



Cultural Policy and Governance in the Digital Age

Mika (Jaeyun) Noh¹ 

Received: 15 February 2025/ Revised: 14 April 2025/ Published: 24 June 2025

Abstract

South Korea's cultural policy has played a significant role in its rise as a global soft power, influencing economic growth, international diplomacy, and national identity. This paper explores the mechanisms behind South Korea's cultural governance, particularly in the digital age, and examines its applicability to the Himalayan region. By analysing policies that have fostered the K-wave (Hallyu), such as government support for creative industries, digital infrastructure, and global partnerships, this study identifies key governance strategies that could be adapted for cultural policy development for developing countries. Based on the secondary data, this paper analyses the historical evolution of cultural development in South Korea. It discusses challenges of regulatory issues, funding structures, and balancing cultural preservation with globalisation. Through a comparative analysis, this study offers policy recommendations for leveraging cultural governance as a tool for economic advancement in emerging markets and also sustainable cultural diplomacy for developing countries.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Digital Governance, Hallyu, Policy Innovation, Soft Power, South Korea, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Cultural policy has become a crucial component of national development, particularly in the digital era, where media and technology enable rapid cultural dissemination. Countries worldwide are leveraging their cultural industries for economic growth and diplomatic and strategic advantages. Integrating digital platforms, streaming services, and globalised media distribution has reshaped how culture is produced, distributed, and

consumed. Cultural industries play a pivotal role in fostering national identity, generating economic revenue, and enhancing a country's global influence. South Korea is a prime example of how a well-structured cultural policy can contribute to national branding and soft power, turning cultural assets into economic and diplomatic leverage. Understanding these strategies for the Himalayan region presents an opportunity to develop policies.

¹ Art Market Strategy & Partnership Director, Niio Art & Chair, AI Art Forum, South Korea

✉ mikaroh0413@gmail.com

© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Himalayan Research Institute.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial which permits non-commercial reproduction and distribution of the work, in any medium, provided the original work is not altered or transformed in any way, and that the work is properly cited. For any further information, contact himalayanpolitics@gmail.com



Capitalise on its rich cultural heritage while embracing digital transformation. South Korea's remarkable transformation from a war-torn nation to a global cultural powerhouse offers valuable insights for emerging regions seeking to harness their cultural assets for economic and diplomatic gain. This paper examines South Korea's cultural governance strategies, particularly in the digital age, and explores their potential application to other developing regions, especially for the Himalayan region.

The Evolution of South Korean Cultural Policy

South Korea's Cultural Policy Framework

Cultural policy in South Korea has played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's identity and international standing. While the 20th century saw significant challenges to traditional Korean culture due to Japanese colonisation, the Korean War, and rapid industrialisation, the late 20th and early 21st centuries have witnessed a resurgence in cultural preservation and innovation. The rise of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) and the global influence of Korean popular culture have reinforced the importance of cultural policy as a key driver of South Korea's soft power. This paper explores the historical development of South Korea's cultural policy, key governmental and institutional efforts, and the role of digital transformation in enhancing cultural governance. (Jin, D. Y., 2020).

A defining moment in the evolution of South Korea's cultural policy occurred under the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998–2003), which recognised the strategic potential of cultural industries for both economic growth and national branding. In this period, the government dramatically increased its investment in the cultural sector, with the cultural industry budget rising from USD 14 million in 1998 to USD 84 million by 2001 (2003 White Paper on Culture and Industry).

This financial expansion was not an isolated measure but part of a broader state-led agenda to institutionalise and professionalise cultural development. In tandem with funding, legislative reforms laid the legal foundation for long-term cultural industry growth. The enactment of the Basic Law for Culture Industry in 1999 and the Online Digital Contents Industry Development Act in 2002 provided robust regulatory frameworks for safeguarding intellectual property, promoting fair competition, and encouraging innovation in digital content. These laws signalled a shift toward a more structured and rights-conscious cultural economy. Complementing this legal infrastructure was the creation of dedicated cultural governance institutions,

most notably the establishment of the Korea Culture and Content Agency (KOCCA) in 2001. As a central coordinating body, KOCCA played a pivotal role in designing policy interventions, distributing public funding, and fostering the international promotion of Korean content. Its formation symbolised the institutional maturity of South Korea's cultural policy framework, combining state investment, legal codification, and administrative capacity to sustain the country's growing influence as a global cultural powerhouse.

Public-Private Partnerships and Digital Transformation

Another driving force behind Korea's cultural ascent has been the strategic use of public-private partnerships. By working with private companies, the government has harnessed capital and creative expertise to develop a thriving ecosystem for content creation and global distribution. A clear example is the worldwide success of Korean dramas and K-pop, facilitated by collaboration between government agencies and entertainment conglomerates such as CJ ENM and HYBE. The government has leveraged resources and expertise by collaborating with private enterprises to create a robust ecosystem supporting cultural production, distribution, and promotion. These partnerships have facilitated the expansion of South Korean media content, including film, music, and digital art, to international audiences.

Moreover, digital transformation has redefined the boundaries of cultural policy. With the proliferation of online platforms, content consumption patterns have drastically changed. Recognising this, the South Korean government introduced initiatives to support digital content creation and safeguard digital intellectual property. These measures have enabled Korean cultural products – from online webtoons to digital art – to reach global audiences unprecedentedly and scale, strengthening Korea's cultural influence worldwide (Jin, D. Y., 2020).

Finally, from public initiatives to private companies, the Korean government is trying to create an impact through its cultural influence over other nations by transforming cultural identities into digital realities to expand its reach over a large community.

Table 1. Characteristics of Hallyu Policies by Administration

Administration	Hallyu Policy Phase	Key Policies & Initiatives
Kim Dae-jung Administration (1998–2003)	Beginning of Hallyu Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enactment of the Basic Law for Cultural Industry Promotion • Establishment of the Five-Year Cultural Industry Development Plan • First use this term in the policy agenda (2001)
Roh Moo-hyun Administration (2003–2008)	Institutionalization of Hallyu Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cultural industry is positioned as a key growth driver for the national economy and cultural welfare expansion. • Hallyu has been established as a key policy agenda for a "Cultural Powerhouse" • Formation of (Public-Private Partnership) • Establishment of the Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE)
Lee Myung-bak Administration (2008–2013)	Expansion of Hallyu Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of the 1st Content Industry Promotion Plan • Registration of Korean cultural heritage as UNESCO World Heritage • Globalization of Korean cuisine • Operation of the Expansion of Hallyu beyond entertainment to broader cultural domains
Park Geun-hye Administration (2013–2017)	Attempts at Hallyu Prosperity and Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restructuring government organisations around • Establishment of the 2nd Content Industry Promotion Plan • Promotion of the content industry as a driver of the Creative Economy • Launch of thein 2014 • Establishment of thein 2015
Moon Jae-in Administration (2017–2022)	Hallyu Policy. Revitalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempts to expand export markets and linked industries (Core Strategies for Strengthening Content Industry Competitiveness, 2018) • Creation of a dedicated Hallyu Promotion Department (Hallyu Support and Cooperation Division) • Formulation of the New Hallyu Promotion Policy
Yoon Suk-yeol Administration (2022–Present)	Global Expansion of Hallyu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plans to enhance Korea's global influence through K-content development • Establishment of a robust media and content industry • Plans to create an integrated support agency for cultural content exports • Expansion of financial support programs for small and medium-sized cultural content companies • Plans to establish a "control tower "for media and content industry regulation • Designation of 2023 and 2024 as "Years of Hallyu Tourism" to attract foreign tourists

Source: Twenty Years of Korean Wave: Past Achievements and Future Strategies, Chae, Jeeyoung, Korea Culture & Tourism Institute

The Rise of Hallyu as a Model for Cultural Diplomacy

Hallyu as a Case Study of Successful Cultural Policy Implementation

Hallyu's phenomenon exemplifies the successful convergence of cultural policy implementation and soft power strategy. Emerging in the late 1990s and gaining global momentum throughout the 2000s, Hallyu transformed South Korea into a key player in international cultural diplomacy. Rather than a spontaneous cultural trend, the Korean Wave was the product of a deliberate and well-coordinated policy framework that combined state-led initiatives with private sector dynamism.

At the heart of this strategy was a significant financial commitment from the South Korean government, which invested in cultural content production and international promotion. This funding allowed Korean cultural products – from K-pop and K-dramas to film, fashion, and beauty to develop high production values and global appeal. Institutional support further strengthened this ecosystem. Agencies such as the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) and the Cultural Heritage Administration provided targeted funding, professional training programs, and global marketing platforms for content creators. These institutions also acted as intermediaries between policymakers and industry stakeholders, ensuring agile policy responses to market demands.

Simultaneously, the government prioritised the development of cultural infrastructure, including digital platforms, media production hubs, and export channels, which facilitated the seamless distribution of Korean content across borders. Complementing these physical and institutional investments, South Korea established a robust legal framework to protect intellectual property rights, encouraging innovation and ensuring the sustainability of creative industries in a highly competitive global environment.

The success of Hallyu thus lies not only in the cultural resonance of its content but also in the strategic policy environment that enabled its rise. By aligning cultural investment with legal safeguards and institutional capacity, South Korea presented a replicable model of cultural diplomacy in the 21st century – one where culture becomes both an economic asset and a tool for international influence (Kim, J., 2016).

Strategies for the Global Expansion of Korean Cultural Products

The global expansion of Hallyu has been driven by a multifaceted strategy that engages multiple cultural domains—most notably K-pop, K-drama, and digital

arts—through government and private sector coordinated efforts. Rather than treating each domain in isolation, South Korea has implemented an integrated approach to cultural export, combining technological innovation, international marketing, and institutional support.

In the case of K-pop, entertainment companies have adopted a highly systematised model of talent cultivation, involving years of rigorous training in performance, language, and cultural adaptation. This production model, supported by strategic use of digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, has rapidly disseminated content to global audiences. World tours, live-streamed events, and interactive fan platforms have deepened international engagement, transforming K-pop into a powerful vector of South Korean soft power (Jin, D. Y., 2024).

K-dramas have followed a similar trajectory of internationalisation. By partnering with global streaming services like Netflix and Viki, South Korean producers have expanded their reach far beyond domestic audiences. Government incentives supporting subtitling, dubbing, and co-production agreements have made Korean television series more accessible and appealing to global viewers. The success of shows like *Crash Landing on You* and *Squid Game* reflects the strength of domestic storytelling and the effectiveness of global distribution strategies.

Meanwhile, in the digital arts sector, South Korea has positioned itself as a leader in creative technology. Significant investments in digital infrastructure and arts education have cultivated a new generation of artists skilled in animation, gaming, and interactive media. Government-backed initiatives have encouraged experimentation with emerging technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and artificial intelligence (AI), allowing South Korean digital creators to push the boundaries of cultural expression in an increasingly immersive global content market.

Collectively, these strategies demonstrate South Korea's comprehensive approach to cultural expansion, which fuses content excellence with policy support and digital innovation to maintain a competitive edge on the world stage.

Economic and Geopolitical Implications of Cultural Soft Power

The rise of Hallyu has not only transformed South Korea's cultural landscape but also yielded substantial economic gains and geopolitical leverage. As Korean popular culture continues to captivate global audiences, it has become a critical driver of South Korea's soft

power and economic diplomacy.

Economically, the Korean Wave has significantly boosted cultural exports. According to the Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE), exports related to *Hallyu* content and associated products reached approximately USD 14.2 billion in 2023, reflecting a 5% increase from the previous year. The content industry alone achieved record-breaking exports of USD 13.2 billion, up from USD 11.9 billion in 2022. In the first half of 2023, content exports reached USD 5.39 billion, underscoring sustained international demand. This export performance highlights the global resonance of Korean culture and its ability to create new economic opportunities, including collaborations with global luxury brands that now incorporate Korean aesthetics into their storytelling to appeal to aspirational consumers worldwide.

In addition to export growth, *Hallyu* has had a profound impact on tourism. Fans from across the globe visit filming locations featured in popular K-dramas and music videos, contributing to South Korea's tourism industry and local economies. This cultural tourism has helped diversify South Korea's tourism offerings, attracting visitors to traditional heritage sites and contemporary urban settings shaped by popular culture.

Beyond economic returns, *Hallyu* has functioned as a powerful tool of cultural diplomacy. Government-supported cultural exchange initiatives, such as international K-pop concerts, film festivals, and Korean language programs, have facilitated deeper intercultural understanding and strengthened bilateral relations. Jang and Paik (2012) noted that the strategic use of cultural content has enhanced South Korea's diplomatic presence by projecting a positive national image and fostering goodwill abroad.

More broadly, the popularity of Korean culture has enabled South Korea to project soft power on an unprecedented scale. *Hallyu* has shaped global cultural consumption patterns through its influence in fashion, language, cuisine, and lifestyle trends and expanded Korea's role in international cultural discourse. This fusion of economic value and diplomatic influence positions *Hallyu* not merely as a cultural phenomenon but as a central pillar of South Korea's global engagement strategy.

Comparative Analysis: Cultural Policy in the Himalayan Region

Spanning India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and China, the Himalayan region holds a wealth of cultural heritage shaped by centuries of spiritual, linguistic, and artistic

traditions. Yet, the governance and promotion of cultural industries across this region remain fragmented and under-resourced. This section analyses the current cultural policy landscape in the Himalayas and proposes strategies for sustainable cultural development, drawing comparative lessons from South Korea's cultural policy successes.

Fragmented Governance and Uneven Development:

The Himalayan region's cultural diversity is both a strength and a policy challenge. The presence of multiple ethnic groups, languages, and local customs complicates efforts to design cohesive cultural strategies. Administrative and legal frameworks differ significantly across national and subnational levels, often leading to inconsistent and poorly coordinated policies (Smith, 2020). In contrast to South Korea's centralised and well-funded approach to cultural promotion, Himalayan nations largely depend on state support and international aid, which tend to be insufficient or irregular.

Digital infrastructure is a major obstacle. Many remote areas still suffer from unreliable internet access, which limits the digitisation of cultural content and hinders participation in the global digital economy. Without robust digital connectivity, cultural practitioners remain disconnected from broader audiences, and young creators face barriers to innovation and visibility. Financial constraints exacerbate these challenges; cultural sectors often receive minimal budgetary allocations, making it difficult to sustain heritage programs or invest in digital transformation.

Navigating Digital and Financial Barriers:

Geographical and infrastructural barriers severely restrict digital access in the Himalayan highlands. Sparse broadband coverage hinders not only content dissemination but also administrative functions such as e-governance and data collection. Additionally, the lack of technical training and digital literacy among artists further limits their ability to adapt to digital tools for cultural production and outreach (Sharma, 2019).

The region faces chronic underinvestment in cultural sectors. In terms of funding, reliance on foreign grants, while helpful, often results in externally driven agendas that may not reflect local priorities. The absence of long-term, sustainable funding models impairs the growth of a resilient creative ecosystem.

Geopolitical Tensions and Restricted Cultural Exchange:

Persistent geopolitical conflicts among Himalayan nations, particularly between India and Pakistan, India and China, and India and Nepal, pose significant barriers to regional cultural collaboration. These disputes often result in restricted cross-border movement, visa limitations, and censorship of cultural

narratives, stifling opportunities for joint initiatives, academic exchanges, and collaborative heritage preservation. The 2017 Doklam standoff between India and China, ongoing tensions over Kashmir, and sporadic disputes along the India-Nepal border have heightened nationalistic rhetoric, leaving little room for trust-based cultural diplomacy (Thapa, 2021). As a result, regional cultural identities risk becoming politicised or overshadowed by state-centric narratives. Unlike South Korea's strategy, which capitalises on cross-sectoral and international cooperation to project cultural soft power, Himalayan countries struggle to forge a unified cultural front due to fractured bilateral relations and mutual suspicions. These conflicts limit the potential for a shared Himalayan cultural identity and inhibit the development of a transnational cultural policy framework.

Emerging Digital Initiatives and Untapped Potential:

Despite these challenges, digital technologies are beginning to offer new opportunities. Initiatives such as e-governance platforms in Uttarakhand demonstrate how technology can improve connectivity and service delivery in mountainous regions. Online repositories for traditional knowledge, oral histories, and crafts—some led by academic or non-profit institutions—have started documenting endangered cultural practices and making them accessible to future generations (Gupta, 2018). Digital marketplaces have also allowed artisans to connect with global buyers, offering new economic pathways for communities previously isolated from international trade.

Learning from South Korea: Institutional Models and Policy Lessons

South Korea's rise as a global cultural leader offers valuable insights for the Himalayan region. The Korean government has implemented comprehensive policies that provide financial support, training infrastructure, and international marketing channels for cultural industries. Importantly, Korea has maintained a balance between preserving traditional heritage and fostering contemporary innovation. Its success in embedding traditional motifs into globally appealing formats, whether in film, fashion, or digital art, demonstrates how cultural identity can be protected and reimaged for global audiences.

For the Himalayan region, adapting similar strategies could involve creating national cultural frameworks that guarantee sustained financial investment, developing digital infrastructure in remote areas, and establishing legal mechanisms that safeguard indigenous cultural rights while promoting innovation.

Toward a Regional Strategy for Cultural Promotion

Rather than isolated national efforts, the Himalayan region would benefit from a coordinated regional approach. Cross-border collaboration among India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet could facilitate shared cultural promotion strategies and help harmonise policy frameworks. Regional cultural hubs equipped with digital production facilities and training centres could serve as content creation and distribution anchors. These hubs could also help local artists leverage global digital platforms to share their work.

On the other hand, Pakistan and China can work together around their border, especially across Torkham, where the world's highest peaks are situated. This region has enormous potential through cultural exchange that can be displayed worldwide. In recent times, few developments have been seen among these states.

International institutions like UNESCO and ICIMOD (2024) can play a crucial role by offering technical expertise, funding, and platforms for cross-cultural exchange. With its established cultural industries, South Korea could serve as a strategic partner in capacity building and knowledge transfer.

Cautions and Considerations for Digital Transition

While digital transformation presents promising opportunities, it also brings regulatory and ethical challenges. Content regulation and censorship policies must be carefully calibrated to respect freedom of expression and cultural sensitivities. Financial models should prioritise sustainability through public-private partnerships, micro-financing schemes, and locally managed grant programs. Above all, care must be taken to avoid commodifying or diluting cultural identities. Policies must affirm the rights of communities to define, protect, and evolve their artistic expressions on their terms.

Conclusion

This study has examined the landscape of cultural governance and industry development in the Himalayan region, identifying persistent challenges such as fragmented institutional frameworks, inadequate digital infrastructure, and unstable funding mechanisms. Through a comparative lens, South Korea's cultural policy model offers valuable insights into how the Himalayan region might advance its cultural sectors by strategically integrating governance, technology, and innovation.

A key finding is the critical role of digital access in shaping the future of cultural industries. While digital platforms hold significant potential for preserving heritage, enhancing visibility, and generating income, the Himalayan region's digital divide continues to impede these possibilities. Without substantial

infrastructure and digital literacy investment, many communities remain excluded from participating in and benefiting from the digital cultural economy.

Moreover, inconsistencies in policy across national and subnational levels make it challenging to coordinate cultural development strategies. This fragmentation reduces the effectiveness of existing initiatives and limits the scalability of successful models. Addressing this issue requires governance structures that are both locally responsive and regionally coherent.

A unified cultural policy that reflects the region's pluralistic identities while promoting digital innovation and international cooperation will be vital. Such a framework should not merely replicate external models but adapt them to the Himalayas' unique socio-political and cultural dynamics. Future research should focus on developing governance mechanisms that are both context-sensitive and future-oriented, with particular attention to cross-border collaboration and sustainable financing strategies. Adapting strategies similar with Adapting strategies similar to those implemented in Korea may entail establishing national cultural frameworks that assure ongoing financial investment, advancing digital infrastructure in remote regions, and instituting legal mechanisms to protect indigenous cultural rights while fostering development innovation frameworks that guarantee sustained economic investment, developing digital infrastructure in remote areas, and establishing legal mechanisms that safeguard indigenous cultural rights while promoting innovation.

South Korea's trajectory from economic recovery to global cultural influence through deliberate cultural policy demonstrates the transformative power of state-supported creative industries. With its deep cultural reservoirs and growing interest in soft power, the Himalayan region can chart a similar path by investing in cultural infrastructure, supporting digital transitions, and fostering innovation rooted in tradition.

Regional integration and international partnerships will ultimately be key to overcoming structural barriers. By cultivating a shared vision for cultural sustainability, solving conflicts, and promoting digital inclusion, the Himalayan region can reposition its cultural assets as heritage to be preserved and as dynamic drivers of economic vitality and diplomatic engagement in the digital age.

References

- Business Korea. (2023). The battery industry grows 35% in 2023. Business Korea. <https://www.businesskorea.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=221227>
- BBC News. (2017). What's behind the India-China border stand-off? BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-40478813>
- Chae, J. (2023). Twenty years of Korean Wave: Past achievements and future strategies. Korea Culture & Tourism Institute.
- Dhiman, T. (2025). Empowering Uttarakhand: Rise of digital public infrastructure. Garhwal Post. <https://garhwalpost.in/empowering-uttarakhand-rise-of-digital-public-infrastructure/>
- Gupta, A. (2018). Digital connectivity in the Himalayas: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Himalayan Studies*, 12(3), 45–60.
- Guyot-Réchart, Berenice. 2016. *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalaya, 1910–1962*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development. (2024). Advancing regional and transboundary cooperation in the conflict-prone Hindu Kush–Himalaya. *Mountain Research and Development*, 37(4), 502–508. <https://doi.org/10.1659/MRD-JOURNAL-D-17-00008.1>
- Jang, G., & Paik, W. K. (2012). Korean Wave as tool for Korea's new cultural diplomacy. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 2(3), 196–202. <https://doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2012.23026>
- Jin, D. Y. (2020). Transnationality of popular culture in the Korean Wave. *Korea Journal*, 60(1), 9–11. <https://doi.org/10.25024/kj.2020.60.1.9>
- Jin, D. Y. (2024). The rise of digital platforms as a soft power apparatus in the New Korean Wave era. *Media, Culture & Society*, 9(2).
- Kim, J. (2016). Hallyu (Korean Wave) and its implications for cultural policy. *The Korean Journal of Policy Studies*, 31(3), 101–118.
- Korean Culture and Information Service. (2023). Hallyu white paper 2023. Author.
- Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. (2004). 2003 white paper on culture and industry. Author.
- Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. (2024). New ministry strategy to create 'Global Pivotal State of Culture'. Korea.net.

- <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=252002>
- Ministry of Science and ICT. (2023). Digital strategy of Korea. Author.
- Pragya. (n.d.). Protection of cultural diversity in the Himalayas.
<https://www.pragya.org/doc/Cultural-diversity.pdf>
- Sharma E, Molden D, Wester P, Shrestha R. 2016. The Hindu Kush Himalayan Monitoring and Assessment Programme: Action to sustain a global asset. *Mountain Research and Development* 36(2):236–239.
- Sharma, R. (2019). Cultural governance in the Himalayan region: A comparative analysis. *Asian Cultural Studies*, 25(2), 78–92.
- Smith, J. (2020). Cultural diversity and policy implementation in the Himalayas. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 26(4), 101–115.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2018.1514654>
- Thapa, M. (2025, February 15). Geopolitical rivalry between India and China in Nepal. *Journey for Sustainable Development and Peace Journal*, 3(1), 106–122.