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Korean Studies for International Management Journal (KSIMJ)

Objectives

1. To promote high-quality research in international management related to the Korean Peninsula
KSIMJ aims to advance scholarly knowledge by publishing rigorous and original research on management, governance, and economic issues connected to Korea.
2. To foster interdisciplinary academic exchange
The journal seeks to bridge Korean studies with fields such as business, public administration, policy studies, and international development to encourage diverse perspectives.
3. To support global academic collaboration and knowledge dissemination
KSIMJ aims to serve as a platform for researchers, scholars, and practitioners worldwide to share insights and contribute to the understanding of Korea in a global context.

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Editorial Statement

The Korean Studies for International Management Program, under the School of Interdisciplinary Studies at Chulalongkorn University, has consistently achieved success in administering graduate programs since 2008. In 2026, the program modernized its title and expanded its curriculum to encompass both Master and Doctoral degrees. This program represents the first and only initiative in Asia focused directly on establishing specialized expertise in Korean Studies for International Management. It has also been recognized with Outstanding Awards from Chulalongkorn University.

To promote a comprehensive academic ecosystem, the program initiated the 1st Korean Studies for International Management Conference 2026, which is scheduled to convene annually in June. This forum serves as a central hub for exchanging visions and presenting rigorous research. High quality papers will be selected for publication in the Korean Studies for International Management Journal (KSIMJ). This academic journal concentrates specifically on international management within the context of Korean Studies.

Each issue of KSIMJ consists of five research and academic articles. The proportion of authors from Chulalongkorn University is maintained at a lower level than that of external contributors. KSIMJ is published three times per year.

- Issue 1, January to April
- Issue 2, May to August
- Issue 3, September to December

The peer review process strictly follows international standards. Every article must undergo evaluation by three international experts per paper. These reviewers possess specialized expertise in various aspects of Korean Studies and Management. Furthermore, reviewers must belong to institutions different from the authors to ensure the highest levels of transparency and academic quality.

KSIMJ Volume 1, Issue 1, features five research articles as follows.

The first article, “Korean Beauty Surgery as Capitalized Soft Power, From Aesthetic Practice to Global Cultural Authority” by Korakoj Tongboriboon and Penphitcha Khumtong, examines the development of Korean beauty surgery as capitalized soft power.

The second article, “Monitoring Anti-Bribery Enforcement in South Korea, Evidence from OECD” by Waranphat Kiranawat, explores the management processes of South Korea regarding its membership in the OECD.

The third article, “Korea–ASEAN Business and International Management (2006–2025), A Bibliometric Mapping” by Kittituch Orisoon and Natkrita Lerdwicharudii, utilizes bibliometric mapping to provide a comprehensive overview of Korea–ASEAN business and international management over the past two decades.

The fourth article, “Institutional Alignment and Governance Capacity, Evaluating THACCA through Theoretical Models of Creative Economy” by Hyunwoo Yoon, Setthanunt Thitithammasak, and Waranphat

Kiranawat, provides a systematic analysis of cultural industry management as a lesson for developing the Creative Economy through THACCA in Thailand.

The final article, “The Evolution of Citizenship, Tracking the Shift from Collective Duty to Individual Rights in KOBACO Campaigns (1981–2025)” by Chidchanok Yomjinda, presents the evolution of South Korean public service communication over the past 45 years.

These five articles have undergone revisions based on peer reviewer feedback to provide maximum value to the academic community of Korean Studies for International Management.

Kamon Butsaban

Editor in Chief

Publication Ethics

Type of Article Quality Assessment

The Korean Studies for International Management Journal (KSIMJ) employs a *Double-Blind Peer Review* process, in which the Author has no access to the identity of the Reviewers, and the Reviewers likewise cannot access the identity of the Author.

Articles or opinions expressed in the Korean Studies for International Management Journal are the sole responsibility of the Authors. College of Interdisciplinary and Integrative Studies, Chulalongkorn University, the Korean Studies for International Management Program, and the Editorial Board do not necessarily share these views.

The Editorial Board does not reserve the right to restrict the reproduction of articles for educational purposes, provided that complete and accurate citations of the source are given.

Every article is reviewed by at least three qualified Reviewers prior to publication in the Korean Studies for International Management Journal.

Duties of Authors

Authors must:

1. Certify that the submitted manuscript is original and has not been previously published elsewhere.
2. Report factual findings derived from their research without distortion of data or provision of false information.
3. Properly cite the works of others when such works are referenced in the manuscript, and provide a complete reference list at the end of the article.
4. Prepare the research article in accordance with the format specified in the "Instructions for Authors."
5. Ensure that all individuals listed as authors have made a substantive contribution to the research.
6. Disclose all sources of funding that supported the research.
7. Declare any conflicts of interest (if any).

Duties of Editors

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1. Be responsible for evaluating the quality of articles for publication in the journal under their supervision.
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3. Make decisions on the selection of articles for publication after the peer-review process, based primarily on the significance, originality, clarity, and consistency of the article's content with the journal's policies.
4. Not publish articles that have been previously published elsewhere.
5. Not reject the publication of an article based on suspicion or uncertainty alone; authors must be given the opportunity to provide evidence to clarify any such concerns.
6. Have no conflict of interest with the authors, reviewers, or members of the executive board.
7. Conduct rigorous plagiarism checks using reliable software to ensure that articles published in the journal contain no plagiarized content.

8. If plagiarism is detected during the review process, immediately halt the review and contact the corresponding author to request clarification, in order to support the decision to “accept” or “reject” the article.

Duties of Reviewers

Reviewers must:

1. Maintain confidentiality and not disclose any part or all of the submitted manuscript for review to any unrelated third party during the review process (Confidentiality).
2. After receiving the manuscript from the Editor, if the reviewer recognizes that they may have a conflict of interest with the author, for example, being a co-investigator, having a personal relationship with the author, or any other reason that may prevent them from providing independent comments and recommendations, the reviewer should inform the Editor and decline to review the article.
3. Review articles within their area of expertise, considering the importance of the content to the discipline, the quality of the analysis, and the rigor of the work. Reviewers should not use unsupported personal opinions as criteria for judging research articles.
4. Identify significant research works relevant to the article being reviewed that the author has failed to cite, and include such observations in the review. Furthermore, if any portion of the article appears similar to or duplicates other works, the reviewer must inform the Editor accordingly.

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The Evolution of Citizenship: Tracking the Shift from Collective Duty to Individual Rights in KOBACO Campaigns (1981–2025)

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Abstract

This study examines the longitudinal transformation of citizenship in South Korea by analyzing state-sponsored public service advertisements (PSAs) produced by the Korea Broadcast Advertising Corporation (KOBACO) from 1981 to 2025. Situated at the intersection of media studies and political sociology, the research utilizes a longitudinal mixed-methods approach combining quantitative thematic coding of 445 campaigns with critical discourse analysis to track how the "Good Korean Citizen" has been discursively reconstructed across different political and economic eras. Findings reveal a significant shift from the developmental-authoritarian period (1980s), which emphasized collectivist national duties such as economic productivity and family planning, toward a neoliberal model (1990s-2000s) focused on individualized ethical consumption and personal responsibility. Notably, the contemporary "Smart Society" phase (2020s) marks a new evolution toward digital citizenship. At this time, civic virtue is increasingly characterized by compliance with digitized public health standards and active participation in state-led digital ecosystems. Despite these transitions, the analysis suggests that Korean civic identity maintains a unique synthesis of Confucian relational ethics and modern surveillance norms, where individualism often functions as a form of social obligation rather than radical autonomy.

Keywords

Public Service Advertisements, Public Service Announcements, Korean Studies, Media Studies

Introduction

Roles and Importance of Media in society

Within the context of contemporary society, media serves as a powerful force that helps people access, share, and make sense of information across the globe. Over time, media has undergone a remarkable transformation — evolving from traditional broadcasting, through the rise of digital platforms, and now into the era of Generative AI. This shift is more than just technological progress; it represents a fundamental change in how we communicate and understand the world around us. Media no longer simply delivers information or reflects the reality but it actively shapes our society, influencing how institutions operate and how individuals connect, think, and interact with one another. The power of media used in the society can be seen clearer overtime. Media is used in various dimensions such as in private and public institutes or organizations, in country's management, in diplomatic relations, or in military matters. The power to influence how people think and how society evolves does not belong solely to private media; government-produced media also contributes in meaningful ways. To illustrate, one of the most important tools for the government to direct the messages to their own citizens is “Public Service Advertisement” that many countries have been using in different methods.

Mostly the term “Public Service Advertisement” is confused with the term “Propaganda” because both use persuasive strategies to convey the messages and mostly both types of media are generated under government organizations. Moreover, both share the same aim which is to persuade or affect public behavior. However, Public Service Advertisement is designed to promote social welfare or to address critical social issues such as public health issues, safety of the society, or roles of citizenship. On the other hand, propaganda is designed to serve a political ideology, government agenda, or specific group interests.

Public Service Advertisements

The term of “Public Service Announcement” used in the United States according to Merriam-Webster (2020) refers to an announcement made for the good of the public. Also, “Public Service Advertisement” is defined as advertisements which are related to social issues and broadcast for the interests of the society and for public awareness; they are called social advertisements, public service or public service advertisements. The objective of these advertisements is not to earn financial profit but they work to awaken social consciousness (Narwal, 2024). Moreover, Ni et al. (2022) gave the role of Public Service Advertisements as they involve the collective interest of a community and are concerned to spread the awareness for a purpose that is broadcasted without any charge by the government for the promotion of some state programs or other social agendas (p. 114).

Public Service Advertisements (PSA) can be managed by different kinds of organizations; some by government departments, some by government-funded public organizations, and some by non-governmental councils working with government agencies. In case of South Korea, a government-funded public corporation named “KOBACO” or “한국방송광고진흥공사” is responsible for PSAs.

KOBACO, since its establishment in 1981, has been selling terrestrial broadcast advertising. For those years, it has contributed to the stable supply of financial resources for broadcasting corporations and has protected the public-service nature and the diversity of broadcasting. KOBACO was reborn as a government-funded public corporation on May 23, 2012. To achieve its vision of becoming an 'Industry-leading Public Media Rep', KOBACO is striving to reach its three major goals: to be 'a forward-looking leader that guides the balanced development of the advertising industry', 'a specialized media rep with comprehensive media solutions' and 'a public-interest company that fulfills its social responsibility' (한국방송광고진흥공사, n.d.).

In addition, most of the research and articles related to Korean Public Service Advertisements mainly focused on the analysis of each area of topics such as the effects of Public Service Advertisements and the prevention of diseases or health issues in the society with the research topics "The Effect of Public Service Advertising on Cardiovascular Disease in Korea" (Jang et al., 2016), "Does a TV Public Service Advertisement Campaign for Suicide Prevention Really Work?" (Song et al., 2017) or "Effects of Anti-Smoking Public Service Announcements on the Attitudes of Korean College Students toward Smoking" (Cho et al., 2017). Also, the social issues raised in Korean society such as 'Multiculturalism' are examined through the analyzation of Public Service Advertisements with the research topic "Qualitative analysis of informal curricular texts about multiculturalism in Korea: Two cases of government sponsored public service advertising" (Na et al., 2016). Undeniably, the topic about Korean Wave and Public Service Advertisements is done under the research topic "The discursive construction of the role of public service broadcasting amid the rise of the Korean Wave" (Kim, 2023). There is also one remarkable study about the overall picture of Korean Public Service Advertisements from 1981 – 2023. It is found out that the most common subjects in public service advertisements were 'national unity,' 'social safety,' 'economy,' 'social education,' 'environment,' 'public service,' 'family love,' 'youth,' 'elections,' and 'national health,' in that order. In terms of expression in public service advertisements, information provision was the most frequently used strategy, followed by imperatives, psychological motivation, symbolic imagery, argumentation, and repeated claims. The primary objective of these advertisements was to induce changes in public awareness, followed by behavior modification, information dissemination, and general announcements. Lastly, regarding advertising message strategies, 'promotion-focused' advertisements were the most prevalent, followed by 'prevention-focused' advertisements. Analyzing differences across time periods, statistical differences were found in the themes and expression strategies of public service advertisements, but there were no significant differences in advertisement objectives and message strategies (Um & Kim, 2024).

Therefore, "The Evolution of Citizenship: Tracking the Shift from Collective Duty to Individual Rights in KOBACO Campaigns (1981–2025)" is analyzed to understand how the definition of a "Good Korean Citizen" has changed in the eyes of the state.

Research objectives

1. To identify the shifting thematic priorities of KOBACO campaigns from the developmental-authoritarian era (1981) to the contemporary smart society (2025).
2. To deconstruct the discursive strategies used by the state to internalize civic duties, ranging from physical order and frugality to digital ethics and algorithmic participation.
3. To examine the tension between persistent collectivist values and emerging neoliberal individualism within the Korean civic identity.

Hypothesis

1. The definition of the "Good Korean Citizen" has transitioned from a state-subject (focused on developmental duty and national order) to a digital-participant (focused on ethical consumption and online conduct).
2. Despite the rise of individualism during the Globalization era, KOBACO campaigns maintain a unique "Koreanized" civic model that synthesizes traditional Confucian collectivism with modern digital surveillance norms.
3. The 2020s "Smart Society" phase marks a return to high-compliance citizenship, where the "good citizen" is defined by their willingness to integrate personal data with state-led public health and safety initiatives.

Conceptual framework

This study conceptualizes the evolution of citizenship in South Korea through an analysis of state-sponsored public service advertising campaigns produced by Korea Broadcast Advertising Corporation (KOBACO) between 1981 and 2025. Situated at the intersection of media studies, Korean Studies, and political sociology, the framework integrates theories of developmentalism, neoliberal governmentality, digital citizenship, and Confucian collectivism to explain how civic subjectivity has been discursively constructed and reconstructed across eras.

Research Methodology

This study employs a Longitudinal Mixed-Methods Approach. Firstly, the quantitative content analysis is used to analyze a thematic coding of over 40 years of KOBACO campaigns (1981–2025) across television and print media to identify frequency shifts in categories. Moreover, the critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to analyze the representative campaigns from each decade to uncover the underlying ideologies. The data used for analysis in this study is from the data sheet "Status of public service advertisements produced by the Korea Broadcast Advertising Corporation by topic" from 1981 – 2025 (한국방송광고진흥공사, 2026).

Research results

From the data sheet “Status of public service advertisements produced by the Korea Broadcast Advertising Corporation by topic” from 1981 – 2025 (한국방송광고진흥공사, 2026), with a total of 445 campaigns within 45 years, the primary categories are divided into 11 types which are

1. National Consciousness (20.40%) focused on national identity and civil duties
2. Environment / Energy (17.00%) included resource conservation, pollution and climate change issues
3. Health / Safety (16.50%) included basic safety such as traffic safety to public health and mental health
4. Economy / Industry (10.70%) mostly produced during economic downturns (1982, 1988, 2009)
5. Public Etiquette / Etiquette (10.20%) covered issues of public manners to modern "Digital Etiquette"
6. Home / Child / Youth (9.70%) shifted from “Family Planning” (1980s) to “Child Protection” and “Youth Leadership”
7. Sense of Community (7.80%) focused on multiculturalism and neighborly trust
8. Crime Prevention (7.80%) mostly focused on “Phishing” and “Cybercrime” in recent years
9. Socially Disadvantaged / Minorities (4.90%) emphasized on the elderly, disabled, and multicultural families
10. Human Rights / Labor / Welfare (3.40%) focused on fair recruitment and labor rights
11. Science / Culture / Tourism / Technology & Culture (1.50%) focused on national branding and reading culture in recent years

The secondary categories are divided into 5 most frequent sub-categories which are

1. National Consciousness
2. Traffic Safety
3. Energy / Resource Conservation
4. Public Manners
5. Phishing / Cybercrime

From the analysis of primary categories and secondary categories of Public Service Advertisements, it is found out that there are thematic transitions that can be seen as dramatic changes from the 1980s to the 2020s. Focus of Public Service Advertisements' themes in the 1980s was savings, family planning (curbing population growth), and national events (preparing for the '88 Olympics). In the 2020s, focus was shifted to public health (post-pandemic), digital etiquette, multiculturalism, and cybercrime.

Discussions and Conclusions

The early phase of KOBACO campaigns (1980s–early 1990s) corresponds to South Korea's late developmental-authoritarian context under regimes such as that of Park Chung-Hee. During this period, citizenship was framed through a collectivist-nationalist paradigm in which individuals had to perform due to the state orders or policies. Public service campaigns functioned as a moral theoretical concept, emphasizing public order, anti-corruption, and economic productivity. Citizenship was less about rights and more about disciplined participation in national development. The “Good Korean Citizen” was defined through obedience, sacrifice, and alignment with state modernization goals. With democratization in 1987 along with intensifying globalization in the 1990s, particularly after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the construction of citizenship shifted. Influenced by neoliberal governance models, campaigns began emphasizing personal responsibility, consumer choice, and self-management. KOBACO campaigns increasingly reframed civic duty as individualized ethical conduct such as responsible consumption or protection of environments. The “Good Korean Citizen” became an entrepreneurial self that was no longer merely obedient, but self-regulating and choice-oriented. However, unlike Western neoliberal models centered on radical individual autonomy, Korean civic discourse retained communitarian undertones rooted in Confucian relational ethics. While campaigns increasingly emphasize personal choice, they continue to embed Confucian relational norms and collective well-being as moral imperatives. Thus, individualism emerged not as a replacement of collectivism, but as a form of social obligation. After that, around 2010s–2020s, Korean society shifted to digital citizenship and the smart society which marks a new transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic and rapid digital governance expansion under recent administrations have shaped this phase. In this phase, citizenship becomes mediated by platforms, algorithms, and digital surveillance infrastructures. As South Korea formalizes its smart governance model, the 'ideal citizen' is increasingly characterized by their active participation in digital ecosystems and their adherence to digitized public health and safety standards.

Suggestions

Data of South Korean Public Service Advertisements shows the changes and significant shifts of the society; however, various areas of the social issues presented through Public Service Advertisements should be considered for further researches in different aspects such as in linguistic aspect, discourses analysis aspect, or social sciences and media analysis aspects.

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Korea–ASEAN Business and International Management (2006–2025): A Bibliometric Mapping

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Abstract

This study examines the intellectual and thematic structure of Korea–ASEAN business and international management research published between 2006 and 2025 using a systematic bibliometric approach. The analysis draws on 163 Scopus-indexed documents and integrates performance indicators with science mapping techniques to trace publication trends, collaboration patterns, and the field's conceptual organization. Research output increases markedly after 2016, with nearly two-thirds of the corpus published in the past decade and a peak in 2024. The field remains highly dispersed across 118 journals, reflecting its interdisciplinary character. In terms of knowledge production, South Korea is the leading contributor, followed by the United States, China, and Malaysia, alongside substantial international collaboration among major publishing countries. Thematic patterns continue to be dominated by foreign direct investment (FDI) and global value chain perspectives, with growing attention to regional integration and country-specific contexts, particularly Vietnam. Bibliographic coupling identifies four main research fronts: FDI determinants and outcomes, FDI–energy–environment linkages, knowledge transfer and organizational mechanisms, and global value chain restructuring. Co-citation analysis further indicates an intellectual base rooted in FDI–growth and spillover research, complemented by value-added trade and capability-based perspectives. The findings reveal a structural imbalance in the field. While macroeconomic approaches dominate, firm-level and organizational mechanisms remain comparatively underdeveloped despite their strong influence. This study contributes by clarifying this imbalance and outlining a research agenda focused on production-network reconfiguration, digital internationalization, sustainability governance, and multi-level designs linking firm strategy to regional policy frameworks.

Keywords

Korea, ASEAN, Bibliometrics, International Management, Business

Introduction

The economic relationship between South Korea and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has shifted fundamentally since the mid-2000s. What was once primarily an export-oriented relationship has evolved into a production-integrated system embedded within regional and global value chains. Korean firms increasingly treat ASEAN not simply as a market, but as a strategic production base within their international operations. This reconfiguration reflects a combination of structural pressures and strategic responses. Rising labor costs in South Korea, growing geopolitical uncertainty in parts of East Asia, and the need to diversify supply chains have collectively redirected Korean outward foreign direct investment (FDI) toward manufacturing hubs such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. As a result, South Korea now ranks consistently among ASEAN's major investors, with cumulative investment stocks underscoring the depth of this economic integration. Institutional frameworks, including the ASEAN–Korea Free Trade Agreement (AKFTA) and the New Southern Policy, have further accelerated this process, reinforcing the Korea–ASEAN corridor as a key component of contemporary production networks. These developments can be interpreted through established frameworks in international business research. The eclectic paradigm (Dunning, 1993) highlights how firms combine ownership advantages with location-specific benefits and internalization strategies when expanding abroad. In the Korea–ASEAN context, this logic is reflected in the deployment of firm-specific capabilities alongside cost and market opportunities in host economies. The Uppsala model (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977, 2009) offers a complementary perspective, emphasizing incremental learning and the role of network embeddedness in shaping firms' international expansion. Institutional approaches further suggest that host-country environments condition how strategies unfold in practice (Peng, Wang & Jiang, 2008).

A central debate within this literature concerns the developmental consequences of Korean investment in ASEAN. Early research often framed FDI as a driver of technological catch-up. Subsequent evidence, however, shows that spillover effects are uneven and contingent on local conditions. In particular, the ability of host-country firms to absorb and utilize external knowledge has emerged as a critical factor. At the same time, analytical attention has shifted toward value creation within global production systems. Rather than focusing solely on aggregate investment flows, recent studies examine how value is distributed across fragmented supply chains, often finding that higher-value activities remain concentrated in home economies despite the relocation of production. The scope of the literature has also broadened to include the externalities associated with export-led industrialization. A growing body of work examines the relationships between FDI, energy consumption, and environmental outcomes, raising questions about the sustainability of current development trajectories in ASEAN. Taken together, these strands of research span multiple disciplines and analytical levels. The result is a field that is intellectually rich but increasingly fragmented.

This fragmentation presents a clear limitation. Without a systematic synthesis, it remains difficult to assess how different research streams relate to one another, which areas are well established, and where significant gaps persist. Existing studies provide valuable insights, but they do not offer a consolidated view of the field's intellectual structure or its evolving research fronts.

This study addresses that gap. It applies a systematic bibliometric approach to map Korea–ASEAN business and international management research published between 2006 and 2025. The analysis reconstructs the field's intellectual foundations, identifies its dominant thematic clusters, and examines patterns of collaboration and knowledge production. Three objectives guide the study: first, to document the evolution of the field through publication trends and collaboration networks; second, to identify its intellectual base using reference co-citation analysis; and third, to delineate contemporary research fronts through bibliographic coupling, with particular attention to the divide between macroeconomic and firm-level perspectives. By clarifying the structure of the field, this study provides a foundation for more cumulative and theoretically integrated research on one of Asia's most significant economic corridors.

Research Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a bibliometric science mapping approach to analyse the structure and development of Korea–ASEAN business research. Such methods are well suited to fragmented and interdisciplinary fields, where they enable systematic and reproducible assessment of publication patterns and the underlying intellectual structure through citation-based networks (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015). The analysis follows established reporting practices for bibliometric research. A structured search strategy is applied, the screening process is documented using PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), and key mapping parameters are reported transparently to ensure replicability.

Data source and corpus construction

Bibliographic records were retrieved from Scopus on 22 February 2026. Scopus was selected over Web of Science as the primary source because of its broader coverage of Asian and ASEAN-region journals, which is directly relevant to the domain under study. The search was restricted to journal articles and review articles published between 2006 and 2025. The year 2006 was selected as the start point because it precedes the entry into force of the AKFTA (2007) while capturing any immediately preceding scholarly anticipation of that agreement. The search string combined Korea-related terms with ASEAN-related terms and business-management constructs.

The search yielded 838 records. Non-English and non-accessible full-text documents were excluded prior to screening, reducing the dataset to 313 records for title and abstract review. Screening was guided by two criteria: first, Korea and ASEAN (or individual member states) had to constitute the

substantive empirical or theoretical focus rather than appear incidentally in broader comparative studies; second, the content had to fall within the domains of business, management, or international economics. The screening process was conducted independently by two reviewers, with discrepancies resolved through discussion. This stage resulted in the exclusion of 150 records, producing a final corpus of 163 documents for analysis.

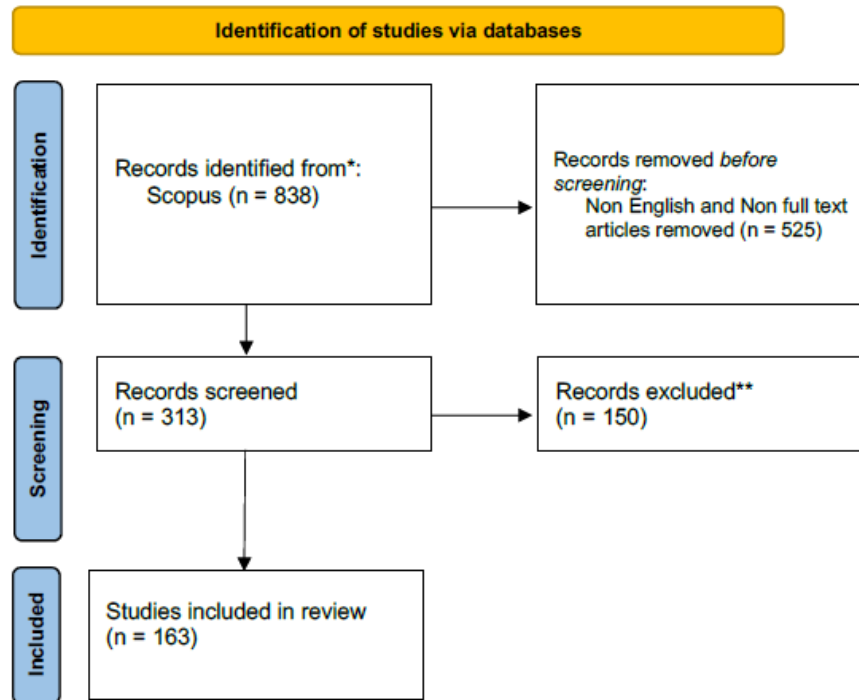


Table 1 PRISMA 2020 flow diagram.

Analytical procedures

The analysis was conducted in two stages. The first stage focuses on performance indicators, examining publication trends, leading outlets, and geographic contributions. Country participation is based on author affiliations, with all contributing countries counted per document rather than restricting attribution to first or corresponding authors. International collaboration is assessed using multiple-country publication (MCP) counts and corresponding shares.

The second stage applies science mapping techniques using VOSviewer (version 1.6.20; van Eck & Waltman, 2010) to reconstruct the field's thematic and intellectual structure. Three complementary approaches are used. Author keyword co-occurrence is employed to identify dominant topics, with a minimum occurrence threshold of three; this yields 73 keywords from an initial set of 456, which are further reduced to 40 after consolidating near-duplicates. Bibliographic coupling is then used to detect contemporary research fronts by linking documents with shared references. Applying a minimum threshold of five shared references retains 81 documents, of which the largest connected component (43 documents) forms the basis for cluster interpretation. Finally, reference co-citation

analysis is used to identify the field's intellectual foundations, with a minimum co-citation threshold of three resulting in 62 core references from a total of 2,847. All networks are constructed using fractional counting to normalize link weights and are visualized using the VOS layout algorithm with default parameter settings.

Research results

Publication trajectory (2006–2025)

Publication activity in the Korea–ASEAN research domain remains limited in the early years before expanding more rapidly over time. From 2006 to 2012, output is consistently low, averaging around five publications per year. A clear shift emerges in 2013, marking the beginning of a sustained growth phase, although annual output continues to fluctuate.

Growth becomes more pronounced in the late 2010s, culminating in a peak of 18 publications in 2024. The lower count recorded for 2025 ($n = 11$) should be interpreted with caution, as it reflects an incomplete publication cycle at the time of data collection. Overall, the expansion is recent: 103 of the 163 documents (63.2%) were published between 2016 and 2025, indicating that the field has developed primarily within the past decade. This trajectory suggests that Korea–ASEAN business research has transitioned from a marginal topic to a more established area of inquiry, reflecting broader structural shifts in regional economic integration and supply chain reconfiguration. (See Figure 1: The annual number of new scientific articles on Korea-ASEAN business and international management research (2006–2025), $N = 163$)

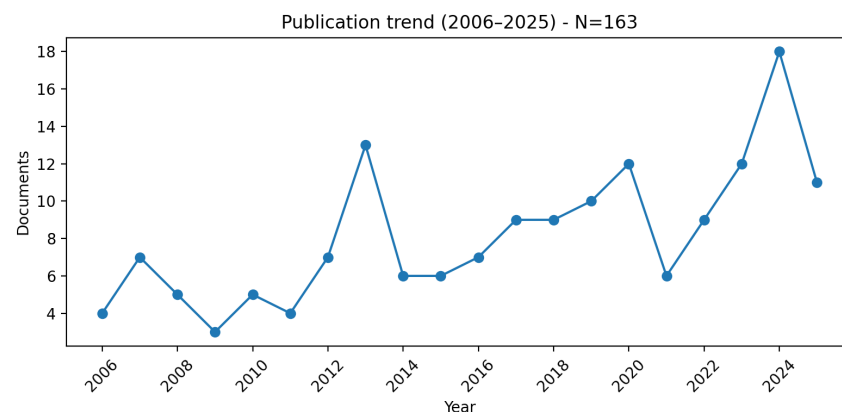


Figure 1. The annual number of new scientific articles on Korea-ASEAN business and international management research (2006–2025).

Disciplinary orientation and leading outlets

The publication landscape is highly fragmented. The 163 documents are distributed across 118 journals, and no single outlet dominates the field. This dispersion reflects the absence of a consolidated

disciplinary core, with Korea–ASEAN research spanning multiple domains rather than clustering within a defined set of international management journals. In terms of publication volume, the Asian Journal of Technology Innovation appears most frequently (10 documents), followed by a smaller group of journals; including International Economic Journal, Seoul Journal of Economics, and International Journal of Business and Society, with four publications each. Several outlets contribute three articles, such as Journal of Asian Economics, Asia Pacific Business Review, and Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity. A different pattern emerges when citation impact is considered.

Journals with relatively few contributions account for some of the highest average citation levels, including Asian Business and Management, Journal of Asian Economics, and Review of International Political Economy. This divergence between publication volume and citation influence suggests that the field's most impactful work is not concentrated in its most frequent outlets. Instead, higher-impact contributions tend to appear in journals with stronger disciplinary positioning, indicating that influence is shaped more by journal context than by publication frequency within the Korea–ASEAN domain itself.

Geographic contributions and collaborative networks

Knowledge production in the field is geographically diverse but unevenly distributed. South Korea accounts for the largest share of publications (31 documents), followed by the United States (20), China (19), and Malaysia (19), with additional contributions from Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and the United Kingdom. The strong presence of non-ASEAN economies, particularly the United States and China, indicates that Korea–ASEAN research is embedded within broader global debates on East Asian production networks rather than confined to a bilateral scholarly community.

Collaboration patterns reinforce this international orientation. A substantial proportion of publications from major contributors involve cross-country co-authorship, including 51.6% of South Korea's output, 70.0% of the United States, and 87.5% of the United Kingdom's. Anglo-American contexts are predominantly collaborative and internationally embedded. At the dyadic level, the most frequent collaboration occurs between South Korea and the United States, followed by several pairings involving China, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, and Thailand. A more uneven pattern emerges when authorship is compared with empirical focus. Vietnam appears frequently as a research context in the dataset, yet its institutional representation remains limited. This imbalance indicates that Vietnam is primarily positioned as an object of analysis rather than as a producer of knowledge within the field. Such asymmetry raises broader questions about authorship concentration, research capacity, and the extent to which local perspectives are incorporated into the study of Korea–ASEAN economic dynamics. (See Figure 2: Co-authorship network based on country affiliation, VOSviewer)

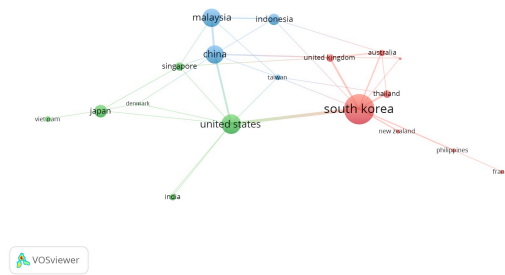


Figure 2. Co-authorship network based on country affiliation, VOSviewer.

Thematic salience and orientation

Author keywords indicate a field still anchored in investment-based analysis. The most frequent terms—foreign direct investment (16) and FDI (12)—confirm the dominance of investment as the primary empirical lens. Production-oriented perspectives are also visible, with global value chain (10) and global value chains (6) suggesting an emerging, though not yet dominant, parallel framework. Geographic markers (ASEAN, Korea, South Korea, Vietnam, China) and institutional terms such as RCEP further point to a strong focus on region-specific dynamics within broader production and trade systems. The co-occurrence structure reinforces this pattern. A central cluster links FDI, economic growth, trade, and Vietnam, reflecting the persistence of macro-level investment–growth analysis. Surrounding this core, global value chain and supply chain concepts form a secondary grouping connected to South Korea and East Asia. Environmental and energy-related terms appear in a more peripheral cluster, indicating that sustainability remains analytically separate from the dominant investment-focused narrative. This separation is significant. It suggests that sustainability constitutes an emerging but still weakly integrated research stream. (See Figure 3: Author keyword co-occurrence network, VOSviewer)

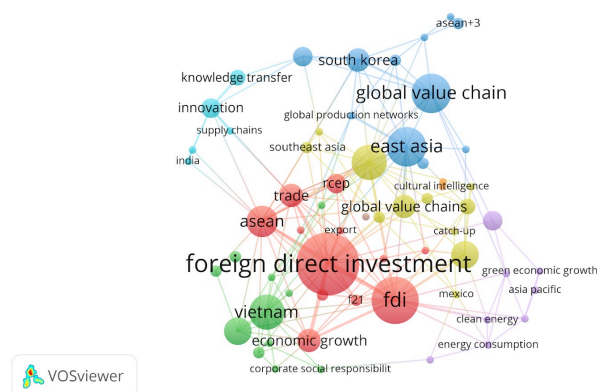


Figure 3. Author keyword co-occurrence network, VOSviewer.

Intellectual foundations: reference co-citation structure

Reference co-citation analysis reveals three interconnected but unevenly developed intellectual pillars that underpin the field. Together, they reflect a persistent tension between macroeconomic explanation and firm-level interpretation.

Pillar 1: The conditional FDI–growth nexus.

The most central and densely connected body of work focuses on the conditions under which foreign direct investment contributes to host-country growth. Foundational studies establish that FDI effects are contingent rather than automatic, depending on factors such as absorptive capacity, trade openness, and institutional quality (Balasubramanyam et al., 1996; Borensztein et al., 1998). Subsequent firm-level evidence complicates this picture, showing that spillovers vary with technological

distance and competitive dynamics (Aitken & Harrison, 1999; Blomstrom & Kokko, 1998). Later contributions introduce financial development as an additional conditioning factor, extending the framework beyond technology transfer alone (Alfaro et al., 2004). This pillar is dominated by panel and time-series econometrics, which continue to shape how FDI outcomes are empirically assessed.

Pillar 2: Global production networks and value-added trade.

A second strand shifts attention from aggregate outcomes to the structure of cross-border production. Rather than treating trade as a flow of final goods, this literature examines how value is created and distributed across fragmented production systems. Value-added accounting approaches (Daudin et al., 2011) and gravity-based models (Anderson, 1979) provide the analytical backbone for this perspective, while the global value chain framework (Gereffi et al., 2005) situates Korea–ASEAN relations within broader patterns of production governance. Despite its conceptual relevance, this pillar is less central in the co-citation network. This suggests that while GVC language is widely used, it has not yet fully displaced the FDI–growth paradigm as the field’s dominant analytical foundation.

Pillar 3: Strategy, organizational capabilities, and cross-cultural management.

The third pillar introduces firm-level perspectives that remain comparatively peripheral in the overall structure. Work in this area conceptualizes multinational enterprises as networks balancing global integration with local responsiveness (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002), and highlights the role of managerial capabilities, such as cultural intelligence, in shaping cross-border performance (Ang et al., 2007). The resource-based view (Barney, 1991) further grounds international outcomes in firm-specific capabilities rather than country-level conditions. However, the relatively low co-citation density of this pillar indicates that perspectives have yet to be fully integrated into the field’s core analytical framework.

Taken together, these pillars reveal a field that remains anchored in macroeconomic explanation, with firm-level and organizational perspectives occupying a secondary position. The

persistence of this structure helps explain the imbalance identified in later sections: while the determinants and outcomes of FDI are well established, the mechanisms through which these outcomes materialize remain comparatively under-theorized. (See Figure 4: Reference co-citation network, VOSviewer)

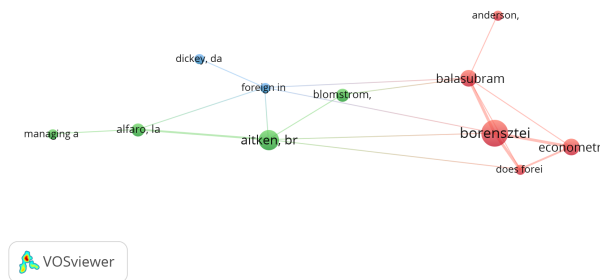


Figure 4. Reference co-citation network, VOSviewer

Contemporary research fronts: document bibliographic coupling

Bibliographic coupling identifies clusters of documents that share reference profiles, capturing active research fronts rather than historical foundations. Within the largest connected component of the network (43 documents), four distinct fronts emerge. Taken together, they show a field still dominated by macro-level investment analysis, but increasingly diversified by sustainability and firm-level perspectives.

Front 1: FDI determinants and growth outcomes.

This is the largest and most central cluster, comprising 15 documents. It reflects the continued prominence of empirical work examining the drivers and consequences of Korean and intra-regional FDI in ASEAN economies. Studies in this front rely heavily on panel econometric methods and focus on bilateral investment determinants, growth effects, and variation in spillovers across host countries. Its moderate citation profile suggests a mature research stream: widely studied, methodologically standardized, and cumulatively influential rather than driven by a small number of highly cited contributions.

Front 2: FDI–energy–environment linkages.

This cluster, with 12 documents, stands out for its high citation impact (mean cited-by: 27.4). It connects investment dynamics to environmental and energy outcomes, examining how FDI interacts with income levels, energy consumption, and emissions across ASEAN contexts. Despite its smaller size, the cluster's citation intensity indicates disproportionate influence. This suggests that

sustainability-oriented perspectives have gained traction beyond their numerical representation, repositioning environmental governance as a central—rather than peripheral—dimension of Korea–ASEAN economic integration.

Front 3: Knowledge transfer and organizational/managerial mechanisms.

Comprising nine documents, this front shifts attention to firm-level processes underlying multinational activity. It focuses on issues such as expatriate management, inter-organizational knowledge flows, and the development of subsidiary capabilities, often in Vietnam-centered contexts. Although smaller in scale, the cluster exhibits a relatively high citation average, indicating strong influence. This pattern highlights a structural imbalance: while the broader literature emphasizes the conditions under which FDI generates spillovers, relatively few studies examine the organizational mechanisms through which such outcomes are produced.

Front 4: Global value chains and regional restructuring.

The smallest cluster (seven documents) reflects a more recent shift toward analysing production networks and regional restructuring. Research in this front moves beyond bilateral

investment relationships to consider value capture, upgrading trajectories, and the distributional implications of network embeddedness within East Asia. Its limited size suggests that this perspective is still emerging, despite its conceptual importance for understanding how Korea–ASEAN integration operates within global value chains.

Taken together, these fronts reinforce a consistent pattern. Macroeconomic approaches centered on FDI remain dominant, but newer lines of inquiry—particularly those focused on sustainability and firm-level processes—are gaining influence without yet reshaping the field’s overall structure. This uneven development mirrors the imbalance observed in the intellectual foundations, where established econometric traditions continue to outweigh more recent organizational and network-based perspectives. (See Figure 5: Document bibliographic coupling network, VOSviewer)

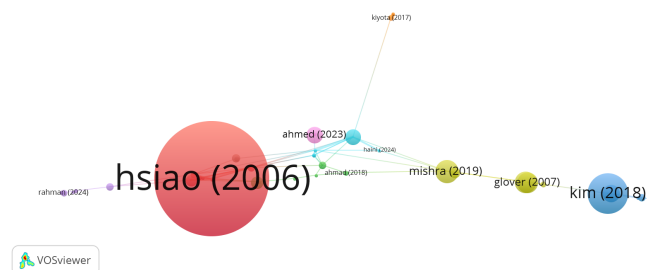


Figure 5. Document bibliographic coupling network, VOSviewer.

Discussions and Future research agenda

Interpreting the structural asymmetry

The combined evidence points to a clear structural imbalance in the field. Korea–ASEAN business research is more developed at the macroeconomic level than at the organizational level, and this imbalance is not incidental. It reflects the theoretical orientation of the field and shapes what it is able to explain. Both the co-citation and bibliographic coupling results support this pattern. The intellectual base is dominated by FDI–growth econometrics, value-added trade approaches, and aggregate institutional frameworks. At the same time, the coupling structure places macro-level empirical work at the centre of the network, particularly studies on investment determinants and outcomes. Research on organizational mechanisms, especially knowledge transfer and firm-level capability development, remains peripheral, even though it exhibits relatively high citation impact.

This imbalance has direct theoretical consequences. The spillover literature, which anchors much of the field, consistently shows that the effects of FDI depend on absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Meyer & Sinani, 2009). However, the processes through which such capacity is developed in host-country firms are rarely examined in detail. In the Korea–ASEAN context, there is limited systematic evidence on how Korean multinational enterprises shape learning dynamics within partner firms in countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia.

A similar limitation arises in relation to global value chain (GVC) theory. Governance structures, whether market-based, modular, relational, captive, or hierarchical, determine how knowledge is transferred and how upgrading opportunities are distributed (Gereffi et al., 2005). Yet these distinctions are difficult to capture using aggregate data alone. The Korea–ASEAN production system encompasses multiple governance forms, from captive relationships in labor-intensive manufacturing to more modular arrangements in electronics assembly. Each carries different implications for capability development, but these differences remain underexplored in the current literature.

Taken together, the dominance of macro-level approaches constrains the field's explanatory depth. While aggregate analyses identify when and where FDI contributes to growth, they provide limited insight into how these outcomes are produced in practice.

The FDI–energy–environment nexus as a reframing opportunity

The high citation impact of Front 2, despite its relatively small size, points to a research stream that is gaining influence rather than one that is already consolidated. This literature challenges a core assumption underlying the FDI–growth paradigm: that capital inflows are broadly welfare-enhancing for host economies. Instead of focusing primarily on productivity gains and technology transfer, this line of work highlights a parallel set of externalities. Investment-driven growth is associated not only with increased output, but also with rising energy demand, higher carbon intensity, and environmental stress. These effects are not incidental; they shape the overall developmental impact of Korean

investment in ASEAN economies. As a result, the net benefits of FDI cannot be assessed without accounting for these environmental costs. This reframing is particularly relevant in the context of Korea's New Southern Policy and ASEAN member states' commitments under the Paris Agreement.

A key analytical opportunity lies in connecting this environmental perspective with global value chain (GVC) governance. The environmental intensity of production is not determined solely by host-country conditions; it is also shaped by how activities are organized within multinational supply chains. Governance structures influence technology choice, production standards, and upgrading trajectories. If this is the case, then interventions targeting Korean multinational enterprises, such as incentives for cleaner technologies or supply chain standards, may be more effective than policies focused exclusively on regulating emissions at the host-country level. This type of cross-level analysis remains largely absent from the current literature. Integrating environmental outcomes with firm-level governance structures would provide a more complete account of how Korea–ASEAN production networks generate both economic and ecological effects.

Supply chain resilience as an emerging research frontier

The cluster centred on global value chains and regional restructuring points to a growing emphasis on supply chain resilience under conditions of geopolitical and economic disruption (Baldwin, 2016; UNCTAD, 2022). In the Korea–ASEAN context, this line of research remains underdeveloped but carries significant analytical potential. A central gap lies in the limited integration between governance-based approaches to global value chains and the quantitative tools used to analyse production networks. Input–output frameworks, including the GTAP database (Aguiar et al., 2019) and value-added trade decomposition methods (Daudin et al., 2011), allow researchers to trace value creation, distribution, and interdependence across countries. However, these tools are rarely combined with perspectives from international business and GVC governance that explain how firms organize and control these networks. As a result, the literature captures either structural patterns or firm-level strategies, but seldom both.

Trade tensions between the United States and China, pandemic-related disruptions, and the strategic reorientation of Korean firms toward ASEAN have exposed vulnerabilities in existing production networks while accelerating their reconfiguration. These dynamics create a setting in which resilience, diversification, and upgrading can be observed in real time. Research that links firm-level evidence on supply chain strategy with macro-level value-added accounting would address this gap directly. Such designs would make it possible to analyse not only where value is created, but also how governance choices shape resilience and adjustment within the network. This would extend existing GVC and international business frameworks and provide more policy-relevant insights into the future of Korea–ASEAN economic integration.

Theoretical implications

The results highlight a clear imbalance in the theoretical foundations of the field. Existing work remains anchored in FDI–growth and spillover perspectives, with more limited engagement with broader international business theory. While methods have generated important insights into aggregate outcomes, they offer only a partial explanation of how Korean firms operate within ASEAN contexts. Notably, several core IB frameworks are underrepresented in the field’s shared reference base. The eclectic paradigm (Dunning, 1993) and the Uppsala model (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977), both central to understanding internationalization processes, appear only marginally in the co-citation structure. More recent developments, including perspectives on the liability of foreignness (Zaheer, 1995), institutional distance (Kostova & Roth, 2002), and the springboard behaviour of emerging-economy multinationals (Luo & Tung, 2007), are largely absent. This suggests that Korea–ASEAN research has not fully engaged with the theoretical tools needed to explain firm-level entry strategies, adaptation, and network positioning.

The imbalance between macro-level explanation and firm-level analysis also limits how absorptive capacity is conceptualized. Although widely cited, the frameworks developed by Cohen and Levinthal (1990) and Zahra and George (2002) are rarely operationalized in empirical terms. As a result, absorptive capacity is often treated as a background condition rather than as an outcome shaped by organizational processes. Addressing this gap requires a shift in analytical focus. Future research should examine how absorptive capacity is produced within Korean-led production networks, with particular attention to governance structures, expatriate management practices, and inter-firm relationships. Such an approach would move beyond treating learning as an abstract condition and instead explain how it emerges from specific organizational arrangements.

Practical and policy implications

For managers in Korea–ASEAN production networks, competitive advantage is shifting from cost arbitrage to effective coordination and capability building across subsidiaries and partners. Evidence from the knowledge transfer stream highlights the importance of organizational design, particularly expatriate deployment, inter-subsidiary knowledge flows, and the management of cultural distance, in shaping subsidiary performance beyond what aggregate FDI data capture.

For policymakers, sustainability is embedded in Korea–ASEAN investment dynamics rather than peripheral to them. The FDI–energy–environment literature shows that capital inflows are closely linked to energy use, emissions, and environmental outcomes. This underscores the role of policy instruments, such as investment screening, technology-upgrading incentives, and regional carbon pricing, in shaping how multinational activity translates into environmental impact. Existing frameworks offer entry points for alignment. Initiatives under the New Southern Policy, including smart city cooperation and people-to-people exchanges, can support both capability development and sustainability objectives. Linking these more directly to investment governance would strengthen their effectiveness and improve policy coherence.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. The analysis is restricted to Scopus-indexed, English-language publications, which may under-represent regionally grounded scholarship, particularly in Korean and ASEAN languages. In addition, citation-based methods introduce temporal bias, as more established works are more likely to appear prominently than recent contributions. Finally, the screening and mapping process involves interpretive judgment; although conducted independently by two researchers, decisions reflect disciplinary perspectives that may differ across research teams. These limitations are inherent to bibliometric approaches and should be considered when interpreting the field's structure and research fronts.

Conclusion

This study maps the structure and development of Korea–ASEAN business and international management research between 2006 and 2025 ($N = 163$). The results show sustained growth in publication activity, particularly since the mid-2010s, alongside a highly fragmented and interdisciplinary publication landscape. The field is anchored by three main intellectual pillars: the conditional FDI–growth and spillover literature, value-added and production network approaches, and firm-level strategy and capability perspectives. At the same time, four contemporary research fronts can be identified, centred on FDI outcomes, environmental externalities, knowledge transfer processes, and global value chain restructuring.

A consistent pattern across these findings is a structural imbalance in the field's analytical focus. Macroeconomic approaches remain dominant, while research on organizational mechanisms, sustainability governance, and resilience is comparatively underdeveloped. Although the FDI–growth tradition has established well-supported empirical relationships, it provides limited insight into the processes through which these outcomes emerge at the firm and subsidiary level. Future studies need to treat absorptive capacity as an outcome shaped by organizational arrangements, examine how governance structures within global value chains influence upgrading trajectories, and combine macro-level investment and environmental data with firm-level evidence on behavior and strategy.

By establishing the field's performance patterns, thematic structure, and intellectual foundations through a transparent bibliometric approach, this study provides a reference point for cumulative research. Advancing Korea–ASEAN scholarship will depend on integrating macro-level analysis with micro-level explanation, particularly in relation to learning, capability development, and sustainability. Without this integration, the field risks continuing to identify patterns without fully explaining how they are produced.

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Korean Beauty Surgery as Capitalized Soft Power: From Aesthetic Practice to Global Cultural Authority

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Abstract

South Korea's cosmetic surgery industry has emerged as an influential sector that transcends medical services and functions as a form of soft power. This study reconceptualizes Korean cosmetic surgery as capitalized soft power, emphasizing its dual role in generating economic value while shaping global aesthetic norms. Rather than framing cosmetic surgery solely in terms of gendered beauty norms, medical tourism, or individual consumer choice, this paper situates the industry within broader processes of national branding, transnational service management, and cultural political economy. Drawing on qualitative thematic analysis of policy documents, digital platforms, and scholarly literature, the study analyzes the role of state policy, urban spatial concentration, notably Gangnam, and medical tourism initiatives in institutionalizing cosmetic surgery as part of South Korea's branding strategy. Clinics emerge as transnational cultural sites where foreign patients encounter Korean service culture, affective labor, and aesthetic ideology, transforming surgical procedures into immersive cultural experiences rather than purely clinical transactions. From an international management perspective, the paper demonstrates how Korean cosmetic surgery clinics operate as transnational service firms that strategically manage trust, risk, and uncertainty across borders. Their global success derives not only from surgical expertise but also from organizational capabilities such as standardized consultation systems, digital visualization technologies, and post-operative care infrastructures. Ultimately, the study argues that Korean beauty surgery operates through mechanisms of persuasion, normalization, and aspiration, thereby extending Korea's cultural authority beyond traditional media industries. This contributes to Korean Studies by reframing aesthetic medicine as a significant site of geopolitical influence and economic power.

Keywords

Soft power, cosmetic surgery, Hallyu, cultural capital, global aesthetic

Introduction

Over the past three decades, South Korea has become internationally recognized as a leading destination for cosmetic surgery. Clinics in Seoul particularly in the Gangnam district attract patients from across East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and North America. While existing scholarship has primarily interpreted cosmetic surgery through the lenses of beauty standards, gender norms, and medical tourism, such approaches remain insufficient to explain the industry's sustained global influence and institutional expansion.

This paper demonstrates that Korean beauty surgery constitutes a form of capitalized soft power: an industry that monetizes cultural attraction and actively shapes global aesthetic preferences. Rather than viewing cosmetic surgery merely as a domestic social phenomenon or medical phenomenon, this study positions it as a strategic cultural export embedded within South Korea's global branding and Hallyu-driven influence.

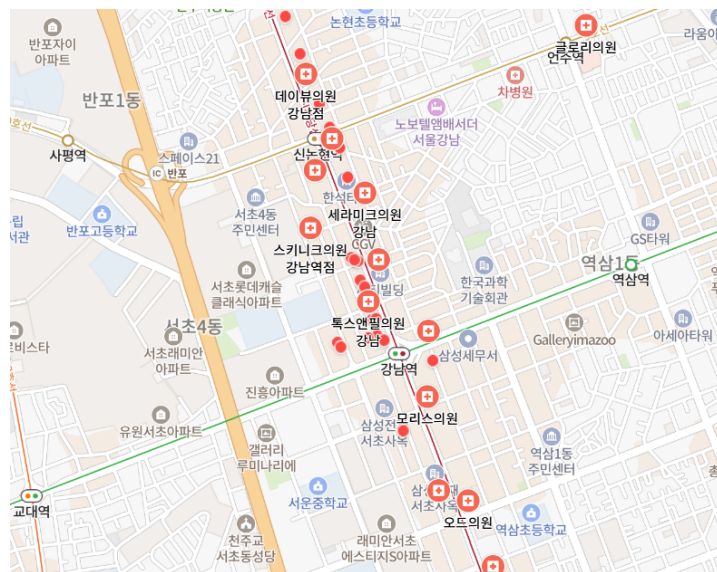


Figure 1. Medical Tourism Cluster: Cosmetic Surgery Clinics in Gangnam

The central research question guiding this study is: How has Korean cosmetic surgery evolved from a localized medical practice into a globally institutionalized system of aesthetic authority? Addressing this question contributes to ongoing debates in Korean Studies, international management, and cultural political economy by foregrounding the body as a site of geopolitical and economic power.

To answer this question, the study adopts a qualitative research design based on thematic analysis of secondary data sources, including policy documents, digital platforms, and scholarly literature. This approach enables a systematic examination of how state policy, market mechanisms, and cultural narratives converge to transform aesthetic surgery into a globalized form of influence.

Literature Review

Cosmetic Surgery and Gendered Beauty Norms

Early feminist scholarship conceptualizes the body as a socially regulated and disciplined site rather than an expression of purely individual autonomy (Bordo, 1993). This foundational perspective reframes beauty practices, including cosmetic surgery, as embedded within broader systems of power, surveillance, and normalization.

Building on this foundation, subsequent scholars argue that in neoliberal societies, bodily modification is increasingly framed as a form of self-responsibility and personal investment. Rather than being imposed externally, individuals are encouraged to internalize beauty standards and actively work toward achieving them. This shift reflects a broader transformation in governance, where control is exercised through self-discipline rather than direct coercion.

In the South Korean context, Holliday and Elfving-Hwang (2012) demonstrate that cosmetic surgery is not stigmatized but normalized and morally legitimized, particularly within competitive social environments such as education and employment. Surgical enhancement is often framed as a rational and necessary strategy for self-improvement, aligning physical appearance with expectations of professionalism and competence.

Elfving-Hwang (2013) further emphasizes that cosmetic surgery in Korea is embedded in moral discourses of effort, sincerity, and continuous self-improvement, transforming it into an ethical practice rather than a purely aesthetic or superficial choice. In this sense, the body becomes a project that reflects one's discipline, ambition, and social responsibility.

However, despite these valuable insights, existing scholarship remains largely focused on domestic sociocultural dynamics and gendered interpretations. There is limited attention to how these normalized practices scale beyond national boundaries and become embedded within global systems of production, consumption, and influence. This gap is particularly significant given the increasing internationalization of Korean cosmetic surgery and its role in shaping transnational aesthetic standards.

Medical Tourism and Global Healthcare Markets

Korean cosmetic surgery has expanded alongside the growth of global medical tourism and cross-border healthcare markets. South Korea is consistently identified as a strategically successful medical tourism destination due to the convergence of state policy, advanced medical capacity, cost competitiveness, and service-oriented organizational systems.

According to Kim & Lee (2023), the Korean government regards medical tourism as a key economic sector and has deployed a range of legal, institutional, and promotional strategies (e.g., simplified visa issuance, hospital certification systems, and medical tourism clusters) to attract foreign

patients across diverse specialties, including surgery, dermatology, and other elective procedures. These efforts reflect an intentional policy-driven positioning of healthcare as a high-value export industry rather than a purely domestic service sector.

Kim et al. (2025) report that foreign patient visits from North America and Europe coming after the pandemic in Korea surged to over 1.17 million in 2024, nearly doubling from 2022 and surpassing the pre-pandemic era. Although this specific study focuses on Korean medicine clinics rather than aesthetic surgery, the wider trend underscores Korea's broader strategy of leveraging cultural appeal, service quality, and medical reputation to capture global healthcare demand.

A significant development is the rise of the digital platform called UNNI, which focuses specifically on aesthetic services (UNNI, n.d.). This platform provides foreign patients with centralized access to procedure information, clinic profiles, approximate pricing, promotional discounts, and user reviews in multiple languages, effectively lowering informational and linguistic barriers to participation. These apps are designed to be foreigner-friendly by offering tools such as in-app comparisons, doctor ratings, and pre-booking options that align with modern demands for transparent and efficient service discovery.

From a tourism and international management perspective, digital intermediaries function as market infrastructures that reorganize how trust, choice, and legitimacy are produced prior to travel. By standardizing clinic information, increasing price visibility, and normalizing discount practices, these platforms reduce perceived risk for foreign patients and integrate elective cosmetic surgery into global healthcare decision-making. More than marketing tools, they actively shape patient expectations and position Korean cosmetic surgery as credible and accessible within international medical tourism flows.

Despite their central role, digital platforms remain under-theorized in medical tourism scholarship. This paper argues that platforms such as UNNI should be understood as infrastructural actors through which Korean cosmetic surgery is transformed into capitalized soft power, linking national strategy, digital governance, service management, and cultural authority. Importantly, Korean cosmetic surgery does not merely compete on price but also leverages a sophisticated digital ecosystem and a reputation for medical excellence that transform clinical procedures into a lifestyle-oriented and trustworthy consumer experience for global patients.



Figure 2. UNNI Application Interface as a Digital Intermediary Enabling Multilingual Access, Price Transparency, and Clinic Comparison for International Patients Seeking Korean Cosmetic Surgery

Hallyu, Visual Culture and Aesthetic Influence

The Korean Wave has played a central role in amplifying South Korea's global cultural presence and shaping transnational aesthetic preferences. Through the widespread circulation of K-pop, television dramas, film, and social media content, Hallyu generates highly curated visual representations that construct and disseminate specific ideals of beauty (Sunyogita, 2024).

Unlike traditional cultural exports, which rely on narrative or linguistic engagement, Hallyu operates primarily through visual and affective mechanisms. Repeated exposure to stylized images of celebrities and influencers creates aspirational standards that are internalized by global audiences.

These visual representations function as implicit templates for aesthetic enhancement, linking media consumption to bodily modification. Audiences do not simply admire these images; they seek to emulate them, thereby generating demand for cosmetic procedures that align with Korean beauty norms.

Kim (2025) argues that South Korea's emergence as a cultural powerhouse is driven by the integration of cultural production, digital platforms, and state-supported governance. This integration enables cultural influence to extend beyond entertainment into broader domains of consumption, identity formation, and embodiment.

However, while existing studies highlight the global impact of Hallyu, they rarely examine its direct connection to aesthetic medicine. This paper addresses this gap by linking visual culture to the material transformation of the body, demonstrating how media-driven aspiration translates into medical consumption.

Soft Power, Cultural Capital, and Embodied Authority

Soft power, as defined by Nye (2004, 2008), refers to the ability to shape preferences through attraction, legitimacy, and persuasion rather than coercion. While traditionally associated with cultural diplomacy and media influence, soft power is increasingly embedded within economic systems and commercial industries.

This study extends the concept by introducing the notion of capitalized soft power, in which cultural attraction is systematically converted into economic value and institutional authority.

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital provides a crucial framework for understanding this process. In contemporary service economies, the body itself becomes a form of capital that can be invested in, enhanced, and leveraged for social and economic gain.

Aesthetic capital manifested through appearance plays an increasingly important role in determining opportunities for employment, social mobility, and recognition. Cosmetic surgery represents an intensified form of this process, where technological intervention is used to align the body with dominant global standards of attractiveness.

Importantly, surgically modified bodies function as mobile carriers of cultural influence. As individuals circulate across borders through tourism, media, and social interaction, they embody and reproduce Korean aesthetic norms, thereby extending Korea's cultural authority.

This form of influence is particularly powerful because it operates at an intimate and personal level, embedding soft power directly within the body rather than external cultural products.

International Management and Transnational Service Firms

From an international management perspective, Korean cosmetic surgery clinics can be conceptualized as transnational service firms operating in complex and high-risk environments. Service industries differ from manufacturing because they are characterized by intangibility, simultaneous production and consumption, and high dependence on trust (Lovelock, 1999). These challenges are amplified in cross-border contexts, where firms must navigate cultural differences, regulatory variation, and consumer uncertainty. This is consistent with international service-sector research, which shows that service firms face distinct challenges when expanding across national markets (Contractor et al., 2002).

Korean cosmetic surgery clinics address these challenges through the development of sophisticated organizational capabilities. These include standardized consultation protocols, multilingual communication systems, digital visualization technologies, and comprehensive post-operative care services. Such practices enable clinics to build trust with international patients while maintaining consistency in service quality.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on thematic analysis and theoretical interpretation. It examines how South Korean cosmetic surgery has developed into a monetized form of soft power through medical services, digital platforms, cultural imagery, and state-supported medical tourism. The analysis follows thematic analysis, which is used to identify, code, group, and interpret recurring patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data Sources

The study uses secondary data from four main sources. First, policy documents and national statistics from the South Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, the Korea Health Industry Development Institute, and the Korea Tourism Organization are used to examine medical tourism policy, foreign

patient attraction, and healthcare export strategies (Ministry of Health and Welfare, n.d.; Korea Health Industry Development Institute, n.d.; Korea Tourism Organization, n.d.). Second, digital platforms and clinic materials, including cosmetic surgery websites, online consultation services, and the UNNI application, are analyzed to understand how Korean surgery is marketed to domestic and international consumers (UNNI, n.d.). Third, selected Hallyu related media materials, including K-pop, K-dramas, beauty content, and influencer images, are examined to analyze how Korean beauty ideals circulate globally. Fourth, scholarly literature on soft power, cultural capital, medical tourism, Korean beauty culture, and cosmetic surgery is used to support the theoretical interpretation.

Data Selection Criteria

The study focuses on materials published between 2010 and 2024. This period was selected because it covers the global expansion of Hallyu, the growth of Korean medical tourism, and the digitalization of cosmetic surgery services. The data were selected based on three criteria. First, the material must be directly related to Korean cosmetic surgery, K-beauty, medical tourism, beauty standards, or foreign patient demand. Second, the source must be credible, such as official institutions, peer-reviewed studies, or widely used commercial platforms. Third, the material must show analytical value by linking cosmetic surgery to cultural attraction, economic value, or national branding.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is not individual patients. Instead, this study analyzes institutions, platforms, media images, and narratives. These include government policies, clinic branding, digital platform functions, Hallyu-based beauty representations, and academic discussions of Korean aesthetic culture. This approach allows cosmetic surgery to be studied as a wider cultural and economic system rather than only as a medical practice.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed through thematic coding. First, the materials were read and categorized according to recurring keywords, including medical tourism, K-beauty, foreign patients, Korean aesthetics, clinic branding, digital consultation, Hallyu, and beauty standards. Second, these initial codes were grouped into broader themes. Third, the themes were interpreted through the concepts of soft power and cultural capital.

The final analysis is organized around three themes. Economic mechanisms examine how medical services are transformed into cultural commodities and profitable export services. Transnational management examines how clinics and platforms manage language barriers, cultural distance, consumer trust, and international reputation. Symbolic power examines how K-beauty aesthetics become internalized as desirable global beauty norms.

Analytical Framework

This study uses Joseph Nye's concept of soft power to explain how Korean cosmetic surgery attracts foreign consumers through desire, credibility, and cultural appeal rather than coercion (Nye, 2004, 2008). It also uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to explain how Korean beauty knowledge, surgical expertise, and aesthetic taste become symbolic resources that can be converted into economic value (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Together, these concepts support the idea of Korean beauty surgery as capitalized soft power, meaning cultural attraction that is transformed into market demand, service exports, and national economic value.

Analysis Korean Beauty Surgery as Capitalized Soft Power

From Aesthetic Practice to Cultural Authority

Korean beauty surgery did not emerge as soft power through a single state-led strategy. Rather, it gradually developed through the normalization of cosmetic procedures in everyday life, the standardization of surgical techniques, and the global circulation of Korean beauty ideals. Over time, Korea shifted from being a receiver of external beauty standards to becoming a producer of globally recognized aesthetic norms. Korean surgeons, clinics, and techniques are valued not only for medical expertise, but also for the belief that Korea possesses advanced and culturally legitimate knowledge of beauty.

Capitalization Mechanisms of Aesthetic Soft Power

The capitalization of Korean beauty surgery operates through three interrelated mechanisms.

Marketization: The cosmetic surgery industry is organized as a competitive and export-oriented service market. Clinics operate as branded institutions, surgeons are promoted through reputation and expertise, and procedures are packaged as specialized services. In this process, the body becomes a site of investment through which consumers seek social, professional, and personal value.

Mediatization: K-pop idols, actors, and influencers function as indirect references for surgical outcomes. While explicit endorsements are rare, visual culture continuously reinforces Korean aesthetic norms. Digital platforms amplify before-and-after narratives, normalize surgical transformation, and enhance Korea's aesthetic authority.

Institutional support: Government policies promoting medical tourism, international accreditation, and healthcare exports legitimize the industry (Ministry of Health and Welfare, n.d.; Korea Health Industry Development Institute, n.d.; Korea Tourism Organization, n.d.). This institutional support

embeds beauty surgery within national development and global competitiveness strategies, transforming private medical practices into national soft power assets.

The Strategy of Persuasion and Aspiration

Korean beauty surgery operates through persuasion rather than coercion. Foreign consumers voluntarily travel to Korea, seek Korean surgeons, and adopt Korean aesthetic ideals. This dynamic reflects soft power because it reshapes preferences and aspirations through attraction rather than direct political messaging. Patients do not merely purchase surgery. They also buy into Korean expertise, lifestyle, and cultural legitimacy.

Integration into the Hallyu Ecosystem

Korean beauty surgery does not function in isolation. It is embedded within the broader Hallyu ecosystem, alongside K-pop, K-dramas, cosmetics, and fashion. This ecosystem creates a self-reinforcing loop. Media visibility increases aesthetic aspiration, which drives demand for surgery, which then reinforces Korea's image as a beauty authority. This integration distinguishes Korea from other cosmetic surgery hubs. The industry's success lies not only in medical competence, but also in cultural storytelling and symbolic coherence.

Implications for Korean Studies and International Management

Conceptualizing Korean beauty surgery as capitalized soft power expands the analytical scope of Korean Studies beyond traditional cultural products. Rather than limiting Korean cultural influence to entertainment industries such as K-pop or television drama, this study shows that aesthetic medicine is also an institutionalized domain of cultural authority embedded in economic and regulatory structures.

For Korean Studies, this case highlights the role of embodied practices in shaping transnational influence. It shows that the body can become a geopolitical site where beauty, modernity, nationalism, and global competitiveness intersect. It also challenges the separation between cultural production and service industries by positioning cosmetic surgery as part of Korea's broader cultural economy.

For international management, the case demonstrates how service industries can function as cultural exporters. Korean clinics show how private firms manage cross-border consumers, reputational risk, language barriers, and cultural distance while also contributing to national symbolic capital. This means that soft power can be monetized not only through media or diplomacy, but also through institutionalized market systems.

Taken together, these implications reposition aesthetic medicine as both an economic strategy and a mechanism of cultural governance. Korean beauty surgery demonstrates how contemporary soft power increasingly operates through markets, platforms, services, and consumer desire.

Conclusion

This study has argued that Korean cosmetic surgery constitutes a distinctive and increasingly influential form of capitalized soft power, operating at the intersection of culture, economy, and embodied practice. By moving beyond conventional interpretations that frame cosmetic surgery primarily in terms of gender norms or medical tourism, the paper has demonstrated how aesthetic medicine functions as a strategic cultural industry embedded within national branding and global service systems.

Through the integration of state policy, digital platforms, transnational service management, and the broader Hallyu ecosystem, Korean cosmetic surgery has evolved from a localized medical practice into a globally institutionalized system of aesthetic authority. This transformation illustrates how influence in the contemporary era is no longer confined to traditional cultural exports such as film or music, but increasingly operates through market-driven, service-oriented, and technologically mediated industries.

A key contribution of this study is the conceptualization of the body as a site of geopolitical and economic power. Unlike conventional forms of soft power that rely on symbolic representation, Korean aesthetic surgery embeds influence directly within the materiality of the body, producing visible and durable forms of cultural authority. Surgically modified bodies circulate transnationally through tourism, media, and everyday interaction, functioning as embodied carriers of Korean aesthetic norms and professional legitimacy.

From an international management perspective, the study highlights how Korean cosmetic surgery clinics operate as transnational service firms that successfully manage trust, uncertainty, and cultural distance. Their competitive advantage lies not only in technical expertise but also in organizational capabilities that integrate standardized procedures with culturally adaptive service delivery. This demonstrates how service industries can simultaneously generate economic value and extend national cultural influence.

At the same time, the institutionalization of aesthetic authority raises critical questions regarding commodification, bodily governance, and the sustainability of globally circulating beauty standards. The increasing normalization of cosmetic surgery as a form of self-investment may reinforce unequal access to aesthetic capital and intensify pressures for bodily modification across different social contexts.

Therefore, while Korean cosmetic surgery represents a powerful and innovative form of soft power, it also necessitates critical reflection on its broader social and ethical implications. Future research should explore the long-term sustainability of aesthetic soft power, potential cultural resistance, and the evolving relationship between digital platforms, identity formation, and bodily transformation.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that contemporary soft power is increasingly embedded within institutionalized market systems and embodied practices, challenging conventional boundaries between medicine, culture, and geopolitics. By reframing cosmetic surgery as both an economic strategy and a mechanism of cultural governance, the paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how influence operates in the globalized, service-driven economy.

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Institutional Alignment and Governance Capacity: Evaluating THACCA through Theoretical Models of Creative Economy

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Abstract

This study examines the Thailand Creative Culture Agency (THACCA) by applying established theoretical frameworks to evaluate its institutional readiness and governance capacity. The study serves as the foundation for understanding the challenges to transform cultural capital into a sustainable global industry. The research question is how the agency aligns with concepts such as the creative economy, soft power, national branding, and the developmental state to assess THACCA's potential to drive economic growth. The analysis conducted through the developed theoretical framework under those theories finds the gap in the THACCA context. The study finds that Thailand has good policy goals, but there are still significant structural gaps. These gaps include legal ambiguity, fragmented coordination, and underdeveloped intellectual property protections. It suggests that THACCA requires a more robust legal foundation and greater autonomy from political shifts.

Keywords

THACCA, Creative Economy, Soft Power, National Branding, Developmental State

Introduction

In recent years, the creative economy has become a major policy priority for governments to seek economic growth, innovation, and international influence. The creative economy is increasingly viewed as strategically important because it intersects with cultural policy, soft power, and national branding. The Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) is a well-known example of how the government provides institutional support and can contribute to commercial success and global visibility. Consequently, this successful model inspires the creative economy as a critical area of policy design, requiring specialized agencies, coordinated funding systems, and long-term strategic planning.

Thailand has begun to follow this policy by positioning the creative economy and soft power as core pillars of national development. The Thailand Creative Culture Agency (THACCA), inspired by KOCCA, represents institutional innovation in line with global creative economy trends. The objective of THACCA is to be a main agency to promote creative industries. It also expects to bridge fragmented policy efforts across ministries and link the creative sector to broader global efforts (Bank Finance, 2026).

Even though there is strong political momentum, THACCA remains in a formative phase. The government pushes the agency to evolve its legal authority, governance structure, and related mechanisms. So, this raises many questions about whether the institution is ready and the policy is appropriate. However, establishing a specialized agency alone does not guarantee success because there are factors such as clarity of functions, coordination capabilities, financial stability, and strategic direction. Moreover, these factors determine whether the agency primarily serves as a promotional platform or a mere state instrument.

Nevertheless, existing discussions of Thailand's creative economy have tended to focus on policy narratives, potential of related sectors, or comparative lessons from other creative economy agency models. There has been less attention to theory-driven assessment of THACCA's institutional design.

This study treats THACCA not as a completed agency but as an evolving project. The study evaluates THACCA through theoretical frameworks with the policy models. In a nutshell, to address the study gap, it analyzes institutional design and readiness, offering an early analytical baseline for understanding Thailand's emerging creative economy agency.

Research objectives

1. To assess that THACCA aligns with theoretical perspectives on creative economy, soft power, national branding, and developmental state.
2. To identify institutional gaps that may affect the agency's capacity.

Research questions

1. How does THACCA's design reflect key theoretical models of creative economy governance?

Literature Review

The rapid expansion of the creative economy has elevated the industry contributing to economic growth. Therefore, the Thai government announced the THACCA in 2024 as a part of a broader effort to support the country's cultural and creative sectors. Among the existing literature, Kim, Shim, and Kim (2024) provide the most direct comparative analysis between THACCA and KOCCA. Their study explicitly evaluates both agencies side by side, assessing differences in legal mandate, organizational structure, and the scope of the creative value chain each agency is designed to govern. This comparative approach is particularly important because it goes beyond the general claim that THACCA is inspired by KOCCA and instead identifies the specific institutional gaps between the two. Kim, Shim, and Kim (2024) highlight in their study about differences between the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) and THACCA. They argue that THACCA draws inspiration from the KOCCA. The KOCCA is institutionally different from THACCA since it is a centralized executive body under Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. The Ministry oversees the full content from initial planning and production to international distribution. However, THACCA does not adopt the full model of KOCCA because THACCA still has fragmentation in policies. The reason for fragmentation is that THACCA is designed to operate as a one-stop service to manage everything by itself (Kim, Shim, & Kim, 2024).

THACCA is not the first creative economy agency in Thailand. There was the Creative Economy Agency (CEA), which is the creative economy agency established before THACCA. The challenge of the CEA is that it has a flat organizational structure, without legal support, while the THACCA will be under a specific act, with legal support. The legal support is different. However, the objectives of both agencies are similar. So, Rodpan (2023) presents risk to organizational overlap and potential loss of expert skills if not managed through a clear and successive plan (Rodpan, 2023). Besides fragmentation in policies, some literature highlights fragmentation in responsibility among public entities. The Asian Development Bank (2024) identifies that there are at least four to six different agencies in Thailand that share overlapping jurisdiction over sectors like gaming and audiovisual production. This reflects a lack of communication, duplicated efforts, and a failure to maintain a 360-degree view of the creative industry (Asian Development Bank, 2024). Therefore, there are some fragmentations and overlapping in the creative economy idea of the government.

In terms of governance capacity, this is challenging because Thailand lacks data infrastructure. The ADB reports that Thailand still lacks a centralized, systematic data collection center. So, this will be difficult for policymakers when assessing data of the economic contribution. Thereby, this challenge hinders efficient resource allocation and discourages private investment (Asian Development Bank, 2024). In terms of theoretical models, the creative economy often distinguishes between instrumental (top-down) and organic (bottom-up) approaches. Moonsarn (2025) argues that the Thai government's strategy, including the One Family One Soft Power (OFOS), follows a bureaucratic model which is the top-down model, like the OTOP program. This model focuses on mass training and cultural products that readily

serve the market. So, this reflects that it prioritizes economic success over authentic impact (Moonsarn, 2025). Cogan (2024) and Ainslie (2025) further identify the so-called soft power paradox within the institutional framework. They argue that while Thailand attempted to be a digital hub through THACCA, Thailand also represses some cultural policies like banning some expressions in games or films (Theppaitoon, 2024). This contrasts with authenticity and attractiveness from soft power theory by Joseph Nye. Ainslie also critiques that Thailand can clash with global creative standards and reinforce outdated stereotypes from using some kinds of incentives (Ainslie, 2025).

Therefore, previously mentioned literature provides many perspectives of the THACCA, such as comparative analysis agency model, fragmentation, and state-led soft power and paradoxes. The research gap still lies in the lack of assessing the institutional alignment with the theoretical framework. It aims to fill this gap and explain the theoretical approach, based on the Creative Economy Theory, Soft Power Theory, National Branding Theory, and Developmental State Theory.

Conceptual framework

This study adopts four theories, Creative Economy, Soft Power, National Branding, and Developmental State, because each addresses a distinct institutional dimension that successful creative economy agencies, such as Korea's KOCCA and Taiwan's TAICCA (Ministry of Culture (Taiwan), 2020), have been able to fulfil. Creative Economy theory explains the value-chain logic that allows KOCCA and TAICCA to convert cultural assets into economic value through IP protection and integrated production support. Soft Power theory captures how these agencies project cultural influence abroad through deliberate institutional channels rather than by chance. National Branding theory accounts for the cross-sector coordination that aligns creative content with tourism, exports, and diplomacy under a coherent national identity. Developmental State theory, finally, explains the bureaucratic capacity and embedded autonomy that enable such agencies to plan strategically beyond political cycles. Together, these four theories form a layered framework that allows THACCA to be assessed not only against its stated ambitions but also against the institutional foundations that have made comparable agencies effective.

The theoretical framework for assessing the THACCA resides at the intersection of economic transition, bureaucratic governance, and international influence. At its foundation, the creative economy represents a fundamental shift from goods or products to an industry fulfilled by ideas, innovation, and service. According to John Howkins' (2002) model, this economy is defined by creative products derived from human creativity and protected by intellectual property laws. So, these creative products can contribute to economic value. The UNCTAD (2018) framework further characterized the creative economy as a feasible development option that combines social inclusion and cultural diversity. This moves beyond traditional upstream arts to downstream integration with services such as publishing and designing.

In terms of soft power, Joseph Nye (2004) describes a nation's co-optive ability to influence international actors through attraction rather than coercion. This intangible power arises from cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions. In the modern context, Jin Dal Yong (2016) mentions soft power in the perspective of the Korean Wave that soft power is inextricably linked to digital technologies

and social media. So, in this framework, cultural exports are no longer accidental but are the result of well-planned policy initiatives. This shows the transition from hands-off to hands-on government support, to ensure that local creative content links to digital platforms and contributes to broader economic value.

In terms of national branding, Simon Anholt (2007) argues that a nation's reputation is a valuable asset that cannot be constructed easily. The branding must be earned through innovation and behavior. He illustrates the Hexagon of Competitive Identity and describes that national reputation is formed through six channels: Tourism, Export, Policy, Investment, Culture, and People. According to this model, the state plays a main role as coordinator, acting as a magnet that aligns these six channels under national strategy.

If the state aspires to support creative industries, it must possess high governance capacity. This governance model is described through the lens of the developmental state. According to Chalmers Johnson (1982), successful economic miracles occur in a state that is well-planned with rationale. This kind of state takes a lead role through an elite economic bureaucracy to guide market systems and coordinate industrial policy. This model is also mentioned by Peter Evans (1995) in the concept of Embedded Autonomy. For the state to facilitate industrial transformation, state institutions must maintain corporate coherence and meritocratic professionalism (autonomy). This structural balance allows the state to negotiate its goals and strategies with business actors without being dominated by narrow interests or falling into the trap of a self-serving elite.

Theory	Key scholars	Core idea from theory	Implication for THACCA analysis
Creative Economy	Howkins (2002); UNCTAD (2018)	Economic value derives from creativity, IP, and the full creative value chain integrating arts, services, and innovation	Examine whether THACCA supports the creative value chain (talent, funding, IP, market access, services)
Soft Power	Nye (2004; 2011); Jin (2016)	Influence comes from cultural attraction; modern soft power is policy-driven and platform-mediated through digital technologies	Assess whether THACCA is designed to promote cultural export, digital distribution, and international cultural presence
National Branding	Anholt (2007)	National reputation is coordinated across tourism, exports, policy, investment, culture, and people through state strategy	Evaluate whether THACCA is integrated into Thailand's broader nation branding and soft power narrative

Developmental State	Johnson (1982); Evans (1995)	Strategic bureaucracy with embedded autonomy coordinates industrial transformation and state-business collaboration	Analyse whether THACCA has authority, coordination capacity, and long-term strategic orientation rather than a purely promotional role
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Table 1 Conceptual framework

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, theory-informed policy analysis to assess the institutional design of THACCA. It applies a framework mapping approach drawing on the creative economy, soft power, national branding, and developmental state. The data analysis is based on official policy documents, government statements, and other related literature.

These documents are analyzed through a thematic approach, focusing on recurring patterns and key dimensions within THACCA's design. In particular, the analysis looks at aspects such as institutional authority, coordination mechanisms, regulatory capacity, and strategic direction. These dimensions are then used as criteria to compare THACCA's structure with the core principles derived from the theoretical frameworks.

This approach allows the study to examine how THACCA aligns with established models of creative economy governance, while also identifying gaps that may affect the agency's overall effectiveness.

Research results

In this part, the study aims to evaluate the institutional design of the Thailand Creative Culture Agency (THACCA) through the theoretical framework, as mentioned before, which includes creative economy, soft power, national branding, and developmental state theory. This goes beyond only assessing policy outcomes.

THACCA positioned itself as the centralized One-Stop Service authority by providing financial support (Bank Finance, 2026), removing legal barriers, and building an infrastructure to promote Thailand's soft power ecosystem and support industries. Also, THACCA serves as the Job Creator to generate 20 million high-skill positions in the job market to support talent under the One Family One Soft Power (OFOS) project. THACCA focuses on 11-14 target sectors, covering from food and film to festivals and art (Yangiam & Promkam, 2025). Through these policies, THACCA aims to translate Thailand's cultural capital into significant economic value (Vitrina, 2025). The initiative aims to align with the goal of generating 4 trillion THB in annual revenue. Moreover, THACCA is the main player to push Thailand toward becoming a sustainable international leader in soft power and aiming to elevate the nation to high-income status. However, translating the creative potential into practical economic and diplomatic influence requires more than symbolic coordination.

In this part, therefore, the study treats THACCA not as a completed institutional arrangement, but as undergoing a governance project (The Legal, 2024). The study introduces theory by theory. First, the study analyzes whether THACCA aligns with the core principles of the creative economy model. Especially, on the capitalization of intellectual property and the integration of creativity into measurable economic value. Second, the study evaluates the agency's soft power strategy in terms of attraction, cultural legitimacy, and the tension between state direction and organic production. Third, the study assesses THACCA's contribution to national branding through the framework of competitive identity and policy coherence. Fourth, the study analyzes how the agency employs characteristics of a developmental state institution, especially in terms of embedded autonomy and strategic industrial guidance.

Creative Economy

Firstly, the creative economy's lack of clarity regarding Intellectual Property (IP) (Howkins, 2002), data system, and market mechanisms within THACCA's design shows a big gap between the government's big dreams and the complex reality of Thai bureaucracy. While the ambition to turn Thailand into a Creative Hub (Thailand Creative Culture Agency, n.d.) is high, the structural design of this new agency still feels like a work in progress, with several structural gaps that could swallow its potential before it even begins.

In terms of the Intellectual Property (IP) side, even though THACCA wants to turn Thai culture into economic value, the legal framework is incredibly confusing (Ritkasem & Somchom, 2025). In the present, the power to register and protect copyrights still sits firmly with the Department of Intellectual Property (DIP) under the Ministry of Commerce. THACCA, on the other hand, is being designed primarily as a promoter. So it creates a One-Stop Service (Thoopkrajae & Vongpuapan, 2025) paradox which is that a creator might go to THACCA for support, but THACCA doesn't have the legal framework to settle IP disputes or finalize registrations (Lexpertise Law Firm, 2025). This means small creators and independent artists will likely get stuck in the same administrative hurdles, forced to navigate fragmented jurisdictions just to protect their work. Furthermore, there is an institutionalized tension between wanting to be a global creative powerhouse and keeping conservative censorship laws. If the state still uses IP to control films, games, or art, it creates a hidden tax on creativity. Creators are never sure where the line is drawn, which discourages the kind of bold, risky ideas that go viral globally.

When it comes to data, THACCA faces what experts call a massive readiness gap. In the modern creative economy, data is the new oil (Digital Government Development Agency, 2024), but in the present, Thailand's data is leaking everywhere. Information about artists, local businesses, and global market trends is scattered across different government offices that do not communicate with one another. One ministry knows about food, another about textiles, and another about digital exports, but none of them shares a unified language or database. The current plan for THACCA doesn't clearly explain how it will link all this data together. This is known as data interoperability. Without a unified system, it's almost impossible for THACCA to act as a real knowledge hub. If it can't track what global consumers want, like what people in Europe are eating or what gamers in Brazil are playing, and match it with what Thai creators are making, the policy might end up producing things that nobody wants to purchase. It's like building a factory without

knowing if there are any customers. Furthermore, this readiness gap is exacerbated by domestic digital inequality. Since digital access remains uneven across Thailand, evidenced by a 5.7% disparity between urban and rural areas (Digital Economy Promotion Agency, 2023), any data harvested is predisposed to an urban bias. Consequently, the resulting insights may primarily reflect big-city dynamics, thereby marginalizing the needs of rural creators and undermining the inclusive objectives of the One Family One Soft Power (OFOS) project.

Finally, the THACCA market mechanism remains very blurry and raises many questions about sustainability. For example, the government talks a lot about the Soft Power Mutual Fund to consolidate substantial fiscal resources. However, they haven't explained the specific rules for who gets that money or how they will measure success. The dichotomy between national sentiment and commercial viability (UNCTAD, 2008) is also a concern. If the criteria are not clear, there will be a high risk that decisions based on political affiliations will be made, leaving SMEs and grassroots artists behind. The plan to train 20 million people with the One Family One Soft Power goal is significantly ambitious, but it ignores the demand side of the market. If THACCA focuses only on spending billions to create a huge supply of skilled workers without building a real global market for them, it might end up with millions of certified chefs or fashion designers who have no place to work (UNCTAD, 2010). This could lead to a creative bubble that eventually pops, leaving the government with a massive bill and no real economic growth to show for it (UNCTAD, 2018).

To make THACCA work, the government needs to stop thinking like a traditional bureaucracy and start thinking like a platform. It needs to move away from the inward-looking mindset where the state tries to control culture and instead focus on an outward-looking strategy that empowers the private sector. This means fixing IP laws to make them fast and digital-friendly, creating a real-time data bridge between ministries, and ensuring the market is fair for everyone, not just the big players. If THACCA does not fix these unclear points before officially starting, this whole soft power initiative might become a temporary political trend rather than a sustained agency. It would be a tragedy if such a bold idea failed simply because the plumbing of the institution wasn't ready for the flow of creativity.

Soft Power

The gap between promotion and its sustainability in terms of soft power, one of the biggest issues, is that THACCA is designed to be a promoter itself rather than a protector or a diplomat in legal terms (Vivatanapaiboonlap & Pham, 2024). However, when considering other successful models like South Korea's KOCCA, their international projection is built into the law (Dinamika, 2023; Korea Creative Content Agency, n.d.). They not only introduce K-Pop brands globally but also negotiate trade deals that favor their creative exports. While in THACCA's case, the design is still inward-looking. This is evident in the THACCA's policy to train 20 million people under the One Family One Soft Power (OFOS) project that focuses on building skilled labour inside Thailand (Public Relations Department of Thailand, 2025). Yet, there is no clear institutional link that explains how THACCA is planning to provide assistance to all 20 million people on generating income from foreign investors or hirers (Kanyapong, 2023). Based on the

discussion above, it suggests that THACCA only functions as a training center rather than a national powerhouse, because it lacks a legal framework that connects Thai creators to global markets.

The paradox between authenticity and control suggests that international projection works only if the world perceives culture as cool and authentic (Nye, 2004). However, the research by Mark S. Cogan highlights a major risk which is called the Soft Power Paradox. THACCA is currently designed to be closely aligned with the central government and the Prime Minister's office. This creates a risk that the international projection will look like government propaganda rather than organic culture (Cogan, 2024). Especially when soft power is overvalued, it may sound more like propaganda than genuine promotion to the audience.

When a country tries to control its image too much by showing only positive or traditional versions of Thailand, it often fails to attract a global audience. Global hits like *Parasite* or *Squid Game* became popular because they were allowed to criticize Korean Society (Jin, 2016). If THACCA is institutionalized as a tool to promote a narrow version of Thainess, it will struggle to gain international credibility. To be a true international player, THACCA needs institutional independence to support creators even when they challenge the status quo, but that independence is not in the current design.

In terms of budget and sustainability, currently, the international push of THACCA is tied to a specific budget of 5.1 billion baht and the current political administration. This is a huge risk. International projection takes decades of consistent work, because THACCA's international role is not locked into a long-term plan, THACCA lacks a sustainable legal framework, so it could easily disappear if the government changes. According to the KOCCA model, the funding and the global offices are permanent. Referring to this successful model, THACCA's soft power mutual fund is still vague. People do not know how this money will be used to support international marketing in the long run. Without a permanent and sustained budgeting plan or initiative to expand globally that operates independently of local politics, Thailand's international projection will remain a series of one-time events, such as festivals or road shows, rather than a constitutionalized presence.

To conclude, THACCA's role in projecting Thailand onto the world stage is currently more of a slogan than a system. To move from soft power without power to a real global force, THACCA needs to bridge these institutional gaps. Several practical steps illustrate how these gaps could be addressed. For example, creating a legal bridge to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, building a world-class data hub to track global trends, and most importantly, giving creators the freedom to be authentic. Until these elements are written into the agency's institutional DNA, Thailand's international projection will remain fragmented and dependent on luck rather than strategy.

National Branding

In terms of national branding, this focuses on how a country organizes its policies, institutions, and international presence to project a consistent identity unlike soft power. According to Competitive Identity, national branding is not only about communication strategy or image promotion (Anholt, 2007). It is the result of long-term policy alignment across economic management, governance quality, cultural production,

and international engagement. Therefore, this examines whether THACCA's institutional design supports a coherent and credible projection of Thailand's identity.

THACCA aims to reposition Thailand from its traditional image of a tourism and low-cost production destination by focusing on creativity, cultural value, and innovation. By positioning Thailand as a future Creative Hub, the agency aims to translate its cultural assets, such as food, film, fashion, festivals, and digital content, into national competitive advantages (Creative Economy Agency, n.d.; Brand Finance, 2026). The centralization of coordination under THACCA also reflects an effort to reduce fragmentation among ministries that previously handled creative sectors separately. By theory, this direction is fine with the idea that the national image must be supported by structural coordination rather than by isolated campaigns (Murphy, 2022).

However, national branding requires consistency between policy narrative and regulatory practice (Ipsos, 2021a; 2021b). Yet THACCA promotes innovation and global competitiveness, while some existing bureaucratic structures remain conservative and complex. All film administrative approval procedures such as regulation, and content oversight, may create uncertainty for creators (Ritkasem & Somchom, 2025). When domestic regulatory conditions do not fully support experimentation and risk-taking, the external branding message of creativity may lose credibility. However, the most important condition is that national identity should not be separated from domestic governance conditions (Vivatanapaiboonlap & Pham, 2024).

Furthermore, effective national branding depends on cross-sector integration. Trade promotion, intellectual property protection, digital infrastructure, and cultural diplomacy must reinforce the same strategic direction. Although THACCA positions itself as a coordinating center, its formal authority over these areas remains limited. Key regulatory and economic instruments are still located within other ministries. Without clearly institutionalized coordination mechanisms, the risk of fragmented branding remains. Different sectors may project different images, which weakens the clarity of Thailand's overall international positioning.

Another important dimension is policy continuity. Competitive identity is built gradually through stable and predictable policy behavior. THACCA benefits from strong political endorsement; however, its long-term funding stability and institutional autonomy are still developing. If creative economy promotion becomes dependent on short-term political priorities, it may reduce international confidence in Thailand's branding strategy. Sustainability, rather than intensity, determines whether branding efforts generate long-term impact.

This reflects that THACCA shifted Thailand's strategy by recognizing that cultural industries can not only shape economic growth but also influence national reputation (World Bank, 2026). However, national branding requires much deeper institutional consolidation, regulatory alignment, and long-term coordination capacity. THACCA, in its current stage, reflects its strong narrative ambition, but a strong structural foundation is also necessary to maintain a consistent and credible competitive identity while remaining under development.

Developmental State

Finally, beyond questions of intellectual property, soft power projection, and national branding coherence, THACCA can also be evaluated through the lens of developmental state theory. The creative economy framework (Johnson, 1982) emphasizes market generation through intellectual property. Soft power theory focuses on attraction and cultural influence. In contrast, the developmental state perspective examines whether the agency functions as a strategic pilot institution capable of guiding industrial transformation. Drawing on MITI and the Japanese Miracle, and Embedded Autonomy (Evans, 1995). This perspective shifts analytical focus from narrative aspiration to the question of bureaucratic capacity, autonomy, and strategic coordination

The state did not simply encourage creativity; it structured markets, sequenced sectoral upgrading, and tied support to measurable performance. When examined against these benchmarks, THACCA appears politically strong but institutionally weak. Even though THACCA holds a high position within Thailand's soft power agenda, its formal authority across ministries is fragile. Intellectual property enforcement, export regulation, and financial instruments are still dispersed among different bureaucratic actors. As a result, THACCA's coordination role resembles facilitation more than command (Wright, 1996). It convenes, but it does not yet decisively steer.

Moreover, developmental states can be described as selective industrial targeting rather than broad inclusivity. Johnson's analysis emphasizes disciplined prioritization, as limited resources are the main factor that improves upgrading potential. On the other hand, THACCA adopts coverage from food and festivals to digital content and sports without clear mechanisms or performance-based conditionality. This reflects political inclusiveness over strategic focus. Furthermore, without clear prioritization criteria, the agency may struggle to translate cultural assets into globally competitive industries and continue to compete on a global stage.

The assessment could be further sharpened by applying Evans' concept of embedded autonomy. Effective developmental institutions rely on connections with industry while preserving bureaucratic insulation from short-term political pressures. However, THACCA promotes stakeholder engagement, yet the institutionalization of these linkages remains unclear. There is limited evidence of formalized advisory structures, long-term industrial compacts, or structured performance evaluation systems. Without these mechanisms, embeddedness may become informal networking rather than strategic coordination. At the same time, strong political sponsorship, while accelerating visibility, may reduce bureaucratic insulation if policy direction becomes overly dependent on shifting political priorities.

Another core feature of developmental states is technocratic competence. Institutions such as MITI invested heavily in internal research capacity, industrial intelligence, and long-term planning expertise (Johnson, 1982). In the context of the creative economy, where global demand changes rapidly and digital platforms can reshape market needs, THACCA's current design still relies on coordination and promotion rather than on developing an integrated policy capable of informing strategic intervention.

Financial instruments also reveal limitations. Developmental states deploy targeted credit schemes, export financing, and conditional subsidies to nurture industrial upgrading. While THACCA positioned itself as a funding mobilizer, its mechanisms are broader governmental budgeting processes. This shows the absence of stable multi-year industrial financing frameworks that may constrain its ability to pursue sustained upgrading strategies beyond annual policy cycles.

Discussions and Conclusions

Taken together, the four theoretical lenses reveal a consistent pattern. Across creative economy governance, soft power strategy, national branding, and developmental state logic, THACCA shows high strategic intent but uneven institutional consolidation, which does not translate well. THACCA shows an ambitious political project to reposition Thailand to compete in the global creative stage, yet its legal authority, coordination mechanisms, technocratic infrastructure, and performance discipline remain in formative stages.

From the four theoretical aspects, the most significant gap appears within the developmental state framework. The analysis shows its weaknesses at the structural level, which is the root constraint. This extends into the other domains, including national branding, soft power strategy, and ultimately the broader creative economy agenda. Altogether, it reflects the core issue which is the ambiguity of THACCA's structural authority within the state apparatus. Its institutional position within the Office of the Prime Minister, combined with funding from central budget allocations, creates uncertainty about its formal jurisdiction and hierarchical standing. This structure might create coordination problems between ministries especially with agencies that are creative-related.

Moreover, THACCA was not well constructed through a natural step-by-step bureaucratic consolidation process. Instead, it was integrated into the executive structure with immediate budgetary support from the Office of the Prime Minister, enabling rapid operationalization. While this allows the agency to begin operations quickly, it also means that certain foundational governance elements are not fully institutionalized. This lack of maturity is made worse by a readiness gap in the country's data systems. Currently, information is spread across different ministries that do not share a unified database. Without this data interoperability, THACCA cannot easily track what global customers want. This means the government might spend billions training millions of workers for skills that the global market does not actually need.

As a result, THACCA has not yet fully developed in terms of governance architecture, procedural clarity, and institutional maturity. This foundational weakness within the developmental state dimension therefore has cascading effects on its ability to execute coherent soft power policy, strengthen the credibility of national branding, and sustain long-term governance of the creative economy. Furthermore, the agency faces a soft power paradox because it is so closely tied to the government. To be successful, cultural exports need to feel authentic to a global audience. However, if the state controls the message too much, international audiences might see it as government propaganda.

In summary, the analysis shows that Thailand Creative Culture Agency (THACCA) reflects strong political ambition throughout the creative economy, soft power, and national branding agendas. However, its institutional consolidation, especially within the developmental state dimension, remains uneven. Because of this, it reveals a gap between strategic vision and institutional capacity.

Suggestions

As mentioned before, the main challenge of THACCA is not the absence of vision from THACCA, but the gap between strategic aspiration and the institutional readiness of THACCA. The following chapters, therefore, synthesize these assessments and discuss their broader implications for Thailand's creative economy governance and long-term policy sustainability (Tilleke & Gibbins, 2025). So it would like to propose that if THACCA aims to implement its policies successfully, efficiently, and in a sustainable manner, it must begin with the most fundamental issue that was overlooked from the outset: establishing the organization on a clear and proper legal foundation.

A useful comparison can be made with the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) in South Korea (KOCCA, 2023). KOCCA has policy goals and operational characteristics that are like those of THACCA. However, one important factor behind KOCCA's success is that it developed its projects step by step and accumulated institutional experience before being formally established as a full government agency. As a result, KOCCA gained clear legal authority and was able to cooperate effectively with other ministries, industries, and private actors through well-defined procedures. This gradual institutional development strengthened both its legitimacy and its administrative capacity.

In contrast, THACCA is currently placed under the Office of the Prime Minister and relies on central budget allocations. This arrangement creates uncertainty regarding its exact position within the state structure. It has the potential to lead to confusion about its authority and causes difficulties when coordinating with different ministries, public organizations, and private sector stakeholders. Without a clearly defined legal mandate and institutional status, inter-agency cooperation can become slow and inconsistent.

In conclusion, the study kindly suggests that if a future organization is to perform a role like THACCA's in promoting the creative economy, it must be established through a clear and formal state mandate. Its legal status, authority, and institutional position should be explicitly defined from the beginning. This clarity would allow the organization to demonstrate its full potential, operate with greater stability, and sustainably advance the country's long-term creative economy policies.

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Monitoring Anti-Bribery Enforcement in South Korea: Evidence from OECD

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Abstract

This article investigates the implementation and enforcement of the OECD Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions (Anti-Bribery Convention) in South Korea by analyzing the Working Group on Bribery's (WGB) four-phase peer-review monitoring system. Since ratifying the convention in 1999, South Korea has developed a legal framework, which is the Foreign Bribery Prevention Act (FBPA). However, there is a significant gap between formal (de jure) compliance and practical (de facto) enforcement. Through successive monitoring phases, the study identifies South Korea as a condition of "maturity without volition". This means that South Korea has good institutional structures but lacks the political and judicial will that is important to prosecute powerful economic actors, specifically Chaebols. While phases 1-3 show that South Korea has rapid legislative adoption, phase 4 highlights that South Korea has a declining performance in enforcement and problems that some cases rely on foreign jurisdictions. These problems derive from high levels of secrecy in case detection, narrow interpretations of foreign public officials, and cultural leniency regarding corporate sanctions. Eventually, the article concludes that transitioning to genuine integrity requires moving beyond impractical compliance. So, the article recommends strengthening the judiciary's understanding of the convention's principle of functional equivalence and fostering a shift toward proactive and practical risk management within the corporate sector. This will bridge the existing enforcement gap.

Keywords

Korea, OECD, Foreign Bribery, Compliance, Working Group on Bribery

Introduction

The evolution of the global anti-corruption regime has been characterized by a transition from a unilateral domestic standard to a multilateral peer-review regime. The Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions (Anti-Bribery Convention) was adopted in 1997 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This convention is the first multilateral legal instrument that focuses on the supply side of foreign bribery (OECD, 2025a). The target of this convention is on the “supply side” of corruption, focusing on those who offer, promise, or give bribes rather than those who receive them. In other words, this convention pays attention to companies to hold liability for bribing foreign public officials.

The Anti-Bribery Convention requires State Parties (member to the convention) to establish the offence of bribing a foreign public official, to provide effective sanctions, and to ensure that their law enforcement authorities investigate and prosecute without improper influence. Moreover, the convention places particular emphasis on enforcement in practice, including the detection of cases, the conduct of investigations, and the initiation of criminal proceedings, rather than merely on the legislative body. The convention is accompanied by an intensive monitoring process under the Working Group on Bribery (WGB) to evaluate compliance with these obligations (OECD, 2025a). Even though the State Parties have adopted the convention, enforcement of foreign bribery laws remains highly uneven across them. Even though some countries actively investigate and prosecute cases of bribery of foreign public officials, many others have inconsistent or unrelated enforcement (Basarik Kasap, 2024). This shows a key problem in enforcing the law relating to the convention. So, the OECD needs to figure out how to ensure not merely that legal instruments are adopted on paper, but also that they are implemented and enforced effectively in practice.

The importance of OECD is that it plays a part in the international governance of foreign bribery through its WGB. The WGB was established in 1994 to bring together States Parties to monitor and assess the implementation and enforcement of the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention. The WGB seeks to promote compliance by creating transparency about national enforcement practices, mobilizing peer and reputational pressure, and encouraging learning and institutional reform through successive monitoring processes (OECD, 2025b). The WGB conducts a detailed and recurrent monitoring process through 4 phases of assessment, unlike many international monitoring bodies. The process includes on-site visits, completing questionnaires, and participating in plenary discussions with peers. Then, the results from the process are published in comprehensive country reports that assess legal frameworks and institutional structures in enforcing the law. Therefore, the WGB has become one of the most influential peer-review mechanisms in the global anti-corruption regime through these processes.

The OECD Anti-Bribery Convention’s peer-review monitoring process is considered the gold standard for evaluating how countries implement and enforce this gold standard. This evaluation also ensures that the convention’s laws and structures are effective in practice. This 4 phases of monitoring process is compulsory for all Parties to the convention. The core functions of the monitoring process are (1) to ensure compliance in a level playing field; (2) driving legislative and structural reform; (3) promoting

accountability; and (4) applying stricter measures for non-compliance (OECD, 2024). Therefore, the results of monitoring seek functional equivalence, meaning that, even if the legal system is not applicable, the Convention's measures must be comparable across all Parties to the Convention.

The Republic of Korea, South Korea, is an export-oriented country that recovered from the devastation of war and became one of the global industrial powerhouses. South Korea is a member of OECD and ratified the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention in 1999. Since then, South Korea has participated in all phases of the WGB monitoring process. Moreover, South Korea has adopted a series of legislative and institutional reforms, including the criminalization of foreign bribery, the amendments to corporate liability provisions, and the establishment of specialized agencies over successive review cycles (OECD, n.d.-a). Meanwhile, the WGB has expressed concern that Korea has persistent weak enforcement, especially in the last phase. This weak enforcement is shown through the low number of prosecutions, challenges to prosecute independently, and the criminal justice system (OECD, 2018). Even though South Korea is defined as having high formal legal commitment and transparency, it simultaneously struggles to enforce the law, which creates an enforcement gap, particularly in conglomerates (the Chaebols¹) (Hong & Kim, 2025). So, South Korea is a good case study in the struggle to implement the gold standard.

This article, therefore, explores how South Korea's implementation and enforcement of the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention have been assessed through successive monitoring processes conducted by the OECD WGB. This article also emphasizes how international monitoring influences domestic legal evolution and identifies the challenges that impede the transition from *de jure* compliance to *de facto* enforcement.

The OECD Convention and the Theoretical Framework of Compliance

Before the convention, the United States was the first country to criminalize bribing foreign officials through its 1977 Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA). For other countries, bribery was often viewed as a necessary cost of doing business. Even in some European jurisdictions, such bribes were tax-deductible (Pieth et al., 2014). This created an uneven playing field. The firms from countries with strict anti-corruption laws were at a disadvantage in the competitive field when compared to firms that could freely use illegal payments to secure government contracts. Thus, the convention sought to solve this problem by requiring all Parties to criminalize active bribery and establish effective sanctions to ensure that competition would be based on merit rather than illicit connections (Pieth et al., 2014).

The effectiveness of this multilateral convention is best understood through the lens of Managerial Theory, as mentioned by Abram Chayes and Antonia Handler Chayes in *The New Sovereignty* (Chayes & Chayes, 1995). This theory argues that the traditional view of states as rational actors who comply only

¹ Chaebols (재벌) are large, family-controlled business conglomerates that dominate the South Korean economy. Groups such as Samsung, Hyundai, SK, and LG operate across multiple industries under concentrated family ownership and cross-shareholding structures, and they wield substantial political and economic influence.

under the threat of sanctions is incomplete and suggests that compliance is often the norm rather than the exception. The states generally intend to comply with the treaty obligations but are frequently hindered by three main factors: (1) the ambiguity of treaty language, (2) the lack of bureaucratic capacity to implement complex regulations, and (3) the lag time required for domestic institutions to adapt to new norms (Chayes & Chayes, 1995). Within this theory, compliance is induced not through punishment, but through a horizontal process of justification, discourse, and persuasion. So, the states are persuaded to improve the enforcement performance as part of maintaining their status and legitimacy within the international community, especially in the norms of transparency and successive monitoring.

The case of South Korea is related to the New Sovereignty Theory. Sovereignty is not defined by absolute independence, but it is defined by a state's status and participation that is tightly put together by international institutions (Nam, 2018). As South Korea sought to secure and be a good OECD member, its commitment to the Anti-Bribery Convention became important to reflect its readiness in the global stage. However, while the administrative process has proven effective in legislation, it faces significant obstacles when dealing with certain domestic structures rooted in cronyism that limit corporate accountability.

The OECD Working Group on Bribery and the Peer Review System

The OECD Working Group on Bribery (WGB) serves as the primary engine for the convention's implementation. The WGB oversees and evaluates whether national laws meet the gold standards and how effectively they are enforced in practice. It appoints two lead examiner countries to select experts and conduct an evaluation of the country's performance (OECD, n.d.-b). It evaluates each country's performance and adopts final reports and recommendations by consensus minus one, meaning the evaluated country cannot veto (OECD, 2024). If the country fails to implement the WGB's recommendation, the WGB can employ escalating measures. Lastly, the WGB is responsible for providing regular information through the reports on the OECD website to ensure transparency (OECD, 2024).

The WGB's monitoring power relies on several specific institutional mechanisms. During the on-site visit, each member country is required to provide updates on its domestic foreign bribery cases. This forces law enforcement officials to justify why certain investigations have stopped or why specific prosecutions resulted in low sanctions (OECD, 2024).

The peer-review process is guided by the principles of effectiveness, equal treatment, and efficiency to ensure a level playing field in international business. The primary objective is to ensure that all Parties comply with the convention and related instruments. The process seeks to achieve functional equivalence among Parties, to ensure that measures are comparable across all Parties. Monitoring used peer pressure to improve the Parties' capacity to fight bribery (OECD, 2024). This pressure also encourages countries to rectify their weaknesses. Moreover, monitoring provides a unique forum for countries to consult on implementation difficulties and learn from diverse ways and techniques from their peers. Lastly, the peer review identifies specific gaps by focusing on enforcement efforts and outcomes (OECD, 2024).

The peer-review monitoring system complies with the gold standard. The process is compulsory and conducted in four successive phases.

Phase 1: Evaluation of Legal Frameworks

The principal objective of Phase 1 is to evaluate whether national laws accurately reflect the gold standard. The evaluation in this phase is conducted in a vertical (country-by-country) approach and self-evaluation (OECD, 2024).

Phase 2: Assessment of Enforcement Structures

This phase moves beyond laws to examine the structure of how the country enforces and implements those laws. Then, if the WGB has any suggestions, it will provide a way to improve. A key feature of this phase is the on-site visit, which allows examiners to meet with actors (whether public or private sector) in this field to understand how the law works in practice (OECD, 2024).

Phase 3: Progress and Enforcement Results

This phase concludes the progress that was made from the recommendations of Phase 2. It also highlights potential issues that may arise from changes of any laws or institutional frameworks. The evaluation also considers whether the country has an effort to enforce and what the outcomes are, as well as key cross-cutting issues affecting the broader system (OECD, 2011).

Phase 4: Tailored Enforcement Review

Phase 4 may vary depending on a country-specific approach that considers each nation's particular context and challenges. It focuses primarily on enforcement efforts and their outcomes, follows up on Phase 3 recommendations that remain unimplemented, examines cross-cutting issues, and also recognizes each country's positive progress and achievements (OECD, 2024).

Korea under OECD Peer Review: Enforcement across Four Phases

South Korea is a country that has completed all four phases, with another two follow-up reports. However, South Korea's experience reflects a process of rapid institutional development that has often outpaced some actions to enforce the law.

Phase 1: The Legislative Reform

South Korea ratified the convention on 4 January 1999 and, soon after, enacted the Act on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions (FBPA). The timing is significant because the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 exposed deep-rooted relationships between South Korea and the Chaebols. This generated a broad consensus that corruption is a serious threat to national stability (OECD, 1999).

The government introduced penalties for foreign bribery under the FBPA that, in some respects, were more stringent than those for domestic bribery under the Korean Criminal Code. This reflects its effort to demonstrate a strong reform agenda to the international community. Whereas domestic bribery basically emphasized maintaining the integrity of official duties, the FBPA was explicitly designed to meet the gold standard. In doing so, it shows a clear prioritization of international credibility, even though the government needs to change the domestic legal framework.

Phase 2: Institutionalizing Detection Systems

The Phase 2 evaluation finished in 2007. This marked a period of institutional consolidation. South Korea established the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission (ACRC) to serve as a central coordinator for prevention and ombudsman services (OECD, 2012). During this time, South Korea also integrated its Anti-Money Laundering (AML) reporting systems with its corruption detection systems (OECD, 2007). This made foreign bribery a predicate offense for money laundering. Even though South Korea improved institutionally, the Phase 2 report noted that the number of actual investigations into outward bribery remained disappointingly low. This means some Korean firms were still paying officials abroad.

Phase 3 and the Military Trap of Enforcement

By the time of the Phase 3 report in 2011, South Korea had secured convictions in nine separate foreign bribery cases. However, a closer qualitative review revealed an important limitation that most of these cases involved bribery of foreign military personnel stationed in Korea. Even though South Korea has the FBPA as the legal actor, it still has complex and cross-border commercial bribery. And this is what the convention was intended to address.

As a result, the OECD WGB encouraged South Korea to move beyond these relatively contained cases and scrutinize the overseas activities of major construction and electronics firms operating in high-risk markets. In response, the government introduced a new information-gathering initiative in May 2021, led by the Ministry of Justice and the Supreme Prosecutors (OECD, 2011). This movement aims to improve the detection and investigation of bribery occurring abroad.

Phase 4: Maturity Without Volition

The Phase 4 report and the 2021 follow-up marked a period of significant tension between South Korea and the WGB. The WGB expressed serious concern that South Korea's enforcement performance had weakened since Phase 3, with only four convictions recorded over seven years (OECD, 2018; OECD, 2021). The report also points out that South Korea has high exportation, leading to a high risk of corruption. Moreover, the report drew attention to what examiners described as a relatively non-autonomous approach within the Korean judiciary (OECD, 2018). The courts often relied on narrower domestic legal traditions rather than interpreting the FBPA in line with the convention's objectives. This makes it more difficult to prosecute the cases that involve third-party beneficiaries or state-owned enterprises.

Across all four phases of the monitoring process, South Korea can be characterized as “mature without volition”. This means there is a system in which the laws and institutions are in place, but the political and judicial willingness to enforce them against powerful economic actors remains limited. This characterization of weak enforcement volition is consistent with how Korean scholars and domestic observers describe the phenomenon. Empirical research by Choi et al. (2018) on Korean sentencing patterns found that Chaebol-affiliated defendants receive jail-sentence suspensions at a rate 9.9 percentage points higher than non-Chaebol counterparts, with average jail terms roughly 19 months shorter, even after controlling for the quality of defense counsel and other sentencing factors. They attribute this pattern, which Korean commentators label “too big to jail,” to structural features of the Korean legal market, including the revolving door between the judiciary and law firms that primarily serve Chaebol clients. Lee and Yoo (2025), examining the SK Group scandal, describe the resulting dynamic as “patterned permissiveness,” in which oversight over Chaebol conduct is selectively withdrawn by prosecutors, regulators, and courts. Hong and Kim (2025) further argue that the Korean government has at times downplayed or reframed direct WGB criticism when communicating with the domestic public, thereby softening the reputational pressure that underpins the peer-review model. Read alongside the OECD findings, these Korean-perspective analyses suggest that the enforcement gap identified by the WGB is not primarily a technical deficiency in the FBPA but a reflection of embedded politico-business relationships that the Korean judiciary has historically been reluctant to disrupt.

Monitoring Phase	Key Outcome	Enforcement Reality
Phase 1 (1999)	FBPA Enactment	Rapid adoption causing the tougher sanction than domestic law
Phase 2 (2007)	Institutional Evaluation	Integration of ACRC and AML, few outbound cases
Phase 3 (2011)	Convictions	9 bribery cases (mostly military bribes on Korean soil)
Phase 4 (2018)	Decline in Performance	Only 4 convictions, showing serious concerns from OECD

Table 1 Enforcement Realities across WGB Monitoring Processes

Discussion: Analyzing the Peer Review and the Reality Gaps

While Korea has completed all four phases of the monitoring process, its enforcement and effectiveness, as measured by Transparency International, have declined from moderate to little or no enforcement since 2013 (Hong & Kim, 2025). The evidence from the OECD official reports reveals a systematic gap between South Korea's institutional performance and the realities of enforcement on the ground. This is sustained by a combination of limited transparency, judicial constraints, and a broader culture of corporate leniency.

The High Degree of Secrecy

One of the most significant challenges is the opacity surrounding how bribery cases are detected. An empirical study examines 174 bribery cases involving 198 convicted individuals. This study found that the source of detection was unknown in 91.5% of cases. It also contrasts with patterns in many other OECD countries, where investigations are more clearly linked to whistleblowers, media exposure, or official audits (Hock et al., 2024). To close this detection gap, South Korea should adopt more transparent reporting standards consistent with the practice of other OECD Parties, including the systematic disclosure of detection sources in concluded foreign bribery cases and the active publication of aggregated enforcement data. Korean scholars have argued that the Korean government's reluctance to report comprehensive information to the WGB has weakened the peer-review process itself (Hong & Kim, 2025). Strengthening whistleblower channels under the Act on the Protection of Public Interest Whistleblowers (PPIWA) and expanding the role of domestic audit bodies, such as the Board of Audit and Inspection and the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission (ACRC), would move the Korean detection system closer to the whistleblower- and audit-driven models observed in Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Korean law allows investigators to request banking records from the financial institutions, but procedures and rules may complicate and affect investigations. However, there is no secrecy since financial institutions must notify an account holder within ten days after providing banking records to law enforcement actors (OECD, 2018). So, this may alert the suspects, and they might destroy other evidence or transfer assets. This creates the difficulty in prosecution. However, the authorities may request that notification be deferred for up to one year if it could obstruct any legal procedures (OECD, 2018). This defer has already been used in foreign bribery investigations. This needs to be monitored in the long term to determine whether this issue could obstruct any future cases.

This can be defined as a high degree of secrecy, which is further reinforced by legal provisions since the provisions allow case files to be destroyed soon after conviction. The reason why the case files are destroyed rapidly is that the Act on Management of Public Documents mandates the rapid destruction of case files after conviction if the penalty is less than three years in prison (Hock et al., 2024). As a result, researchers and civil society actors face serious limitations in assessing enforcement effectiveness or identifying challenges. For the WGB, this lack of transparency complicates peer review itself because there is no clear insight into how cases are initiated or why important cases are overlooked. So, it becomes difficult to apply peer pressure and to discuss in terms of policy, which is important for amending or strengthening compliance with the OECD.

However, South Korea has a mechanism to protect whistleblowers. The confidentiality provisions also function as protective measures for individuals who report wrongdoing. The Act on the Protection of Public Interest Whistleblowers (PPIWA) criminalizes the disclosure of the identity or the content of a whistleblower's report (OECD, 2018). Since violations of this confidentiality provision are punishable by up to five years of imprisonment or a monetary fine, OECD monitoring reports describe this as a protective

measure for whistleblowers (OECD, 2018). Even though there is a high degree of secrecy in those cases, there is also a high degree of secrecy in whistleblowing.

The Reliance on Foreign Enforcement

Information provided by foreign law enforcement authorities constitutes an important source of detection in Korean foreign bribery cases. According to OECD reports, there is some information from foreign law enforcement authorities showing that there is detection in Korean foreign bribery cases. Between the Phase 3 and Phase 4 monitoring processes, foreign jurisdictions were the second most significant source of detection, triggering 5 of the 13 investigations opened since 2013. These cases include the CCTV, Hanwha, FELDA, US Relocation and Construction, and UAE Oil matters (OECD, 2018).

This pattern has also appeared in earlier cases. For example, the Telecommunications Services Company Case was detected by the U.S. Air Force Office of Special Investigation (OSI) rather than Korean authorities (OECD, 2011). In several cases, the report shows that Korean authorities rely on the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) which involves the U.S. military based in South Korea, to support investigations (OECD, 2011). This shows such weak enforcement by the Korean authorities that it requires a foreign jurisdiction.

Weak domestic enforcement mechanisms have led to the delegation of regulatory authority or outsourcing of it. South Korean companies are primarily investigated and sanctioned by foreign agencies rather than domestic authorities. The primary example is Samsung Heavy Industries. In 2019, the company agreed to pay roughly \$75 million in global penalties to resolve a U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation that involved Brazilian officials (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019). This case was one of five new cases under review since the OECD's Phase 4 monitoring (OECD, 2021). However, the WGB expressed concern that South Korea's enforcement record has declined since Phase 3 monitoring and noted as "limited progress" (OECD, 2021). So, this case reflects the complex realities of foreign bribery enforcement in South Korea.

During the monitoring process, Korean authorities indicated that this case would likely end without prosecution. The burden is on the investigators to gather enough evidence to proceed beyond mere initial investigation. This highlights a recurring issue identified by the WGB that the outcome of the enforcement is often limited, not because of the absence of allegations, but because of limitations in detection and evidence. Moreover, this case also illustrates the structure of South Korea's enforcement mechanism. Investigations frequently get information from foreign regulators or media reports rather than from a proactive domestic mechanism. When compared to businesses operating internationally, those often get enforcement pressure from external jurisdictions, particularly the U.S., as more urgent than regulatory oversight from South Korean authorities.

There are many other cases, as reported in the OECD, that were closed after judicial processes in other countries. In 2011, the Korean Prosecution Service decided not to initiate formal investigations in three cases because they were already under investigation by foreign law enforcement authorities as domestic bribery cases (OECD, 2014). In the Vietnam Investment case, Korean investigators closed their file based on the principle of non bis in idem following the conviction of the bribe payer abroad (OECD, 2021). The KSA Metro case was also closed after Korean authorities concluded that bribery involvement had not been established, noting that this assessment was “confirmed by another WGB country’s law enforcement authorities” (OECD, 2021). This shows a lack of an effective domestic mechanism to prosecute those kinds of cases fully and effectively.

One of the cases, in 2022, KT Corporation paid fines to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) of \$6.3 million after a decade-long corruption investigation. The case originates from KT executives who created a slush fund to provide illegal political contributions in South Korea and bribed to secure a government contract in Vietnam. Although these actions fall directly under Korea’s FBPA, the enforcement mechanism largely failed to secure an independent indictment. However, the case continues to be monitored since it was reported by the media and sanctioned by U.S. authorities. This case highlights a recurring pattern that South Korea appears to rely on the U.S. Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2022).

Another famous case that causes embarrassment for the Korean government is the Ban Ki-moon case (Hong & Kim, 2025). Bang Ki Sang is an executive at Keangnam Enterprise and the brother of a former UN Secretary-General. He was involved in a plan to bribe a Qatari official to secure an \$800 million real estate “Landmark 72” building in Vietnam. Bang Ki Sang remained in hiding in Korea for a year because he bribed through a third party, Malcolm Harris. This case was also detected and prosecuted by the U.S. DOJ, same as in the previously mentioned case. At that time, this was not considered a crime under the then-enforced FBPA. U.S. prosecutors eventually forced South Korea to amend the FBPA in 2008 to include third-party beneficiaries (Hong & Kim, 2025). However, this case serves as a reminder that South Korea’s legal change is often amended in response to foreign enforcement rather than as a matter of domestic will.

As previously mentioned, cases identified in OECD monitoring reports highlight that there are limitations in domestic mechanisms for prosecuting foreign bribery. The WGB noted that many cases were brought to the attention of the Korean authorities by foreign governments. So, this reflects limited effort and capacity to detect such bribery cases domestically. Moreover, the OECD reported that one of the cases examined at the time of the Phase 4 report had been proactively detected by domestic law enforcement. Monitoring reports also note that investigators sometimes wait for foreign proceedings to conclude or for formal referrals before initiating action, which may increase the risk that the statute of limitations expires for domestic prosecution (OECD, 2021). So, from the OECD’s findings, South Korea should improve the detection and prosecution of those kinds of cases that fall under the convention to improve the liability of South Korea on the global stage.

Judicial Bottlenecks

OECD monitoring reports identify several legal and procedural issues in Korea that affect the enforcement. These issues primarily relate to the interpretation of foreign public official under the Foreign Bribery Prevention Act (FBPA) and to procedures that may limit the investigations.

The China Eastern Airlines case illustrates how this interpretation may affect prosecution. In that case, the court acquitted the defendants because they could not qualify the payment recipient as a foreign public official, even though the recipient holds Chinese government's ownership share. The court indicated that official documentation obtained through Mutual Legal Assistance (MLA) would have been required (OECD, 2018).

OECD monitoring reports also note concerns regarding the autonomy of the offence. Korean courts have in some instances required proof of the foreign country's domestic law to establish the status of an official (OECD, 2018). According to the OECD, this approach may be inconsistent with the principle that foreign bribery offences should be applied autonomously under the gold standard without requiring proof of the details of the foreign legal system (OECD, 2018).

The reports also identify several procedural bottlenecks that may affect investigations. One of the bottleneck issues involves the statute of limitations. According to the law, the limitation period is seven years for natural persons but five years for legal persons (OECD, 2021). In the US Relocation and Construction case, the legal person case had to be terminated because the limitation period of five years had expired. However, the investigations against individuals could still proceed (OECD, 2018). Even though the case still goes on, the convention focuses on prosecuting legal persons rather than natural persons.

The convention also pays attention to pre-trial resolution. However, the OECD reports also note that South Korea lacks a formal pre-trial resolution or plea-bargaining system (OECD, 2018). Without such mechanisms, prosecutors must rely on full judicial proceedings to resolve cases, and companies may have fewer incentives to self-report potential bribery conduct (OECD, 2018).

A further issue concerns jurisdiction involving North Korean officials. Because the South Korean Constitution does not recognize North Korea as a foreign country, officials from North Korea do not fall within the definition of foreign public officials under the FBPA (OECD, 2014; OECD, 2018). OECD monitoring reports note that this situation may create a legal gap in cases involving bribery connected to inter-Korean economic cooperation areas such as the Kaesong Industrial Zone (OECD, 2011; OECD, 2018).

Cultural Leniency

In the Phase 4 report, the Indonesia Mining Case is illustrated. This case shows that local custom can influence a decision not to prosecute a foreign bribery allegation. In this case, Koreans have gathered money around KRW 1.97 billion as so-called "sumbangan" or donations to a regent in Indonesia, to secure the acquisition of a mining exploration company (OECD, 2018). This directly fell under the convention.

However, the authorities seem not to prosecute. The National Police Agency (NPA) submitted a written opinion stating that the payment did not constitute a bribe but rather a donation (OECD, 2018). The NPA also accepted the defendant's explanation that such payments were traditionally required to obtain a mining license from a "regent" in Indonesia (OECD, 2018). During the OECD on-site visit, as reported in the Phase 4 report, an NPA representative further stated that offering such a donation in exchange for exploration rights was considered merely as local custom in Indonesia, so it cannot be called a bribe (OECD, 2018). Ultimately, this case was ended as the Seoul District Prosecutor's Office (DPO) decided not to prosecute since there is no clear guideline regarding political donation in Indonesia (OECD, 2018). Even though this case can directly fall under the convention, if there is no clear local guideline, the authorities can decide not to prosecute, as in this case.

From this case, the Working Group on Bribery (WGB) raised concerns regarding this interpretation. The WGB has raised Commentary 7 to the Anti-Bribery Convention, which states that local custom or local authorities accepting this kind of payment cannot be defended not to fall within the offence (OECD, 2007; OECD, 2018). The WGB noted that the case reflected a restrictive interpretation of international business and a failure to apply the foreign bribery offence autonomously (OECD, 2018). After this case, South Korea has improved by publishing "Interpretive Notes on the FBPA" in 2019 by the Ministry of Justice, to clarify for investigators and judges that perceptions of local custom do not constitute defenses to prosecution (OECD, 2021). South Korea has an implementation gap, but it still recognizes and addresses it.

Other forms of leniency have also been monitored. Korean jurisprudence has historically recognized an exception for payments or gifts offered as a social courtesy. Earlier concerns also focused on Article 20 of the Criminal Act, which exempts acts conducted in pursuance of accepted business practices or social rules (OECD, 2007). However, the WGB recommended continued monitoring to ensure that this exception is not applied to foreign bribery cases. Finally, in 2006, the Supreme Court decision clarified that this defense does not apply to foreign bribery (OECD, 2007; OECD, 2011).

In conclusion, South Korea's approach to prosecuting foreign bribery has developed in response to OECD suggestions. Earlier interpretations of concepts such as social courtesy and local customs were suggested to reinterpret and identify as factors that could affect the enforcement of foreign bribery. Finally, the Ministry of Justice issued "Interpretive Notes on the FBPA" in 2019. These improvements show efforts to clarify its law and its consistency with the Anti-Bribery Convention.

Conclusion

The OECD peer-review phases demonstrate that Korea has successfully constructed *de jure* compliance in advancing foreign bribery but has yet to achieve *de facto* enforcement. This highlights that institutional structural changes toward international standards may not yet be sufficient to incentivize strict domestic compliance. The enforcement has mainly faced challenges of a narrow interpretation of laws and leniency toward large corporations.

Moving past the condition of maturity without volition means that the country needs to recognize that compliance is not just a technical legal task. It is also cognitive, organizational, and cultural. This is where education and awareness become keys of enforcement. OECD guidance repeatedly highlights targeted training for officials working abroad and for companies operating in high-risk markets. Therefore, in the Korean context, it refers to strengthening judicial and prosecutorial understanding of the convention's principle of functional equivalence. This will help reduce narrow interpretation and limit liability in cases involving state-owned enterprises or third-party beneficiaries. In fact, increased engagement, especially from the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission and the Department of Justice, could stimulate international corporations to understand compliance systems better. Ultimately, this can lead compliance systems to become more than just a formal requirement. They could become a practical compliance tool in an increasingly cross-national scrutiny environment.

For Korea with its market-dependent economy, credibility depends on demonstrating consistent enforcement of anti-bribery laws, not merely as policy. South Korea's approach demonstrates that consistent monitoring to meet international standards enables states to strengthen domestic mechanisms. However, the domestic institutions must also be willing to adapt to the recommendation. So, it is necessary to address institutional obstacles, strengthen the judicial mechanism, and embed compliance with the authorities. This will bridge the gap between written policies and practical implementation.

South Korea's experience highlights the importance of sustained anti-bribery efforts through the Working Group's assessments. However, this Working Group acts as an external anchor, continuously monitoring the situation. The Working Group also expressed concerns about Korea's implementation, pushing for changes to legislation and investigative procedures, which could be hampered without Korea's efforts to rectify the situation. Furthermore, while all four assessment phases have concluded, the Working Group appears inclined to conduct a fifth phase. The WGB is already designing the next monitoring cycle and has announced a multi-stakeholder public consultation for June 2026 to inform its scope (OECD, 2025c). Based on the thematic trajectory of recent WGB work and the 2021 Recommendation for Further Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials, Phase 5 is likely to concentrate on at least four areas that are especially consequential for South Korea. First, non-trial resolutions, such as deferred and non-prosecution agreements, are expected to receive heightened attention, which is significant because Korea remains one of the few major OECD economies that does not recognize such mechanisms and therefore depends entirely on full trials to resolve foreign bribery cases (OECD, 2025c). Second, digital and cross-border bribery risks, including the role of professional enablers, crypto assets, and the use of artificial intelligence in both facilitating and detecting corrupt schemes, are emerging priorities of the WGB. Third, enforcement against legal persons, including the calibration of corporate sanctions and the effectiveness of compliance programs, is expected to remain central. Fourth, the systematic collection and disclosure of enforcement data will likely feature prominently, given the WGB's revised 1999-2024 dataset and its stated concern that uneven reporting weakens the peer review process. For Korea, which entered Phase 4 already lagging on these fronts, Phase 5 will most likely test whether the country can translate its mature legal framework into demonstrable and measurable enforcement outcomes.

In many aspects, the OECD process has already modified Korea's legal framework and clarified global expectations for anti-corruption governance. The next step is not to draft new rules, but to normalize their application. Auditing has already paved the way; what remains is the political and institutional commitment to follow that path.

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