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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 2, covering the period from May to August, features five research articles as follows.

The first article, "How Drinking Culture is Learned, A Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem Perspective on South Korea" by Piyakasidet Plueai-sri, applies a socio-cultural learning ecosystem perspective to explain how drinking culture is transmitted and acquired in South Korean society.

The second article, "Korean Brand Origin under French-Inspired Positioning, A Qualitative Semi-Systematic Review of Paris Baguette's Market Entry Opportunity" by Vajirawit Siripiyaphat, conducts a qualitative semi-systematic review of the brand origin strategy underlying Paris Baguette's positioning and its implications for market entry.

The third article, "The Execution Gap, Why Foreign Startups Fail to Convert Korean Market Entry into Commercial Traction" by Pidchayanin Chutipattana, analyzes the gap between formal market entry and commercial traction among foreign startups operating in South Korea.

The fourth article, "The Role of Korea in Promoting Maritime Security in the Asia-Pacific Region" by Captain Pongsakorn Puangsuwan, assesses the contribution of South Korea to the maritime security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region.

The final article, "Traces of Compressed Modernity in the Representation of Multicultural Family: A Case Study of Wandeukki by Kim Ryeoryeong" by Chatmongkon Moonninta, examines how the multicultural family is represented in contemporary Korean literature as a site where the tensions of compressed modernity become visible.

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.

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

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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).

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7. Conduct rigorous plagiarism checks using reliable software to ensure that articles published in the journal contain no plagiarized content.

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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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How Drinking Culture is Learned: A Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem Perspective on South Korea

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Abstract

Alcohol drinking culture occupied a central place in South Korean social life, functioning as a key mechanism for social networking, interpersonal communication, and the maintenance of organizational relationships. Although previous scholars had examined drinking patterns, health consequences, and gender-related changes in alcohol use, relatively little attention had been given to the learning processes through which drinking-related knowledge, values, and practices were acquired, reproduced, and transmitted across social contexts and generations. This article addressed this gap by analyzing the socio-cultural learning ecosystem that shaped drinking behaviors and alcohol-related values in South Korean society. Using a documentary research approach, the study synthesized scholarly articles, research studies, academic reports, and relevant media sources through content analysis within the framework of learning ecosystem theory.

The findings reveal that drinking culture in South Korea is sustained through an interconnected learning ecosystem comprising five principal environments: family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry. Rather than operating as independent influences, these environments interact to reinforce, modify, and transform drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and practices. Family provides early cultural meanings and behavioral models; peer groups reinforce belonging and conformity; workplaces institutionalize drinking through organizational practices such as *hoesik*; mass media circulates and normalizes particular representations of drinking; and the alcohol industry commercializes and amplifies these meanings through branding, advertising, celebrity culture, and product placement. The study therefore argues that Korean drinking culture is best understood not simply as individual alcohol consumption but as an ongoing process of socio-cultural learning across interconnected environments.

Keywords

Drinking Culture, Learning Ecosystem, Social Learning, South Korea, Cultural Transmission

Introduction

The widespread social acceptance of alcohol consumption in South Korea is reflected not only in everyday drinking practices but also in the visibility of alcoholic beverages in public culture and media. South Korea is among the countries where alcohol advertising remains relatively common, alongside nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan. Celebrity endorsements of beer, liquor, and soju are widely accepted, and popular actors, singers, and K-pop idols frequently serve as brand ambassadors for alcoholic beverages. As Amlamyong (2022) noted, drinking culture permeates virtually every sphere of Korean society, to the point that even young entertainment celebrities are commonly featured in soju advertisements. Unlike in many countries where alcohol promotion is heavily restricted or visually censored, advertisements for alcoholic beverages in South Korea are often presented openly, reflecting a relatively permissive cultural attitude toward alcohol consumption.

Beyond its visibility in advertising and popular media, alcohol occupies a prominent place in the everyday lives of many South Koreans. Sharing food and drinks is a common feature of social interaction, whether among family members, friends, university students, or workplace colleagues. In particular, the practice of hoesik (회식) - the after-work dining and drinking gathering - has long been regarded as an important part of organizational life, providing opportunities for employees to interact beyond formal workplace hierarchies, build trust, and strengthen interpersonal relationships (Amlamyong, 2022). Over the past several decades, alcoholic beverages, especially soju, have emerged as recognizable symbols of contemporary Korean culture. Drinking occasions frequently serve as spaces where individuals express respect toward senior members, develop a sense of group belonging, and navigate social expectations, reflecting the broader collectivist values that underpin Korean social life (Ko & Sohn, 2018). Participation in these gatherings often signifies inclusion within a community rather than simply the consumption of alcohol itself.

Importantly, drinking culture in South Korea has not remained static. Rapid industrialization, expanding access to higher education, and increasing women's participation in the workforce have significantly transformed drinking behaviors and their associated meanings. Historically regarded as a male-dominated activity rooted in Confucian social norms (Yang, 1997), alcohol consumption has increasingly become a practice in which women actively participate, symbolizing modernity, personal autonomy, and shifting gender identities (Kim & Kim, 2008). At the same time, the global rise of the Korean Wave through K-Dramas, K-Pop, and related cultural media - has extended Korean drinking culture far beyond national borders, shaping how international audiences perceive and engage with alcohol consumption as part of Korean social life (Pasupathy et al., 2022; Bonny-Noach et al., 2026).

Yet participation in these practices is not instinctive. People are not born knowing when it is appropriate to drink, how to behave in drinking situations, or what meanings are attached to drinking rituals.

Such understandings are acquired gradually through everyday experiences. Individuals observe family members, interact with peers, adapt to workplace norms, and consume media representations of drinking, learning along the way the values and expectations associated with alcohol consumption. What appears to be a routine social activity is therefore the result of a long process of socialization and cultural learning.

Existing studies on alcohol use in South Korea have examined a wide range of issues, including drinking patterns, health consequences, organizational culture, gender transformations, and changing social norms. While these studies have generated valuable insights, most have tended to examine these factors independently, treating family, peers, workplaces, and media as separate domains rather than as interconnected components of a broader socio-cultural system. Consequently, less attention has been given to the learning processes through which drinking-related knowledge, values, and practices are collectively formed, transmitted, and reproduced across social contexts and generations.

To address this issue, this article draws on the concept of the socio-cultural learning ecosystem to examine drinking culture in South Korea. Rather than viewing learning as something that occurs within a single institution or setting, the learning ecosystem perspective emphasizes the interconnected relationships among individuals, social groups, institutions, and cultural environments (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Eudy, 2018; Wongdaeng, 2025). Using this framework, the article explores how families, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry collectively contribute to the formation and transmission of drinking-related norms and values. In doing so, it argues that drinking in South Korea should be understood not merely as an individual choice but as the product of ongoing social and cultural learning processes that unfold across a complex network of relationships and institutions.

Research Question

How does the socio-cultural learning ecosystem contribute to the formation, transmission, and reproduction of drinking practices and alcohol-related values in South Korean society?

Research objectives

This article aimed to examine the socio-cultural learning ecosystem that contributed to the formation and reproduction of drinking practices and alcohol-related values in South Korean society.

Research Methodology

This study used a documentary research approach to examine South Korea's drinking culture through the Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem framework. Documentary research is a qualitative method that relies on collecting and analyzing existing documents as the main source of data. The materials included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, research reports, policy documents, news

articles, and media and cultural industry sources. These sources were selected based on their relevance to drinking culture, social learning processes, gender norms, media influence, and cultural change in South Korea. The purpose of this approach was to synthesize existing knowledge to better understand how drinking behaviors are socially and culturally learned, rather than collecting new data from fieldwork.

For the analysis, the selected documents were reviewed systematically to identify recurring evidence concerning how drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, practices, and meanings are learned and reinforced. The analysis focused on evidence describing socialization, observation, imitation, conformity, participation, institutional expectations, media representation, and commercial influence. Similar findings from different sources were then coded and grouped according to the learning environment in which the learning process occurred. Five analytical components were identified: family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry.

For example, evidence concerning family rituals, parental modeling, intergenerational practices, and early exposure to alcohol-related meanings was grouped under the family component. Evidence concerning friendship, peer pressure, conformity, belonging, and drinking practices among young people was grouped under peer groups. Evidence concerning organizational expectations, workplace relationships, hierarchy, networking, and hoesik was grouped under workplaces. Evidence concerning K-dramas, K-pop, celebrity representations, and the normalization of drinking in popular culture was grouped under mass media. Finally, evidence concerning alcohol advertising, branding, celebrity endorsement, product placement, and the commercialization of soju was grouped under the alcohol industry.

After the initial thematic grouping, the five components were compared across the literature to identify relationships and patterns that extended beyond individual settings. The analysis therefore moved from identifying separate learning environments to examining how these environments may reinforce, complement, or reshape one another. The Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem framework was used as an interpretive lens to synthesize these relationships and explain how drinking culture may be continuously learned and reproduced across interconnected social and cultural contexts.

“Drinking Culture in Korea”: Past and Current Trends Studies

The study of drinking culture in South Korea has attracted sustained scholarly attention, particularly since the late twentieth century, as alcohol consumption represents a significant social and cultural phenomenon closely intertwined with Korean lifestyles, values, and social structures. A review of the existing literature reveals that early studies primarily focused on patterns of alcohol consumption, health-related consequences, and factors influencing drinking behaviors among the population. Particular attention was devoted to heavy drinking and alcohol-related health problems. However, subsequent research

gradually expanded beyond medical and public health perspectives to examine drinking as a social and cultural institution.

One notable example is the work of Ko and Sohn (2018), *Behaviors and Culture of Drinking among Korean People*, which represents an important contribution within the social sciences and humanities. Their study highlights the role of drinking as a mechanism for establishing and maintaining social relationships within a collectivist society that highly values group solidarity and interpersonal harmony. Drinking frequently occurs in communal settings, including family meals, gatherings with friends, and after-work social events involving colleagues (Ko & Sohn, 2018). In the context of Korean corporate culture, after-work drinking gatherings, commonly referred to as *hoesik*, have been described as important social spaces that foster interpersonal relationships, reduce hierarchical barriers between supervisors and subordinates, and strengthen employees' sense of organizational belonging (Amlamyong, 2022).

Beyond examining the social functions of drinking, several studies have explored its relationship with broader social value systems shaped by Confucian traditions. Yang (1997), for example, argues that the traditional family structure contributes to patterns of alcohol dependence among Korean men. Specifically, first-born sons often experience greater pressure to fulfill familial expectations rooted in Confucian values and patriarchal family systems, increasing their vulnerability to alcohol dependence as a coping mechanism. At the same time, drinking practices in South Korea are governed by a complex set of rituals and etiquette that reflect social hierarchy and power relations. Customs such as pouring drinks for elders, receiving a glass with both hands, and demonstrating deference during drinking occasions serve as important expressions of respect and social order. These rituals can also reduce interpersonal distance, particularly in workplaces characterized by age and status differences. Consequently, alcohol frequently functions as a social intermediary that alleviates tension and facilitates communication during work-related interactions and meetings. Such practices demonstrate that drinking is embedded within broader processes of socialization and normative learning that help maintain social cohesion and interpersonal relationships within Korean society (Amlamyong, 2022).

Over the past decade, research on Korean drinking culture has increasingly addressed issues of gender and cultural identity, particularly through analyses of soju as a national cultural symbol. Recent social transformations have revealed significant changes in both alcohol marketing and drinking practices. Changes in soju products, the growing use of female celebrities as brand ambassadors, and evolving media representations of drinking reflect broader shifts in gender norms and lifestyles among younger generations. Historically, drinking was largely perceived as a male-dominated activity. However, contemporary Korean society increasingly recognizes alcohol consumption as an activity in which women actively participate. As noted by Amlamyong (2022), early soju advertisements primarily targeted men because traditional soju contained relatively high levels of alcohol, often exceeding 35 percent alcohol by volume. As alcohol content gradually declined—from approximately 30 percent in the 1960s to around 25 percent in the 1980s—

manufacturers sought to expand their consumer base by appealing to female consumers. This shift was accompanied by branding strategies that emphasized purity, softness, and approachability, often featuring female celebrities as endorsers. These developments suggest that drinking has become a cultural arena in which social identities and gender roles are continuously negotiated, contested, and reconstructed.

Similarly, Kim and Kim's (2008) study, *Women's Alcohol Use and Alcoholism in Korea*, illustrates significant transformations in Korean drinking culture through the lens of gender. Their research argues that women's drinking behaviors are not merely individual choices but rather outcomes of rapid social, economic, and cultural changes experienced in South Korea over recent decades. Under traditional Confucian norms, men were generally permitted to drink as part of social networking, professional advancement, and status display, whereas women were expected to avoid alcohol consumption to preserve personal and family honor. However, industrialization and modernization expanded women's access to education and employment, increasing their participation in public life and exposing them to drinking cultures previously dominated by men.

The study further reports that younger Korean women begin drinking at earlier ages and consume alcohol in greater quantities than previous generations, reflecting changing social values and the gradual erosion of traditional gender norms. Importantly, women's drinking has increasingly come to symbolize modernity, personal autonomy, and gender equality, particularly within urban and professional environments (Kim & Kim, 2008).

At the same time, the rapid growth of the Korean Wave has prompted scholars and cultural commentators to investigate the role of mass media and entertainment industries in reproducing and disseminating drinking culture. The global popularity of Korean films, television dramas, and popular music has enabled audiences worldwide to become increasingly familiar with Korean cultural practices, including drinking rituals and alcohol consumption. Viewers frequently encounter scenes involving soju bombs, communal drinking sessions, and alcohol-centered social interactions, thereby internalizing aspects of Korean drinking culture through media exposure (Saejia, 2021).

Research within this area has examined how drinking is portrayed in television dramas, films, and variety programs. Alcohol consumption is often depicted as a routine aspect of everyday life associated with celebration, stress relief, friendship formation, romantic development, and expressions of grief. Such portrayals contribute to the social normalization of drinking and facilitate the global diffusion of Korean drinking culture through K-dramas and K-pop. As Amlamyong (2022) observes, the international popularity of Korean entertainment has transformed soju into one of South Korea's most recognizable cultural exports, alongside Korean music, cuisine, tourism, and popular culture.

A particularly important contribution is the study by Pasupathy et al. (2022), *Alcohol Consumption Messages in Korean Dramas: The Globalization of South Korean Drinking Norms*. The authors argue that K-dramas serve as a major vehicle through which Korean drinking culture is transmitted to global audiences. These dramas frequently portray alcohol consumption in family gatherings, friendships, workplace relationships, and after-work social events, framing drinking as a mechanism for strengthening social bonds, promoting solidarity, and alleviating stress. Furthermore, characters who consume alcohol are often depicted in positive contexts, such as expressing genuine emotions, developing romantic relationships, or receiving care and support from others. In contrast, negative consequences associated with alcohol consumption are portrayed relatively infrequently. Consequently, K-dramas function as important sites of social and cultural learning that shape audience perceptions of drinking as a normal, socially acceptable, and integral component of Korean life (Pasupathy et al., 2022).

Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the processes through which individuals learn and internalize drinking culture, particularly among younger generations. Existing studies demonstrate that drinking behaviors emerge through ongoing interactions with individuals, institutions, and social environments, transforming alcohol consumption into a form of cultural knowledge transmitted across generations through social networks and relationships. Bonny-Noach et al. (2026), for example, examined the relationship between alcohol portrayals in Korean dramas and viewers' attitudes and drinking behaviors in Indonesia and Israel. Their findings reveal that although many viewers recognize the risks associated with alcohol consumption, repeated exposure to drinking scenes contributes to perceptions that drinking is normal and socially accepted, especially when linked to friendship, celebration, relaxation, and interpersonal relationships.

The study further found that individuals who held positive attitudes toward drinking portrayals in K-dramas were more likely to consume alcohol, drink soju, and engage in heavy drinking. Additionally, Indonesian viewers, whose cultural and religious backgrounds impose stronger restrictions on alcohol consumption, exhibited more critical attitudes toward drinking scenes than their Israeli counterparts. These findings suggest that Korean entertainment media play a significant role in shaping drinking norms across national contexts and may influence alcohol-related behaviors through processes of social learning and cultural transmission (Bonny-Noach et al., 2026).

Taken together, existing scholarship has generated substantial knowledge about Korean drinking culture from diverse perspectives, including public health, social relationships, family socialization, gender, workplace practices, media representation, and alcohol marketing. However, these strands of research have generally been examined as separate domains of inquiry. Previous studies have provided valuable explanations of particular settings in which drinking practices are learned or reinforced, but they have paid comparatively less attention to how these settings interact with one another as part of a broader learning process.

More specifically, family studies emphasize early socialization and the transmission of cultural values; research on peer groups highlights conformity, belonging, and social acceptance; studies of workplace drinking examine organizational expectations and practices such as hoesik; media studies focus on the representation and normalization of alcohol consumption; and research on the alcohol industry examines advertising, branding, and the commercialization of drinking. While these studies provide important insights into individual components of Korean drinking culture, they do not fully explain how these components operate together to shape, reinforce, reproduce, and transform drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and practices.

This study addresses this gap by bringing these dimensions together within a Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem framework. Rather than treating family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry as independent contexts, the study conceptualizes them as interconnected learning environments. In this ecosystem, meanings and practices learned in one setting may be reinforced, modified, or contested in another. The contribution of this study therefore lies not in claiming that these five contexts have previously been unidentified, but in providing an integrated framework for understanding how they interact as a broader system through which drinking culture is learned, reproduced, transmitted, and transformed in contemporary South Korean society.

Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem: Conceptual Foundations and Definitions

The concept of a Learning Ecosystem is rooted in the field of ecology, which views various elements within a system as interconnected and interdependent. Changes occurring in one part of the system inevitably affect other components. This ecological perspective was applied to human development by Bronfenbrenner (2005), who argued that individuals do not grow or learn in isolation. Rather, human development is shaped by multiple layers of environmental influences, ranging from family and peer groups to communities, cultural values, and broader social structures.

Building upon this perspective, the concept of a learning ecosystem emerged from the recognition that learning is not confined to classrooms or formal educational institutions. Instead, it is a dynamic process that occurs through interactions among people, knowledge, resources, technologies, and diverse social contexts. Eudy (2018) defines a learning ecosystem as a network of individuals, knowledge resources, technologies, and other assets connected through complex relationships. Similarly, Lotrecchiano and Norman (2021) argue that these interconnected elements function both within and beyond organizational settings to support formal and informal learning. Learning occurs across individual, team, and organizational levels through knowledge sharing, collaboration, reflection, and the practical application of knowledge in real-world situations.

Within the Thai context, Wongdaeng (2025) synthesized and expanded this concept by describing a learning ecosystem as a system of relationships between learners and their surrounding environments. Such environments include learning resources, learning processes, collaborative networks, and technologies that support learning both inside and outside educational institutions. This perspective emphasizes that learning can occur anywhere and at any stage of life, whether within families, communities, workplaces, or other social settings.

Several scholars further suggest that learning ecosystems consist of diverse components, including people, spaces, time, content, activities, culture, strategies, and technologies, all of which contribute to creating conditions that support learning (Kondratova et al., 2017). At the same time, an effective learning ecosystem should provide learners with the flexibility to direct their own learning pathways across formal, non-formal, and informal learning environments (Harrell, 2020).

One of the most significant contributions of the learning ecosystem perspective to the study of social and cultural phenomena is its recognition that culture is not merely a contextual backdrop for learning but an integral component of the learning process itself. Cultural values, beliefs, traditions, and social norms influence what people learn, how they learn, and the meanings they assign to knowledge. Simultaneously, learning processes contribute to the creation, transformation, and transmission of culture across generations.

Furthermore, Walcutt and Schatz (2019, as cited in Wongdaeng, 2025) argue that a comprehensive learning ecosystem should support holistic human development, encompassing physical, emotional, interpersonal, social, and cultural dimensions. This perspective highlights that learning is fundamentally embedded in everyday life rather than existing as an activity separate from social experience.

From this standpoint, a Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem may be understood as an interconnected system that links individuals, social groups, institutions, places, and cultural practices in the collective creation, transmission, and preservation of knowledge, skills, values, and meanings through everyday interactions. Learning, therefore, is viewed as a continuous and lifelong process that unfolds within complex networks of social and cultural relationships.

Based on this understanding, the study of any social or cultural practice cannot be limited to individual behavior alone. Instead, it requires an examination of the broader social and cultural networks that shape how individuals learn, interpret, and enact practices. The drinking culture of South Korean society provides a useful example. Drinking behaviors do not emerge solely from personal choices; rather, they are the product of ongoing learning processes that occur through interactions with family members, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the social values and norms encountered in everyday life.

From this perspective, drinking in South Korea should not be viewed merely as a form of alcohol consumption. Rather, it represents an important aspect of social participation, relationship building, and membership within social groups. Consequently, understanding Korean drinking culture requires a socio-cultural learning ecosystem perspective that illuminates how individuals acquire the meanings, practices, and values associated with drinking through diverse learning environments and social interactions. Such an approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how drinking-related norms are learned, reproduced, and sustained within contemporary South Korean society.

“How Drinking Culture is Learned”: A Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem Perspective

The objective of this study is to examine how drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and practices are learned and transmitted within South Korean society through an interconnected socio-cultural learning ecosystem. The findings are organized around five principal learning environments—family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry—to examine not only how each environment contributes to the formation and reproduction of drinking culture, but also how these environments interact with and influence one another.

Although drinking culture in South Korea is often understood as an integral part of everyday life, social relationships, and workplace culture, examining the process of “learning to drink in South Korea” through a socio-cultural learning ecosystem framework reveals that drinking should not be understood as an innate or naturally occurring behavior. Rather, drinking practices are acquired through an ongoing process of social and cultural learning that unfolds across the life course.

Individuals are not born knowing when, how, with whom, or for what purposes alcohol should be consumed. Instead, they gradually acquire the meanings, rules, norms, values, and forms of etiquette associated with drinking through sustained interaction with others and through exposure to multiple social, institutional, and media environments. This learning process begins in the family and continues through interactions with peers, workplaces, and mass media, while also being shaped by the commercial influence of the alcohol industry. These learning environments do not operate independently. Rather, they are interconnected and continuously shape, reinforce, modify, and sometimes challenge one another, creating a dynamic socio-cultural learning ecosystem through which drinking culture is learned, reproduced, transmitted, and transformed.

Accordingly, the analysis that follows examines each of the five learning environments individually before considering the relationships among them. This approach makes it possible to move beyond viewing drinking culture as the product of any single social context and instead understand it as the outcome of multiple, interconnected processes of learning that operate across different stages and domains of social life.

(1) Family as an Early Learning Environment

Based on an analysis of studies on drinking culture in Korean society, the family can be identified as a core social institution and one of the earliest learning environments through which individuals develop an understanding of alcohol consumption. Learning about drinking does not necessarily occur through explicit instruction. Rather, it emerges implicitly through everyday socialization, observation, participation in family rituals, and exposure to parental and intergenerational practices. Through these processes, individuals may gradually learn not only what drinking entails, but also when it is considered appropriate, with whom drinking is socially acceptable, and what meanings and values are attached to alcohol consumption.

In the Korean context, Damrong (2015) highlights that traditional family structures have been characterized by hierarchical relationships and relatively distinct gender roles. Men have traditionally been expected to embody leadership, strength, and responsibility in the public sphere, whereas women have been associated more closely with caregiving and domestic responsibilities. These gendered expectations extend beyond the organization of family life and are also reflected in drinking culture. Alcohol consumption has often been associated with masculinity, drinking capacity, social competence, and demonstrations of strength, particularly in social settings where men are expected to participate in collective drinking practices.

The cultural meanings attached to alcohol are further evident in family rituals. The Korean Foundation (2014) explains that alcohol in Korean society functions not merely as a substance consumed for intoxication but also as a “ritual component” embedded in important cultural practices. In ancestral rites (jesa) and major holidays such as Seollal and Chuseok, alcoholic beverages serve as symbolic media through which filial piety, respect for ancestors and elders, and the continuity and unity of the family lineage are expressed. Within these contexts, alcohol consumption is culturally legitimized and associated with positive social and moral meanings. Consequently, family rituals provide an important context through which younger generations are exposed to and learn culturally accepted meanings of drinking.

From a learning perspective, the family therefore operates as a site of implicit and observational learning. Children and adolescents encounter alcohol-related practices in everyday situations, including family gatherings, reunions, celebrations, and ritual occasions. Through observing how adults consume alcohol and how drinking is incorporated into social interactions, younger family members may come to understand drinking as a socially situated practice associated with celebration, relationship-building, respect, and membership within the family. In this sense, learning takes place not through direct instruction but through repeated exposure to behaviors and meanings that are embedded in ordinary family life.

This process can be further understood through Bandura’s (1989) Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes that individuals acquire behaviors, attitudes, and values through observation and imitation of

socially significant models. Within the family, parents and older relatives may serve as important behavioral models. When drinking is presented as a normalized and socially meaningful aspect of adult life, younger generations may consequently develop an understanding of alcohol consumption as an ordinary component of social and cultural participation rather than simply as an individual behavior or a potentially problematic activity.

Importantly, families transmit not only specific drinking behaviors but also the broader meaning systems through which alcohol is interpreted. Within family contexts, drinking may signify respect for elders, reinforce kinship solidarity, facilitate social bonding, and mark important transitions in the life course, including the transition into adulthood. Through repeated exposure to these practices and meanings, alcohol-related knowledge and values can become incorporated into individuals' broader cognitive and cultural frameworks, shaping how they subsequently perceive and evaluate drinking.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the family functions as an early learning environment in which alcohol acquires social and cultural meanings before individuals develop independent drinking practices. Through observation, participation in family rituals, and exposure to parental and intergenerational behavior, individuals learn not only how drinking is practiced but also when it is considered appropriate, with whom it is acceptable, and what social purposes it serves. The family therefore functions not merely as a co-residential or kinship unit, but as a cultural mechanism through which drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and meanings are transmitted across generations.

From the perspective of the Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem, however, family-based learning represents only the initial layer of a broader and interconnected process. The meanings and norms acquired within the family may subsequently be reinforced, modified, or challenged through interactions with peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry. In this way, early family-based learning provides an important foundation upon which subsequent learning experiences are built, contributing to the continued reproduction, negotiation, and transformation of drinking culture within Korean society.

(2) Peer Groups and the Formation of Drinking Norms

During adolescence and early adulthood, peer groups often become increasingly influential in shaping individuals' attitudes, norms, and practices related to alcohol consumption. In the Korean context, group membership carries considerable social significance, and the desire for peer acceptance, the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, and the avoidance of social exclusion can encourage individuals to conform to established group norms. As Ko and Sohn (2018) highlight in *Behaviors and Culture of Drinking among Korean People*, alcohol consumption in South Korea is not merely an individual behavioral choice but a socially regulated practice shaped by enduring cultural norms, values, and relational expectations.

Within this context, alcohol functions as an important social medium for initiating, maintaining, and strengthening interpersonal relationships. Drinking is particularly embedded in interactions among friends, acquaintances, and colleagues, as well as in post-work gatherings and informal social occasions. Rather than serving solely as a form of recreational consumption, drinking can facilitate social bonding, the development of trust, and the affirmation of group membership (Ko & Sohn, 2018). Participation in drinking therefore becomes closely associated with the maintenance of social relationships and the performance of one's role within a group.

A defining characteristic of Korean drinking culture is its strongly collective orientation. Drinking is frequently organized around shared participation and interaction, as reflected in practices such as group "one-shot" drinking, mixed alcoholic beverages commonly referred to as "bomb shots," and the ritualized exchange or passing of drinks among participants. Such practices demonstrate that alcohol consumption operates not only as an individual act but also as a social and performative practice through which solidarity, inclusion, reciprocity, and relational commitment are expressed and reinforced.

Ko and Sohn (2018) further note that drinking is embedded in a wide range of social contexts, including family meals, peer gatherings, workplace interactions, ceremonial occasions, and hospitality practices. The widespread presence of drinking across these contexts indicates that alcohol consumption is deeply integrated into everyday social life and operates across multiple institutional domains. Within peer groups, this integration may generate implicit expectations that members should participate in drinking activities and, in some situations, consume alcohol in ways that are interpreted as demonstrating sincerity, commitment, trust, or group belonging. Consequently, participation in collective drinking can become an important mechanism through which social norms are communicated and reinforced.

From a socio-cultural learning perspective, peer drinking can therefore be understood as a form of participatory and observational learning through which individuals acquire culturally appropriate behaviors and meanings. Practices such as making toasts, sharing drinks, taking turns pouring drinks, and participating in collective drinking occasions contribute to the construction of a shared group identity. Peer groups can consequently function as communities of practice, in which newcomers learn the expected forms of behavior through observation, imitation, participation, and social feedback. Through these interactions, individuals learn not only drinking practices and etiquette but also the implicit social boundaries that influence inclusion, acceptance, and exclusion within the group.

Peer groups also play an important role in shaping individuals' understanding of reciprocity and relational obligation. For example, practices surrounding the pouring and receiving of drinks may communicate respect, attentiveness, and mutual recognition among group members. Learning to participate appropriately in such practices involves more than acquiring behavioral skills; it also involves learning the meanings and expectations that underpin social interaction. In this sense, peer-based drinking

provides a context in which broader cultural values concerning friendship, reciprocity, hierarchy, and belonging are translated into everyday practices.

Historically, drinking in Korean university settings has also been associated with a rite of passage into adulthood. Participation in drinking activities with senior students and peers has carried symbolic significance beyond alcohol consumption itself, functioning as a means of social integration and identity formation within university culture. Through these experiences, young adults may learn the expectations and conventions associated with participation in adult social life, while simultaneously developing a sense of belonging within their peer networks.

The evidence reviewed in this section suggests that peer groups extend drinking-related learning beyond the family by providing opportunities for observation, imitation, participation, conformity, and social reinforcement. Within peer settings, drinking may become a means of demonstrating belonging, strengthening relationships, and affirming one's position within the group, while refusal or non-participation may, in some circumstances, generate pressure to conform to prevailing expectations. Peer groups therefore function not simply as contexts in which individuals encounter new drinking behaviors, but as important learning environments in which drinking-related norms and meanings are actively negotiated and reinforced.

From the perspective of the Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem, peer-based learning also illustrates how learning environments are interconnected. Norms and meanings initially acquired within the family may be reinforced through peer interactions, while simultaneously being modified by youth culture and changing forms of social interaction. In this way, peer groups represent a second layer of the learning ecosystem, transforming individual understandings of drinking from family-based cultural knowledge into socially negotiated practices of belonging, identity, and relationship-building.

(3) The Workplace and the Learning of Drinking Culture

In South Korean society, the workplace functions not only as a setting for carrying out professional responsibilities but also as a significant social institution through which drinking culture is embedded in employees' everyday lives. This process is particularly evident in hoesik, the tradition of after-work dining and drinking gatherings, which serves as an important context for the social learning of workplace norms, particularly for newcomers entering an organization. Through participation in hoesik, employees are introduced to the informal expectations, interpersonal relationships, and cultural practices that shape organizational life.

The learning that takes place within this semi-formal setting extends far beyond the acquisition of drinking etiquette or table manners. Rather, hoesik provides employees with direct experiences through which they learn about organizational hierarchies, power relations, seniority, and expectations concerning

appropriate workplace behavior. Practices that may initially appear routine—such as pouring drinks for supervisors, receiving a glass with both hands as a sign of respect, or waiting for senior colleagues to drink first—function as practical lessons through which broader Korean cultural values are translated into workplace practices. Through repeated participation, employees gradually learn how to navigate organizational relationships and how to behave in ways that conform to established workplace norms.

The relationship between workplace culture and drinking-related social learning is reflected in the findings of Kim and Jeon (2012), in their study *Relations of Drinking Motives and Alcohol Consumption in Korean Male Office Workers*. Based on a survey of 270 South Korean male office workers, the researchers found that alcohol was widely perceived as an ordinary and routine component of everyday life, to the extent that it was treated as almost comparable to food. This cultural perception contributed to the incorporation of drinking into workplace practices, through which employees learned to perceive alcohol as an important medium for social interaction, relationship building, and professional networking. Their statistical analysis further indicated that social motives were the strongest reported motivation for drinking among office workers. Alcohol was also used as a means of coping with work-related stress and emotional strain. These findings suggest that workplace drinking is shaped not only by individual preferences but also by organizational norms that position alcohol as a socially meaningful tool for integration, relationship maintenance, and stress management.

Similarly, Lee and Lee (2008) argue that the widespread perception of alcohol as an ordinary part of everyday life has contributed to the adoption of drinking as an important means of managing interpersonal relationships within workplaces. In this context, alcohol consumption is closely associated with social interaction, networking, and career development. Their findings indicate that social motives remain a major factor influencing workplace drinking behavior, while alcohol is also used as a coping mechanism for alleviating stress arising from everyday work responsibilities. These findings demonstrate that workplace drinking is embedded within a broader organizational culture in which alcohol may serve multiple social and emotional functions.

From a socio-cultural learning perspective, the workplace represents a transition from relatively informal forms of social learning to a more institutionalized form of cultural learning. Through hoesik, organizational hierarchy, networking practices, and expectations concerning participation, employees may learn that drinking is not simply a personal activity but can also constitute part of workplace membership and relationship building. Participation may communicate sociability, respect, reciprocity, and commitment to the group, while non-participation may, in some organizational contexts, create challenges for social integration.

Importantly, workplace-based learning does not occur independently of earlier learning experiences. Rather, organizational practices may reinforce meanings and norms previously acquired

through family and peer groups while simultaneously transforming them within a professional context. For example, values concerning respect for elders and seniority that are initially encountered within the family may be reproduced through workplace drinking etiquette and hierarchical interactions. Similarly, the sense of belonging and reciprocity learned within peer groups may be extended into professional relationships through collective drinking and networking activities.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the workplace functions as a significant learning environment in which drinking culture is institutionalized through organizational routines, interpersonal relationships, and hierarchical structures. Hoesik and related drinking practices provide employees with repeated opportunities to observe, participate in, and internalize culturally appropriate forms of drinking behavior. The workplace therefore serves not merely as a context in which existing drinking norms are reproduced, but as an institutional environment that actively reinforces and reshapes those norms. Within the Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem, workplace learning represents an important stage through which drinking-related knowledge, values, and practices acquired in earlier social environments are carried forward into adult professional life and reproduced across generations of workers.

(3) Media, K-Dramas, and K-Pop in the Construction of Drinking Meaning

Beyond direct social institutions, mass media—particularly K-Dramas and K-Pop—also represent a crucial component of the contemporary learning ecosystem. These cultural industries play a significant role in constructing representations of alcohol consumption in Korean society, especially through their widespread portrayal of drinking practices.

Frequently, audiences observe characters consuming alcohol in moments of success, disappointment, romantic involvement, or life difficulties. In this sense, drinking is closely associated with emotions, relationships, and various life experiences, thereby generating emotional value. Many consumers also associate soju with images of love, friendship, social gatherings, and the warm atmosphere commonly depicted in Korean dramas. Consequently, drinking soju is not merely the consumption of an alcoholic beverage but also a form of “cultural consumption,” through which audiences feel a sense of participation in Korean cultural life (Thanabordeekij, 2025).

As can be observed, regardless of the drama, film, or even variety show, scenes involving soju consumption appear consistently. This reflects Korean drinking culture very clearly, where soju is portrayed as a national beverage embedded in everyday life. In nearly all life situations—whether moments of happiness, sadness, exhaustion, social gatherings, or solitude—and even in everyday meals, bottles of soju and shot glasses are frequently present (Marketing Oops!, 2022; Pasupathy et al., 2022).



Figure 1: A Meal with Soju
(Source: Blockdit, 2022)

Over the past decade, the Korean Wave has exerted a profound influence on global societies, including Thailand, through various forms of mass media such as television dramas, music, films, and variety shows. This cultural diffusion has contributed to the widespread popularity of Korean celebrities and, more broadly, Korean culture itself. Similar patterns of cultural reception have also been observed in several countries worldwide, including Indonesia and Israel (Bonny-Noach et al., 2026).

Furthermore, Nawarat (2017), in a study examining the cultural industries of Korean dramas and food culture in Korean society, identifies a key turning point in the global popularity of Korean cultural products. The drama *Dae Jang Geum: Jewel in the Palace* is highlighted as one of the earliest productions that significantly propelled the global interest in Korean cultural goods, particularly Korean food culture, leading to its expanded international recognition.

In more recent Korean dramas, cultural elements are continuously embedded throughout the narrative. For example, *Crash Landing on You*, which centers on a storyline involving North Korean military life, incorporates numerous scenes depicting Korean food culture and eating practices. One notable scene involves soldiers and the female protagonist sharing grilled shellfish alongside soju. The combination is portrayed as enjoyable, with the narrative suggesting that shellfish enhances the sweetness of soju, thereby increasing the drinking experience (Chomphunut, 2022).

The evidence above indicates that the role of K-Dramas in South Korean society extends beyond merely reflecting existing drinking culture. Rather, media functions as a key mechanism in constructing and reproducing meanings of alcohol consumption as part of contemporary social and cultural order. In other words, K-Dramas do not simply depict what Koreans drink or how they drink; they also communicate what

drinking means within social life. Korean series and films thus serve as powerful channels through which the Korean Wave expands globally, disseminating Korean cultural content in subtle and pervasive ways.

Based on this perspective, the researcher analyzes the construction of drinking meanings as follows:

A key aspect is that K-Dramas transform drinking into a form of social ritual used to create, maintain, and affirm interpersonal relationships. In many key scenes, drinking occurs during moments when characters express emotions, resolve misunderstandings, or build mutual trust. Acts such as raising glasses, pouring drinks for one another, or sitting together in group drinking settings after meals are not merely everyday behaviors; rather, they function as symbolic practices that signify belonging, intimacy, and social acceptance. In this sense, drinking is presented as an important mechanism that connects individuals to social networks and provides access to group membership.

In addition, K-Dramas contribute to the normalization of drinking through the repeated representation of alcohol consumption in diverse contexts, such as after-work drinking, drinking with meals, celebrating achievements, and relieving daily stress. This repeated portrayal is not merely a narrative device but a cultural process that gradually constructs social norms, leading audiences to perceive drinking as a natural and ordinary part of Korean life. As a result, drinking becomes a familiar, accepted behavior that does not require justification or explanation.

However, the significance of K-Dramas goes beyond normalization. They also subtly associate drinking with positive emotional values and life experiences. Drinking scenes are frequently accompanied by themes of friendship, love, success, familial warmth, and emotional relief from daily struggles. Consequently, alcohol is not framed as a substance of risk or harm, but rather as a symbol of happiness, relaxation, and emotional release. This representational pattern encourages audiences to gradually associate alcohol consumption with positive emotional experiences, producing what may be described as an “imagined affective happiness” linked to drinking behavior.



Figure 2. Celebrity Endorsements of Soju in South Korea

Source: Amlamyong (2022)

On the other hand, K-Dramas also play a significant role in generating desires for imitation through social learning processes. Viewers are not merely passive observers of characters from a distance; rather, they actively learn through observation, interpretation, and imaginative identification with the narrative. Drinking soju, therefore, does not simply refer to the consumption of an alcoholic beverage. Instead, it becomes a means of accessing the experiences, emotions, and identities embodied by the characters in the drama.

Many viewers attempt to consume related products, visit filming locations, or adopt aspects of the lifestyles depicted in dramas in order to feel a stronger connection to the cultural world they admire. In this sense, drinking is transformed from an everyday behavior into a symbolic experience that individuals seek to participate in and emotionally inhabit.

At a structural level, K-Dramas function as part of the cultural industries under the Korean Wave (Hallyu), transforming alcohol consumption into both cultural capital and a global cultural commodity. The appearance of soju in dramas is not merely a background element; rather, it operates as a representational mechanism that constructs and exports “*Koreanness*” to global audiences. Drinking is thus elevated from an ordinary everyday practice to a cultural symbol that reflects national identity. As a result, global consumers are not only consuming alcoholic beverages, but also consuming meanings, memories, and imaginaries of Korea that are produced through contemporary media.

From this analysis, the researcher argues that K-Dramas serve as an important space for shaping understandings of drinking in South Korean society through storytelling and the creation of shared viewer experiences. Korean dramas consistently portray drinking as part of everyday life in various contexts, including family, friendship, romantic relationships, and work environments. Through such representations, audiences gradually internalize the values and meanings that Korean society attaches to alcohol consumption.

The learning process involved is not direct instruction on how to drink, but rather an acquisition of meanings regarding what drinking signifies in relation to social relationships, emotional expression, and group belonging. In this sense, media functions as a “cultural teacher” that frames how drinking should be perceived in contemporary society through repeated representations and narratives.

Importantly, the influence of such media is not limited to South Korean society. Under the Korean Wave (Hallyu), these representations extend globally, shaping how audiences in different cultural and social contexts perceive, interpret, and reframe Korean drinking culture.

Overall, the researcher concludes that audiences do not learn how to drink directly from media, but rather learn the “social meanings of drinking” through the interpretation of narratives and characters. Media therefore acts as a cultural educator that shapes perceptions of alcohol consumption in contemporary

society. Moreover, its influence extends beyond South Korea, exporting drinking culture globally through the Korean Wave.

Mass media expands the learning ecosystem beyond direct interpersonal interaction by allowing audiences to observe drinking practices repeatedly through mediated cultural representations. K-dramas and K-pop do not necessarily teach audiences to drink directly; rather, they may contribute to the construction of meanings by repeatedly associating alcohol with friendship, celebration, relaxation, romance, and social participation. These representations can reinforce meanings already learned through family, peer groups, or workplaces while also introducing such meanings to audiences who have not directly experienced the corresponding social practices. Media therefore functions as a cultural environment through which drinking norms can be represented, circulated, normalized, and renegotiated.

(4) Alcohol Industry and the Construction of Drinking Values

The Korean Wave (Hallyu) has increasingly blurred the boundary between fictional media worlds and everyday life, allowing audiences to experience Korean television dramas not as distant narratives but as culturally immersive realities. This sense of proximity encourages viewers to engage with the content beyond passive consumption—for example, by traveling to filming locations or consuming foods and beverages featured in popular series.

As Tiemlom (2022) argues in *“Korean food enjoys us: Culture industry in Korean series,”* even though the study focuses primarily on food culture, it reveals a broader cultural mechanism at work: the Korean cultural industry actively shapes how audiences perceive and emotionally connect with alcohol, particularly soju, through repeated and normalized representations in television dramas.

Soju appears consistently across major Korean dramas such as *Itaewon Class* and *Crash Landing on You*, to the extent that it can be seen as an almost constant narrative presence. This repetition is not incidental; rather, it reflects how alcohol is embedded into storytelling as a familiar and socially meaningful element of Korean life. Over time, this repeated exposure transforms drinking from a simple behavioral act into a culturally loaded symbol.

Within these narratives, soju is rarely framed as merely an intoxicating substance. Instead, it is closely associated with emotional and relational contexts—friendship, celebration, intimacy, and emotional release. Drinking scenes are integrated into everyday situations such as workplace interactions, social gatherings, and personal moments of reflection or distress, reinforcing the idea that alcohol is a routine part of social life.

From this perspective, the alcohol industry’s influence extends beyond production and consumption in an economic sense. Through its integration into popular media, it participates in the construction of cultural meaning. Alcohol—particularly soju—is therefore not only consumed as a beverage but also

consumed symbolically, as part of a broader cultural narrative that defines contemporary “*Koreanness*” for both domestic and global audiences.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined South Korean drinking culture through the framework of a Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem, emphasizing that alcohol consumption is not simply an individual behavioral choice but a socially and culturally constructed practice that is continuously learned, reinforced, transmitted, and transformed. By bringing together evidence from five interconnected learning environments—family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry—the study both confirms important findings from previous scholarship and extends existing understandings of Korean drinking culture by offering a more integrated explanation of how drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and practices are acquired and reproduced across social contexts.

A. Reinforcing and Extending Previous Research

First, the findings are consistent with earlier sociocultural research emphasizing the collective and relational nature of drinking in South Korean society. Ko and Sohn (2018), for example, demonstrate that drinking functions as an important mechanism for building social cohesion and maintaining interpersonal relationships within a collectivist cultural context. The present study supports this interpretation by showing that drinking is deeply embedded in processes of social bonding, particularly within peer groups and workplaces, where it can function as a form of symbolic “social language” through which individuals express inclusion, establish trust, maintain relationships, and affirm group membership. However, whereas previous studies have primarily focused on what drinking accomplishes socially, this study shifts attention toward how the meanings associated with drinking are learned and reproduced over time. By locating drinking within interconnected learning environments, the study demonstrates how socially meaningful drinking practices are continuously reinforced across different stages and domains of social life.

Second, the findings extend Yang’s (1997) argument that Korean drinking behavior is influenced by Confucian family structures, hierarchy, and broader social norms. The present study suggests that these cultural values are not simply expressed in adult drinking practices but may begin to be learned much earlier through everyday family interactions. Family rituals, parental modeling, and intergenerational practices provide children with opportunities to observe how alcohol is associated with respect, family relationships, celebration, and social obligation. This interpretation is consistent with Bandura’s (1989) Social Learning Theory, particularly the processes of observational learning, modeling, and reinforcement. The contribution of the present study, however, lies in positioning the family not merely as a cultural background factor but as an initial learning environment or “entry point” through which individuals acquire meanings that may later be reinforced, modified, or challenged in other social contexts.

Third, the findings reinforce previous research on workplace drinking culture, particularly the role of hoesik as an important social institution within Korean organizational life. Existing studies have described hoesik as a distinctive feature of Korean workplaces that can promote solidarity and interpersonal cohesion while simultaneously reflecting organizational hierarchy and power distance. This study extends this literature by interpreting hoesik not only as a workplace practice but also as a learning environment. Through participation in workplace drinking, employees learn implicit expectations concerning hierarchy, respect, reciprocity, networking, and appropriate interpersonal behavior. In this sense, workplace drinking constitutes both a form of social participation and a form of cultural instruction through which employees learn how to navigate organizational relationships.

Fourth, the findings are consistent with recent research concerning the role of Korean popular media in the globalization of drinking culture. Pasupathy et al. (2022) and Bonny-Noach et al. (2026), for instance, demonstrate that K-dramas can contribute to the normalization of alcohol consumption and the development of positive attitudes toward drinking among international audiences. The present study supports these findings while extending the interpretation of media beyond that of a simple reflection or external influence. Within the Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem, mass media functions as an integrated learning environment that actively participates in the construction of cultural meanings. Through repeated representations of alcohol in contexts of friendship, romance, emotional expression, relaxation, success, and everyday life, media can shape how audiences interpret the social significance of drinking. Media therefore functions not merely as a representational system but as a cultural learning agent through which drinking-related meanings are circulated and potentially normalized across national and cultural boundaries.

Fifth, the study extends existing literature on the alcohol industry and the cultural commodification of soju. Previous research has largely focused on advertising, branding, market expansion, and commercial strategies. The present study adds a cultural dimension by highlighting how soju can be transformed from an ordinary consumer product into a symbolic marker of “Koreanness” within the global cultural economy. This perspective is compatible with scholarship on the Korean Wave (Hallyu), which emphasizes the role of Korean cultural products in generating cultural influence and soft power. However, the present study further demonstrates that the cultural meaning of alcohol is not produced by commercial branding alone. Rather, it emerges through the interaction of commercial practices, media representations, and everyday social practices, which collectively reinforce and reproduce particular meanings associated with alcohol and Korean identity.

B. Theoretical Contribution: From Separate Influences to an Interconnected Learning Ecosystem

The principal academic contribution of this study lies in its conceptualization of Korean drinking culture as a Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem, rather than as the outcome of a collection of separate

social influences. The study does not claim that family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, or the alcohol industry are newly identified determinants of drinking culture. Instead, its contribution lies in synthesizing existing evidence to demonstrate how these environments operate as interconnected sites of cultural learning.

This perspective shifts the analytical focus from asking simply where drinking occurs or what factors influence drinking to asking how drinking-related meanings are learned, reinforced, transmitted, and transformed across interconnected social environments. The framework therefore provides a more dynamic understanding of cultural transmission. An individual may first encounter particular meanings associated with alcohol within the family, reinforce or modify those meanings through peer interactions, encounter new expectations within the workplace, and subsequently encounter mediated or commercial representations that further reinforce, challenge, or transform previous understandings.

Importantly, these learning environments do not operate in a linear or one-directional manner. Rather, they interact dynamically with one another. Family-based norms may influence how individuals respond to peer expectations, while peer practices may reshape meanings acquired within the family. Workplace practices may institutionalize norms previously learned through social relationships, while mass media may reinforce or challenge both family- and workplace-based understandings. At the same time, the alcohol industry can draw upon and commercialize meanings already embedded in social and cultural practices, while media representations can further circulate these meanings to broader audiences. The resulting ecosystem is therefore characterized by mutual reinforcement, adaptation, negotiation, and transformation.

C. Cultural Learning as a Dynamic and Lifelong Process

The findings also highlight that learning about drinking is not confined to a particular stage of life. Rather, it is a continuous process that develops across the life course. Individuals encounter different learning environments as they move from childhood and adolescence into adulthood and professional life, while simultaneously being exposed to increasingly diverse forms of mediated and commercial culture.

This perspective also highlights the dynamic nature of cultural learning. Drinking norms that have been established through family socialization and organizational practices may be reproduced across generations, but they are not necessarily fixed or immutable. Changes in gender expectations, generational values, workplace practices, youth culture, and media environments may modify or challenge established norms. Individuals are therefore not simply passive recipients of cultural expectations. They actively interpret, negotiate, accept, adapt, or contest the meanings they encounter across different learning environments.

The Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem consequently provides a framework for understanding both continuity and change in drinking culture. It explains how established practices can persist through repeated socialization and institutional reinforcement while also allowing for transformation as individuals encounter new social conditions, cultural influences, and alternative forms of meaning-making.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study confirms many of the central insights established by previous research on the social, cultural, relational, and symbolic dimensions of drinking in South Korean society. At the same time, it advances the literature by shifting the analytical focus from isolated determinants of drinking behavior to an interconnected system of cultural learning.

The findings demonstrate that drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and practices are learned through multiple environments that extend from the family to peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry. These environments do not function independently; rather, they continuously interact to reinforce, modify, reproduce, and sometimes challenge the meanings attached to alcohol consumption. Drinking culture can therefore be understood not simply as a set of established behaviors but as an ongoing process of socio-cultural learning and cultural reproduction.

The Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem framework offers a holistic perspective for understanding how drinking culture is formed and sustained across different domains of social life, while also accounting for the processes through which cultural meanings change and circulate beyond national boundaries. By connecting interpersonal, institutional, mediated, and commercial forms of learning within a single analytical framework, this study provides a foundation for further research on drinking culture and other culturally embedded practices in which behavior is learned through interconnected social environments.

Suggestion

Based on the findings of this study, South Korean drinking culture can be understood as the outcome of a continuous socio-cultural learning process in which individuals acquire, negotiate, and reproduce drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and practices across interconnected social environments. The findings also suggest that these environments do not operate independently. Rather, family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry interact dynamically, reinforcing, modifying, and sometimes challenging one another. Accordingly, future research should move beyond examining these contexts as separate influences and investigate more systematically how they function together as a Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem.

First, future research should examine the development of drinking-related learning across the life course. Longitudinal and life-course studies would be particularly valuable for tracing how meanings and norms associated with alcohol are initially acquired in childhood, reinforced or transformed during adolescence and early adulthood, and subsequently reproduced or renegotiated in professional and family life. Such research could provide a clearer understanding of how early socialization influences later drinking practices and how learning experiences at different stages of life interact with one another.

Second, future studies should investigate more closely the mechanisms of learning within each component of the ecosystem. Research on family contexts could examine parental modeling, family rituals, intergenerational transmission, and gendered expectations. Studies of peer groups could explore conformity, belonging, peer influence, reciprocity, and identity formation. Workplace research could further investigate hoesik, organizational hierarchy, networking, social expectations, and the relationship between drinking and workplace integration. Examining these mechanisms in greater depth would help clarify not simply whether these environments influence drinking, but how and under what conditions they shape individuals' understandings and practices.

Third, greater attention should be given to the changing role of media and cultural industries. As Korean popular culture continues to circulate globally, future research should examine how K-dramas, K-pop, social media, streaming platforms, celebrity culture, advertising, product placement, and alcohol branding contribute to the construction and circulation of drinking-related meanings. Particular attention should be paid to how domestic and international audiences interpret these representations differently and how mediated representations may interact with individuals' existing experiences of drinking.

Fourth, future research should investigate the interactions and feedback processes among the five learning environments. Rather than asking only how the family, peers, workplace, media, or alcohol industry independently influence drinking, researchers should examine how learning in one environment affects learning in another. For example, family-based meanings may shape how individuals respond to peer drinking practices, while peer experiences may modify previously acquired family norms. Workplace practices may institutionalize these norms, whereas media and commercial representations may reinforce, reshape, or challenge them. Understanding these cross-contextual relationships would provide stronger empirical support for the ecosystem perspective proposed in this study.

Fifth, future research should pay greater attention to social and cultural change within the learning ecosystem. Changes in gender relations, generational values, workplace practices, digital media, and attitudes toward alcohol may alter established patterns of drinking-related learning. Comparative research across generations, gender groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and urban and rural settings could therefore reveal how the ecosystem varies across different social contexts. Cross-cultural research could also examine how Korean drinking culture is interpreted and adapted when it encounters other cultural drinking norms.



Finally, future research should consider the implications of the learning ecosystem for alcohol-related policy and intervention. If drinking culture is produced and reinforced across multiple interconnected environments, interventions focused solely on individual behavior may have limited effectiveness. A more comprehensive approach could consider family socialization, peer norms, workplace practices, media representations, and commercial influences simultaneously. Understanding these interconnected mechanisms may help identify more culturally appropriate strategies for promoting healthier drinking practices while taking into account the social and cultural meanings that make alcohol consumption deeply embedded in everyday life.

Overall, future research should develop the Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem framework from a primarily conceptual and integrative model into an empirically testable framework. By examining how learning occurs, how different learning environments interact, and how these relationships change across the life course and across generations, future studies can provide a deeper explanation of how drinking culture is constructed, reproduced, negotiated, and transformed in South Korean society and beyond.



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Korean Brand Origin under French-Inspired Positioning: A Qualitative Semi-Systematic Review of Paris Baguette's Market Entry Opportunity in Thailand

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Abstract

This study examines Paris Baguette's market entry opportunity in Thailand as a case of Korean brand origin under French-inspired positioning. Using a qualitative semi-systematic literature review with thematic synthesis and conceptual framework development, the study integrates literature on country-of-origin, Korean branding and Hallyu, bakery café experience, and international localization with official business and institutional sources. The synthesis suggests that Paris Baguette's Korean origin can be a strategic but partly hidden asset because the brand name and bakery identity may activate French or European associations more strongly than Korean origin. French-inspired positioning may support premium quality perception, but country-of-origin ambiguity can create confusion unless Korean origin and French-inspired bakery cues are connected coherently. The synthesis identifies six literature-based themes: Korean brand origin as a hidden asset, French-inspired positioning as a quality cue, ambiguity as risk and opportunity, Thai K-lifestyle familiarity, bakery café as lifestyle experience, and balanced localization–Koreanization. The study proposes a conceptual framework and six literature-based propositions suggesting that Paris Baguette's opportunity may depend on combining Korean lifestyle appeal, French-inspired bakery quality, and Thai market adaptation. It offers an integrative conceptual contribution to country-of-origin and Korean branding literature and provides literature-informed recommendations for Korean food-service brands entering Southeast Asia.

Keywords

Korean brand origin, country-of-origin ambiguity, Paris Baguette, bakery café, market entry strategy

Introduction

Background of the Study

South Korean brands have become increasingly visible in international markets. In the past, the global image of South Korea was often linked to large industrial firms, electronic products, and automobiles. More recently, however, Korean brands and Korean-related products have become more visible across consumer-oriented sectors, including entertainment, beauty, food, fashion, lifestyle retail, dining, and service experiences (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2025). This shift reflects the broader influence of Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, which has moved beyond cultural content and is increasingly associated with international demand for Korean consumer goods, particularly food, beverages, and other non-durable products (Jin et al., 2024).

Paris Baguette provides a relevant case for examining this issue. Although its name and symbolic cues suggest a French-inspired bakery image, Paris Baguette is rooted in South Korea and operates as a global bakery café brand within SPC Group's food-service portfolio (Malaysian Investment Development Authority, 2022; Paris Baguette, n.d.-a). Its business model combines bakery products, brewed beverages, café service, and everyday bakery café consumption (Paris Baguette, n.d.-b). The brand's planned expansion into Thailand through a master franchise arrangement with Berjaya Food indicates the growing regional ambition of Korean food-service brands in Southeast Asia (Berjaya Food Berhad, 2024).

Thailand is a meaningful market for this case. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that Thailand's foodservice market was projected to reach approximately USD 35.4 billion in 2025, supported by store expansion and tourism recovery (USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, 2025). Bangkok also has a visible urban café culture, where specialty coffee businesses are shaped by craft, creativity, lifestyle concepts, and visually attractive store presentation (Azavedo & Gogatz, 2021). At the same time, Thai consumers are familiar with Korean culture, with Korean food, music, beauty, and dramas being visible categories of Hallyu popularity (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2025).

These conditions create an opportunity for Paris Baguette to position itself beyond a standard bakery. However, the brand also faces a strategic challenge. Its Korean corporate origin may be valuable in Thailand, but its French-inspired name and positioning may lead consumers to associate the brand with French, European, or broadly international meanings because foreign-language brand names can activate implicit country-of-origin perceptions (Charinsarn & Speece, 2025). This makes Paris Baguette an interesting case for analyzing Korean brand origin under French-inspired positioning in Thailand's bakery café market.

Research Problem and Research Gap

The main research problem of this study lies in the tension between Paris Baguette's Korean corporate origin and its French-inspired brand identity. In this study, such tension is understood as country-of-origin ambiguity, where consumers interpret a brand through multiple and sometimes competing cues, including brand origin, language, product style, ownership, and symbolic positioning (Chen et al., 2021; Charinsarn & Speece, 2025).

Country-of-origin ambiguity is important because country-related cues can shape perceived quality, credibility, authenticity, and purchase relevance (Chen et al., 2021; Riefler, 2020). Existing country-of-origin studies often examine brands associated with clearer national images or product-country images, and may not fully explain cases where brand origin, brand name, and consumer interpretation are layered across different countries (Serrano-Arcos et al., 2021).

Korean branding and Hallyu studies have mainly discussed cultural content and its influence on consumer attitudes and Korean-related consumption (Chae et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2024). Less attention has been given to Korean-origin brands that do not directly present themselves through Korean names or obvious Korean cultural symbols. Paris Baguette therefore provides a useful case for examining how Korean brand origin can be strategically understood when presented through French-inspired positioning in a foreign market.

Although previous studies have provided important insights into country-of-origin and brand origin, Hallyu-related Korean branding, service experience, and localization strategy, these areas have often been discussed as separate streams of literature (Chae et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Hong et al., 2023; Jin et al., 2024; Kandampully et al., 2023; Mandler et al., 2021; Serrano-Arcos et al., 2021). The theoretical gap addressed in this study is not the absence of country-of-origin research, but the limited integration of these perspectives in explaining a Korean-origin service brand that uses foreign-inspired positioning in a host market. Therefore, this study does not claim to develop a new country-of-origin theory. Its contribution is to integrate country-of-origin ambiguity, Korean branding and Hallyu, bakery café experience, and localization strategy into a case-based conceptual framework for understanding Paris Baguette's market entry opportunity in Thailand.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how Korean brand origin may influence Paris Baguette's market entry opportunity in Thailand.
2. To analyze how French-inspired positioning may create country-of-origin ambiguity for Paris Baguette.

3. To synthesize literature on country-of-origin, Korean branding, café lifestyle consumption, and market entry strategy through a qualitative semi-systematic literature review.
4. To propose literature-informed marketing recommendations for Paris Baguette in Thailand.

Research Questions

1. What role does Korean brand origin play in shaping Paris Baguette's market entry opportunity in Thailand?
2. What role does French-inspired positioning play in creating country-of-origin ambiguity for Paris Baguette?
3. What does the literature suggest about how Korean brand origin and French-inspired positioning shape Thai consumer perceptions?
4. What literature-informed marketing strategy can be recommended for Paris Baguette in Thailand?

Literature Review

Country-of-Origin Effect and Brand Origin

Country-of-origin effect refers to the way consumers use country-related information to evaluate products, brands, and services in international markets. Country image and product-country image remain important because consumers often connect products or services with the reputation, competence, culture, or perceived expertise of a particular country (Serrano-Arcos et al., 2021).

Brand origin is closely related to country-of-origin, but the two concepts are not always identical. In global markets, consumers may evaluate a brand through several country-related cues, including brand origin, country of manufacture, ownership, product category, and marketing communication (Chen et al., 2021).

Country-of-Origin Ambiguity

In this study, country-of-origin ambiguity refers to a situation in which consumers receive country-related cues that do not point to one clear national origin. A brand may be owned by a company from one country, use a name associated with another country, sell products inspired by a different cultural tradition, and operate in a foreign consumer market. In such situations, consumers may construct meaning from several cues at the same time, including brand origin, language, product style, ownership, and symbolic positioning (Chen et al., 2021; Charinsarn & Speece, 2025).

Recent international branding research also indicates that brand country-of-origin can work together with perceived brand globalness in hybrid positioning strategies, rather than functioning as a separate cue (Hong et al., 2023). Empirical evidence further suggests that brand origin misperception or non-identification can weaken brand equity compared with correct brand-origin identification (Tseng et al., 2022).

Paris Baguette reflects this type of ambiguity. Its corporate origin is South Korean, but its name and bakery symbolism suggest French or European associations. For this case, the issue is not simply whether the brand is Korean or French in consumers' minds. The more important question is how this layered origin cues can be organized into a coherent market position. This makes the case useful for examining how brand origin, symbolic naming, product style, and host-market interpretation interact in international food-service branding (Chae et al., 2020; Charinsarn & Speece, 2025).

Korean Branding, Hallyu, and Lifestyle Consumption

Korean branding has increasingly been shaped by the global visibility of Hallyu, or the Korean Wave. Hallyu originally gained attention through Korean dramas, music, films, and entertainment, but recent evidence suggests that its influence has expanded into Korean consumer goods, including non-durable goods, processed household food, and beverages (Jin et al., 2024). In many markets, Korean culture does not only create entertainment value. It can also shape how consumers perceive Korean-related products, services, and brand experiences through the broader formation of K-brand image (Chen et al., 2025).

Hallyu connects products with cultural meanings. Korean cultural content can shape consumer attitudes, national image, acceptance intention, and social connectedness among Hallyu-related audiences (Chae et al., 2020; Laffan, 2021). Korean branding may therefore operate through direct cues, such as Korean food or K-pop, and indirect cues, such as store atmosphere, product design, service style, packaging, digital communication, and lifestyle experience (Kandampully et al., 2023).

Thailand is a relevant context because Thai consumers have shown strong familiarity with Korean culture. Korean food, music, beauty, and dramas are visible categories of Hallyu popularity in Thailand (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2025). For Paris Baguette, Korean origin may work as a second layer of meaning that supports lifestyle positioning, rather than as an obvious surface identity.

Bakery Café Experience and Thai Urban Café Culture

Bakery cafés should be understood as part of a wider experience-based foodservice market. Rather than being evaluated only through bakery products, a bakery café can be examined as a service setting that combines products, beverages, store atmosphere, service interaction, seating space, and visual presentation (Mora & Ueasangkomsate, 2023). This format is relevant to contemporary consumer behavior because consumers often evaluate food-service brands through both perceived product quality and the broader experience created by atmosphere, service, and brand interaction (Kandampully et al., 2023).

Thailand provides a meaningful context for this type of consumption. In Bangkok, café culture has developed through specialty coffee businesses, lifestyle-oriented store design, craft-based product presentation, and visually attractive spaces (Azavedo & Gogatz, 2021). Café-hopping intentions among

Gen Y and Gen Z consumers are also influenced by lifestyle patterns and marketing factors such as product, physical characteristics, location, and service process (Amornsittinon et al., 2025).

International Market Entry and Localization Strategy

International market entry is a key issue for food-service brands because the expansion of a restaurant or bakery café concept involves both operational control and local market adaptation. Franchising is often used in food-service internationalization because it allows a brand owner to expand through a contractual business format while relying on local partners to support market knowledge, regulatory understanding, location development, and business networks in the host market (Bretas & Alon, 2021). Recent research on restaurant franchises also suggests that market selection is shaped by market attractiveness, geographic expansion logic, and the early-stage internationalization process of franchise firms (González-Márquez et al., 2023).

International food-service brands also need to balance standardization and localization. Standardization helps maintain brand consistency and global recognition, while localization becomes necessary when consumer taste, dining behavior, cultural meanings, and competitive conditions differ across markets (Liu et al., 2022; Mandler et al., 2021). International marketing strategy therefore requires fit between the firm's global brand system and the local market environment (Poulis, 2024).

Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review, this study proposes a conceptual framework for understanding Paris Baguette's market entry opportunity in Thailand. The framework begins with two main brand cues: Korean brand origin and French-inspired positioning. Korean brand origin may provide cultural familiarity and lifestyle relevance because Thai consumers are already exposed to Hallyu and Korean-related consumption (Chae et al., 2020; Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2025). In contrast, French-inspired positioning may operate as a premium quality cue through the brand name, bakery style, and visual identity.

When these two cues appear together, they may create country-of-origin ambiguity because consumers may interpret the brand through Korean, French, European, or broadly international meanings (Charinsarn & Speece, 2025; Chen et al., 2021). In this framework, country-of-origin ambiguity influences Thai consumer interpretation, including perceived authenticity, quality, lifestyle relevance, trust, and market fit. The outcome is Paris Baguette's market entry opportunity in Thailand.

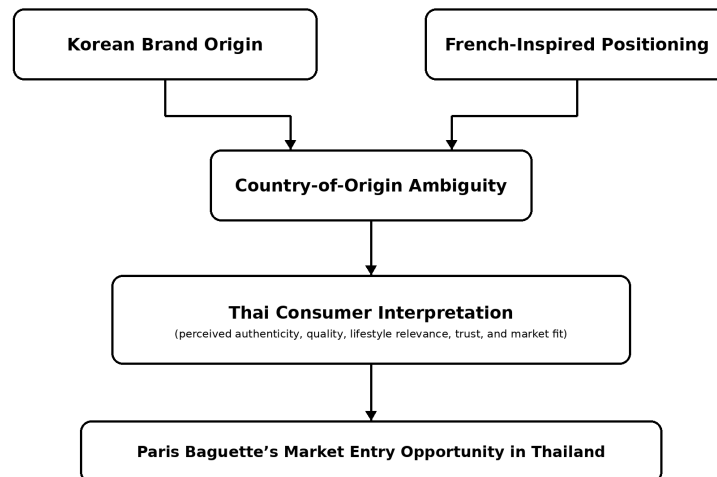


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework¹

Research Propositions

Based on the literature review and the proposed conceptual framework, this study develops six literature-based research propositions. Since this study uses a qualitative semi-systematic literature review, these propositions are not presented as statistical hypotheses or direct empirical findings about Thai consumers. Rather, they serve as theory-informed statements that guide future investigation into how Korean brand origin, French-inspired positioning, country-of-origin ambiguity, Thai consumer interpretation, and localization strategy may shape Paris Baguette's market entry opportunity in Thailand.

P1: Korean brand origin may strengthen consumer interest when it is communicated as a source of lifestyle meaning and cultural familiarity rather than as a purely factual corporate origin.

P2: French-inspired positioning may enhance consumers' perception of Paris Baguette as a premium bakery café brand when it is supported by consistent product quality, store experience, and visual communication.

P3: Country-of-origin ambiguity may create consumer confusion when Korean origin and French-inspired positioning are not clearly connected within the brand's communication and experience.

P4: Country-of-origin ambiguity may become a strategic advantage when Paris Baguette is interpreted as a Korean-global bakery café that combines French-inspired bakery quality with Korean lifestyle appeal.

¹Contextual factors, including Thai K-lifestyle familiarity, urban bakery café culture, and balanced localization–Koreanization strategy, are treated as market-context conditions that may shape Thai consumer interpretation and Paris Baguette's market entry opportunity in Thailand.

P5: Thai consumers with higher familiarity with Korean culture may respond more positively to Korean-origin communication, especially when such communication is connected with café lifestyle, visual experience, and social media-friendly consumption.

P6: A balanced strategy that combines Korean lifestyle appeal, French-inspired bakery quality, and Thai market adaptation may strengthen Paris Baguette's market entry opportunity in Thailand.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative semi-systematic literature review with thematic synthesis and conceptual framework development. This design is appropriate because the research question draws on several related but distinct streams, including country-of-origin, Korean branding and Hallyu, bakery café experience, franchising, and localization strategy. Rather than attempting an exhaustive review of one narrowly defined field, the study integrates evidence across these areas to examine Paris Baguette's market entry opportunity in Thailand. The review nevertheless applies explicit search, selection, and synthesis procedures to maintain transparency and coherence (Simsek et al., 2023).

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Academic literature was identified through Scopus and publisher databases, including ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, Taylor & Francis Online, SAGE Journals, and ThaiJO. Searches focused on combinations of terms related to "country-of-origin effect," "brand origin," "country-of-origin ambiguity," "Korean Wave," "Hallyu marketing," "Korean branding," "bakery café," "café experience," "restaurant franchising," "market entry," "standardization," and "localization." The search concentrated on publications from 2020 onward, while earlier works were retained only when they provided necessary conceptual foundations. Candidate studies were checked through publisher pages, DOI records, and available academic metadata.

Official company, government, and institutional sources were used separately to establish case facts, including Paris Baguette's corporate background and menu, Berjaya Food's Thailand expansion announcement, Hallyu-related public information, and Thailand's foodservice market context. These sources supported factual context but were not treated as peer-reviewed academic evidence.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Academic sources were included when they were relevant to at least one central concept of the study and were published in credible peer-reviewed outlets, with priority given to Scopus Q1–Q2 journals and TCI Tier 1 journals. Sources also needed to provide sufficient conceptual or empirical information for

interpretation. Studies were excluded when they were duplicates, outside the research scope, focused only on technical or operational issues without consumer or market relevance, or lacked verifiable publication details. Blogs, Wikipedia, informal webpages, and promotional materials without official or academic support were excluded. Official business and institutional documents were included only when their authorship and organizational source could be verified. The selection process followed a purposive but explicit sampling logic suitable for management review research (Hiebl, 2023).

Screening Process

Records were screened in stages. Titles and abstracts were first reviewed for relevance to the research questions. Potentially relevant studies were then assessed through available full texts, publisher abstracts, DOI records, and verified publication metadata. Duplicate, weakly related, and unverifiable records were removed. Because this study uses a qualitative semi-systematic review rather than a PRISMA-style exhaustive systematic review, the screening process does not claim full coverage of all publications in each database. Instead, it reports a transparent source selection record and final source pool used for thematic synthesis and case analysis. The final manuscript retained 20 academic sources that directly informed the thematic synthesis and conceptual framework. Three methodological sources were used to support the review design, thematic synthesis, and literature review sampling logic. Six official company, government, and institutional sources were used to establish case-specific facts. These official sources were not treated as peer-reviewed academic evidence but were included to support the business case.

Screening / source category	Number	Role in the study
Academic sources retained for thematic synthesis and conceptual framework	20	Used to develop themes, propositions, and conceptual interpretation
Methodological sources retained	3	Used to support semi-systematic review design, thematic synthesis, and sample selection logic
Official company, government, and institutional sources retained	6	Used to establish case facts and market context
Total references retained in the manuscript	29	Final source pool used in the revised manuscript

Table 1. Summary of Literature Screening and Source Pool²

² The review is semi-systematic and case-based. Therefore, the table reports the final source pool used for thematic synthesis and case analysis rather than a PRISMA-style exhaustive database retrieval count.

Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis

Information extracted from the selected sources included publication details, research context, main concepts, principal findings, and relevance to the proposed framework. Academic studies provided the main evidence for conceptual relationships and theme development, while official sources supplied case-specific facts. The evidence was coded around Korean brand origin, French-inspired positioning, country-of-origin ambiguity, Hallyu-related lifestyle consumption, bakery café experience, and localization strategy.

Thematic synthesis followed an iterative process. Initial codes were developed from recurring concepts and findings, related codes were grouped into broader categories, and the categories were refined into six themes. These themes were then connected to the conceptual framework and research propositions. This approach enabled evidence from different research streams to be interpreted within one coherent case analysis (McMahon et al., 2022).

Synthesis Validation

A study-to-theme check was used to confirm that each theme could be traced to relevant academic or official sources. The conceptual relationships and propositions were also checked against the extracted evidence, followed by a reverse review to ensure that the principal sources were represented consistently in the literature review, results, discussion, and recommendations. Table 2 summarizes the principal studies and official sources supporting each theme. This process was used to reduce unsupported interpretation and maintain alignment across the article.

Theme	Principal academic / official sources	Contribution to theme
Theme 1: Korean brand origin as a strategic but hidden asset	Chae et al. (2020); Jin et al. (2024); Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (2025); Paris Baguette (n.d.-a)	Supports the argument that Korean origin and Hallyu-related familiarity can create lifestyle value, while Paris Baguette's surface identity does not directly signal Korean origin.
Theme 2: French-inspired positioning as a premium quality cue	Azavedo and Gogatz (2021); Kandampully et al. (2023); Paris Baguette (n.d.-b)	Supports the role of bakery café atmosphere, service experience, and visual presentation in shaping premium quality interpretation.

Theme 3: Country-of-origin ambiguity as both risk and opportunity	Charinsarn and Speece (2025); Chen et al. (2021); Hong et al. (2023); Serrano-Arcos et al. (2021); Tseng et al. (2022)	Explains how consumers interpret brand origin through multiple country-related cues and how ambiguity or misperception may affect perceived quality, credibility, and brand equity.
Theme 4: Thai consumers and K-lifestyle familiarity	Chae et al. (2020); Jin et al. (2024); Laffan (2021); Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (2025); Sansomedang et al. (2021)	Supports the link between Hallyu exposure, Korean lifestyle meanings, social identity, and Thai consumer familiarity with Korean-related consumption.
Theme 5: Bakery café as lifestyle experience	Azavedo and Gogatz (2021); Kandampully et al. (2023); Mimoun and Gruen (2021); Mora and Ueasangkomsate (2023); Oldenburg (1989)	Supports the interpretation of bakery cafés as service and lifestyle spaces involving atmosphere, seating, interaction, visual presentation, and third-place functions.
Theme 6: Balanced localization and Koreanization	Berjaya Food Berhad (2024); Bretas and Alon (2021); González-Márquez et al. (2023); Liu et al. (2022); Mandler et al. (2021); Poulis (2024)	Supports the need to balance global brand consistency, franchising logic, local consumer expectations, and selective adaptation in international food-service expansion.

Table 2. Principal Studies and Theme Contribution

Research Results

Following the coding and thematic synthesis process, six literature-based themes were identified. These themes should be interpreted as conceptual patterns derived from the reviewed academic literature and selected official business and institutional sources. They do not represent direct empirical evidence from Thai consumers. Rather, they indicate how existing literature and case evidence can be used to interpret how Korean brand origin, French-inspired positioning, country-of-origin ambiguity, Thai K-lifestyle familiarity, bakery café experience, and localization strategy may shape Paris Baguette's market entry opportunity in Thailand.

Theme 1: Korean Brand Origin as a Strategic but Hidden Asset

The first theme suggests that Paris Baguette's Korean brand origin can be viewed as a strategic but partly hidden asset. Hallyu may give Korean origin positive lifestyle meaning in Thailand (Chae et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2024; Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2025). However, because the brand name

and bakery identity are more likely to activate French, European, or international associations, Korean origin should be treated as a supporting positioning layer rather than the brand's only identity.

Theme 2: French-Inspired Positioning as a Premium Quality Cue

The second theme indicates that Paris Baguette's French-inspired cues may work as a premium quality signal in Thailand's bakery café market. Its name, bakery style, and visual identity can support perceptions of refinement and international appeal, especially where consumers value atmosphere, design, and visual presentation (Azavedo & Gogatz, 2021; Kandampully et al., 2023). This premium image, however, depends on consistent product quality, store experience, and communication.

Theme 3: Country-of-Origin Ambiguity as Both Risk and Opportunity

The third theme may suggest that country-of-origin ambiguity creates both risk and opportunity. The risk is that prospective Thai consumers may not clearly interpret Paris Baguette as Korean, French, European, or international, which could limit its ability to benefit from Korean cultural familiarity. The literature indicates that consumers form brand-origin perceptions from language, ownership, product style, and symbolic communication (Charinsarn & Speece, 2025; Chen et al., 2021), and that origin misperception or non-identification may weaken brand equity (Tseng et al., 2022). This ambiguity may become an opportunity only when Korean origin and French-inspired cues are connected coherently.

Theme 4: Thai Consumers and K-Lifestyle Familiarity

The fourth theme can be interpreted as indicating that Thai K-lifestyle familiarity may support market entry when it is translated into a relevant café experience. Thailand has strong exposure to Hallyu, especially Korean food, music, beauty, and dramas (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2025). Therefore, Korean cues may be more effective when linked with store atmosphere, menu storytelling, visual presentation, and social media-friendly experiences that fit Thai urban café culture (Amornsittinon et al., 2025; Sansomedang et al., 2021).

Theme 5: Bakery Café as Lifestyle Experience

The fifth theme indicates that Paris Baguette's opportunity depends not only on bakery products but also on the lifestyle experience surrounding the café format. In Bangkok's café culture, consumers value atmosphere, presentation, service interaction, seating, and visually attractive design (Azavedo & Gogatz, 2021; Mora & Ueasangkomsate, 2023). Since cafés can also operate as third-place settings for work, socializing, and leisure, the bakery café format may become more meaningful when bakery quality, café comfort, and visual experience are combined (Mimoun & Gruen, 2021; Oldenburg, 1989).

Theme 6: Balanced Localization and Koreanization

The sixth theme suggests that Paris Baguette's market entry opportunity depends on a balanced strategy between localization and Koreanization. Localization is necessary because consumer taste, café behavior, pricing expectations, locations, and competition differ across markets (Liu et al., 2022; Mandler et al., 2021). At the same time, selected Korean lifestyle cues, menu storytelling, seasonal products, or cultural communication may help maintain distinctiveness when integrated carefully with the French-inspired bakery image.

Discussions and Conclusions

Discussion

This study contributes to country-of-origin and international branding literature by showing how a service brand may be interpreted through layered country cues rather than one clear national association. In the case of Paris Baguette, Korean corporate origin, a French-inspired brand name, European bakery symbolism, and Thai market context may interact in shaping brand interpretation (Charinsarn & Speece, 2025; Chen et al., 2021; Hong et al., 2023; Serrano-Arcos et al., 2021). This should be understood as an integrative conceptual contribution, not the development of a fundamentally new theory. Managerially, the study connects this interpretation with Korean branding, bakery café experience, and localization strategy to provide a literature-informed framework for Korean food-service brands entering Southeast Asian markets (Chae et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2024; Mandler et al., 2021; Poulis, 2024).

Taken together, the literature-based themes suggest that Korean origin, French-inspired symbolism, and Thai café culture do not operate separately. Their strategic value depends on whether they can be combined into a clear and credible consumer-facing position. For Paris Baguette, this means Korean origin should support, rather than replace, its French-inspired bakery positioning.

The synthesis also suggests that localization should be selective rather than excessive. Korean food-service brands may need to adapt to local taste, location expectations, pricing conditions, and social media-oriented café culture while maintaining a clear global identity. The key managerial challenge is how to connect brand origin, foreign-inspired positioning, and local consumer experience into a coherent market entry strategy (Mandler et al., 2021; Poulis, 2024).

Conclusion

This study concludes that Paris Baguette's market entry opportunity in Thailand depends on how the brand manages the relationship between its Korean corporate origin and French-inspired positioning. Korean origin can provide cultural familiarity and lifestyle relevance, while the brand's French-inspired name, bakery style, and visual identity can support a premium bakery café image. The main strategic issue

is not whether Paris Baguette should be positioned as Korean or French, but how these two meanings can be connected in a clear, credible, and locally relevant way.

The synthesis suggests that country-of-origin ambiguity can become both a challenge and an opportunity. If Korean origin and French-inspired positioning are not connected carefully, consumers may interpret the brand only as a French, European, or broadly international bakery café. However, if the brand communicates itself as a Korean-global bakery café inspired by French bakery culture, this ambiguity may become a distinctive positioning advantage. For the Thai market, Paris Baguette may benefit from a balanced strategy that maintains its premium bakery café identity, uses Korean lifestyle appeal as a supporting layer, and adapts selected elements to Thai consumer expectations.

Suggestions

Recommended Marketing Plan

Based on the literature-informed synthesis, Paris Baguette could consider positioning itself in Thailand as a Korean-global bakery café inspired by French bakery culture. This recommendation should be treated as a strategic implication from the review rather than confirmed evidence of Thai consumer preference. The potential target segment may include urban Gen Z consumers, young millennials, café hoppers, K-culture followers, students, first-jobbers, and young professionals who value café atmosphere, visual presentation, social media sharing, and Korean-related lifestyle consumption (Amornsittinon et al., 2025; Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2025; Sansomedang et al., 2021).

For product strategy, Paris Baguette could maintain its signature bakery items and beverages while selectively introducing Korean-inspired and Thailand-exclusive items. For price strategy, affordable premium pricing could be supported by bundle sets, seasonal promotions, and student- or office-friendly meal combinations.

For place strategy, Paris Baguette could prioritize Bangkok lifestyle malls, office districts, university areas, and transport-connected locations, where the bakery café format may support convenience and everyday lifestyle use (Azavedo & Gogatz, 2021; Mora & Ueasangkomsate, 2023). Promotion could emphasize Korean lifestyle storytelling, café experience, social media content, influencers, and selected Korean cultural collaborations. Physical evidence could balance French bakery elegance with Korean café modernity through store design, product display, packaging, lighting, seating, and photo-friendly spaces.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations. First, it is based on a qualitative semi-systematic literature review and uses secondary data from academic articles, official company sources, government sources, and credible institutional reports. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as conceptual and literature-



informed suggestions rather than direct evidence of Thai consumer behavior. Second, the study focuses on Paris Baguette as a single business case. Although this case is useful for understanding Korean brand origin under French-inspired positioning, the findings may not fully represent all Korean food-service brands or all bakery café consumers in Thailand.

Future research should collect primary data from Thai consumers to test and refine the propositions proposed in this study. Interviews or focus groups could explore how consumers interpret Paris Baguette's Korean origin, French-inspired positioning, and bakery café experience. Surveys and experiments could examine relationships among country-of-origin perception, perceived authenticity, lifestyle relevance, trust, purchase intention, and alternative positioning messages.

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The Execution Gap: Why Foreign Startups Fail to Convert Korean Market Entry into Commercial Traction

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Abstract

Korea has become one of Asia's most structured destinations for foreign startup entry, supported by government-backed programs, institutional infrastructure, and a nationally coordinated startup ecosystem. Yet rising inbound interest has not translated evenly into commercial outcomes. This paper proposes that an important and undertheorized failure mode is not market access but an execution gap, defined here as the disconnect between the moment of market entry and the achievement of commercial traction. The paper argues that this gap is shaped substantially by home market mental models, the assumption frameworks founders carry from prior market experience that lead them to misread commitment signals, underweight the role of physical presence, and interpret culturally embedded communication as commercial progress. The framework is developed from the author's structured practitioner observations within Korea's foreign startup ecosystem and situated within internationalization theory. Because the evidence base is observational rather than systematically sampled, the framework is presented as a set of testable propositions rather than as established findings. The paper contributes a practitioner-grounded perspective to the internationalization literature and proposes an agenda for empirical work on pre-entry preparedness.

Keywords

Execution gap, Foreign startups, Korean market entry, Liability of foreignness, Home market mental models

Introduction

South Korea has established itself as one of Asia's most structured and well-supported destinations for foreign startups to land in. The country offers various programs for foreigners, including the K-Startup Grand Challenge (KSGC), K-Scouter, and the Global Startup Center network. Korea has systematically built an institutional infrastructure designed to attract, evaluate, and support foreign ventures seeking market access. In 2025, KSGC alone received 2,626 applications from 97 countries, representing a 54% increase from the previous year, signaling accelerating global interest in Korea as a viable expansion market (KISED, 2025). This institutional momentum sits alongside a broader foreign investment trajectory, though the two should be read carefully. Inward foreign direct investment on a notification basis reached USD 36.1 billion in 2025, an all-time high and a fifth consecutive record year, while actual arrived investment, which represents executed rather than pledged capital, was USD 18.0 billion (Ministry of Trade, Industry and Resources, 2026). The distinction is analytically relevant to this paper's argument: notification measures declared intent, arrival measures execution, and the persistent gap between the two at the national level mirrors, in aggregate form, the individual-firm gap this paper examines.

However, despite this infrastructure and rising inbound interest, a persistent pattern of execution failure among foreign startups in Korea remains largely understudied. Startups that successfully enter Korea through competitive programs, secure initial meetings with Korean counterparts, and generate early commercial interest frequently fail to convert that momentum into sustainable traction. This pattern recurs across the author's practitioner engagements and is consistent with liability of foreignness dynamics identified in the internationalization literature (Zaheer, 1995; Lee et al., 2022). Many foreign startups exit the market not because Korea rejected them, but because they were unprepared for what market entry actually requires. Entry and execution are treated as a single continuous process when, in practice, they are two fundamentally distinct phases.

Existing internationalization theory offers partial explanations for why entry and execution should be treated as two different phases. Building on foundational internationalization theory (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; 2009) and the liability of foreignness framework (Zaheer, 1995), which identifies the structural disadvantages foreign firms face relative to domestic competitors, including unfamiliarity with the local environment, cultural distance, and the absence of established legitimacy, scholars have examined how foreign companies accumulate market knowledge and deepen commitment over time. More recently, Lee, Paik, and Horak (2022) examined how foreign companies operating in Korea specifically can navigate informal network structures to convert the liability of foreignness into a strategic asset. These contributions provide a valuable theoretical foundation for understanding the challenges foreign firms face in Korea.

Yet existing literature has not examined how execution failure specifically unfolds among foreign startups operating within Korea's government-supported entry ecosystem. Unlike established multinational enterprises, startups face distinct constraints, including limited resources, compressed timelines, founder-

led decision-making, and a heavy reliance on government programs as their primary channel into the market. Connections and relational access matter enormously in Korea, yet startups rarely arrive with either. It is also worth noting that Korea's foreign startup ecosystem is relatively new. The country has only recently and actively pushed for foreign startup participation at scale, meaning the dynamics of how foreign founders navigate this market are still evolving and have not yet been captured in academic literature. Within this context, the mechanisms underlying execution failure remain understudied.

This paper argues that an important and undertheorized failure mode among foreign startups in Korea is not a market access problem but an execution gap. The execution gap is defined here as the structural disconnect between the moment of market entry and the achievement of commercial traction. This gap does not originate in operational failure after entry. It originates in the home market mental models that founders carry before they arrive: assumption frameworks shaped by prior experience that cause them to tend to misread the commitment signals, communication patterns, and trust architecture that define how Korean business actually operates. Drawing on practitioner experience in the Korean startup ecosystem and situated within the theoretical frameworks outlined above, this paper introduces the execution gap as an analytical lens and home market mental models as a diagnostic concept to understand why entry and execution must be treated as separate problems requiring distinct preparation.

This paper pursues three interconnected objectives. First, it introduces and defines the execution gap as an analytical framework for understanding why foreign startups in Korea fail to convert market entry into commercial traction. Second, it identifies and examines the home market mental models that systematically produce this gap, specifically the assumption frameworks founders carry that cause them to misread Korea's commitment signals, communication infrastructure, and trust architecture. Third, it situates both concepts within existing internationalization theory, contributing a practitioner-grounded perspective to the literature and opening a broader conversation on what structural conditions foreign startups must meet before market entry, not after.

Theoretical Framework

The study of foreign firm entry into international markets has generated a rich body of theoretical literature, yet significant gaps remain in understanding how these dynamics operate specifically within the context of foreign startups entering Korea's government-supported ecosystem. This section situates the execution gap framework within three interconnected bodies of scholarship: the liability of foreignness, internationalization process theory, and high-context communication theory. Together, these frameworks provide the theoretical scaffolding for understanding the execution gap and home market mental models as analytically distinct and practically consequential concepts.

The Liability of Foreignness

The concept of the liability of foreignness (LOF), introduced by Zaheer (1995), identifies the structural disadvantages foreign firms face when operating in host markets relative to their domestic counterparts. These disadvantages arise from four primary sources: the costs of operating at a distance, the unfamiliarity of the host environment, the absence of legitimacy within local institutional and relational networks, and discriminatory treatment by host country actors and governments (Zaheer, 1995). Critically, LOF is not merely a function of cultural distance. It is a relational condition embedded in how host-market actors perceive, evaluate, and choose to engage with foreign entrants.

For foreign startups, the liability of foreignness operates with particular intensity. Unlike established multinational enterprises, startups may not draw on organizational history, brand recognition, or prior market presence to signal credibility. They arrive without a verified track record in the host market, without existing relationships inside local networks, and without demonstrated accountability to local stakeholders. Each of these represents a distinct dimension of LOF that compounds the difficulty of building commercial traction. This paper argues that LOF, in the Korean startup context, is not simply a background condition to be managed over time but an active constraint that shapes the outcome of every early-stage interaction between a foreign founder and a Korean counterpart.

Recent scholarship has examined how LOF manifests specifically within Korea's business environment. Lee, Paik, and Horak (2022) demonstrate that foreign companies in Korea face particular disadvantages in accessing the informal network structures that govern trust and business access in Korean organizational culture. Their work shows that overcoming LOF in Korea requires not merely operational competence but active navigation of relationship-based access systems that are structurally closed to newcomers without credible intermediaries. This finding is directly relevant to the foreign startup context, where founders rarely arrive with pre-existing relationships inside Korean networks and must navigate access from a position of structural disadvantage that existing government programs do not fully address.

Internationalization Process Theory and the Role of Commitment

The Uppsala model of internationalization (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977; 2009) provides a complementary theoretical lens. In its original formulation, the model posits that firms enter foreign markets incrementally, deepening their commitment as experiential knowledge of the host market accumulates. The relationship between knowledge and commitment is central: firms that lack sufficient understanding of a host market tend to under-commit resources and relationships, while those that invest in building local knowledge progressively increase their market presence and operational depth. The 2009 revision of the model further emphasizes the role of business network relationships as the primary mechanism through which market knowledge is accessed and commitment is built, positioning network embeddedness rather

than simply cultural familiarity as the key driver of successful internationalization (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009).

For foreign startups in Korea, this theoretical framework surfaces a specific and underexamined tension. The Uppsala model's logic of incremental commitment assumes that founders will invest time in building local knowledge before deepening their market engagement. Yet the Korean business environment operates under what is widely characterized as *palli-palli* (빨리빨리) culture, a strong orientation toward speed and decisive action, which creates pressure for visible commitment from the earliest stages of engagement. This paper proposes that foreign founders who enter Korea with the incremental, exploratory approach that internationalization theory treats as rational may have that approach read by Korean counterparts as hesitation. The claim requires care, since the Uppsala model concerns the escalation of resource commitment rather than the tempo of interpersonal engagement, and the two are distinct. What is proposed here is not that incremental internationalization is inherently unresponsive, but that its outward manifestations, including deferred decisions and provisional undertakings, are available to be interpreted as low commitment in an environment where visible engagement carries signalling weight.

Korea as a High-Context Business Environment

Korea is empirically classified as a high-context culture within Hall's (1976) framework, in which meaning is conveyed through relational context, shared understanding, and implicit signals rather than explicit verbal or written communication. In high-context cultures, the relational environment surrounding a business interaction carries as much informational weight as the content of the interaction itself, a dynamic that fundamentally shapes how trust is established, how decisions are made, and how commitment is signaled between parties (Hall, 1976). This stands in direct contrast to low-context communication cultures, where meaning is encoded explicitly in language and agreements are formalized through direct verbal or written exchange.

In the Korean business context, this high-context orientation produces several patterns that are directly consequential for the execution of foreign startups. Verbal expressions of interest do not carry the same binding meaning they might in low-context business cultures. An affirmative response may signal courtesy rather than commercial commitment, and a gradual reduction in communication frequency may signal disengagement rather than temporary unavailability. Relationship-building and deal progression occur through platforms and channels embedded in Korean social infrastructure, most notably KakaoTalk, rather than through formal email correspondence. Internal decision-making processes occur in Korean, regardless of a counterpart's external English proficiency, meaning that foreign founders who cannot access this communication layer are at a structural disadvantage from the environment where consequential decisions are made. These dynamics compound the liability of foreignness for foreign

startups, whose founders typically arrive with low-context mental models and interpret high-context signals through an assumption framework that tend to misreads them.

Theoretical Gap

Taken together, these three bodies of scholarship provide a robust foundation for understanding why foreign firms generally struggle in host markets, and specifically in Korea. However, a significant gap remains. Existing literature addresses LOF at the level of established firms and multinational enterprises, examines Korea's informal network structures in the context of corporate foreign investment, and theorizes internationalization as an incremental process of knowledge accumulation. What remains underexamined is how these dynamics interact specifically within the foreign startup context in Korea, where founders operate under compressed timelines, with limited resources, through through government-supported entry programs that provide access without necessarily developing execution readiness.

This paper addresses that gap by introducing two analytical concepts: the execution gap and home market mental models. Both are defined formally in the Operational Definitions below. Together, they reframe execution failure not as an operational problem that emerges after entry, but as a preparedness problem that originates before it.

Distinguishing the Execution Gap from Adjacent Constructs

Because the execution gap overlaps with several established constructs, its boundaries require specification.

The liability of foreignness (Zaheer, 1995) locates disadvantage in the host environment's treatment of the foreign firm: unfamiliarity, absent legitimacy, and discriminatory treatment are conditions the market imposes. The liability of outsidership (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009) locates disadvantage in network position: the firm is disadvantaged because it stands outside the relevant business networks. Internationalization barriers, in the broader literature, are typically exogenous obstacles such as regulatory complexity, informational asymmetry, or trade friction.

Each of these locates the source of difficulty outside the firm. The execution gap, as proposed here, is located inside it, and specifically before entry. It refers to the discrepancy between the assumption set a founder brings and the assumption set the host market rewards. Its distinguishing properties are three. It is endogenous, in that it is constituted by the firm's own planning rather than by host-market conditions. It is antecedent, in that it exists prior to first contact and shapes how severely liability of foreignness and outsidership subsequently bind. And it is in principle correctable unilaterally, in that a founder can revise a mental model without any change in the host environment.

The relationship is therefore complementary rather than competing. Liability of foreignness and outsidership describe what the market does to the firm. The execution gap describes what the firm brings to that encounter, and thus how much of that liability is amplified or absorbed.

Methodology and Evidence Base

This paper is a conceptual contribution developed from practitioner observation rather than from systematic empirical sampling. Because the argument rests substantially on the author's direct professional experience, the basis, scope, and limits of that experience are stated explicitly here.

The author is the founder of a cross-border market expansion consultancy based in Seoul and has participated directly in Korea's foreign startup entry ecosystem, including the K-Startup Grand Challenge. The observational base for this paper comprises approximately thirty foreign startups observed between August 2025 and August 2026, all of which entered Korea through government-supported entry programs. The set is concentrated in deep technology and artificial intelligence applications, spanning food, defense, transportation, education technology, lifestyle, and other sectors, with founders originating from a range of home markets. Observations were accumulated through participation in and proximity to program activities rather than through research interviews designed in advance.

Several limitations follow directly from this. The set was not randomly sampled and is restricted by construction to firms that had already selected Korea as a target market and had been competitively selected into a support program, which excludes both firms that never entered and firms that entered independently of government channels. No comparison group was assembled. No coding protocol, inter-rater reliability procedure, or formal outcome measurement was applied, and patterns reported here were identified through recurrence across cases rather than through analytical procedure. Because the observation window spans twelve months, the twelve-month traction criterion defined below could not have elapsed for firms entering in the later part of that window, so outcome observation is complete for only part of the set.

Accordingly, the concepts introduced in this paper are advanced as propositions rather than as findings. Where a claim rests on the author's observation, it is marked as such in the text. Where a claim rests on peer-reviewed literature, it is cited to that literature. The two are not treated as interchangeable. This approach follows established precedent in entrepreneurship theory, where conceptual contributions developed from illustrative cases and reasoning have been advanced as sets of testable propositions rather than as empirical findings (Sarasvathy, 2001).

Disclosure. Portions of the practitioner observations discussed in this paper were previously reported in a KoreaTechDesk feature by Cindy (2026), which is based substantially on an interview with the present

author. That article is therefore not an independent source for the claims it contains and is cited in this paper only as a prior publication of the author's own observations, not as corroborating evidence.

Operational Definitions

For the purpose of future empirical testing, the following operationalizations are proposed.

Market entry is the point at which a foreign startup obtains formal access to the Korean market through at least one of: acceptance into a government-supported entry program, establishment of a Korean legal entity or branch, or initiation of documented commercial negotiations with a Korean counterpart.

Commercial traction is the achievement, within 12 months of market entry, of at least one of: a signed revenue-generating agreement with a Korean counterpart, a paid pilot deployment, a distribution or reseller agreement, or investment sourced from a Korean investor.

Execution failure is the absence of all traction indicators above within the same window, in cases where the startup had achieved at least two documented commercial meetings with Korean counterparts. The distinction matters because it separates failure to execute from failure to obtain access.

These thresholds are proposed rather than validated, and are offered so that the propositions above can be falsified.

Section 1: What Foreign Founders Get Wrong Before They Arrive

The execution gap does not begin when a foreign startup lands in Korea. It begins earlier, in the planning assumptions founders make before they arrive, the mental models they carry from prior market experience, and the strategic decisions they make about how to structure their Korea presence. This section examines three interconnected patterns of pre-entry failure that this paper identifies as the primary sources of home market mental models: the checkbox entry assumption, the half commitment loop, and the wrong hire planning fallacy. Together, these patterns constitute a preparedness failure that precedes operational engagement and shapes every subsequent interaction between the foreign startup and the Korean market.

The Checkbox Entry Assumption

The first and most pervasive pattern is what this paper terms the checkbox entry assumption, treating Korea market entry as a program to complete rather than a market to commit to. Foreign founders who pursue Korea through government-supported programs frequently conflate program selection with market validation. Being selected by a competitive program is treated as evidence that the market opportunity is real and that the hard work of entry has been accomplished. In practice, program selection provides access, not traction.

This pattern reflects a broader tendency identified in the internationalization literature: founders build their Korea strategy from what they already know, which is their home market experience, rather than from what Korea specifically requires (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). The result is a form of market entry that resembles participation more than commitment. As Hartono (2026) documents, many foreign startup CEOs visit Korea, attend programs and demo days, generate warm signals and verbal expressions of interest, then return home expecting momentum to sustain itself remotely. It does not. In the words of one practitioner observed in that account, this approach amounts to the following: "That's not market entry — that's tourism" (Cindy, 2026). The checkbox entry assumption systematically underestimates the sustained relational engagement that Korea requires because it applies home market logic, where digital channels and remote operations may suffice, to a market where physical presence and continuous relationship-building are prerequisites for commercial progress. As the International Trade Administration's market guide for South Korea notes, maintaining strong local relationships and frequent in-market engagement remains critical for business success in Korea.

The Half Commitment Loop

The second pattern operates as a structural trap. Foreign founders who enter Korea without sufficient prior knowledge of how the market operates tend to under-commit resources and relationships, consistent with Johanson and Vahlne's (1977) Uppsala model, which predicts that firms increase commitment incrementally as experiential learning accumulates. However, in the Korean context, this incremental approach produces a compounding disadvantage that the standard internationalization framework does not anticipate. As Hartono (2026) observes, limited commitment leads to limited learning, which reduces founder confidence in the market, delaying further commitment, which in turn generates further limited learning. This paper terms this dynamic the half commitment loop.

The half commitment loop is particularly damaging in Korea because the Korean business environment does not reward exploratory presence. Korean counterparts read the signals of founder engagement with precision. Responsiveness, frequency of contact, willingness to make decisions, and visible investment of time and resources are all interpreted as indicators of how seriously the foreign startup treats the Korean market (Cindy, 2026). A founder caught in the half commitment loop sends signals of hesitation that Korean counterparts detect immediately, often before any explicit conversation about terms or next steps has occurred. The 2009 revision of the Uppsala model positions network embeddedness and relationship-building as the primary mechanisms through which market knowledge is accessed and commitment deepens (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009), but the half commitment loop structurally prevents this embeddedness from forming, trapping the founder in a state of perpetual uncertainty that the Korean market reads as disinterest.

The Wrong Hire Planning Fallacy and the Founder Presence Typology

The third pattern concerns a specific planning assumption that is particularly common among budget-constrained foreign startups: the belief that hiring a bilingual Korean national constitutes adequate local representation. This paper terms this the wrong hire planning fallacy, not because local hiring is wrong, but because the assumption that language capability equals market navigation capability is a home market mental model that systematically fails in the Korean context. As the internationalization literature establishes, CEO-level foreign market knowledge is particularly critical for SMEs, whose internationalization processes depend disproportionately on the strategic assumptions and decision-making patterns of their founders (Francioni et al., 2015; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). When founders delegate Korea market navigation to a hire without ensuring that the hire possesses both product knowledge and Korean business navigation capability, they are not solving the knowledge problem. They are relocating it. As Hartono (2026) documents, the issue is not language capability but market navigation: a local representative must understand buyer behavior, industry networks, partnership dynamics, and commercial expectations, and must carry sufficient decision-making authority to represent the company credibly.

Drawing on practitioner observations of foreign startups operating in the Korean market, as documented in Hartono (2026), this paper identifies three observable founder presence patterns, each with distinct implications for execution outcomes. The first pattern involves a CEO who maintains a sustained physical presence in Korea, navigating the market directly, with or without a local hire, an arrangement that creates the strongest conditions for knowledge accumulation and commitment signaling. The second pattern involves a CEO who remains primarily abroad, but delegates Korea operations to a local representative, an arrangement whose effectiveness depends critically on the degree of trust and decision-making authority the CEO extends to that representative. When founders hire locally but retain all meaningful decisions, the local hire becomes structurally unable to advance relationships with Korean counterparts, who quickly recognize the absence of real authority (Cindy, 2026). The third pattern, and the most commonly observed failure mode, involves a CEO who engages with Korea minimally and deploys no credible local representative, treating the market as manageable through periodic visits and remote communication.

These three patterns are not merely operational choices. They are commitment signals. Before any product demonstration, any partnership negotiation, or any program participation, Korean counterparts read the structure of a foreign startup's Korea presence as evidence of how seriously that startup treats the market. Home market mental models in the cases observed underestimate this dynamic because in low-context business environments, commitment is typically demonstrated through explicit agreement and formal contractual engagement rather than through the relational and structural signals that Korean business culture prioritizes (Hall, 1976). The following section examines how these signals are read,

interpreted, and acted upon by Korean counterparts, and why foreign founders operating from home market mental models tend to misread the responses they receive.

Section 2: The Commitment Signals Korea Actually Reads

If Section 1 establishes what foreign founders get wrong before they arrive, this section examines the consequences. It examines how Korean counterparts read, interpret, and respond to the signals founders send once engagement begins. The execution gap does not widen because Korea is unwelcoming. It widens because foreign founders, operating from home market mental models, in the cases observed misread the signals Korea sends and misunderstand the signals Korea is reading from them. This section examines three signal layers through which Korean counterparts evaluate foreign startup commitment: the ambiguous communication layer, the speed and responsiveness layer, and the language and access layer. Each layer operates according to high-context communication logic (Hall, 1976) that low-context founders are structurally unprepared to navigate.

The Ambiguous Communication Layer

The most consequential signal misreading that foreign founders experience in Korea involves the interpretation of affirmative responses. In Korean business communication, an apparent agreement or expression of interest does not carry the same binding meaning it would in low-context business cultures. As Merkin (2009) documents, Koreans tend to create ambiguous messages to maintain harmony and avoid direct confrontation, a communication pattern shaped by Korea's long-standing Confucian tradition, which emphasizes collective harmony and face preservation over explicit disclosure. In practice, phrases such as "we will think about it" or "this will require further investigation" frequently function as polite disengagement rather than as genuine indicators of ongoing interest (Gesteland, 2002). A verbal expression of interest at a first meeting, an encouraging exchange at a demo day, or a warm follow-up message may each signal courtesy rather than commercial intent.

Foreign founders operating from low-context mental models tend to misread these signals as evidence of traction. They build projections around relationships that are not progressing, allocate resources toward partnerships that Korean counterparts have already mentally deprioritized, and interpret the absence of explicit rejection as confirmation of continued interest. By the time the disengagement becomes visible through declining response frequency, shorter replies, and the cessation of founder-initiated contact, the Korean counterpart's decision has typically already been made. As Merkin (2009) documents in her study of Korean and American communication patterns, reduced communication frequency functions as an indirect disengagement signal in Korean business contexts, one that low-context counterparts frequently misinterpret as a neutral gap rather than a deliberate withdrawal. Home market mental models, calibrated to low-context environments where disengagement is communicated explicitly, frequently fail to register this signal until the relationship has already cooled beyond recovery.

This dynamic is further compounded by what the wrong hire planning fallacy produces at the engagement level. When a foreign startup sends a local representative who lacks sufficient decision-making authority, Korean counterparts do not read this as a reasonable operational arrangement. They read it as a signal that the foreign company does not regard the Korean market as a genuine priority (Cindy, 2026). The absence of the decision-maker from the room, or the presence of a representative who must defer all substantive questions to a CEO based abroad, communicates hesitation through the relational architecture of the engagement itself, regardless of what is said explicitly.

The Speed and Responsiveness Layer

The second signal layer concerns the pace of engagement. Korea's business environment is widely described, in both practitioner and academic accounts, through the idiom of palli-palli (빨리빨리), an orientation toward speed and prompt responsiveness. This paper treats palli-palli as a described cultural discourse rather than as a measured behavioral variable and does not derive it from national culture scores. Uncertainty avoidance, on which Korea scores highly (Hofstede, 2001), indicates a preference for structure and predictability and does not by itself imply rapid decision-making. The narrower claim advanced here is that responsiveness functions as a commitment signal. When a Korean counterpart receives a prompt, substantive response, that responsiveness is available to be read as evidence that the foreign startup is engaged, capable, and serious. Delayed responses, vague replies, or silence are available to be read as evidence of the opposite, irrespective of the operational reasons behind them (Merkin, 2009). This is stated as a proposition at P5 and remains open to empirical test.

For foreign startups caught in the half commitment loop described in Section 1, this dynamic is particularly damaging. The incremental engagement approach that home market mental models treat as prudent, which involves taking time to evaluate the market before deepening commitment, may be read by Korean counterparts as hesitation. Johanson and Vahlne's (1977) logic of gradual commitment deepening sits in tension with palli-palli expectations, and the founders who suffer most from the execution gap are frequently those whose home market experience has trained them to treat measured deliberation as a sign of strategic sophistication. In Korea, that same measured deliberation reads as a sign of insufficient commitment.

The Language and Access Layer

The third signal layer concerns the environment in which consequential decisions are made. As Hall (1976) establishes, high-context cultures embed meaning in relational context and shared understanding, and in the Korean business context, that relational context is overwhelmingly Korean-language. Korean companies conduct their internal evaluations, partnership discussions, and decision-making processes in Korean, regardless of the English proficiency of the individuals involved in external

communication (Lee et al., 2022). A foreign startup's proposal may be discussed, evaluated, and ultimately decided upon in a room and a language that the foreign founder cannot access, and the materials, positioning, and relational signals that reach that room are shaped entirely by whoever is representing the foreign company within the Korean-language layer of the relationship.

This creates a structural access problem that home market mental models do not anticipate. Foreign founders accustomed to low-context business environments, where decisions are made in the language of the contract and the meeting room, frequently assume that because their Korean counterparts communicate fluently in English at the external interface, the decision-making process operates in a similarly accessible way. It does not. The practical implication is significant: a foreign startup that operates exclusively through English-language materials, English-language communication, and a local representative without sufficient standing to navigate Korean-language decision environments is not merely disadvantaged. It is structurally absent from the room where the decision is actually made.

Taken together, these three signal layers explain why the execution gap persists even among foreign startups that have successfully accessed Korea through competitive programs, secured strong initial meetings, and generated genuine early interest. Access to the Korean market and the ability to read and respond to the Korean market's commitment signals are fundamentally distinct capabilities, and home market mental models calibrated to low-context business environments do not provide the preparation for either. The following section synthesizes these findings and considers their implications for both foreign startup practice and the broader internationalization literature.

Research Propositions

The preceding sections are advanced as the following testable propositions.

P1: Selection into a government-supported entry program provides market access but does not by itself predict commercial traction.

P2: Foreign startups whose pre-entry planning treats Korea entry as program completion rather than as sustained market commitment exhibit lower rates of post-entry conversion, other factors held constant.

P3: Under conditions of low initial market knowledge, incremental commitment can become self-reinforcing, in that limited commitment constrains learning, which in turn delays further commitment (the half commitment loop).

P4: Local representation selected primarily for bilingual capability, absent market navigation capability and delegated decision authority, does not reduce the execution gap and may increase it.

P5: Korean counterparts' assessments of foreign startup commitment are informed by observable engagement behaviors, including response latency, meeting frequency, and in-country presence, in addition to product attributes.

P6: The execution gap is co-produced. Its magnitude varies with both founder preparedness and the design of the entry program through which the founder enters, including whether that program includes post-selection execution support.

Discussion

The execution gap framework introduced in this paper reframes a persistent and undertheorized problem in international business scholarship. Foreign startup failure in Korea has frequently been attributed to market access barriers, regulatory complexity, or cultural distance, explanations that locate the problem in the structure of the Korean market itself. This paper argues that this framing is incomplete. The evidence examined across Sections 1 and 2 suggests that an important and undertheorized failure mode is not a market access problem but a preparedness problem, one that originates in the home market mental models founders carry before they arrive and manifests through their systematic misreading of the commitment signals, communication patterns, and trust architecture that define how Korean business actually operates.

This reframing has theoretical implications for the existing literature. Zaheer's (1995) liability of foreignness framework identifies the structural disadvantages foreign firms face in host markets but treats LOF primarily as a condition to be managed after entry. The execution gap framework suggests that LOF in the Korean startup context is not merely a post-entry condition. It is actively constructed before entry, through the planning assumptions and mental models that founders bring with them. A founder who enters Korea with a checkbox mentality, a half commitment posture, and a wrong hire planning assumption has not simply encountered LOF upon arrival. They have structurally amplified it before setting foot in the market.

Johanson and Vahlne's (1977; 2009) Uppsala model's emphasis on incremental commitment and experiential learning similarly requires reconsideration in the Korean startup context. The model's logic treats measured commitment deepening as rational behavior. This paper proposes that in the Korean context, the observable expressions of that measured approach may be read as hesitation, contributing to the half commitment loop described in Section 1. Whether this interpretation occurs systematically, and under what conditions, is an empirical question the present evidence cannot settle. This paper does not argue that the Uppsala model is wrong. It argues that the model's prescriptions are context-dependent in ways that existing literature has not fully examined for the startup case. In high-context, high-speed business environments like Korea, the incremental logic of internationalization theory may itself constitute a home market mental model that requires recalibration.

The home market mental models concept introduced in this paper also extends the work of Lee et al. (2022) on navigating informal networks in Korea. Their research demonstrates that overcoming LOF in Korea requires active navigation of relationship-based access systems but does not examine the pre-entry assumption frameworks that determine whether founders even recognize those systems exist. The execution gap framework provides the missing antecedent: founders who arrive with low-context mental models do not fail to navigate Korean network structures because those structures are impenetrable, but because their mental models do not register them as the relevant terrain to navigate in the first place.

The framework advanced here should not be read as treating foreign founders or Korean organizations as homogeneous. The severity of the execution gap plausibly varies with the founder's home market and its context orientation, prior experience operating in East Asian markets, industry and whether the sales cycle is enterprise or consumer, firm type and stage, and the nature of the Korean counterpart, since a conglomerate affiliate, a mid-sized manufacturer, a public agency, and a venture-backed startup differ substantially in decision architecture and tolerance for foreign counterparties. Founders arriving from other high-context markets may face a materially smaller gap than the framework as stated implies. Establishing which of these dimensions moderates the effect is an empirical question this paper cannot resolve.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the execution gap, defined as the structural disconnect between foreign startup market entry and commercial traction in Korea, originates not in operational failure after entry but in the home market mental models founders carry before they arrive. Through an examination of three pre-entry failure patterns and three commitment signal layers, this paper has argued that execution failure in Korea is a preparedness problem, one that can be anticipated, diagnosed, and addressed before the first meeting, the first program application, or the first flight to Seoul.

Two concepts introduced in this paper, the execution gap and home market mental models, offer analytical tools for both practitioners and researchers navigating the Korea market entry challenge. For foreign founders, the practical implication is straightforward. The work of Korea market entry does not begin when the program acceptance arrives or when the first meeting is scheduled. It begins with an honest audit of the mental models that will shape every decision made once engagement starts. For researchers, the execution gap framework opens a broader conversation about the relationship between pre-entry preparedness and post-entry performance, a relationship that existing internationalization theory has undertheorized, particularly in the startup context.

This paper acknowledges its limitations. The framework presented here is grounded in practitioner observation of the Korean startup ecosystem and situated within existing theoretical literature, rather than in systematic empirical data collection. Future research should examine the execution gap through primary



qualitative data, specifically structured interviews with foreign founders who have both succeeded and failed in Korea, to test and refine the concepts introduced here. Additionally, while this paper focuses on the Korean context, the execution gap framework may hold relevance for foreign startup entry into other high-context, government-program-supported markets in East Asia, including Japan and Vietnam. Whether similar dynamics operate in those contexts remains an open and productive question for future scholarship.

Korea has built world-class infrastructure to welcome foreign startups. The execution gap is not a failure of that infrastructure. It is a failure of preparation. Closing it begins not with better programs, but with better mental models.

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The Role of Korea in Promoting Maritime Security in the Asia-Pacific Region

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Abstract

Maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region is critically important due to the presence of major Sea Lines of Communication, strategic maritime chokepoints, leading economies, and contested maritime domains. Stability at sea underpins global trade, energy security, and regional prosperity while increasingly shaping the strategic calculations of major powers and the broader international order. Since the end of the Cold War, the international system has evolved from a bipolar structure into a complex multipolar order characterized by competition and selective cooperation among major actors, including the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union. These dynamics, together with evolving U.S. defense strategies emphasizing engagement with China and greater burden-sharing among allies, have significantly influenced the Asia-Pacific security environment.

As a middle power, the Republic of Korea faces the strategic challenge of redefining its role amid these changes. Recent conflicts, particularly the Russia – Ukraine War and instability in the Middle East, have highlighted the importance of military capability, diplomatic influence, economic resilience, and technological advancement as key elements of national power. Simultaneously, the region confronts growing non-traditional maritime threats that are transnational in nature. they require enhanced international cooperation and multilateral coordination. In accordance with the Complex Interdependence theory, the Republic of Korea is able to strengthen maritime security through two complementary approaches: enhancing its autonomous capabilities and fostering cooperation through multilateral engagement with regional partners and institutions. The role of South Korea is significant in promoting long-term peace, stability, and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.

Keywords

Maritime security, Asia-Pacific Region, Sea Lines of Communication, Traditional and Non-Traditional Challenges

Introduction

Maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region critical importance, whereas the region encompasses some of the world's busiest sea lines of communication, major economic centers, strategic maritime chokepoints, and contested maritime domains. Stability at sea directly affects global trade, energy security, and regional peace and prosperity. Beyond its economic significance, maritime security has become increasingly important in shaping the strategic calculations of major powers and influencing the evolving international order.

Following the end of the Cold War, the international system gradually evolved from a bipolarization structure toward a more complex and dynamic distribution of power. In this environment, the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union have emerged as influential actors as a multi-polarization shaping the global balance of power and the direction of the international order. Consequently, patterns of strategic competition and selective cooperation among major powers have increasingly affected the security environment of the Asia-Pacific region. Recent developments in 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy, reflecting approaches emphasizing direct engagement with China to achieve the US. national objective without confrontation while increasing burden-sharing arrangements with allies and partners, particularly in the defense and military-industrial sectors, further illustrate the evolving nature of great-power relations and their implications for regional security.

As a result, shifts in the strategies and policies of major powers have compelled regional states to reassess and adapt their foreign and security policies in order to safeguard national interests and respond effectively to emerging challenges. As a middle power situated in the Asia-Pacific, the Republic of Korea faces the strategic imperative of redefining its role and positioning within the evolving international order (Shon, 2016). This process has become increasingly important amid ongoing global crises, including the Russia–Ukraine War and persistent instability in the Middle East. These developments have demonstrated that military capability, diplomatic influence, economic resilience, and technological advancement are critical determinants of national power to overcome challenges.

In addition, the Asia-Pacific region faces a growing range of non-traditional maritime challenges, including illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, transnational crime and natural disasters. As these challenges are inherently transnational in nature, no single state can address those challenges effectively alone. Instead, they require enhanced international cooperation, institutional coordination, and constructive regional engagement.

The Republic of Korea can play a significant role in strengthening maritime security and promoting regional stability through the enhancement of its maritime and defense capabilities, active participation in multilateral security cooperation, and support for rules-based maritime governance. The efforts are

particularly important as the regional maritime security in the increasingly complex and strategic world order.

Research Objective

The objectives of this research are to examine the maritime security environment in the Asia-Pacific region by analyzing its underlying causes, strategic drivers, and the key factors that shape the formulation and implementation of international maritime security policies. In addition, the study seeks to identify and propose effective policy approaches for the Republic of Korea's maritime security strategy in response to the evolving regional security environment and the ongoing transformation of the international order.

Through an assessment of regional security dynamics, geopolitical competition, and emerging maritime challenges, this research aims to develop policy recommendations that enhance maritime security, protect national interests, and strengthen the Republic of Korea's role as a constructive contributor to regional security. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the promotion of sustainable peace, stability, and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.

Research Hypothesis

Both bilateral and multilateral cooperation are essential to promoting security and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. The Republic of Korea can leverage these frameworks to strengthen collaboration with its long-standing allies and regional partners while contributing to a stable balance of power within the evolving multipolar international order shaped by major powers. At the same time, self-reliance remains a fundamental component of national security and sovereignty. Enhancing autonomous capabilities is essential for safeguarding South Korea's national interests and ensuring strategic flexibility in an increasingly uncertain security environment. By combining robust self-reliance with active international engagement, South Korea can strengthen its capacity to address emerging challenges effectively. This dual approach will not only advance South Korea's national interests but also contribute to regional peace, security, and prosperity.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology based on descriptive and analytical approaches. Information and data are collected from a wide range of secondary sources, including academic literature, scholarly journal articles, government reports, policy documents, and publications issued by relevant international organizations. These are systematically categorized, analyzed, and synthesized to develop a comprehensive understanding of the maritime security environment in the Asia-Pacific region within the context of the evolving international order. Particular attention is given to identifying

key security issues, emerging challenges, and structural constraints arising from changes in the international system and their implications for regional stability and security.

The analysis is conducted through the application and comparative assessment of major theories and concepts in International Relations, including Realism, Liberalism, and the Balance of Power framework. These theoretical perspectives are utilized to explain and interpret security dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly those related to great-power competition, geopolitical transformation, maritime disputes, and emerging non-traditional security challenges. By integrating theoretical and empirical analyses, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the factors shaping regional security dynamics and the evolving strategic environment.

Furthermore, the findings of this research are employed to evaluate and propose policy options for the Republic of Korea's maritime security strategy. Particular emphasis is placed on the effective utilization of national power, including military, diplomatic and economic instruments, to strengthen maritime security, protect national interests, and contribute to long-term national stability and prosperity. The study also examines how the Republic of Korea can enhance its role as a responsible middle power in promoting regional maritime cooperation and security governance.

The scope of this research encompasses the evolution of the international security environment from the post-Second World War period to the present day. The analysis begins with the establishment of the United Nations and the emergence of the post-war international order, which sought to promote international peace, collective security, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. The study subsequently examines the Cold War period and the Korean War, both of which were characterized by ideological rivalry, the expansion of great-power influence into the Asia-Pacific region, and the emergence of strategic competition that significantly shaped the regional security landscape.

The analysis then extends to the post-Cold War era and the contemporary international environment, focusing on the transformation of the global balance of power, the rise of China, renewed great-power competition, and the emergence of complex transnational security challenges. Particular attention is given to the implications of these developments for maritime security, regional stability, and security governance in the Asia-Pacific region. Through this historical and analytical examination, the study seeks to identify the strategic challenges and opportunities facing the Republic of Korea and to propose policy recommendations for enhancing its maritime security in an increasingly complex and contested regional environment.

New World Order

Since the Cold War, ideological polarization has profoundly shaped the political and security dynamics of the Korean Peninsula. The strategic rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union

extended into Korea, where the two superpowers supported democracy and communism, competing political and ideological systems. This geopolitical confrontation ultimately resulted in the division of the peninsula and culminated in the Korean War (1950–1953). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the international system transitioned from a bipolarization structure toward a more complex multi-polarization. In this evolving environment, the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union emerged as influential actors shaping the global balance of power and the contemporary international order.

Within this changing geopolitical landscape, North Korea has maintained close strategic and political relations with China, while the Republic of Korea has continued to rely on the United States as its principal security ally. For more than seven decades, the U.S.–Republic of Korea alliance has served as a cornerstone of security on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. The alliance has contributed to regional stability through cooperation in defense, economic development, technological innovation, and to protect the freedom of navigation for safety and security of maritime trade routes.

Recent developments in 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy have introduced important adjustments to alliance management and regional security strategy. Under the principles of “America First” and “Peace Through Strength,” the United States has emphasized strengthening deterrence, preserving military superiority, enhancing the resilience of its defense industrial base, and encouraging greater burden-sharing among allies and partners. At the same time, Washington has sought to manage strategic competition with China while maintaining channels for dialogue and cooperation on issues of mutual interest. These policy adjustments reflect broader efforts to adapt American grand strategy to an increasingly competitive and multipolar international environment (United States Department of War, 2026).

The evolving strategic posture of the United States has prompted allies and partners across both Europe and the Asia-Pacific to reassess their foreign and security policies. This trend reflects broader changes in the international security environment, where traditional assumptions regarding alliance commitments, deterrence, and collective security are increasingly subject to scrutiny. Consequently, many states have sought to strengthen national resilience, expand defense capabilities, and diversify strategic partnerships in response to emerging uncertainties.

In the case of the Republic of Korea, the United States has played a central role in the country's security architecture since the Korean War. Following the successful amphibious landing at Incheon in 1950 and the subsequent institutionalization of the bilateral alliance, cooperation expanded through joint military exercises, defense technology cooperation, intelligence sharing, and maritime security initiatives. The continued presence of the U.S. military forces in Northeast Asia, including bases in Okinawa, Japan, and Pyeongtaek, Korea, have long been regarded as important components of regional deterrence to North Korea and China military capabilities.

For decades, U.S. security guarantees enabled allies, involving South Korea, Philippines and Japan, to allocate substantial resources toward economic development while relying on American military protection. However, in the new U.S. defense strategy, the U.S. advocates allies meet the standard of burden sharing around the world and simultaneously leverages allied production to incentivize them to increase defense spending as quickly as possible. These developments have encouraged regional allies to reassess defense priorities, increase military expenditures, and enhance indigenous defense capabilities in order to ensure long-term national security. These changes show that the contemporary international order is undergoing a process of rebalancing, and the balance of power becomes more altered. States are increasingly compelled to adopt more self-reliance security strategies, while international institutions, including the United Nations and other multilateral organizations, face growing scrutiny regarding their effectiveness in maintaining global peace and security. The current situation is able to be understood as a transition toward a more complex multi-polarization system.

Regional International Policies

With regard to sovereignty and maritime boundary delimitation, the Asia-Pacific region continues to experience numerous unresolved claimed areas and maritime disputes across several strategically important location. Among the most significant are the competing sovereignty and sovereign rights claims in the South China Sea, which have become a major source of not only geopolitical tension but also security concern. Since 2023, the People's Republic of China has published an updated official map that includes a revised "ten-dash line," expanding upon the previous "nine-dash line" representation of its maritime demarcation (Sakamoto, 2024). This development has generated concern among neighboring states and the broader international community, as it is perceived as reinforcing China's territorial and maritime zones in disputed waters. The issue is further complicated by the status of Taiwan, whose strategic location at the intersection of key maritime routes connecting East Asia and the Pacific Ocean makes it a critical factor in regional security and geopolitical competition.

The expansion and continued assertion of maritime claims in the South China Sea have intensified longstanding disputes between China and several Southeast Asian states, including the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia. These disputes involve overlapping claims to maritime zones, including Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and continental shelves, as well as competing interpretations of sovereignty over land features. As a result, concerns regarding regional stability and national interests of states have become increasingly prominent and required effective mechanisms for peaceful resolution.

At the same time, Japan has accelerated its defense modernization efforts in response to an increasingly complex security environment in Northeast Asia. Rising defense expenditures, investments in advanced military capabilities, and revisions to national security policies reflect Tokyo's growing concern regarding regional security challenges (Johnson, 2026). In addition, the sovereignty dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima between Japan and the Republic of Korea remains unresolved. Although the dispute

has been managed peacefully, it continues to serve as a source of historical and political disagreement between the two countries and occasionally affects bilateral relations.

In response to the evolving regional security environment and changing expectations within alliance frameworks, the Republic of Korea has placed greater emphasis on strengthening its indigenous defense capabilities. This strategic orientation is reflected in recent national defense white paper, which emphasize both the preservation of peace on the Korean Peninsula and the enhancement of military readiness to address emerging security challenges. Such policies underscore the importance of maintaining credible deterrence while preparing for a rapidly changing strategic environment. National defense policy continues to adopt a cautious approach toward North Korea. Peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula are regarded as essential prerequisites for meaningful progress toward reconciliation and eventual reunification. Deterrence remains a central pillar of South Korea's national security strategy, supported by its alliance with the United States and reinforced through continued military modernization, technological innovation, and the development of independent operational capabilities (Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification, 2026).

Furthermore, South Korea has increasingly sought to diversify its security partnerships beyond traditional alliance structure. In addition to maintaining close cooperation with the United States, Seoul has expanded defense and security cooperation with European partners and other like-minded states through defense-industrial collaboration, joint research initiatives, military exchanges, and strategic dialogues. These efforts are intended to strengthen strategic resilience, enhance defense capabilities, and reduce excessive dependence on any single security partner in an increasingly uncertain international environment.

These kinds of policies reflect broader concerns regarding peace and security in Northeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region. Geopolitical competition, unresolved territorial disputes, military modernization programs, and evolving alliance dynamics have contributed to a more complex and competitive security environment. From a theoretical perspective, the trends may be understood as manifestations of a regional security dilemma, in which efforts by states to enhance their security increasing perceptions of threat among neighboring states and contributing to strategic competition and military balancing.

Moreover, South Korea's white paper can be interpreted not only as a response to the persistent threat posed by North Korea but also as an adaptation to a rapidly evolving regional security. Strengthening deterrence, enhancing military readiness, expanding maritime security capabilities, and broadening international security cooperation are regarded as essential measures for safeguarding national interests and contributing to the maintenance of regional peace, stability, and security.

Geopolitical Tensions and Economic Consequences

A geopolitical conflict is characterized by competition among states over political influence, economic advantages, strategic objectives, or territorial claims. Within the contemporary international system, conflicts are no longer confined to conventional military confrontations but are increasingly conducted through a combination of military, political, economic, and informational means. As a result, their consequences often transcend geographical boundaries and directly influence international political and economic dynamics. Conflicts in one part of the world can have substantial global repercussions, including disruptions to international trade, instability in energy markets, and heightened security challenges. This interconnected reality underscores the increasingly globalized nature of contemporary conflict.

The Russia–Ukraine War constitutes one of the most significant geopolitical crises in Europe since the end of the Cold War. The conflict has deep historical, political, and territorial roots, and it has escalated into a large-scale warfare since 2022. Ukraine's pursuit of closer relations with NATO contributed to escalating tensions with Russia, which perceived the potential expansion of the alliance into Ukraine as a threat to its national security. In response, Russia increased military deployments along the Ukrainian border before launching a full-scale invasion in February 2022. The conflict reflects the strategic importance that Russia assigns to Ukraine, particularly its role as a geographic buffer between Russia and NATO states (Rose, 2026).

According to strategic location, the Crimean Peninsula and the Black Sea possess considerably economic significance. The region serves as a critical hub for maritime transportation, energy transit, and agricultural exports. In particular, the Black Sea functions as an essential maritime corridor for the export of grain and other commodities to global markets. Disruptions to maritime transportation routes in the region have generated significant concerns regarding food security, commercial shipping, and international trade. The conflict has demonstrated how control over strategic location relating to maritime activities can influence both military operations and broader economic outcomes.

In addition, situations in the Middle East further illustrate how regional conflicts can generate far-reaching global security and economic consequences. In particular, tensions between the United States, Israel, and Iran have underscored the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints. As a vital Sea Line of Communication (SLOC), the strait facilitates a substantial proportion of global oil and liquefied natural gas shipments. Consequently, disruption to maritime navigation through this waterway has the potential to affect energy markets, commercial shipping, and economic stability on a global scale (Carra, 2026)

Periods of heightened military tension, including maritime blockades, mining operations, attacks on commercial vessels, or restrictions on freedom of navigation, can significantly increase transportation costs, disrupt supply chains, and create uncertainty in global energy markets. Such activities are particularly

consequential for energy-importing economies in Asia, including Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand, which have depended heavily on Middle East energy transportation. Therefore, governments required to implement energy emergency measures to manage supply shortages, and mitigate the economic effects of rising energy prices (Hale, 2026).

These situations highlight the interconnected nature of contemporary security challenges. Although conflicts may originate in geographically distant regions, their effects can rapidly spread through global trade networks, maritime transportation systems, and energy supply chains. This issue is particularly relevant to the Republic of Korea. Despite its location on the Asian mainland, South Korea's geopolitical circumstances create conditions similar to those of a maritime-dependent state. The division of the Korean Peninsula and the absence of reliable overland transportation routes through North Korea significantly increase South Korea's reliance on maritime transportation for international trade, energy imports, and economic development. The security of Sea Lines of Communication is obviously essential to the country's national interests, economic prosperity, and overall strategic resilience.

Accordingly, geopolitical conflicts occurring in other regions of the world can have substantial implications for both South Korea and the broader Asia-Pacific region. Their effects extend beyond traditional military and security concerns to influence economic growth, industrial production, energy security, and regional stability. In an increasingly interconnected international system, the protection of maritime trade routes, the preservation of freedom of navigation, and the maintenance of stable maritime governance have become fundamental requirements for ensuring both national security and sustainable economic development. From a broader strategic perspective, these situations demonstrate that maritime security is no longer solely a naval or military concern, and for maritime-dependent states including the Republic of Korea, maintaining secure access to global maritime commons is essential for not only national defense but also long-term economic prosperity.

Non-traditional Challenges

Non-traditional security challenges have become increasingly significant in the Asia-Pacific region, necessitating enhanced regional cooperation and collective responses. One prominent example is illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, which poses a serious threat to maritime governance, marine resource sustainability, and regional stability (Information Fusion Center, 2022). IUU fishing activities frequently occur in grey zones or poorly monitored maritime areas, particularly in the Yellow Sea and other shared fishing grounds. Large-scale illegal fishing fleets, sometimes described as ghost fleets due to their use of vessel-tracking avoidance techniques, exploitation valuable marine resources, including blue crabs and other commercially important species, often beyond the effective reach of regulatory authorities. They have usually operated across maritime jurisdictions of several states, including China, the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam. These vessels frequently evade law enforcement and coast guard operations, thereby undermining fisheries management regimes and increasing tensions among coastal states (Urbina, 2020).

This illicit activity can be related to transnational crime, forced labor, human trafficking and smuggling as well.

The challenge of IUU fishing is closely linked to the broader agenda of sustainable development and environmental governance. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), a comprehensive framework consisting of 17 global goals designed to address major economic, social, and environmental challenges. Among these objectives, the 14th UNSDG, Life Below Water, emphasizes the conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas, and marine resources. Effective measures to combat IUU fishing are essential for not only maritime security but also protecting marine biodiversity. At the same time, climate change has emerged as a critical transnational challenge with profound implications for human security, economic development, and environmental sustainability. Rising sea levels, ocean warming, changing marine ecosystems, and intensifying extreme weather condition present significant risks to coastal communities and maritime-dependent states throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The changes affect fisheries, maritime infrastructure, food security, and the livelihoods of millions of people. UNSDGs are required intension and cooperation to achieve all targets for environmental and human security by 2030 (United Nations, 2026).

Moreover, the Asia-Pacific region remains highly vulnerable to natural disasters. Earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, volcanic eruptions, and other natural disasters frequently effect humanitarian and economic consequences that extend beyond national borders. Recent tsunami in Japan has once again highlighted the importance of disaster preparedness, early-warning systems, effective evacuation procedures and crisis response in reducing human and economic losses. In addition, historical disaster, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which affected numerous countries including Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka resulted in more than 230,000 fatalities, further demonstrate the devastating impact in a large scale requiring critical role of international organization and regional assistance (United Nations Development Programme, 2025).

Given the transnational nature of these non-traditional security challenges, regional cooperation in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) has become increasingly significant. Effective collaboration among states, international organizations, regional institutions, and non-governmental actors can strengthen preparedness, improve emergency response mechanisms, facilitate information sharing, and support long-term reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts. Such cooperation not only enhances capability against future environmental disasters but also contributes to confidence-building among regional actors.

Non-traditional security challenges demonstrate that contemporary security extends beyond responsibility of conventional military. Issues, including IUU fishing, climate change, environmental degradation, and natural disasters, inevitably affect economic sector, food and human security, and sustainable development. These challenges are able to transcend national boundaries and often exceed the capacity

of individual states. They require collaboration among allies, partners, and regional institutions remains essential to promote maritime security, environmental sustainability, human security, and long-term stability throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Theory of Complex interdependence

The theory of Complex Interdependence, developed by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, emerged as a significant alternative to the realist perspective in the study of International Relations. Whereas realism emphasizes the centrality of state sovereignty, military power, and interstate conflict in international politics, Keohane and Nye argued that contemporary international relations are increasingly characterized by cooperation, interconnectedness, and mutual dependence among states. They contended that the growing integration of countries through trade, communication, finance, and international institutions has fundamentally transformed the nature of global politics and expanded the range of actors influencing international outcomes (Keohane & Nye 1941).

A central characteristic of Complex Interdependence is the existence of multiple channels of interaction among societies. International relations are no longer conducted exclusively through formal diplomatic exchanges between governments. Instead, interactions occur through a wide variety of actors, including multinational corporations, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), financial institutions, epistemic communities, and transnational social networks. These diverse channels create extensive linkages between states and societies, enabling political, economic, and social developments in one part of the world to generate significant effects elsewhere.

Keohane and Nye further argued that international politics does not operate according to a fixed hierarchy of issues. In contrast to the realist assumption that military security consistently occupies the highest position on the international agenda, Complex Interdependence recognizes the growing importance of economic, environmental, technological, and social issues. Challenges such as climate change, international trade, energy issue, cyber security, public health crises, and environmental degradation frequently require collective action and international cooperation because they cannot be effectively addressed through military means alone. As a result, states are increasingly compelled to cooperate across multiple issue areas and policy domains.

Another important part of the theory is the reduced utility of military force in relations among highly interdependent states. Although military capabilities remain an essential component of national power, their effectiveness may be constrained when states are deeply connected through economic and institutional relationships. Economic interdependence increases the costs associated with conflict and disruption, creating incentives for states to pursue diplomatic engagement, negotiation, and institutional cooperation rather than military confrontation. Therefore, international organizations and multilateral collaboration play

a crucial role in facilitating dialogue, establishing norms and rules, reducing uncertainty, and promoting collective resolution.

The theory also introduces the concepts of sensitive and vulnerable interdependence. Sensitivity refers to the extent to which changes in one state affect other states through policy adjustments while vulnerability concerns the costs that states incur when interdependent relationships are disrupted. These concepts illustrate that interdependence does not necessarily produce equal benefits for all participants. Asymmetric interdependence may emerge, allowing some states to exercise greater influence and leverage over others through economic, technological, or institutional relationships.

Complex Interdependence has become particularly relevant in the era of globalization, where international trade, global supply chains, digital connectivity, and transnational challenges have increased the level of interconnectedness among countries. The theory helps explain why cooperation frequently occurs even among strategic competitors and why international institutions' mechanisms remain important for managing common challenges and reducing the risks associated with interdependence.

In summary, Complex Interdependence provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the evolving nature of international relations in an increasingly interconnected world. By emphasizing mutual dependence, transnational interactions, institutional cooperation, and the increasing importance of non-military issues, Keohane and Nye expanded the analytical scope of International Relations beyond the traditional realist focus on military power and security. Consequently, the theory remains highly influential in explaining contemporary global politics, particularly in areas, such as economic globalization, environmental governance, maritime security, and international cooperation.

Conclusion

Maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region is undergoing significant transformation as a result of changes in the international order and the evolving strategic policies of major powers. In the 2020s, alteration in U.S. defense strategy, China's expanding maritime zones in the South China Sea, and Japan's ongoing defense modernization efforts have substantially influenced the regional security environment. These developments reflect the increasingly dynamic and competitive nature of security within an evolving multi-polarization system.

In addition, conflicts and crises occurring beyond the Asia-Pacific region, including the Russia–Ukraine War and tensions in the Middle East, have generated significant indirect effects on regional maritime security. These incidents have disrupted maritime trade routes, affected global supply chains, and increased uncertainty in international energy market. Rising costs of oil and vulnerable Sea Lines of Communication have highlighted the interdependence between regional maritime security and broader

geopolitical situations. Consequently, maritime security can no longer be viewed as a solely regional framework, and it must be considered in the context of an interconnected global system.

Outstandingly, strategic competition between the United States and China continues to shape the regional security environment. Although both major powers seek to manage tensions through mechanisms focused on strategic stability and deconfliction, geopolitical rivalry has still remained defining feature of security in the Asia-Pacific. Recent adjustments in 2026 U.S. defense strategy emphasize greater burden-sharing among allies and partners, encouraging them to enhance self-reliance defense capabilities, increase defense expenditures, and expand defense-industrial cooperation. The strategy implies a significant message to Asia-Pacific allies who have long relied on American security guarantees.

The Republic of Korea faces the strategic challenges which require reassessing and adapting its role within the complex regional order. Since the Korean War, the U.S. – Korea alliance has served as a cornerstone of the Republic of Korea's national security. The strong alliance has contributed significantly to support Korean maritime trading and military power, and to protect Korean sovereignty from neighboring countries which far superior to Korea. However, the contemporary security environment requires the Republic of Korea to strengthen its own capabilities while simultaneously adapting to an increasingly complicated, competitive, and interconnected world order.

The changing international relations in globalization era and technological advancement can be obviously analyzed through the theory of Complex Interdependence developed by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye. The theory emphasizes the growing interconnectedness of states, the importance of international cooperation, and the increasing significance of non-military issues in geopolitics. It further suggests that elements of both realism and liberalism coexist within the contemporary international system, where military power, economic relations, technological development, diplomatic engagement, and institutional cooperation interact to shape state behavior and regional security outcomes.

In accordance with the Complex Interdependence theory, the Republic of Korea, as a middle power, is able to contribute to maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region through two key approaches. Firstly, South Korea should focus on strengthening its independent capabilities. Capacity building is essential for not only safeguarding national interests but also supporting long – standing allies that still require assistance. The approach is obviously significant to regional stability in terms of the balance of power. By preserving a balance of power, states can deter aggression, reduce the risk of conflict, and sustain strategic stability within the international system. In the region characterized by geopolitical competition, the balance of power is particularly important because it shapes alliance structures, defense policies, and security cooperation among states. Regional maritime security can be regarded as an outcome of regional states respecting each other and implementing their international policies in accordance with international law and regulations, especially 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982 UNCLOS) (Kun, 2019).



Secondly, South Korea should actively build trust with other states, organizations and agencies in the region through constructive collaboration. Security measures, law enforcement, and international cooperation with regional partners are crucial for addressing maritime threats. According to the theory of Complex Interdependence, contemporary security issues can no longer be resolved solely through military power. Sustainable solutions require collaboration and support across multiple sectors in order to achieve a holistic and effective approach. The example is non - traditional challenges including illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, transnational crime, climate change, and natural disaster. They are inherently transnational in nature and cannot be effectively addressed by any single state. Both governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations are essential for overcoming contemporary challenges. When a rules-based maritime order is properly supported, regional countries will also be able to enhance maritime trade safely through sea lines of communication. Those are supporting and collaborative roles of the Republic of Korea in promoting safety and security in the Asia-Pacific region.

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Traces of Compressed Modernity in the Representation of Multicultural Family: A case study of Wandeuksi by Kim Ryeoryeong

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Abstract

This research discovers the coexistence of disparate elements, namely Neo-liberalism and Neo Confucianism, caused by Compressed Modernity in the representation of multicultural family in Kim Ryeo-ryeong's Wandeuksi. To decode the representation of a family comprising of native Korean father, marriage mother, and their mixed-heritage son, characterization is employed to the study for analyzing how they are represented. The result demonstrates that multicultural family is represented as "new Korean family," a crucial micro foundation of society that each family member embraces familial role assigned by Neo-Confucianism as breadwinner father, virtuous mother, and filial son. Despite being centered around Neo-Confucianism, the study shows that driving forces of compressed modernity rebrand the moral duties to align with neoliberal expectations due to the driving force of Compressed Modernity. The breadwinner father must maximize his physical labor to generate the economic output necessary to maintain his position as a household leader who secures his family's well-being. The virtuous mother's role is transformed into that of an affective care worker, thereby reducing the neoliberal state's obligation to provide social welfare to its population. Meanwhile, the filial son maintains his status on the condition that he continuously engages in self-improvement and self-discipline to cultivate specialized skills.

Keywords

Compressed Modernity, Representation, Multicultural Family, Wandeuksi

Introduction

"Compressed Modernity" refers to a civilizational state that shortens South Korea's (hereafter Korea) transition toward a modern society into the span of a single generation, compared to centuries in Western societies. These rapid economic, political, and socio-cultural shifts result in the coexistence of historically and socially disparate elements (Chang, 2022), as ideological transitions become compressed, it gives rise to strongholds for ideologies that typically exist across different spaces and social conditions to coexist. Following this logic, the social structure becomes extremely intricate, as the coexistence of disparate ideologies are not merely in binary opposition, but hybridize with one another (Ibid), as seen in the shared perceptions and expectations Koreans hold toward multicultural family.

The increasing number of multicultural families, comprising native Korean fathers, marriage migrants (mostly from developing nations in Asia), and their mixed-heritage children (Kim, 2017), against the backdrop of low fertility rates and an aging population (Ahn, 2016), serves as the site of hybridization between ethnic homogeneity and multiculturalism. This demographic shift prompted the state to revise its rigid definition of Korean-ness based on shared bloodline and culture, resulting in the official recognition by the state that the country was transitioning into a multicultural society (Kim, 2019) and enactment of multicultural policies that highlights assimilation.

During the rise of multiculturalism, various sectors of society took a deep interest in the multicultural family to establish an episteme for managing this emerging demographic unit (Yun, 2011). This was done through the lenses constructed upon the coexistence of modern and traditional values, which shaped public perceptions and expectations toward multicultural families aligned despite their different roots. On one hand, these families are viewed as a vital force in helping the country overcome its demographic crisis; on the other hand, traditional monoethnic parameters (Shin, 2019a, 2019b) and socio-economic hierarchies (Lee, 2017) create a conditional acceptance. In other word, multicultural families are accepted into society only when each family member proves their worth for the status of "New Korean family" that satisfies both economic and social needs simultaneously. This perception has been disseminated across various cultural forms (Yi & Jung, 2015), including literature, as seen in *Wandeukki*, a novel written by Kim Ryeo-ryeong in 2008 narrating the story of a multicultural family comprising Do Jeong-bok (a native Korean father with dwarfism), a Vietnamese mother, and Do Wan-deuk, their 17-year-old mixed-heritage son.

Despite being a fictional story, *Wandeukki* utilizes socio-cultural resources, such as prevalent stereotypes, perceptions, and societal expectations (Jung, 2014), to construct its representation through the novel. In this sense, *Wandeukki* is not simply a novel about multicultural family, it actively disseminates multicultural discourse regarding the family as a "New Korean family." It relies on literary components, such as theme and characterization, to frame this family as a group of individuals striving to fulfill economic and social demands by embracing traditional values grounded in Neo-Confucianism, while their moral duties to align with neoliberal expectations.

To address the research questions, this study employs a qualitative methodology. The core concepts of compressed modernity and multiculturalism in Korea provide the theoretical background, while characterization serve as the analytical frameworks for examining how the text constructs its representations. The findings derived from the text are subsequently analyzed through the lens of compressed modernity to articulate the relationship between this literary representation and Korea's rapid societal transformation.

Although compressed modernity has been adapted globally to analyze society across various dimensions (Lan, 2014; Ma, 2012; Ochiai, 2014), research bridging this civilizational concept with literary analysis remains limited. Literature, in reality, is a unique medium capable of portraying the intricate realities of compressed modernity in a new light. For this reason, the author expects this research, expanded from my thesis entitled "Compressed Modernity in Literary Work: Representation of Urban Multicultural Children, Focusing on Wandeukki", would fill a critical research gap in knowledge about Compressed Modernity by demonstrating how Neoliberal pressures and Neo-Confucian tradition hybridize within the narrative construction.

While existing Korean-language scholarship extensively examines Wandeukki as an attempt to portray mixed-heritage children and their family beyond passive actors (Lee, 2024; Shin & Kang, 2020), this study proposes that the novel continues to represent multicultural family as passive beneficiaries. Rather than granting genuine agency, the story merely constructs a bounded developmental trajectory where the growth of each family member is conditioned upon conforming to normative state and societal expectations that arise from the hybridization between Neoliberal pressures and Neo-Confucian traditions.

Research objectives

1. To examine how multicultural family is represented in Wandeukki.
2. To examine the relationship between representation of multicultural family and compressed modernity.

Literature review

Before delving into the main corpus, the author reviewed relevant concepts and theories with the objective to identify, expand upon, and address knowledge gaps present in existing academic literature on these topics. The content of literature review is divided into three sub-sections, namely compressed modernity and multiculturalism in Korea as relevant concepts and representation as relevant theory.

Compressed Modernity: A convergence of (post)modern and traditional values

"Compressed Modernity" is a concept coined by Chang Kyung-sup, formulated to join the existing literature on modernities, such as multiple society (Eisenstadt, 2000), second modernity (cite in Sørensen, 2014), and entangled modernity (Therborn, 2003), within a post-modernist approach that conceptualizes forms of modernity not limited to the experience of societies in western hemisphere. The concept was initially developed and tested

through the case of Korea, where rapid political, economic, and socio-cultural transition to modernity resulted in the coexistence of socially and historically disparate elements, before being applied to the study of other non-Western countries (Chang, 2010), particularly in East Asia (Ochiai, 2011; Ya & Shen, 2025) where similar pattern of development occurs. Through a review of this literature, the author observes that compressed modernity functions as a civilizational state whose influence extends beyond social structures to directly shape the realities of individuals residing in such a society.

Although disparate modern and traditional elements reconstruct social structures, their interaction extends beyond competition or separation to actively hybridize, syncretize, and co-exist alongside one another (Chang, 2022). Consequently, the given social structure satisfies traditional cultural demands while simultaneously embracing (post)modern principles. Under this logic, an individual is required to embrace both sets of values and rebranding them to fulfill contemporary economic and social demands (Chang, 2010; Ochiai, 2011).

Multicultural family: A new Korean family

During the era of nation-state building, the myth of Koreans sharing a common, unbroken lineage from Tan'gun (Cawley, 2016) was mobilized to foster the social cohesion needed to overcome post-war hardship. Meanwhile, it granted the state legitimacy to demand public sacrifice for national prosperity in subsequent decades. (Shin et al., 1999). Despite driving an extraordinary economic transformation praised worldwide, the rigid definition of Korean-ness, grounded in monoethnic, monocultural, and monolingual terms (Shin, 2019b), faced significant tension at the turn of the millennium. This shift occurred as an increasing number of multicultural families, comprising native Korean fathers, marriage migrants (primarily from Southeast Asian countries), and their mixed-heritage children, entered the social fabric against the backdrop of low birth rate and a rapidly aging society (Ahn, 2016).

In response to these demographic shifts, governmental and non-governmental bodies formed a nexus to construct a assimilationist narrative around this new family type, positioning them to help the nation overcome its demographic crisis without challenging traditional norms (Oh, 2015). On the state level, a series of multicultural policies was launched to provide assistances necessary for assimilation to multicultural family members. Concurrently, Non-governmental bodies depicted these families as socioeconomically vulnerable units resulting from marriages between disadvantaged Korean men and marriage migrants from developing Asian nations, emphasizing their need of helps for assimilation (Shin, 2019a). Within this discourse, these families are framed as societal unit requiring systematic support to transform them into productive human resources needed for meeting economic demands while requiring them to adhere traditional practices as a mean to reduce socio-cultural anxieties caused by ethnic homogeneity (Watson, 2010).

Following this logic, public perceptions and expectations regarding this emerging social unit are constructed upon the coexistence of disparate elements. This dynamic yields a strategic tactic for survival in a globalized era while simultaneously guiding the traditionalist approach on the national level to secure social

cohesion. Ultimately, the presence of multicultural families is rendered essential to sustain economic competitiveness and labor supplies(Yi, 2012); however, they are accepted to society upon strict assimilation to traditional Neo-Confucian norms to fulfill both neoliberal economic and Neo-Confucian demands.

Literature: a tool for representing the nature of discourse and truth

Literature has shifted from its original positivist view, which conceptualized the text as a mirror that reflects reality exactly as it appears, toward a broader structuralist approach (Charoenporn, 2003). Under this paradigm, text is not a mirror; rather, it functions as a mode of representation in which the author relies on literary techniques, such as narrative, to meticulously select, deselect, omit, highlight, and emphasize specific elements. This process is executed to construct a particular discourse aimed at producing a specific truth. Building upon the conceptualizations of discourse and representation articulated by Michel Foucault (1984) and Stuart Hall (1997), respectively, this research considers *Wandeukki* as a form of discourse that constructs a truth regarding the multicultural family. This truth aligns with the shared perceptions and expectations surrounding this emerging demographic in Korean society as a group of socially and economically at risk whose existence in society may contribute to economic needs under the condition they adhere to traditional norms. To shed light on how the novel constructs this representation of the multicultural family, this research employs characterization, a process of developing and portraying characters in novel, as the core framework for analyzing how multicultural family is represented in *Wandeukki*.

Conceptual framework

Building upon the concept of compressed modernity as a civilizational state, where the coexistence of historically disparate elements creates an intricate social structure, this study examines how these dynamics manifest in public perceptions of the multicultural family. Later on, these shared perceptions and expectations are translated into a discursive practice as the case of *Wandeukki*, which constructs and disseminates the representation of the multicultural family through characters.

Applying characterization, this research demonstrates the conditional acceptance of the multicultural family as a "New Korean family". The multicultural family is able to achieve this status and establish a meaningful place in society only when each member performs their traditional role as father, mother, and son. Meanwhile, they are also required to rebrand these roles to align with neoliberal demands to meet economic needs, proving their successful assimilation into a society where individuals must conform to the dual norms of neoliberalism and Neo-Confucian traditionalism.

Furthermore, the story also reiterates the indispensable role of native Koreans in guiding the multicultural family's journey toward becoming a "New Korean family." Within this framework, native Koreans are encouraged to provide assistance and guide new emerging unit of society toward their proper status. This key message is

structurally reinforced through Dong-ju, a native Korean teacher as the primary helper who orchestrates the family's successful assimilation by the end of the story.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to address two central research questions: (1) How is the multicultural family represented in *Wandeukki*? and (2) What is the relationship between this literary representation and compressed modernity? The author applies the theoretical framework of compressed modernity, specifically focusing on the coexistence of disparate elements and the individual integration of seemingly conflicting values, as the primary conceptual lens for analyzing and synthesizing the characterization of *Wandeukki*.

The data utilized in this study is divided into two categories. Primary data consists of the novel itself, while secondary data encompasses academic articles, research papers, and dissertations relevant to the core concepts (compressed modernity and multiculturalism in Korea) and theoretical approaches (characterization). Both primary and secondary sources were collected from digital and physical databases.

The data collection process began with a systematic review of relevant literature to establish the framework for analysis and synthesis. This was followed by a close reading of the text, focusing specifically on how the novel constructs the representation of the family as a whole and its individual members: the father, mother, and son. Subsequently, the data was categorized to serve as the foundation for the findings. The data analysis proceeded in two phases: first, the author employed characterization through appearance, external and internal action, and reaction with other character to decode the representation of the multicultural family; second, the author examined the relationship between this representation and compressed modernity, specifically analyzing how the novel rebrands traditional familial roles to fulfill neoliberal demands, examining the hybridization of Neo-Confucian values and Neoliberal demands caused by compressed modernity. Criteria focused on instances where traditional duties (paternal protection, maternal care, and filial piety) were rebranded into Neoliberal practices such as hyper-flexible labor, privatized welfare, and self-optimization. The findings are presented through descriptive analysis. Through this coding matrix, the story elements were systematically decoded to reveal how literary choices construct the representation of the 'New Korean Family'

Research results

The author divided the research results into two sections according to the two research objectives. The first part is dedicated to answer the first research question regarding the manner under which multicultural family as a whole unit and their respective members are represented. The second part focuses on connecting the dot between representation found in the first part after applying characterization to study the story and compressed modernity.

Representation of multicultural family in *Wandeukki*

Wandeukki utilizes shared societal perceptions of multicultural families to construct their literary representation. However, certain details diverge from public perceptions. These alterations reinforce specific traits in each family member that align with moral duties grounded in Neo-Confucianism, rather than offering an entirely new mode of representation. Through this process, the novel constructs a representation of the multicultural family as a "New Korean Family", a societal micro-unit that may appear different on the outside, but internally embraces traditional Korean values. The discussion here is divided into two parts: first, the shared public perception regarding multicultural families, and second, the specific details illustrating the similarities and differences between the public perception and the novel's representation of the family.

According to shared public perceptions (Kelder, 2016), the multicultural family emerged in the 1990s when economically and culturally disadvantaged men encountered difficulties in finding partners. The primary objective for these men driven to enter the marriage market is the traditional expectations placed on sons as a person who preserves and passes on the family lineage and to provide care for aging parents, the role they expected a future wife to fulfill. To navigate these constraints, cross-border marriages facilitated by lucrative brokers became an option. This arrangement allowed native Korean grooms to fulfill their traditional filial duties, while enabling marriage migrants from developing nations to migrate to a more developed country to escape poverty and seek better living conditions.

However, public perception holds that these women often flee their marriages after moving to Korea. Their departure stems primarily from mistreatment and a stark mismatch between expectation and reality. First, they are expected to perform domestic labor on the family farm while caring for all household members (Lee et al., 2025). Second, they encounter severe cultural barriers, being required to rapidly adopt Korean norms, dress, speech, and etiquette (Kelder, 2016). Due to lacking Korean language proficiency, these mothers face significant limitations in child-rearing (Lee et al., 2025). Consequently, given paternal absence due to work and maternal language barriers, mixed-heritage children are widely perceived as prone to severe academic and social difficulties (Shin, 2019a).

In the case of Wandeukki, the depiction of the multicultural family shares both similarities and differences with this public perception. In terms of similarities, the family is portrayed as a union between an underprivileged native Korean man and a marriage migrant from a developing nation (Lee, 2018). Jeong-bok, a native Korean father, is a culturally and economically disadvantaged urban resident with dwarfism who works as a cabaret dancer. However, the portrayal of the marriage migrant slightly diverges from public stereotypes, as his Vietnamese wife is depicted as well-educated relative to her home country's standards. A second similarity lies in their meeting through a commercial marriage broker focused primarily on profit. Although Jeong-bok's dwarfism was noted in official documents, the broker deliberately concealed this fact to successfully execute the marriage. After acknowledging the truth of her future husband, the Vietnamese marriage migrant chose to stay with him even rather than fleeing away upon arrival.

Following their marriage, the story further diverges from public perception by emphasizing that Jeong-bok never mistreats his wife. He does not force her to act as a maid like his colleague who views her as a commodity

purchased for domestic labor. Additionally, the story highlights that she endured living with him despite severe hardship until Wan-deuk was born. Even though her action for fleeing family matches with the perception but the decision was made not due to poverty or her husband's disability, it is because she could not bear seeing him touch other women's bodies while working as dancer at the cabaret. The reason why she had left Wan-deuk to his native Korean father after weaning is because she thinks it would be more advantageous for him to grow up under the care of a native Korean rather than a foreign-born mother who, despite gaining citizenship through marriage, remained socially marginalized as an outsider. Another key divergence from perception is her strong command of the Korean language and her deep understanding of Korean customs as a wife and mother. She is portrayed as a mother who can communicate with her husband and son without a single sign of language barrier. She also knows how to cook a variety of Korean dishes from the main dishes to a variety of side dishes.

For a mixed-heritage son, the story initially mirrors societal perceptions by describing Wan-deuk as a troubled youth suffering from a lack of guidance due to his father's long working hours and his mother's early absence. He isolates himself from his surroundings out of fear that others will discover his non-normative family background, resorting to physical violence when his family is insulted or bullied. However, the story reveals a fundamental difference from public stereotypes by portraying Wan-deuk as a son who possesses profound filial piety. This trait is prominently displayed when he steps in to protect and assist his father and uncle when they are harassed by security guards at a metro station.

Ultimately, the representation of the multicultural family as a complete unit highlights structural similarities with shared public perceptions: they are socioeconomically and culturally disadvantaged individuals at risk, brought together by profit-driven brokers, and raising a child of mixed heritage. However, the story guides their individual trajectories differently. Jeong-bok is not a merciless husband, but a considerate man who allows his wife to leave because he cannot bear to see her suffer; his Vietnamese wife is depicted as a talent fluent in Korean language and customs whose departure was driven by personal boundaries rather than betrayal, and Wan-deuk is not born evil-minded, but a youngster whose aggression stems from a lack of structural guidance rather than malicious intent. By intentionally altering these specific traits, the story lays the foundation to represent each family member as an individual who upholds moral duties grounded in traditional values, namely breadwinner, virtuous mother, and filial son.

The integration of traditional value assigned to each familial unit

Before examining each member's unique representation, the story establishes their shared effort to fulfill traditional familial roles grounded in Neo-Confucianism: Jeong-bok as the hardworking Breadwinner, the Vietnamese wife as the Virtuous Mother, and Wan-deuk as the Filial Son. Examining this representation of family members fulfilling traditional roles alongside Chang's (2010) framework, which asserts that the family forms the essential micro-foundation of nation, suggests that a solid familial institution is viewed as a guarantor of overall national prosperity. Hence, the representation constructed in *Wandeukki* reflects a broader societal expectation that it is necessary to Koreanize the multicultural family by guiding them toward embracing these traditional roles. Within

this logic, assimilating into traditional familial frameworks becomes the designated path for multicultural families to elevate their socioeconomically vulnerable status, enabling them to contribute to the nation without posing a threat to the existing social structure.

Native Korean father as hardworking Breadwinner

Although the representation of Jeong-bok relies on shared public perceptions of native Korean fathers in multicultural families as underprivileged urbanite or individual with physical disabilities facing daily discrimination, Jeong-bok is depicted as a hardworking breadwinner, who never give up on fate. Despite enduring severe hardships and ordeals, he strives to ensure that his son can live as good a life as a family patriarch like himself can provide.

At the introduction, the story reveals that Jeong-bok worked as a dancer in a cabaret. Although he possesses a passion for dance and is highly skilled, no one in the cabaret admires and considers his performance as art. Worse, the spectators view his dancing as comical, using derogatory language to mock his physical disability. When the cabaret is converted into a nightclub, Jeong-bok was forced to leave and turned to street vendor selling goods in metro stations, where he constantly risks being chased or harassed by security guards. Following an incident in which Wan-deuk fights a guard to defend his father, Jeong-bok decides to become an itinerant vendor, traveling to markets across the country to sell goods and returning home only for a few days at a time to restock.

Through these examples, the novel portrays Jeong-bok as a conventional patriarch in Confucianism-based society whose primary duty is to secure family income. Despite hardships, Jeong-bok never abandons his engagement in economic activities. He exerts every effort as the family leader to ensure that Wan-deuk, his 17-year-old son, can focus entirely on his responsibilities as a highschooler. Jeong-bok's dedication for his son is explicitly acknowledged in Wan-deuk's reflections regarding why their family relocated to a rooftop room (옥탑방, oktapbang) on the outskirts of Seoul. His father believed that attending a high school closer to Seoul would increase Wan-deuk's chances of entering a university in the capital. The reason why he prioritizes education is same as conventional father as he believes that knowledge will improve Wan-deuk's life and prevent him from repeating a life of daily hardship like him. Driven by this devotion, Jeong-bok, believing his son possesses a special talent for writing (a misunderstanding originating from Wan-deuk's kindergarten years), attempts to create an environment where Wan-deuk can focus on reading and studying

Without acknowledging his son's passion and desires, this protective care eventually generates conflict with his son, particularly when Wan-deuk announces his desire to pursue kickboxing instead of pursuing a degree. Initially, Jeong-bok forbids this, arguing that combat sports will lead to violence and cause Wan-deuk to end up in a marginal life like his own. However, this generational tension is reconciled through the mediation of the Vietnamese mother upon her return to the family as virtuous mother.

Vietnamese marriage migrant as Virtuous Mother

Following her departure, she repeatedly attempted to reconnect with her family. Although her efforts proved unsuccessful for several years, she finally discovered the whereabouts of her long-lost son through the church network of Dong-ju, Wanduk's homeroom teacher and neighbor. The mother's eventual reintegration into the household plays a pivotal role in the story. She fills the traditional matriarchal as the Virtuous Mother, reactivating the functional mechanics of the familial institution. Her presence immediately enhances the family's overall well-being through her dedicated care work. Importantly, the story portrays her as a highly competent subject; despite her non-Korean ethnicity, her strong command of the Korean language and deep familiarity with Korean cultural practices facilitate her reunion and render her ideally suited to fulfill this traditional maternal role.

Even though the initial encounter between her and Wan-deuk is fraught with awkwardness, she persistently seeks opportunities to rebuild their relationship. Upon learning during their first meeting that Wan-deuk survives almost exclusively on instant noodles without even basic side dishes kimchi, she begins preparing home-cooked meals and banchan (반찬) for him and her husband. As their emotional bond deepens, she transitions away from formal, polite speech after Wan-deuk asks her to speak to him more comfortably. Furthermore, despite a 17-year separation from her husband, she retains an intimate memory of his culinary preferences and dietary habits, evidenced by her adjusting the saltiness of her dishes to his taste and using aged chicken to prepare samgyetang (삼계탕) to match the specific taste he prefers. Through these actions, her return serves as a structural catalyst that fortifies the stability of the multicultural family. This domestic transformation is visually symbolized through food. Wan-deuk's diet shifts from instant noodles daily to a table plenty of fresh, varied Korean dishes, a sight he had never experienced in his life.

In this sense, food represents structural domestic stability. Access to nutritious meals sustains both the father as breadwinner and Wan-deuk as an aspiring kickboxer, safeguarding their physical well-being where instant noodles on the daily basis threatened it. This is important particularly for Jeong-bok and Wan-deuk whose performance depends on physical health. Beyond nutritional sustenance, her return also resolves the conflict between Jeong-bok and Wan-deuk regarding kickboxing. She did so by asserting that their son understands his own ambitions best, a phrase that further facilitates a mutual agreement between father and son to respect one another's pursuits.

Once the familial institution resumes its proper operation in accordance with traditional expectations, the story rewards the mother with formal recognition within the family unit. This shift portrays in a scene where Wan-deuk responds to a neighbor's question about her role in family by declaring, "She is my mother." This marks the first time Wan-deuk addresses her directly as "mother" rather than employing distant honorific pronoun of that person (그분). Moved to tears by this validation, she fully joins the family table to share a meal, leaving behind her previous state of domestic marginalization.

Regardless of happy ending, the fact that she successfully resolves the household's deficiencies specifically because of her linguistic fluency and cultural literacy carries a critical implication. Without these competencies, her seamless integration would be impossible. This serves as an attempt of story to reinforce a normative societal expectation, that marriage migrants must attain a high level of Korean cultural and linguistic proficiency to perform Neo-Confucian maternal duties effectively and ensure the flawless operation of the familial institution.

Mixed heritage child as Filial son

Beneath his front stage being a problematic youth who relies on violence as a primary mechanism for problem-solving, the story links the root cause of Wan-deuk's behavior to a lack of proper parental guidance. Deprived of a mother's presence and with a father frequently away due to the demands of his job, Wan-deuk comes to perceive and internalize violence as an effective tool to achieve his goals, a mindset shaped by early exposure to the cabaret guards. However, Wan-deuk is not inherently malicious, rather, he possesses the core qualities of a filial son. This is manifested in two key ways: first, in the conditions under which he resorts to violence, and second, through his direct expressions of filial piety. Since Wan-deuk did not undergo typical early socialization to teach him normative values, his filial devotion manifests through non-conventional means.

First, regarding his reliance on violence, Wan-deuk is portrayed as possessing impressive martial skills, as evidenced by his fights with his classmate Hyeok-joo and security guards, both of which end in Wan-deuk's victory. Despite holding such physical power, Wan-deuk never uses violence to intimidate or exploit others. Instead, he resorts to his fists strictly when opponents mock or threaten his family. This is illustrated when he breaks Hyeok-joo's finger after the latter ridicules Jeong-bok's job as a subway vendor. A similar pattern occurs during his confrontation with the subway guards when Wan-deuk witnesses them chasing and threatening his father and uncle. Although Wan-deuk enables his family to flee the scene, he is slapped by his father and admonished never to use violence again instead of receiving gratitude. While this scene demonstrates that physical aggression is socially unacceptable, for a child lacking other social capital to negotiate like Wan-deuk, violence serves as the only option available to defend his father's honor as a filial son.

Second, beyond these defensive acts of violence, Wan-deuk expresses filial piety through conventional acts of care throughout the story. For instance, he uses money earned from part-time jobs to take his mother to a market to purchase a new pair of shoes, noticing that her current footwear is worn and outdated. In another instance, Wan-deuk pretends to read and write diligently while sitting in the room where his father packages goods, fully aware that appearing studious brings his father emotional relief. When Jeong-bok initially forbids him from practicing kickboxing, Wan-deuk takes on additional part-time work at a barbecue restaurant and delivers newspapers to cover his gym membership fees independently. His capacity for filial devotion also extends to his mentor, Dong-ju. After accidentally kicking upon mistaking him for an intruder, Wan-deuk carries his injured teacher on his back to hospital as fast as possible, bursting into tears upon learning that Dong-ju is a person who consistently assists him and guides him toward a meaningful role in society., refusing to burden his father, who is already overwhelmed by his work as an itinerant vendor.

Dong-ju: a mentor guiding the smooth transition

Given Dong-ju's important role as a helper guiding the multicultural family through a smooth transition toward becoming a "New Korean family," it is worth portraying how this native Korean character enables each family member to fulfill their designated roles grounded in traditional Neo-Confucian values.

From the beginning, Dong-ju consistently assists Jeong-bok in overseeing Wan-deuk while the father is away working, an act of support that allows Jeong-bok to focus fully on his duties as a hardworking breadwinner. Beyond assisting with Wan-deuk's supervision, Dong-ju orchestrates the reunion between Wan-deuk and his long-lost mother, marking a crucial turning point in resolving the household's structural deficiencies. Despite knowing that Wan-deuk initially resists meeting her, Dong-ju provides the mother with their home address, enabling her to wait for Wan-deuk after school and initiate the process of reconciliation. For Wan-deuk, Dong-ju becomes the most influential figure in his personal development. He transforms Wan-deuk from a self-isolated outsider into an adult who recognizes the family as a powerful, supportive unit rather than a source of embarrassment or deficiency that must be hidden from society as his family always put all efforts that they have to guarantee his well-being.

At the resolution of the story, Dong-ju helps Jeong-bok reclaim his passion for dance by facilitating the opening of a dance academy in the building Dong-ju purchases. In this space, Jeong-bok is given a second chance to perform, serving as an instructor who conveys his passion for dance to students, and to secure more stable job than being itinerant vendor, while the rest of the family collaborates to assist in running the school's daily operations

Relationship between representation of multicultural family and compressed modernity

The representation of the multicultural family outlined above, where Jeong-bok, the Vietnamese mother, and Wan-deuk fulfill their respective Neo-Confucian roles as hardworking breadwinner, virtuous mother, and filial son, is closely linked to compressed modernity. Within this civilizational state, neoliberalism and Neo-Confucianism do not exist in binary opposition. Rather, it hybridizes, syncretizes, articulates, and accumulates these concepts together. As seen in *Wandeukki*, the representation of multicultural family employs Neo-Confucian duty as the main structure but rebranded it as a driving force for achieving Neo-liberal capital. In other word, the moral duties of breadwinner, virtuous mother, and filial assigned to each family member fulfil neo-liberal demand while reducing its anxieties caused by ethnic homogeneity.

The sacrificial patriarch as hyper-flexible laborer

The traditional status of father as breadwinner can only be sustained if his economic output remains sufficient to secure his child's well-being. To uphold this status, the story propels Jeong-bok into a continuous search for employment and eventually transforms him into a flexible and precarious laborer.

This flexibility is evident in how Jeong-bok repeatedly shifts occupations without regretting on the loss of his career as a cabaret dancer, a job for which he held genuine passion. He transitions his working hours from night

to day by selling merchandise in metro stations immediately despite the constant risk of confrontation with security guards, and shifts roles yet again following the violent confrontation between Wan-deuk and the guards, becoming an itinerant vendor traveling to markets nationwide. Ultimately, he becomes a dance instructor at the academy operated within Dong-ju's property.

This trajectory constructs a heroic image of Jeong-bok, particularly given that each of these labor-intensive roles is performed by an individual navigating a physical disability. Through this portrayal, the story embeds neoliberal values into Jeong-bok's traditional breadwinner role, framing him as an archetype of self-resilience, someone who neither surrenders to adversity nor demands state assistance. By doing so, this idealization simultaneously obscures intense self-exploitation, masking it under the respectable mantle of the hardworking traditional breadwinner.

Affective matriarchal care worker

The traditional role of the Virtuous Mother fulfilled by the Vietnamese mother aligns directly with neoliberal demands by reducing the state's welfare spending for vulnerable populations. By assigning domestic welfare responsibilities to the family unit, specifically designating the mother as an affective care worker tasked with overseeing the well-being of each household member, the neoliberal state offloads its social safety net duties. Since this role is performed by a mother bound to her family by emotional ties, the efficiency of this care work is presumed to be exceptionally high. Consequently, this arrangement provides ultimate cost savings for the state. Even though this representation fulfills neo-liberal demand, it places immense pressure and burden on the virtuous mother. This burden is particularly acute for a foreign-born marriage migrant who is not only expected to possess high linguistic and cultural proficiency, as demonstrated by the Vietnamese mother, but must also perform double labor as she is also engaged in full-time jobs at a restaurant while simultaneously undertaking unpaid domestic care work inside the household.

Filial piety as body optimization

The role of Wan-deuk as a filial son intersects directly with the neoliberal order by serving as a primary driving force for him to convert his physical capital into social capital. Despite his father's initial opposition to his kickboxing practice, Wan-deuk feels regret yet recognizes that he cannot become a writer as his father envisions, as writing lacks the immediate passion he discovers through kickboxing. To prove to his father that he can secure a meaningful future without following the conventional path of pursuing a degree pursued by his peers, Wan-deuk engages in rigorous self-improvement and self-discipline, all of which are core neoliberal values, through kickboxing. These practices enable him to utilize his specific physical talents to carve out a meaning place in society, fulfilling the same outcome his father considers a literary career would provide it to him. Even though Wan-deuk may deviates from the trajectory his father envisioned, the path he selects yields the same fundamental result. He fulfills a social obligation anchored in neoliberal values that mandate individuals to cultivate their specialized skills to contribute productively to society.

As a final observation, the relationship between the representation of the multicultural family and compressed modernity demonstrates that coexisting ideologies that appear contradictory do not necessarily operate in binary opposition. Instead, they undergo a process of hybridization in which Neo-Confucianism and neoliberalism mutually reinforce each other to produce a powerful representation of the multicultural family as a "New Korean Family", an entity that may appear outwardly diverse but remains inwardly Korean. As each family member fulfills their designated Neo-Confucian roles as a sacrificial breadwinner father, virtuous mother, and filial son, the story rebrands these traditional paradigms to serve neoliberal demands. At the end, this framing posits that so long as the foundation of the familial institution remains solidly grounded in traditional values, the household can overcome structural hardship and gain meaningful place in society.

Discussions and Conclusions

This research was conducted to fulfill two primary research objectives: (1) to examine how the multicultural family is represented in *Wandeukki*, and (2) to examine the relationship between this representation of the multicultural family and compressed modernity. Methodologically, this study utilizes characterization, the analysis of how character is built, as a tool to decode how the story constructs representation. The textual data gathered was then analyzed and synthesized through Chang Kyung-sup's concept of "compressed modernity," specifically focusing on two core dimensions: (1) the coexistence of historically and socially disparate elements, and (2) the simultaneous embrace of traditional and modern values as a defining condition for individuals living under compressed modernity.

The findings reveal that the representation of the multicultural family, a unit comprising an underprivileged native Korean father, a marriage migrant from developing Asian countries, and their mixed-heritage child, contains elements both identical to and distinct from prevailing public perceptions. In terms of similarities, the multicultural family is framed as a union between a disadvantaged native Korean man (Jeong-bok, who lives with dwarfism) and a Vietnamese marriage migrant. Regarding differences, the native Korean husband is depicted as merciful and considerate, his Vietnamese wife is presented as a highly capable woman fluent in Korean language and customs whose initial departure was driven by personal boundaries rather than lacking responsibility, and Wan-deuk is portrayed as an innocent child merely lacking proper guidance.

These distinct characterizations are further expanded upon to produce a family unit that performs traditional Neo-Confucian familial roles: the breadwinner father, the virtuous mother, and the filial son. Although this familial arrangement appears outwardly centered solely to traditional values, compressed modernity redirects this moral duty as a departure point for fulfilling neoliberal demands. The breadwinner must maximize his physical labor to generate the economic output necessary to maintain his position as a household leader who secures his family's well-being. The virtuous mother's role is transformed into that of an affective care worker, thereby reducing the neoliberal state's obligation to provide social welfare to its population. Meanwhile, the filial son maintains his status on the condition that he continuously engages in self-improvement and self-discipline to cultivate specialized skills, securing a meaningful place in society while fulfilling his filial duty under his parents' guidance.

Ultimately, this research yields three major critical discussions:

De-politicization of Structural Inequality: The representation of the multicultural family fails to fundamentally challenge the ongoing discrimination against people with disabilities, marriage migrants, and mixed-heritage children. While the novel exposes these prejudices, the story refrains from offering resistance or structural critiques through the characters' choices and actions, offering instead a standardized, prescriptive roadmap for assimilating into a "New Korean Family."

Gendered Reinforcement of Familial Roles: Familial duties remain strictly tied to traditional gender expectations, mandating that the male subject act as the economic provider while the female subject serves as the domestic care worker.

The Erasure of Vietnamese Cultural Context: Despite centering on a multicultural household, the novel effectively silences the mother's Vietnamese identity. The story provides minimal context regarding her background, omitting even her personal name throughout the text, even though her labor and sacrifice are essential to establishing her husband as a successful breadwinner and her son as a filial child. This rigid representation may obstruct opportunities to promote inclusion in an increasingly culturally diverse Korean society.

Suggestions

This study focuses exclusively on a single novel published during a pivotal era when societal discourses surrounding multicultural families were emerging, future research could fruitfully adopt a comparative approach to examine how the episteme regarding multicultural households in Korea has established and evolved since 2008. Furthermore, scholars could extend this comparative analysis to other media, such as television dramas, variety shows, and state policy documents, using intertextual or multimodal frameworks. Future research could adopt an intermedial approach to examine how the representation of the 'New Korean Family' was subsequently consumed, circulated, and received by broader audiences as an idealized or normative representation of the multicultural family.

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