

# Dream and Critique:

## The Universal Appeal of South Korea's Contemporary Culture

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*The significance of a nation's creative economy as a source of its soft power should not be underestimated. Professor Ramon Pacheco Pardo discusses how the dynamism of the Korean cultural economic model and the contemporary Korean understanding of topical issues have enabled its creative industries to develop diverse cultural products with a global appeal.*

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Close your eyes, and think about today's South Korea. What comes to your mind? Chances are that it will be pop music, movies and dramas. What else comes to your mind if you think more deeply? Perhaps you will picture attending a BTS or Blackpink concert in Seoul, or strolling down Gyeongbokgung like how a princess or prince might have done during the Joseon dynasty. There are millions of people like you around the world. Actually, make that tens of millions. Herein lies the power of culture. It helps you escape, dream, and feel transported somewhere else.

But culture also serves another purpose: to reflect and to offer social critique. If you close your eyes again and think about the South Korean movies and dramas that you watched during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Parasite* and *Squid Game* are likely to be on the list. Both depict a present and future that you do not want for you and your family, one of poverty, inequality and violence; they are an award-winning film and drama, respectively, that make you think, that enable you to understand that these scourges are universal.

If there is one country that in recent years has become known for producing a variety of cultural

products that present a wide range of topics while having universal appeal, it is South Korea. But how has a country that only 35 years ago was fighting for democracy and which 25 years ago suffered a devastating financial crisis emerged with what can well be described as an economic product with universal appeal?

The starting point is, of course, its people. Directors, actors, singers, writers or painters are ultimately responsible for creating the art that others want to consume. These are the creative people who come up with original ideas that they then develop into the products that others enjoy.

In the case of South Korea, the number of creative individuals seems to have grown exponentially since its democratisation in 1987-88. Partly, this is the result of individuals living in free countries being able to imagine and put into practice original ideas. Crucially, free countries do not constrain individuals' right to travel overseas. This allows them to experience new cultures and observe universal themes.

The growth in the number of creative South Koreans is also partially the result of an education system that, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, makes the country's students amongst the best in the world at applying what they learn in practice. Incidentally, this is common across East Asia.

This aspect is crucial. South Koreans, and East Asians in general, are often considered to be good at rote learning and mechanical tasks, and bad at creative pursuits. This outdated stereotype, unfortunately, is yet to go away. For example, some Western media continue to publish articles about

K-Pop bands being artificially created. In this view, the performers do not matter. What matters is their ability to learn the mechanics of becoming a “pop star”. But thankfully, new generations of K-Pop stars are shattering this stereotype and letting their creativity shine, both in their music and via social media for the South Korean education system is good at helping develop creative individuals.

In this way, South Korea can draw upon a pool of creative people with their own new ideas or take on well-known themes. While some of them will not make it as artists, and some may become known only within their country, others will develop an international appeal that makes them successful well beyond Northeast Asia.

However, universal appeal does not necessarily mean the successful export of one’s cultural products. For decades, American culture—from Hollywood movies to boy and girl bands—has been dominant at the global level. When South Korean culture started to make its way out of the country, it had to compete against these and other behemoths.

Along came the government. In 1993, the South Korean government of the time was astonished to learn that *Jurassic Park* had made more money than Hyundai’s total car exports had that same year. So the Kim Young-sam government set about finding ways to support the export of South Korean cultural products. Following the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, the then-President of South Korea, Kim Dae-jung instructed the Ministry of Culture to provide direct financial support to artists and cultural firms seeking to export their art.<sup>1</sup>

By the 2000s, different branches of the government were involved in efforts to support the export of cultural goods. The number of Korean cultural centres showing South Korean movies or organising discussions about South Korean books grew rapidly. Local embassies were sponsoring cultural festivals and K-Pop concerts, and government TV broadcaster KBS was preparing to tour its Music Bank show around the world. These were three of the many ways in which the South Korean government provided support to creative individuals over the years. Up till now, this policy of support has been sustained by both liberal and conservative governments, ensuring continuity and stability within the sector.

Additionally, the South Korean government gives money to artists but does not dictate their topics.<sup>2</sup> This allows artists to choose what they want to focus on. Whether a drama set in the tumultuous late Joseon Dynasty, a movie about Korea’s independence, or a rap about individual choice, all creative works are eligible for government support. Clearly, the South Korean government accepts and supports both dream and critique.

Certainly, in the South Korea of 2022, many movies are distributed by private film companies, many dramas are distributed via streaming platforms, and many bands have their tours organised by private studios. But much like how the South Korean *chaebol* received government support before being able to take off by themselves, many South Korean artists benefit from the support that they receive in the early stages of their career before achieving mainstream success.

This is a key point. Dating back to the 1980s and particularly post-Asian financial crisis, successive South Korean governments have promoted start-ups and SMEs. But South Korea does not focus only on Silicon Valley-style tech firms. Its government specifically sets aside funding for start-ups and SMEs operating in the cultural field, ensuring that music studios, art galleries, documentary production companies and art schools alike are all eligible for government funding and state-supported mentoring from experts in their fields. This way, firms that find it difficult to raise private funding may still launch their operations.

Add to this the economic support that events such as KCON across the world, Korea Spotlight in Texas, or the K-Culture Festival in South Korea itself receive from different government agencies. Without this support, these events would have found it difficult to take off. But even as they have become self-sufficient, the economic support that these events receive from the South Korean government provides them with the necessary stability upon which they can rely so that they can concentrate on their core mission: to spotlight South Korean artists for the world to discover.

Besides funding, there is the freedom in terms of choice of topics that the South Korean government encourages—or at least does not discourage—which allows artists to follow their passion and choose their preferred topics. In contrast, countries such as China or Vietnam do not have a similar practice. As a result, their traditional, uncontroversial culture may be well-known, but the global appeal of their vibrant, domestic cultural scene does not match that of South Korea.

Take the case of some of the topics that K-Pop tackles. Girls' Generation's "Into the New World" has become a protest song in South Korea, thanks to its focus on solidarity in the face of adversity. BTS, meanwhile, has tackled themes such as mental health or self-acceptance as part of their ever-growing repertoire. In other words, K-Pop has moved beyond a narrow focus on songs about love and heartbreak because South Korean singers and producers live in an environment in which this is possible.

Never mind the South Korean movies and dramas that have taken over the world in recent years. Focusing on South Korean cinema, *Oldboy*, *The Handmaiden*, *Train to Busan*, or *Parasite* can only be described as dark movies exploring the depths of the human soul. But on the other hand, *My Sassy Girl*—the first South Korean movie to truly become popular across East Asia—is a more traditional romantic comedy. In other words, South Korean directors have a choice. And this only enhances the appeal of the country's culture.

As the weight of art and other creative industries as a contributor of the South Korean economy grows, while the weight of manufacturing as a contributor decreases, it has become crucial for the country to continue to successfully export movies, dramas and music. Without creative individuals, South Korean culture would not have the universal appeal that it has today. Likewise, without the support of the government, many artists would have found it harder to find fame overseas. In this way, South Korea seems to have perfected the art of making its own art known to the rest of the world. □

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## About the Author



Ramon Pacheco Pardo is Professor of International Relations at King's College London and the KF-VUB Korea Chair at the Brussels School of Governance of Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Prof Pacheco Pardo is also Adjunct Fellow (Non-Resident) with the Korea Chair at CSIS, Non-Resident Fellow with Sejong Institute, and Committee Member at CSCAP EU. He has held visiting positions at Korea University, the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and Melbourne University. His publications include the books *Shrimp to Whale: South Korea from the Forgotten War to K-Pop* (Hurst and Oxford University Press, 2022) and *North Korea-US Relations from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un* (Routledge, 2019). He has participated in track 1.5 and 2 dialogues with South Korea, North Korea, China, and Japan. Prof Pacheco Pardo has testified before the European Parliament and advised the OECD, the European External Action Service, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the United Kingdom's Cabinet and Foreign & Commonwealth offices. He is a frequent media commentator on North East Asian affairs and EU-East Asia relations.

## Notes

1. The name of the ministry has changed over the years. At the time of writing, it is the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.
2. The only exception was a period during the Park Geun-hye presidency when the government drew up a list of allegedly liberal artists who were not to receive state funding.