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Beyond the Nation:
Diasporic Mediation and the Making of Global Korea

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< Abstract >

This study redefines the Korean Wave (Hallyu) as a product of the Korean diaspora's agency, moving beyond nationalist perspectives that view it merely as a state-led export. Rather than dismissing existing scholarship, it enriches Hallyu studies by illuminating long-overlooked diasporic contributions. Methodologically, the research analyzes five historical conjunctures selected to trace a diachronic trajectory of diasporic mediation—from colonial-era exile to post-national platform assemblage: Kim Yom in Shanghai, *Pachinko*, director Lee Sang-il, K-pop's diasporic musicians, and *K-Pop Demon Hunters*. The findings reveal that Korean cultural modernity is rooted in the 'liminal positionality' of the diaspora. Here, "Koreanness" is understood not as a fixed ethnic or territorial marker, but as a relational and displaced construct continuously negotiated across borders. By translating cultural codes between Home and Host Society, diasporic actors have constructed a post-national imaginary transcending ethnic identity. Ultimately, this study argues that diasporic mediation constitutes one of the structurally underestimated engines of Korean cultural globalization. By foregrounding these long-overlooked contributions, it aims to enrich existing understandings of Hallyu and to offer a more nuanced framework for interpreting its ongoing transformations in an increasingly post-national media landscape.

Keywords: *Hallyu, Diaspora, K-pop, Modernity, Post-national, Koreanness*

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1. Introduction: Beyond the National Brand—The Diasporic Engine of a Post-National Imaginary

The global phenomenon known as the Korean Wave (Hallyu) is often celebrated as a triumphant narrative of national soft power—a success story of a state-led cultural industry exporting its products to a global market. In this study, Hallyu is not the final destination of our inquiry, but rather a critical analytical 'gateway' or a strategic 'bait' that allows us to uncover a much older and more complex historical infrastructure: the Korean diaspora. While the world's attention has been focused on Seoul, the most profound impact of this cultural moment may be its role as a catalyst, emboldening long-submerged diasporic communities to reclaim their cultural agency and speak back to both their host societies and their ancestral homeland.

For decades, Korean diasporic populations—from the Zainichi in Japan and the Joseonjok in China to the 'Gyopo' in North America—existed in the shadows of history, their cultural contributions often erased by the exclusionary logic of methodological nationalism. The recent global resonance of Korean culture has provided a new diasporic infrastructure, acting as both a shield and a stage. This global site of articulation allows diasporic practitioners to move beyond the passive role of overseas compatriots to become the primary architects of a post-national cultural imaginary. This shift necessitates a fundamental rethinking of global media; in an era of streaming giants and transnational assemblages, cultural flow is no longer a mono-directional export from a national center, but a multi-directional collision of displacement, memory, and local reinterpretation.

This study argues that the Korean global cultural presence possesses a much longer and more complex genealogy than the contemporary Hallyu phenomenon—which emerged in the late 1990s—would suggest. While the global success of the Korean Wave is often treated as arguably the first case in which 'Korean' becomes 'global', Korean diasporic subjects have been active participants in global cultural production long before this era, and their role is set to become even more vital in its future expansion (Curtin 2003; Shim 2012). To explore this evolution from a structural and diachronic perspective, I examine five pivotal conjunctures where diasporic agency has fundamentally reshaped the global cultural landscape, beginning with Kim Yom (known as Jin Yan in Chinese) in 1930s Shanghai, the 'Film Emperor' who mediated a new Asian modernity through the lens of colonial exile, proving that the roots of Korean cultural globalization were planted outside the peninsula.

This trajectory continues through the streaming-era memory politics of *Pachinko* (2022), where diasporic memory was archived and elevated into a sovereign global narrative subjectivity, and the cultural intervention of Lee Sang-il, a Zainichi director whose reinterpretation of Japanese heritage challenges the presumed purity of national cinema. The narrative then shifts to the transnational return to K-pop, where diasporic mediators—from R&B pioneers like Solid to contemporary icons like Jay Park—internalized global sensibilities within the domestic industry, expanding the Korean cultural field from within. Finally, I analyze the post-national production of *K-Pop Demon Hunters* (2025), where the diaspora functions as a generative engine in a fully decentralized environment where the nation-state is no longer the primary referent. This final case demonstrates how diasporic cultural production continues to diversify, complexify, and enrich the landscape of the Korean Wave into the future.

Ultimately, this study suggests that one of the vital, yet often overlooked, engines of Korean cultural globalization is rooted in the ongoing negotiation of displacement and diasporic experience, rather than being solely a product of the nation-state's industrial strategy. This study invites a broader reflection on how global media functions as a space for historical witnessing and the reimagining of identity. It proposes that the 'global' in contemporary culture is not merely an extension of the 'national,' but is significantly shaped by the radical potential of the diasporic imagination.

This study employs a diachronic case analysis to trace the structural evolution of diasporic mediation across five historical conjunctures spanning from the 1930s to the present. The selection of these five cases is governed by three explicit criteria. First, **temporal representativeness**: each case corresponds to a distinct historical moment in the formation of Korean diasporic agency, charting a structural trajectory from colonial-era exile to post-national platform assemblage. Second, **diversity of mediating practice**: the cases capture the range of modes through which liminal positionality—a concept developed throughout this study—is converted into cultural production, from embodied performance to decentralized digital worldbuilding. Third, **geopolitical diversity**: the cases span three major nodes of Korean diaspora formation—China, Japan, and North America—guarding against the reduction of diasporic experience to a single geopolitical template.

To ensure analytical consistency across this heterogeneous material, each case is examined through three shared analytical axes. The first is **positionality**: the specific historical and geopolitical conditions structuring the diaspora subject's location between homeland and host society. The second is **mediating practice**: the concrete cultural, aesthetic, or industrial strategies through which that positionality is converted into creative agency. The third is **infrastructural effect**: the ways in which that creative agency contributes to the

broader structural formation including Hallyu as a transnational cultural infrastructure.

2. Diaspora as Cultural Position: Theoretical Deepening

Before developing its theoretical framework, this study situates itself within several intersecting fields of scholarship. The argument advanced here does not emerge in a vacuum; it enters into dialogue—and in some cases, productive tension—with at least four bodies of literature.

First, within *Diaspora Studies*, this study builds on the shift from trauma-centered to agency-centered frameworks (Safran, 1991; Clifford, 1994; Hall, 1990), while pushing further to ask how diasporic agency functions not merely as cultural expression but as structural infrastructure. Second, within *Hallyu scholarship*, a growing body of work has challenged the nationalist and state-centric framing of the Korean Wave (Ryoo, 2009; Shim, 2012 Fedorenko, 2025). This study acknowledges and builds on these interventions, while arguing that the infrastructural role of diaspora remains undertheorized even within this critical tradition. Third, within *Zainichi Studies and Korean diasporic history*, scholars have extensively documented the distinct legal, political, and cultural formations of the Zainichi community in Japan (Lie, 2008; Ryang, 2000; Baik, 2017; Kang, 2007). This study draws on these accounts to resist collapsing the Zainichi experience into a generalized "Korean diaspora." Fourth, within *Postcolonial and Cultural Studies*, the frameworks of Bhabha (1994), Gilroy (1993), and Kraidy (2002) inform this study's understanding of hybridity, the Third Space, and the power-laden nature of cultural mediation.

In its classical formulation, diaspora studies were predominantly concerned with the traumatic experience of dispersal and the enduring teleology of return (Safran, 1991). This early paradigm framed diaspora through narratives of victimization, exile, and the persistent longing for a lost homeland. Displacement was conceptualized primarily as rupture, and diasporic identity as suspended between loss and the myth of eventual restoration. Contemporary scholarship, however, has progressively unsettled this teleological framework. Clifford (1994) reconceptualizes diaspora not as a teleology of return but as a condition of "dwelling-in-travel," where displacement becomes a constitutive mode of attachment and identity is forged through routes rather than static roots. In this formulation, diaspora is not defined by deficiency of national belonging but by relational positioning within transnational circuits of mobility. The emphasis shifts from homeland nostalgia to cultural navigation.

This theoretical reorientation enables a deeper understanding of diasporic subjects as cultural mediators who translate structural liminality into aesthetic and symbolic production (Appadurai, 1996; Shim, 2020). Inhabiting what Bhabha (1994) terms the "Third Space," these border-crossing actors negotiate overlapping cultural codes, transforming ambivalence into creative articulation. Du Bois's (1903) and Gilroy's (1993) notion of "double consciousness" further illuminates how partial detachment from singular national frameworks can generate heightened reflexivity toward identity, representation, and power.

Appadurai's (1996) framework of ethnoscapes, mediascapes, and technoscapes situates this mediation within the volatile currents of global flows. In this disorganized global landscape, diasporic subjects do not merely drift; they occupy strategic nodal positions at the intersection of these scapes. This spatial positioning enables them to act as semiotic brokers who decode and encode multiple cultural systems simultaneously. By navigating the friction between these scapes, they transform what was once a site of marginalization into a generative vantage point. Consequently, they produce transnational media content that possesses 'layered cultural intelligibility'—a quality that allows texts to resonate within local specificities while remaining globally accessible.

The Korean diaspora exemplifies this spatial and epistemic agency. Emerging historically through diverse forms of geopolitical marginalization, Korean diasporic communities developed a unique perspective as a 'stranger' (Kim, 2025), establishing new coordinates that allow for a reflexive distance from dominant national narratives. While hybridity has become a central trope in Hallyu scholarship, it is frequently reduced to a stylistic or aesthetic category, flattening Koreanness into a surface-level signifier (Fedorenko, 2025). To counter this abstraction, as Kraidy (2002) argues, hybridity must be understood not as a textual fusion but as a material and communicative process embedded in asymmetrical power relations and lived positionality. From this perspective, diasporic Korean creators do not simply blend cultural forms; they operationalize lived liminality as an epistemic resource. Their productions render structural in-betweenness visible and aesthetically legible.

It is therefore necessary to define the term "Koreanness" as it is used in this study. Rather than denoting a fixed ethnic essence or a territorial property of the peninsula, Koreanness is understood here as a *relational and deterritorialized construct*: a set of cultural referents, affective attachments, and symbolic codes that are continuously renegotiated by diverse actors across different historical moments and geopolitical locations. This definition draws on Hall's (1990) distinction between two modes of cultural identity—one grounded in shared origin, the other in the ongoing process of becoming—and on Bhabha's (1994) notion

of the Third Space as a site of enunciation rather than essence. Crucially, Koreanness in this sense is not a singular object but a contested field: its meanings shift depending on *who articulates it, from where, and to what end*. The political implications of this variability—what we might call the politics of Koreanness—are examined in each case analysis below.

To understand how this mediating capacity scales into global cultural production, it is necessary to consider Curtin's (2003) concept of media capital, which identifies specific sites where media resources, labor, infrastructure, and symbolic power converge. Historically, Hollywood functioned as the paradigmatic global media capital, concentrating financial investment, talent, and technological capacity at an unprecedented scale. Regional formations—Shanghai and Tokyo in East Asia, London and Paris in Europe, Mumbai in South Asia, Cairo and Istanbul in the Middle East, Lagos in Africa, and Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro in Latin America—have similarly operated as continental nodes mediating between local industries and global circuits. These media capitals function as strategic hubs where transnational cultural flows are localized, reconfigured, and redistributed. Diasporic actors have repeatedly gravitated toward such centers, leveraging their liminal positionality within these concentrated infrastructures.

In the era of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017), the nature of media capital has undergone a profound transformation from territorially bounded nodes to "platformized" capitals. Streaming infrastructures such as Netflix and Apple TV+ partially transcend geographical constraints, yet they simultaneously intensify the centralization of economic and algorithmic power through distributed production networks.

Within this reconfigured environment, the Korean diaspora occupies a structural paradox: while platform infrastructures provide an unprecedented stage for the global circulation of diasporic memory, they simultaneously embed cultural production within these very same centralized technological logics. This tension is particularly evident in contemporary productions such as *Pachinko* and *K-Pop Demon Hunters*, where diasporic narratives are made globally legible yet remain shaped by the platforms' algorithmic and financial architectures. Consequently, the diaspora should not be understood merely as a thematic subject of the Korean Wave but as one of its constitutive infrastructures—a generative force that transforms historical displacement into a strategic vanguard within shifting media capitals. To understand the specificities of this mediating capacity, it is necessary to first trace the historical and geopolitical trajectories through which the Korean diaspora emerged as a structural feature of Korean modernity.

The concept of "infrastructure" invoked here requires theoretical clarification. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of assemblage—further developed in media studies by Couldry and Hepp (2017)—

this study understands diasporic cultural infrastructure not as a unified system of homogeneous actors but as a dynamic formation in which heterogeneous elements (bodies, memories, technologies, institutions, affects) are provisionally articulated into a structure with emergent properties. The critical implication is that the differences between diasporic formations are not erased within this assemblage; rather, they are precisely what constitutes it. The Zainichi experience, the colonial exile experience in China, and the Gyopo experience do not dissolve into a single "Korean diasporic voice." Instead, their historically specific tensions and divergences are the generative friction through which the assemblage produces something that neither could produce alone.

A final theoretical consideration concerns what we might call the *politics of flattening*. Koreanness is not only constructed relationally; it is also subject to multiple, competing processes of simplification that serve different interests. We can identify at least four such processes: *institutional flattening*, whereby the Korean state and its affiliated agencies reduce Koreanness to a brandable cultural commodity; *representational flattening*, whereby mainstream global media reproduce stereotyped or exoticized images of Korean culture; *intra-diasporic flattening*, whereby dominant voices within diasporic communities marginalize the experiences of women, queers, the working class, or later generations; and *scholarly flattening*, whereby academic frameworks assume a homogeneous "Koreanness" as their unit of analysis (Fedorenko, 2025; Kraidy, 2002; Ryang, 2000; Ryoo, 2009; Yoon, 2018). This study is alert to all four modes. Crucially, the argument here is not that diasporic mediation escapes these processes of flattening—it often reproduces them in new forms—but that it also creates the conditions for their contestation. It is in this tension that the most productive cultural work of the diaspora occurs.

3. The Historical and Theoretical Landscapes of the Korean Diaspora

The Korean diaspora is not merely a peripheral byproduct of national history but a structural feature of Korean modernity, deeply intertwined with the peninsula's political and economic transformations. The genesis of this global dispersion dates back to the late nineteenth century, when a volatile mix of political instability, economic hardship, and environmental crises forced large-scale migrations to Manchuria and the Russian Far East (Kim, 2025). This initial movement evolved into a more systematic and coercive displacement during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945). Under imperial rule, migration intensified

through a combination of voluntary labor seeking and state-led forced mobilization, establishing significant Korean enclaves within the Japanese Empire and beyond (Baik, 2017). These early trajectories were further complicated by the geopolitical upheavals of the Korean War and the subsequent Cold War division, which solidified dispersed communities across East Asia, Central Asia, and the Americas as permanent fixtures of a fragmented nation.

This trajectory of displacement did not terminate with the end of the Cold War; rather, Korean migration continued to evolve in tandem with the forces of global integration in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Driven by aspirations for higher education, professional advancement, and transnational economic opportunities, a new wave of voluntary mobility expanded the Korean presence to over 190 countries (Overseas Koreans Agency, 2026). Consequently, a conceptual distinction has emerged within the historical continuum between the "old diaspora" and the "new diaspora." While the old diaspora —represented by the Zainichi in Japan, the Joseonjok in China, and the Koryo-saram in Central Asia—was forged under the duress of colonial domination and ideological rupture (Baik, 2017), this new diaspora reflects fluid, globalized life trajectories. This shift from forced survival to elective mobility has fundamentally expanded the diasporic narrative, transforming the Korean experience into a truly globalized phenomenon.

This evolution in historical reality suggests a corresponding shift in conceptualizing the Korean diaspora, moving toward a more transnational and fluid analytical framework. While earlier discourses often positioned overseas compatriots as extensions of the nation-state, a critical diaspora perspective instead emphasizes deterritorialization and the autonomous agency of the displaced (Baik, 2017; Shim, 2020). By cultivating localized identities while maintaining a sense of shared origin, these actors complicate the traditional boundaries of the state. However, this theoretical transition faces a persistent challenge: a prevailing 'national center bias.' If the diaspora is primarily understood as a peripheral subordinate to the peninsula, it risks reinforcing the ideological authority of the nation-state rather than offering a truly post-national alternative. Therefore, we must remain vigilant against the tendency to flatten diasporic complexity into a nationalist project, ensuring that the diaspora is recognized as a self-sovereign site of cultural production.

Ultimately, the Korean diaspora has transitioned from being a mere demographic outcome of displacement to an active agent in global cultural production. In the context of what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) terms "liquid modernity"—a condition marked by the fluidization of social structures and identities—diasporic experiences now fundamentally shape the narratives of film, digital media, and literature, reflecting the unstable and interconnected nature of contemporary society (Kim, 2025). By mediating colonial memories

and post-national realities, the diaspora functions as a critical site for rethinking Korean culture beyond the restrictive confines of the nation-state. This shift positions the Korean experience not as a peripheral echo, but as a vital, participating force in the production of the global cultural imaginary. To ground this theoretical discussion, the following section examines the career of Kim Yom as a foundational historical instance of diasporic mediation, demonstrating how early diasporic subjects actively participated in the formation of inter-Asian modernity and transnational media culture.

4. Kim Yom: The ‘Film Emperor’ and Diasporic Mediation in Shanghai

Before analyzing Kim Yom's cultural work, it is necessary to locate him within a specific and historically distinct form of diasporic formation: that of colonial exile. The Korean presence in early twentieth-century Shanghai was not the product of voluntary migration or ethnic minority settlement, but of political exile and displacement triggered by Japanese imperial rule. Throughout the colonial period (1910-1945), intensifying repression—including the suppression of the March First Movement of 1919, forced labor mobilization, and the systematic persecution of independence activists—drove a continuous stream of Koreans to seek sanctuary and a base for resistance in China, most significantly to Shanghai and Manchuria, which became major centers of the Korean independence movement and diasporic community formation. It is within this context of colonial exile—categorically distinct from both the Zainichi formation in Japan and the later voluntary migration of Koreans to North America—that Kim Yom's trajectory must be understood.

Kim's trajectory was shaped by the structural violence of the Korean diaspora. Born in Seoul in 1910, his family fled to China to escape Japanese persecution following his father Kim Pilsun's involvement in the independence movement (Shim, 2020). After his father's suspicious death, Kim moved precariously between Jinan, Tianjin, and Shanghai—an itinerant existence that constituted not simply displacement but lived liminality. This experience informed his distinctive cinematic presence, where the resilience of a perpetual outsider met the brooding sensitivity of a youth descended from a family of independence activists. His breakthrough performances in *Wild Flowers by the Road* (1930) and *Love and Duty* (1931) marked a departure from the effeminate male archetypes associated with traditional Chinese opera. Instead, he introduced a model of vigorous and modern masculinity that resonated with both his personal heritage of

resistance and the changing sensibilities of the Chinese audience. His immense popularity culminated in his election as China's "Film Emperor" in a 1932 poll conducted by *The Sound of Cinema*, surpassing established Chinese actors (Shim, 2020).

However, Kim's historical significance extends beyond his screen persona. As a key collaborator with leftist directors, he was instrumental in shaping a politically inflected cinematic modernism that transcended mere entertainment. In seminal works like *The Big Road* (1934), his performance served as a conduit for a collectivist heroism, effectively fusing cosmopolitan modernity with anti-imperialist nationalism. Crucially, his later refusal to collaborate with Japanese-controlled film institutions—opting for a hiatus over compromise—illustrates how his diasporic consciousness functioned as a steadfast ethical and political orientation (Shim, 2020). Kim was not simply a Chinese star of Korean descent; his dual positioning enabled him to articulate a form of Asian modernity that was culturally integrated into Chinese national cinema while structurally rooted in Korean diasporic subjectivity.

Despite this deep-rooted national heritage, Kim's Koreanness was rarely foregrounded on-screen; within the cinematic diegesis, he was embraced as the quintessential Chinese youth, "Jin Yan." This created a complex dualism—a reflexive distance akin to "double consciousness" (Du Bois, 1903; Gilroy, 1993)—where his screen persona performed a seamless Chinese modernity while his off-screen life remained anchored in the social and ethical networks of the Korean independence movement. Such a positioning enabled him to navigate overlapping national imaginaries, simultaneously inhabiting Chinese nationalist aspirations and a private, anti-colonial Korean subjectivity. Beyond the camera, this reflexivity translated into tangible support, as Kim functioned as a vital bridge for exiled Korean filmmakers in Shanghai and provided material aid to local Korean educational institutions (Shim, 2020). Consequently, his diasporic liminality operated not merely as a personal identity but as a form of infrastructural connectivity.

Drawing on Berry's (2016) notion of a "disjunctural history of fragments," his stardom can be understood as a layered and relational phenomenon that exceeds the binary of origin and reception. His presence in Shanghai demonstrates that Korean participation in transnational popular culture predates late-twentieth-century globalization. Rather than emerging suddenly in the era of the Korean Wave, Korean global cultural visibility can be recontextualized as part of a longer genealogy of diasporic mediation. Kim Yom exemplifies how Korean cultural modernity has historically been forged through displacement, inter-Asian exchange, and strategic positioning within emergent media capitals. Situating him within this infrastructural history allows us to reconceptualize diaspora not as peripheral supplement to national cinema,

but as a constitutive force in shaping transnational media modernity.

5. *Pachinko* in the Streaming Era: Postmemory, Multilingualism, and the Diaspora as Global Narrative Subject

If Kim Yom represents the diaspora embedded within a regional media capital, the OTT series *Pachinko* (2022) signifies a critical juncture where the diaspora emerges as a global narrative subject. Unlike traditional Hallyu exports produced within the South Korean domestic studio system, *Pachinko* was conceived by the Korean-American diaspora and financed by U.S.-based streaming capital. This production context fundamentally alters the narrative's ontological status; it is a work that dramatizes the lives of Zainichi Koreans—ethnic Koreans in Japan who have historically occupied a precarious legal and social liminality—through a transnational and multi-layered lens.

The series foregrounds the intergenerational transmission of trauma, invoking what Marianne Hirsch (2008) terms "postmemory." Postmemory describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they "remember" only through the narratives, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. By weaving together the disparate temporalities of 1910s colonial Korea, postwar Osaka, and the high-finance world of 1980s Tokyo, *Pachinko* articulates diaspora as a layered experience of time rather than a static identity. Here, Clifford's (1994) "routes" framework becomes palpable: identity is not found in territorial fixity but unfolds through the continuous movement between disparate geographies and historical ruptures.

A defining feature of *Pachinko* is its polyglot structure, which seamlessly navigates between Korean, Japanese, and English. This multilingualism does more than provide aesthetic authenticity; it disrupts the monolingual address typical of national cultural regimes. As such, the diasporic condition is inherently one of "lived tension" (Clifford, 1994, p. 311), and the series enacts this linguistically by refusing to prioritize a single national tongue. Language in *Pachinko* functions as both a formidable barrier and a vital connective tissue, reflecting the complex negotiations of Zainichi subjects who must constantly translate their existence across hostile or indifferent linguistic environments.

Strategically, this linguistic diversity serves a dual purpose within the global cultural landscape. The nuanced use of Korean and Japanese dialects (such as the Jeju or Osaka dialects) preserves the radical

specificity of the diasporic experience, while the overarching narrative structure renders these intimate histories legible to a global audience. In this sense, the diaspora functions as an epistemic translator, rendering the specific ethical structures of the Korean family—such as intergenerational moral obligations and gendered endurance—into a globally resonant drama without erasing their historical particularity (Bennett, 2026).

This circulation, however, introduces a structural paradox. While *Pachinko*'s global reach is enabled by the infrastructural power of streaming platforms—forming a platformized diasporic assemblage—it simultaneously risks subsuming the narrative within a U.S.-based corporate logic. This renders diasporic memory susceptible to commodification and algorithmic visibility regimes. Conversely, these very platforms provide a transnational stage upon which histories marginalized in both Japanese and South Korean national historiographies can achieve unprecedented global legibility.

It is precisely within this tension that diasporic agency emerges. The diaspora operates here not as a passive object of representation, but as an analytical lens and active mediator of historical memory. By narrativizing the intimate consequences of Japanese colonialism and postwar discrimination, the series reframes localized historical trauma as a globally intelligible critique of displacement, racialization, and imperial modernity. In doing so, it strategically inhabits the very platform infrastructures that enable its circulation, exposing the inherent contradictions of the global media landscape.

Ultimately, the success of *Pachinko* signals a significant recalibration in the global imagination of Koreanness. Whereas earlier globally circulating Korean cultural forms frequently foregrounded romantic melodrama or the stylized aesthetics of K-pop, *Pachinko* brings into focus the structural violence of empire and the endurance of displaced subjects. In doing so, it repositions Koreanness not as an exoticized spectacle but as a historically sedimented condition shaped by migration, racialization, and global capital. Here, diaspora becomes a mode of historical consciousness, transforming personal memory into a transnational archive of survival. It demonstrates that the most resonant cultural articulations emerge from liminal spaces—sites where borders, empires, and modernities intersect and fracture.

6. Diaspora and Host-Society Cultural Heritage: Lee Sang-il and Kabuki Modernity

In 2025, the film *Kokuhō* emerged as a major cultural phenomenon in Japan, captivating audiences with

its grand portrayal of Kabuki—a revered UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage and a symbol of Japanese national identity. The film's immense popularity was further heightened by the fact that it was directed by Lee Sang-il, a third-generation Zainichi Korean, whose masterful command of such a hermetic traditional art form sparked a profound realization regarding the creative role of the diaspora. By intervening in the heart of Japanese aesthetics, Lee's work has forced a reevaluation of who possesses the authority to represent the "national," shifting the diasporic subject from the margins of society to the very center of cultural production.

Lee Sang-il's work must be situated within the specific historical and generational position of the Zainichi third generation. Where the first generation experienced colonial displacement directly and the second generation navigated postwar legal disenfranchisement, the third generation came of age in a Japan where formal legal barriers had been partially reduced—through the 1991 Special Permanent Residency status—yet cultural and social discrimination persisted in subtler, more diffuse forms (Chapman, 2008). For many Zainichi third-generation subjects, the question of identity shifted from survival and legal recognition to the more complex terrain of cultural belonging: whether to assimilate fully, to maintain a distinct ethnic identity, or to negotiate a third position that claimed both Japanese cultural fluency and Korean diasporic consciousness. It is precisely this generational shift—from the politics of recognition to the politics of cultural production—that defines the conditions of possibility for Lee's intervention in Kabuki, one of the most symbolically loaded domains of Japanese national heritage (Ryang, 2000).

From a diaspora studies perspective, Lee's positionality embodies James Clifford's (1994) notion of "dwelling in displacement," yet he extends this framework beyond the traditional negotiation of homeland-hostland duality. Lee's positionality creates what Homi Bhabha (1994) terms a "Third Space" of enunciation—an ambivalent site where the boundaries of Japanese-ness are negotiated and the fixity of national identity is disrupted. Rather than estranging him from the 'national' art of kabuki, this space enables a reflexive engagement with its regimes of authority, particularly its reliance on *iemoto* (lineage-based) legitimacy. By positioning himself as an internal interlocutor, Lee reframes kabuki not as a sealed national artifact but as a dynamic site of cultural contestation.

The domestic and international reception of *Kokuhō* serves as symptomatic evidence of this deeper structural intervention. The film's selection as Japan's official submission for the 98th Academy Awards and its historic box office gross of over ¥19 billion confirm its broad resonance; however, its true significance lies in its reactivation of dormant debates surrounding aesthetic authority. By scrutinizing the hereditary

structures of the stage, Lee deconstructs what Eric Hobsbawm (1983) famously called "Invented Traditions"—rituals that appear ancient but are strategically formalized to sustain institutional power. As noted by contemporary critics (The Japan Times, 2025; Nippon.com, 2025), the film forced a public reopening of questions regarding artistic merit versus institutional inheritance, effectively repositioning host-society heritage as a dynamic and contestable field where diasporic vision can intervene and redefine traditional aesthetics.

Ultimately, Lee's sustained engagement with Kabuki illustrates how diasporic agency refashions the host-society's cultural landscape. Following Stuart Hall's (1990) conceptualization of diaspora as a process of "becoming," Lee demonstrates that national heritage can be rearticulated through cinematic translation as a globally circulating symbolic resource. In this process, Kabuki is neither diluted nor merely preserved; it is reframed within a transnational grammar that renders its affective intensity legible beyond institutional boundaries. This aligns with Kang Sang-jung's (2007) vision of the "resident-alien" who, by occupying the interstices of the nation-state, transforms national traditions into transnational symbolic capital. Lee's work proves that the diaspora does not merely supplement national cinema but acts as a primary architect of its renewal, destabilizing the presumed alignment between cultural origin, institutional ownership, and interpretive authority.

7. The Transnational Return: Diasporic Mediators and the Sonic Expansion of K-Pop

The diasporic subjects in this section represent a historically distinct formation from both the colonial exiles of Shanghai and the Zainichi community. The Korean-American 1.5 and second generations—children of post-1965 immigration waves to the United States and Canada—came of age negotiating a double marginality: marked as "other" in the host society, yet estranged from homeland cultural expectations. It is this hyphenated experience, distinct in its historical conditions from other Korean diasporic formations, that these artists carried back into the South Korean cultural field. The figures discussed here serve different analytical functions: Solid and Jay Park exemplify the early structural intervention of Korean-American returnees; Sandara Park represents a supplementary Southeast Asian diasporic trajectory; while Rose, Mark, and Huh Yunjin illustrate a later phase in which the industry institutionalized diasporic recruitment as a global strategy.

The evolution of Hallyu cannot be fully understood without acknowledging a critical conjuncture: the transnational return of diasporic subjects to the South Korean cultural field. This movement was not a simple act of ethnic repatriation or a nostalgic homecoming; rather, it constituted a strategic intervention that fundamentally widened the aesthetic and emotional boundaries of Korean popular music from within. By re-entering the domestic market as internalized others who possessed the cultural codes of the global center, these diasporic mediators utilized the South Korean industry as a site of opportunity provided by the ancestral homeland. These figures functioned as vital conduits for global cultural flows, translating African-American musical traditions like R&B, hip-hop, and New Jack Swing into a local vernacular that would eventually form the DNA of K-pop. This reciprocal process transformed the domestic cultural field into a contact zone where national identity began to negotiate with global sensibilities, effectively priming the infrastructure for what would eventually become a post-national cultural phenomenon.

The pioneering group Solid, composed of Korean-Americans, serves as a quintessential example of this cultural graft. By introducing authentic R&B vocal techniques and sophisticated production values previously absent in the domestic scene, they shifted the listener's sensibility from melodic balladry to groove-oriented structures. This trajectory was followed by a wave of diasporic artists such as Park Joon-hyung (g.o.d), Sandara Park (2NE1), and Tiffany Young (SNSD), each bringing distinct diasporic textures—anging from the West Coast hip-hop ethos to Southeast Asian pop sensibilities—into the idol factory. These individuals did not merely perform; they negotiated with the host society's (Korea) linguistic and social norms, creating a productive tension between their hyphenated identities and the demands of national stardom.

This diasporic presence compelled the Korean music industry to adopt a more cosmopolitan and flexible outlook. For instance, the inclusion of English-speaking members was initially a pragmatic move for global marketing, but it soon evolved into a deeper structural shift where Koreanness began to be defined by cultural fluency rather than ethnic purity. Artists like Jay Park (Park Jae-beom) further radicalized this role. By navigating his career from a K-pop idol to a transnationally recognized hip-hop mogul, he demonstrated how a diasporic subject can dismantle the rigid hierarchies of the domestic industry. These mediators internalized global standards within the domestic production apparatus, effectively priming the Korean cultural field for its subsequent leap into the post-national era.

The contemporary landscape of K-pop continues to be shaped by this "diasporic engine," with artists like Rose (Blackpink) from Australia, Mark (NCT) from Canada, and Huh Yunjin (Le Sserafim) from New York. These performers do not just represent their groups; they act as cultural translators who bridge the gap

between local idol culture and global pop aesthetics. Their ability to code-switch seamlessly between languages and cultural registers allows K-pop to function as a shared symbolic repertoire for a global audience. Through their lived experience of marginality and hybridity in their respective home countries, they infuse K-pop with a sense of universal translatability that bypasses the limitations of national borders.

In this light, the diaspora's return to the domestic field transformed South Korea from a peripheral consumer of Western pop into a generative hub of global culture. By occupying the in-between space within the Korean industry, these artists did more than export a national brand; they expanded the country's cultural empathy and creative vocabulary by dismantling the rigid hierarchies of ethnic purity. Their presence proved that the Korean Wave was never a mono-directional export from a fixed center, but a multi-directional assemblage fueled by those who navigated the world through a hyphenated lens. This internal expansion provided the necessary sociocultural infrastructure for the emergence of fully decentralized, platform-driven productions. As the focus shifts from physical return to digital assemblage, the role of the diaspora as a creative engine becomes even more pronounced in post-national projects like *K-Pop Demon Hunters*.

8. *K-Pop Demon Hunters*: Diaspora as the Creative Engine of Post-National Assemblage

Released in 2025, the animated musical film *K-Pop Demon Hunters* represents a definitive paradigm shift in the global circulation of Korean popular culture. While earlier Hallyu products were frequently framed as successful exports of a national cultural industry, this project emerges from what may be described as a post-national platform assemblage. Produced through the convergence of Japanese and American capital and distributed via Netflix's global infrastructure, the film effectively decouples Koreanness from a singular geographic origin, reconstituting it within a transnational production ecology.

Crucially, this assemblage is not merely a financial arrangement but a profound manifestation of diasporic agency. The film's entire creative spine—from directors and screenwriters to the voice cast and musical performers—is composed of Korean diasporic subjects based in the United States and Canada. The film's rapid ascent to global streaming charts illustrates how culturally embedded narrative logics—affective codes, relational hierarchies, and melodramatic intensities—are mobilized by these diasporic creators who function as

the central creative engine. By centering figures like director Maggie Kang and a cast including Arden Cho, May Hong, and Ji-young Yoo, the production moves beyond cultural appropriation or imitation. Instead, it offers a translation of lived marginality where the in-between experience of growing up in North America provides the very texture of the story.

The film's cultural specificity is articulated through micro-ethnographic textures—culinary rituals, everyday gestures, speech rhythms, and subtle affective calibrations—that anchor the fantasy narrative in recognizable lifeworlds. These elements are not superficial aesthetic markers but emerge from the creative team's shared diasporic biography. The soundtrack, featuring artists such as Ejae, Audrey Nuna, and REI AMI, extends this articulation by fusing the hyper-synchronized energy of K-pop with the individualized sonic sensibilities of North American R&B and hip-hop. Through these layered aesthetic strategies, the film situates supernatural spectacle within a culturally grounded affective environment.

Central to this configuration is Rumi, whose concealed vulnerability functions as a metaphor for diasporic subjectivity. Her hidden identity—not only as a demon hunter but as a hybrid being suspended between the demonic and the human—materializes existential liminality. Her inability to disclose her ontological origins even to intimate peers reflects the internal displacement characteristic of diaspora, where the anxiety of non-belonging necessitates strategic masking. The oscillation between her public idol persona and her fractured interiority reframes displacement not as lack, but as productive tension embedded within the narrative's emotional architecture. In this sense, *K-Pop Demon Hunters* constructs a sophisticated cartography of diasporic psychology through the idiom of supernatural hybridity.

This narrative foregrounds a distinctive form of diasporic agency. Rather than reproducing nationalistic tropes, the film mobilizes the in-between positionality of its creators to recast K-pop as a flexible cultural logic—one capable of balancing cultural specificity with universal translatability. In doing so, Koreanness is repositioned not as an exotic national artifact but as a shared symbolic repertoire available for global reinterpretation. The chart success of the OST and the proliferation of Halloween costumes inspired by the film illustrate how diasporic-inflected Hallyu permeates everyday cultural practice. These participatory enactments transform the text into a lived infrastructure, through which Koreanness is continually performed, recalibrated, and reterritorialized by subjects long accustomed to inhabiting hyphenated identities.

9. Conclusion: Diaspora as the Architect of Post-National Cultural Assemblages

Across the five historical conjunctures analyzed in this study—Shanghai's colonial modernity, the streaming-era memory politics of *Pachinko*, Lee Sang-il's cultural intervention in Japan, the transnational return of diasporic musicians to the K-pop industry, and the post-national digital assemblage of *K-Pop Demon Hunters*—the Korean diaspora has undergone a profound structural transformation. In the 1930s, diasporic Koreans participated in regional media capitals from the precarious position of exile, serving as foundational mediators of an emergent Asian modernity. By the contemporary era, as exemplified by *Pachinko*, the diaspora has matured into a sovereign narrative subject, commanding global attention through the articulation of historical endurance.

The case of Lee Sang-il and the transnational return of K-pop artists introduce a further stage in this trajectory. Lee demonstrates how diasporic agency may extend beyond homeland culture to the reinterpretation of host-society heritage, such as Japanese Kabuki. Complementing this outward intervention is the inward movement of diasporic mediators—from the R&B pioneers like Solid to contemporary icons like Jay Park and Rose—who returned to the South Korean cultural field. These figures did not merely import global styles; they negotiated with the domestic host society to expand its cultural empathy and sonic vocabulary. By internalizing global sensibilities within the national production apparatus, they acted as a structural bridgehead that primed Hallyu for its subsequent global leap. This development marks a significant shift from diaspora as a peripheral supplement to diaspora as an active participant in the reconfiguration of both national and host symbolic systems.

Finally, in the current digital ecosystem, the diaspora functions as a primary creative engine, decoupling cultural production from national territory and reassembling it within transnational platforms. Taken together, this diachronic trajectory demonstrates an expanding spectrum of diasporic functions—from inter-Asian mediation and narrative witnessing to internal cultural expansion and post-national creative production. This trajectory fundamentally challenges the prevailing methodological nationalism that has long dominated Hallyu studies. In the post-national age, Koreanness increasingly operates as an affective deep structure rather than a territorial or ethnic marker. As this study has demonstrated, diasporic creators are uniquely equipped to mobilize this underlying cultural logic within global media formats, navigating the tension between local specificity and universal legibility. Their work underscores the fact that the diaspora is not a peripheral residue of migration, but a structural foundation that enables the continuous reinvention of

Korean cultural identity.

Taken together, the five conjunctures analyzed in this study suggest that diasporic mediation constitutes one of the structurally underestimated engines of Korean cultural globalization. This is not to claim that Hallyu is, in its entirety, a diasporic assemblage; the Korean state's industrial strategy, domestic creative labor, and global platform infrastructure all remain significant factors. By foregrounding the diasporic contributions that have largely been overlooked in existing scholarship, this study aims to enrich our understanding of how Hallyu came to be what it is-and to offer a more nuanced framework for interpreting its ongoing transformations in an increasingly post-national media landscape.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The five cases examined here, while selected according to explicit criteria of temporal, practical, and geopolitical diversity, cannot represent the full spectrum of Korean diasporic cultural production. The study does not address diasporic formations in Central Asia (the Koryo-saram), Southeast Asia beyond Sandara Park's supplementary case, or the Middle East, all of which constitute significant nodes in the global Korean diaspora. Nor does it engage substantively with questions of gender, generation, or class within diasporic communities—dimensions that, as noted in the theoretical section, are subject to their own forms of intra-diasporic flattening. It should be noted that not all cases examined in this study—such as the pre-Hallyu trajectory of Kim Yom or Lee Sang-il's intervention in Japanese national heritage—fall strictly within the conventional boundaries of the Korean Wave.

Nevertheless, these instances demonstrate that Korean participation in global cultural production long predates the late-1990s phenomenon. As seen in projects like *K-Pop Demon Hunters*, future diasporic activities will continue to diversify, complexify, and enrich the landscape of the Korean Wave. Future research should extend the analytical framework developed here to these underexplored formations, and should engage more directly with the intersectional dimensions of diasporic cultural production. Ultimately, the "global" in Global Korea is not a territorial expansion of the nation-state, but a historically achieved and still-contested outcome of diasporic mediation—one that remains open to further critical scrutiny.

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초 록

탈국가적 시선:
디아스포라적 매개와 '글로벌 코리아'의 형성

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본 연구는 한류를 국가 주도의 소프트파워나 전략적 수출 산업의 성공 사례로만 보는 기존의 국가주의적 시각에서 벗어나, 한국 디아스포라를 한류의 핵심 인프라이자 동력으로 재정의하는 것을 목적으로 한다. 이는 그동안 간과되었던 디아스포라의 기여를 재조명함으로써 한류 연구의 지평을 풍성하게 확장하려는 시도이다. 연구 방법론으로는 식민지적 망명에서 탈국가적 플랫폼 어셈블리지에 이르는 디아스포라적 매개의 통시적 궤적을 추적하기 위해 다섯 가지 역사적 분기점을 선정하였다. 구체적으로는 상하이의 김염, OTT 시리즈 <파친코>, 재일동포 감독 이상일, K-pop의 디아스포라 뮤지션, 애니메이션 <K-Pop 데몬 헌터스>를 통시적으로 분석하였다. 연구 결과, 한국의 문화적 근대성은 디아스포라의 '경계적 위치성'에 깊이 뿌리박고 있음을 확인하였다. 여기서 '한국성(Koreanness)'은 고정된 민족적.영토적 표지가 아니라, 국경을 가로질러 지속적으로 협상되는 관계적.탈영토적 구성물로 이해된다. 이들은 모국과 호스트 사회 사이에서 중첩된 문화적 코드를 번역하며 탈국가적 문화 상상력을 구축해 왔다. 결론적으로 본 연구는 디아스포라적 매개가 한국 문화의 세계화를 가능케 한 주요한 동력 중 하나임을 논증한다. 이러한 맥락에서 본 연구는 한류 연구의 지평을 '국가 중심'에서 보다 복합적인 디아스포라적 이해로 확장하는 데 기여하고자 하며, 이는 탈국가적 미디어 지형 속에서 지속되는 한류의 변모를 해석할 수 있는 보다 세밀한 분석틀을 제시하는 계기가 될 것이다.

핵심어: 한류, 디아스포라, K-pop, 근대성, 탈국가, 한국성

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