at a television production company, highlighted the need to focus on the strengths of Korean cultural production rather than producing Western copycats.

I can't imagine whether we can produce something that only attracts foreign audiences and fails to make Koreans understand. That is the case of the tail wagging the dog . . . We should not predetermine that the change [to make products that prioritize global audiences] is our pathway because successful products are always the ones that stick to the basics. See *When the Camellia Blooms* (H. Kim, 2019).[8] The television series was successful because it stuck to the basics. The storyline and characters were based on traditional sentiments while reflecting exclusiveness and a unique type of sociality that characterizes Korean communities. Also, it had messages of solace to humanity. All these things made people love the drama series.

Even if several non-Western cultural businesses have previously adopted strategies of removing cultural odor to target overseas markets, what distinguishes the Korean cultural industries from rival countries is that the idea of producing "culturally odorless" content is widely endorsed and supported by the government's political-economic interests (Iwabuchi, 2002). In contrast to a mixed response of interviewees from the television industry, which reflects both commercial and artistic aspects of producing television as cultural goods, the government's emphasis on making Korean television equipped with transcultural and universal characteristics implies a major shift in understanding cultural products. Then, considering that the main objective of the nation's cultural policies is to promote and develop the national identity through promoting cultural artifacts with distinctive cultural characteristics, the remaining question would be how

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[8] *When the Camellia Blooms* (H. Kim, 2019) is a television series. Receiving favorable reviews from critics for its realistic plot and genre blending of romantic-comedy and thriller, the series was the highest-rated television drama in 2019, with the highest rating of 23.8%. KBS signed a licensing deal with Netflix to release the series on its streaming service.

the government redefines the concept of Koreanness when more cultural products are produced, highlighting less-Korean and more-universal genre characteristics (Miller & Yúdice, 2002).

The State's Market-Oriented Reestablishment of Koreanness

As an outcome of producing cultural goods with less-Korean and more-universal characteristics, several junior-level bureaucrats who participated in the study discussed the universality of Korean television in overseas markets. For instance, participant D, a staff at an MCST-affiliated agency who has experience attending cultural exhibitions in the North American market, noted that "there is not much sense of the difference between Korean and U.S. cultural products," enabling Korean cultural businesses to sell more products to the global market.

The attitude toward promoting Korean popular culture with the emphasis on less-Korean and more-universal aspects of genre characteristics is deeply related to the direction taken by government policy to highlight the commercial viability of cultural products in the global market. Again, this is connected to the changes in the MCST's approach to the cultural domain. In the mid-1990s, cultural bureaucrats and politicians recognized the economic potential of cultural products and set a series of plans for further industrializing cultural production. Inspired by the success of Korean popular culture in East Asian countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the mainstream policy discourse within the cultural ministry gradually shifted to promote further industrialization of culture, many of which mechanisms would be led by market logic. And as participant C noted, the emergence of *K-Culture* without the prefix "K-" in policy contexts is indicative of an understanding of cultural products as profitable merchandise in the market.

> I always argue that we need to prepare for the era of the Korean Wave without "K-." Like how we imported American pop music and transformed it into K-Pop, Asian producers, who are trained and used to K-Pop, are going to produce Asian Pop. Can we claim this as part of the Korean Wave? Therefore, I predict there will be no Korea in the future Korean Wave, and we should lead companies in that direction. Frontrunners are already producing content that appeals to the Asian population and collaborates with local producers as partners. And the government recognizes this.

Similarly, Figure 1 demonstrates how the nation's cultural ministry has allocated its budget to each policy sector, including the promotion of cultural industries, support for pure art, funding for sports infrastructure and athletes, and more.
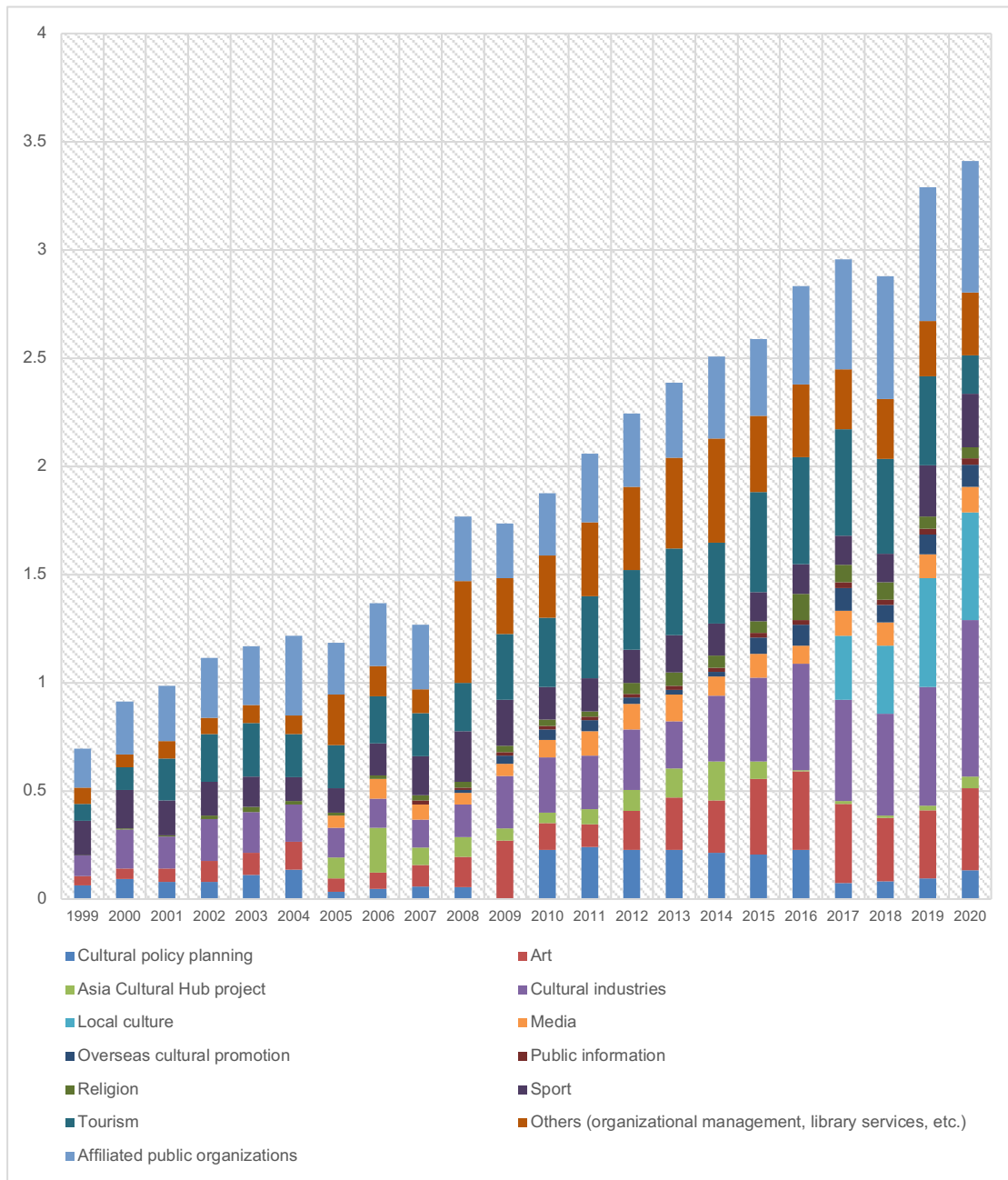
Figure 1. Cultural ministry's allocation of its budgets from 2000 to 2020 (trillion KRW; Source: Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007; Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020).

Figure 1 demonstrates the government's prioritization of developing cultural businesses, including media and tourism, while support for pure arts, religion, and the promotion of local and traditional culture—which had previously been regarded as major elements of the nation's cultural policy—stagnates. In 1997, the budget for the promotion of cultural industries was only 6% of that of the Ministry (Heo, 1999). However, starting from the late 1990s, the budget for promoting cultural businesses expanded rapidly. In 1999, the Culture Industry Bureau (CIB)'s budget—the main organization responsible for establishing and implementing cultural industry policies—became 97 billion KRW (86 million USD), 13% of the cultural ministry's budget. In 2004, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism established the Culture and Media Bureau (CMB) to promote media convergence by separating divisions in charge of the advertising, broadcast, and publishing industries from CIB (Ahn, 2004). In 2010, the ratio of both CIB and CMB increased to 336 billion KRW (300 million USD), which was 18% of the total budget. Finally, in 2020, their budgets increased to 843 billion KRW (753 million USD), 24% of the Ministry's budget—exceeding each of the budgets allocated for supporting arts, sport, and other sectors. Considering that budgets are a political outcome that demonstrates the state's commitment to particular projects expressed quantitatively, tracking the Ministry's expenditure indicates its willingness to monitor the support and development of cultural industries (Wildavsky & Caiden, 2004). Such changes in the budget allocation reflect the Ministry of Culture's reinterpretation of the nation's culture as economic goods and how to use them. About this, participant F, who served as a former high-ranking official in MCST, explained a paradigm shift in cultural policy context as follows:

> We live in an era when all things are industrialized and evaluated by their monetary values. It means that culture has to serve the Korean economy, and culture can maintain itself only when it can generate profit. That said, the mainstream Korean cultural policies are now cultural industry policies.

Despite its emphasis on the universality of cultural products, it does not mean that the Korean government has ceased to use its popular culture to promote national pride and instill nationalism within the population. Instead, it seeks to instrumentalize cultural products as tools for strengthening both soft power and spreading nationalist propaganda to the public (Kim, 2011, 2016). In other words, its praise for the Korean Wave and its recurring emphasis on cultural exports can be understood as a celebration of international recognition that enhances the nation's dignity (Heo, 2015). The government has employed successful television programs like *Good Doctor* (Ki, 2013) and the *Masked Singer* (MBC, 2015) which are remakes of Korean television programs and television formats broadcast by major broadcasters, as opportunities to give the population a sense of pride and show off the strength of the nation's political and cultural power worldwide (Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, 2021). This coincides with its mission surrounding cultural industry policies to promote Koreanness through developing cultural products with less-Korean and more-universal characteristics (Kim & Lee, 2018). The success of Korean popular culture in the global market could be appropriated as a signifier of Korean nationalism even if many cultural products are already de-Koreanized.

Indeed, in the era of globalization, nation-states focus on employing new strategies for revisiting and implementing nationalistic ideologies to legitimize their rule. As national economies are more integrated into a single transnational system, they attempt to inspire national pride among the population. Then, nation branding becomes a useful strategy for the state to motivate its people, whose lives are overwhelmed by

transnational and commercial mechanisms, through recreating and exploiting specific national images that "means to be nationally competitive and nationally competitive *for* globalization" (Aronczyk, 2013, p. 10). As society and its norms are further commercialized, and as national borders become blurred among citizens because of neoliberal globalization, each nation-state has to "brand" itself to appeal to its population as customers (Aronczyk, 2013; Kim & Lee, 2018). Then, as long as de-Koreanized cultural products are branded as *K-Culture* and categorized as parts of the Korean Wave, the government utilizes these hybrid and transcultural genres as new signifiers of Koreanness.

Alongside other genres, the global popularity of Korean television became a major source through which the government can inspire national pride and stimulate nationalistic sentiments among its populace while also satisfying mechanisms of both commercialism and globalization (Volcic & Andrejevic, 2011). Given that the status of media products that play pivotal roles in representing national identity and their reputation in the global community is considered "hitting the jackpot," such products are ideal materials for the government to foster patriotism and cultivate national pride. Combined with its dedication to strengthening soft power, the Korean government consumes the Korean Wave and relevant cultural products. By doing so, it can continue to sustain one of the key objectives of cultural policies—to govern citizens through providing a collective and national imperative for revisiting and nurturing a sense of belonging—in the era of neoliberal globalization where cultural products are increasingly marketized and transcultural (Miller & Yúdice, 2002). Considering that the management and mobilization of national identity, sense of belonging, and collective action increases in complexity as the traditional concept of national borders becomes uncertain, state authorities expect the media to serve as an apparatus for reinterpreting their ideas of nationalism and national identity (Hayward, 2019). Without having traditional virtues or cultural heritage that reflect the nation's long history and ethnic uniqueness, the global popularity that cultural products enjoy in the market becomes an essential characteristic of Koreanness, as participant H, a cultural bureaucrat, explained,

> Like the arts, cultural products have more meaning than making money. Their success led to promoting our culture and eventually raised the nation's prestige in the global community. Since cultural products are vital to improving Korea's national image, cultural bureaucrats have a strong vocation for promoting cultural industries.

Such an interpretation, which understands the global popularity of Korean popular culture as a signifier of the excellence of Korean culture and a catalyst for boosting nationalistic sentiment among the population, can be seen in media coverage. Regarding this, Korean broadcasters, both public and private, have produced news coverage and television programs for Korean audiences to show off the excellence of Korean popular culture. Moreover, when their television series were recognized in international markets, they interpreted such success as promoting national interests. For example, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) and Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS), the nation's public broadcaster and the largest private broadcaster, respectively, included successful Korean celebrities like Korean pop idol BTS and Youn Yuh-jung, a Korean actress who won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress in 2021, in their television sign-off broadcast. Given that the national anthem on television is highly nationalistic and shows the excellence of the nation's natural and cultural heritage and achievements, it encourages Korean audiences to feel pride in this K-Pop idol group's success. That said, alongside highlighting their contribution to the Korean Wave

with their products like television series *Good Doctor* (Ki, 2013; broadcast by KBS) and *My Love from the Star* (Jang, 2013; broadcast by SBS), broadcasters persist in serving the interest of promoting national pride by showing off the success of Korean popular culture worldwide. In this regard, Korean broadcasters played pivotal roles in reinterpreting the success of transcultural Korean cultural products both as propagators and manufacturers. Concerning this, participant Q, a television producer, emphasized the role of Korean television in further spreading Korean culture.

> The Korean Wave should not be limited to cultural industries. It should be more than an industrial phenomenon. It is time to improve quality. We should think about how British and French culture could influence global culture because they can combine traditions and distinctive socio-cultural values alongside cultural products. So, I believe we should also consider economic revenues and high culture like our national psyche and traditions [when we imagine the Korean Wave for the future]. It should not be solely driven by industrial logic.

Such an interpretation of Korean television indicates that cultural products continue to serve as catalysts for advocating Korean nationalism among the public, despite their transcultural and de-Koreanized characteristics (Joo, 2017; Kim, 2011). This can be interpreted as the commodification of Koreanness (G. Kim, 2019). It is worth noting that cultural elements representing Koreanness, such as history, traditions, foods, and attire, can be utilized as another layer of commodities to appeal to broader audiences by providing exoticness (Grinshpun, 2014). About this, participant C raised concerns about how the media embellished several Korean television series, such as a historical fantasy series *Arthdal Chronicles* (W. Kim, 2019) and a horror-thriller series *Kingdom* (S.-H. Kim, 2019), without raising criticism as they succeeded in being exported to Netflix.

Discussion and Conclusion

The globalization of Korean cultural products has been understood as a major strategy for cultural creators to recoup their costs and additional revenue. Despite having the prefix "K-," the genre of *K-Culture* is far from providing authentic and traditional Korean cultural odor as producers and entrepreneurs strive to make their products attractive to broader audiences by adding more transcultural and universal elements to their products. Because of the small size of the Korean market, many cultural workers consider cultural exports to recoup their production costs from the initial stages of production. Expecting overseas markets to be major revenue sources, more cultural producers use various methods to globalize their products— including casting foreign personnel, co-production with foreign distributors, and producing their cultural products with universal themes to appeal to different audience groups worldwide. Such strategies are institutionally supported by state authorities, which significantly influence the nation's cultural production. All these efforts reduce Korean cultural odor and foster the de-Koreanization of Korean popular culture.

However, as its approach to the Korean Wave and successful popular cultural products in the market implies, the Korean government persists in instrumentalizing cultural products to redefine Koreanness and spread its definition and ideals to the population. Instead of traditional culture and relevant virtues that previously categorized Koreanness as the nation's cultural products, Koreanness is redefined as

a less-Korean and more-transcultural concept when cultural production becomes global. As long as they are popular worldwide and manufactured by Koreans, cultural products are recognized as authentically Korean and understood as embedding Koreanness. In this regard, Korean broadcasters function as the main apparatus for certifying the reconceptualized Koreanness by producing less-Korean and more-universal television and propagating such interpretations to the population, which are strongly endorsed by both cultural bureaucrats and producers in the field. As long as Korean companies make these cultural products and become popular overseas, cultural bureaucrats recognize them as Korean regardless of their transcultural and hybrid genre characteristics—which defines new Koreanness in policy contexts. Granted, this represents the state's instrumentalization of culture with the market logic (Yúdice, 2003). Despite such market-oriented changes, however, the state persists in its utilization of these redefined Korean cultural products as a way of raising national awareness—reflecting the Korean government's long-standing viewpoint of approaching culture.

The growing presence of the nation's popular culture worldwide becomes useful for the Korean government to show off the nation's success to the population and inspire national pride. Combined with market values and the ripple effects of improving Korea's national image in the global community that could benefit other industries that seek to export their merchandise, the Korean Wave is an ideal tool for the government to demonstrate its political and economic success in the global arena—which has the potential to become a new criterion in redefining Koreanness. Furthermore, successful cultural products became symbols of national image and instruments to expand its political power for strengthening its soft power. In this regard, despite the increasing power of global market forces in Korean cultural businesses and transcultural and universal characteristics of cultural products, the government continues its cultural exploitation to wield strong influence over its population and the country's perception on the world stage. As controversies over *Gookppong*—a slang term criticizing Korean media and the government's excessive use of the Korean Wave and other well-known Korean brands to demonstrate the excellence of Korean culture—exemplify, the government is dedicated to mobilizing successful cultural products in the market to inspire nationalist sentiments among the population. This means the more cultural production becomes globalized, the easier it would be for the state to serve its political missions alongside economic profit. In this regard, the findings of interviews with cultural bureaucrats coincide with the government's long-standing attitude toward the Korean Wave, which consistently endorses and promotes this cultural phenomenon with a nationalistic, celebratory tone (Cho, 2013).

For years, both the government and media have interpreted the success of Korean popular culture in the global arena as the main signifiers of Koreanness fulfilled by upbeat expressions. Such a reinterpretation of Koreanness is different from that of the previous era when popular culture described Koreanness through the long tradition of suffering (*Han* in Korean) or strong motherhood, etc. (Lie, 2017). In this regard, much of the reinterpretation of Koreanness in the Korean Wave era is operated by global market logic, depending on how aesthetic quality and aspirational ideal of cultural products can be made appealing to overseas markets (Lie, 2015). Considering that nationhood has been defined by unique characteristics that distinguish a nation from others, such a cosmopolitan and capitalist approach to developing the concept of Koreanness is highly paradoxical. The findings of this research have potential applicability in investigating government instrumentalization of domestic cultural production in other non-

Western countries, many of which try to produce cultural goods that reflect both local and global cultural tastes and whose governments serve as a major stakeholder in their cultural production.

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