



## *CULTURAL COOPERATION BETWEEN SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN*

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the evolving dynamics of cultural cooperation and tourism between South Korea and Japan in the 21st century. Despite political tensions and a complex historical legacy, the two nations have developed robust frameworks for cultural exchange and people-to-people diplomacy, particularly through pop culture, academic initiatives, and sustainable tourism. This study explores key areas of bilateral cultural collaboration, current trends in tourism, and the socio-political implications of this soft power engagement, drawing on case studies, recent statistics, and policy initiatives. The paper concludes with a discussion on future directions and policy recommendations for strengthening bilateral cultural tourism.

### *Introduction*

The relationship between Japan and South Korea has long posed a challenge to conventional International Relations (IR) theories. From a realist viewpoint, nations that share common allies and face similar threats are expected to develop cooperative ties. Given their shared security concerns, one would anticipate a close partnership between Tokyo and Seoul. Liberal theory also struggles to explain the persistent friction, as both countries are liberal democracies with vibrant political systems, civil liberties, cultural similarities, and deeply interlinked economies. Despite occasional periods of collaboration and aligned strategic objectives, their bilateral ties are more often marked by tension—reaching a particularly low point in recent years, arguably the worst since diplomatic normalization in 1965<sup>1</sup>. In contrast, constructivist theory offers a more compelling explanation by emphasizing the influence of identity, collective memory, and cultural narratives on national interests and policy. The deeply emotional and historical narratives within each society frequently undermine attempts at rapprochement. South Korea often perceives Japan's apologies for its colonial past and wartime actions as insincere, while Japan expresses frustration that the Republic of Korea continues to reject what it sees as sincere efforts at reconciliation.

South Korea and Japan, two leading nations in East Asia, have historically shared intertwined cultural, political, and economic paths. Although marked by

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<sup>1</sup> Kim, S., & Kingston, J. (2014). *Legacies of Colonialism: Korea–Japan Historical Disputes*. East Asian Politics Review, 12(3), 89–104.



colonization and postwar disputes, contemporary South Korea–Japan relations also exhibit strong undercurrents of cooperation, particularly in the spheres of culture and tourism. These sectors have emerged as arenas of soft diplomacy, promoting reconciliation and regional integration. This paper investigates the modes of cultural cooperation and the evolution of tourism trends, seeking to highlight how cultural diplomacy can transcend political divides and foster mutual understanding.

### *Historical Background of Korea–Japan Cultural Relations*

The cultural relationship between Korea and Japan spans over a millennium, marked by both rich exchanges and periods of conflict. In antiquity, Korea served as a vital conduit for the transmission of Chinese cultural, religious, and technological innovations to Japan. During the Three Kingdoms period, for example, Korean kingdoms such as Baekje and Silla played a central role in introducing Buddhism, Confucian texts, and advanced metallurgical and architectural techniques to the Japanese archipelago. This early transmission laid the foundation for enduring cultural commonalities in East Asia, particularly visible in shared religious practices, artistic styles, and governance models.

However, the harmony of early cultural exchange was significantly disrupted by later historical developments, especially Japan's colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945. This period remains a deeply contested chapter in the collective memory of both nations. Under colonial rule, the Japanese government sought to suppress Korean language and identity, while imposing assimilation policies that aimed to transform Koreans into loyal subjects of the Japanese Empire. This era left long-lasting scars, fueling nationalist sentiments and shaping postwar diplomatic narratives.

Following Japan's defeat in World War II and Korea's liberation in 1945, diplomatic normalization was achieved only two decades later, with the signing of the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea. While this treaty established formal diplomatic ties and opened the door to economic and cultural exchange, it did not resolve deeper issues related to historical interpretation and national identity. Contentious topics—such as Japanese history textbooks, compensation for wartime labor, and the treatment of "comfort women"—have continually reignited public outrage and hindered trust-building efforts<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, periods of cultural rapprochement have occurred. The 1998 joint declaration by South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and Japanese Prime Minister Keizō Obuchi emphasized mutual respect, historical understanding, and cultural exchange as cornerstones for a new partnership. In the early 2000s, South

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<sup>2</sup> Lee, H. (2006). *Cultural Transmission in East Asia: Korea and Japan in Antiquity*. *Journal of Asian History*, 18(1), 21-35.



Korea lifted long-standing bans on Japanese popular culture, leading to a surge in mutual appreciation, especially among younger generations. Since then, cultural cooperation has expanded significantly, though it continues to coexist with political tensions rooted in unresolved historical grievances.

### *Cultural Cooperation as Soft Power Strategy*

Cultural exports—particularly in music, film, and animation—have significantly contributed to bilateral engagement. The Korean Wave (Hallyu), driven by K-pop, dramas, and cinema, has seen tremendous popularity in Japan, while Japanese anime, manga, and J-pop continue to maintain strong followings in South Korea. Collaborative productions, such as K-pop concerts in Tokyo Dome or Japanese drama remakes in Korea, have reinforced these ties.

### *The Rise of “J-Ryū” in Korea: A New Wave of Japanese Popular Culture*

In recent years, Korean society has witnessed a remarkable surge in the popularity of Japanese culture—termed “J-Ryū” (日流). From anime and J-POP to travel in Japan, the influence is increasingly visible. Walking through busy urban streets, it is not uncommon to see signs written in Japanese and hear Japanese music. This would have been unimaginable just 25 years ago. Before the opening of Japanese popular culture in October 1998, initiated by then-President Kim Dae-jung, Japanese cultural content was still taboo in Korean society. Although the initial stages of cultural opening were marked by tensions over historical and cultural differences, the mutual appreciation of each other's cultures has since led to deeper understanding and interaction.

### *A Nation Where Everyone Seems to Have Traveled to Japan*

According to data from the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), between January and June of last year, approximately 10.72 million tourists visited Japan. Of these, over 3.13 million were Koreans—accounting for 29.2% of total visitors. During the March 1st holiday period, nearly 95% of Korea-to-Japan travel packages were sold out, and most flights were fully booked.

This trend is especially pronounced among younger generations. From 2012 to 2021, JNTO data shows that people in their 20s and 30s comprised 45.7% of Korean travelers to Japan. These tourists are drawn to experiences ranging from shopping and cuisine to unique attractions like maid cafés. Park Jun-sik (25), who traveled to Tokyo during the Lunar New Year, said, “I was surprised to see so many Korean patrons at the maid café. A few years ago, Korean visitors rarely sought out these places. Now, people seem more interested in exploring authentic, everyday aspects of Japanese culture.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Tang Yongliang. An Analysis of the Thought of East Asian Cultural Community in Japan. Journal of Yanbian University(Social Science), 2013, 46(1): 42-48.



At the same time, the number of Japanese tourists visiting Korea is also on the rise. From January to September last year, Japanese tourists numbered 1.58 million, surpassing Chinese visitors to become the largest group of foreign travelers to Korea. The Korean cultural wave (Hallyu) and improving bilateral relations are cited as major factors. Notably, Japanese youth in their 20s and 30s—main consumers of Korean culture—make up half of these travelers. A survey by *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (The Nikkei) found that 37% of Japanese respondents had a favorable view of Korea in 2023—the highest rate since 2015<sup>4</sup>.

#### *The Cultural Opening of 1998*

Enjoying Japanese culture—whether through travel, media, or music—was unimaginable 25 years ago due to lingering anti-Japanese sentiment. However, beginning in the 1990s, a more open social atmosphere led to increased underground consumption of Japanese media, including pirated videos and plagiarized music. This trend highlighted the need for formal and legal cultural access.

Professor Park Seong-bin (Public Administration) noted, “Japan’s economic assistance during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis laid the groundwork for the Kim Dae-jung–Obuchi Declaration.” Following this, President Kim’s administration formally initiated the opening of Japanese popular culture in October 1998, signaling bilateral friendship and phased cultural liberalization.

The process began with the release of Japanese films like *Kagemusha* and *Hana-bi*, eventually expanding to include games in 2000 and all media content (except broadcast television) by 2004.

During the early stages, Japanese literature and film gained significant attention. Japanese novels captivated Korean readers with their subtle writing styles and emotional depth. Nobel Laureate Kenzaburō Ōe’s *A Personal Matter* and *Okinawa Notes* were notable examples, addressing themes of post-war reconstruction and historical trauma. Since the mid-2000s, Japanese novels have consistently occupied about 30% of Korea’s literary market. Films such as *Love Letter* and *Crying Out Love in the Center of the World* were also major hits, with *Love Letter* being re-released six times due to popular demand. The line “Ogenki desu ka?” (Are you well?) from the film became widely parodied and memed.

Professor Kim Sun-hee (International Studies) remarked, “Japanese literature and cinema have steadily contributed to fostering emotional familiarity and understanding, laying the foundation for today’s popularity of Japanese culture.”

#### *The Spread of Korean Culture in Japan*

Conversely, Korean culture has also gained traction in Japan. Despite early fears that Japanese media would overwhelm Korean culture, the opposite has

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<sup>4</sup> Japan Animation Association. Animation Industry Report 2017, 2018.



occurred. The Korean Wave began with the 2003 drama *Winter Sonata* and gained momentum through *Dae Jang Geum* in 2005, introducing Japanese audiences to Korean cuisine and lifestyle.

By the mid-2000s, K-POP groups such as Kara and Girls' Generation became popular, eventually paving the way for global acts like BTS and TWICE. Recent Korean dramas—*Crash Landing on You*, *Itaewon Class*, and *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*—have topped Netflix Japan's rankings for months. Today, Korean culture has fully entered Japanese mainstream media.

Notably, the epicenter of youth culture has shifted from Tokyo's traditional hotspots like Ginza and Harajuku to Shinjuku's Koreatown, which ranked as the most popular station among female students.

Strategic cooperation in content production is also emerging. For instance, *Solo Leveling*, a hit Korean webtoon, was adapted into an anime by Japan's A-1 Pictures and distributed in the U.S.—achieving international success. Professor Park commented, “This collaboration combines Korea's strength in webtoons and Japan's anime production skills. While co-development is rare in industries like automotive manufacturing, cultural industries allow for synergistic cooperation.”

#### *The Unique Power of Culture*

The opening of Japanese pop culture in Korea significantly reshaped the domestic cultural industry and transformed Korea-Japan cultural exchanges. Today, Japanese culture in Korea is largely disseminated through new media platforms. Professor Kim noted, “Fears of cultural dependency and concerns about low-quality content have largely dissipated. Korea's cultural industries have proven globally competitive, and the legitimization of Japanese content distribution has rendered such criticisms obsolete.”<sup>5</sup>

South Korea has transitioned from nationalist cultural protectionism to proactive cultural openness. Meanwhile, in Japan, Korean culture is increasingly embraced across platforms—TV dramas, films, music, fashion, and cuisine— independent of political relations.

Cultural production and consumption are now driven by younger generations. While older generations often tie culture to historical or political issues, youth are more open and nuanced. A Korea Research survey found that 45.1% of respondents in their 20s and 30s had a favorable view of Japan, higher than the national average of 39.5%.

“Young people today tend to separate culture from politics,” said Professor Park. “They enjoy Japanese travel and media, while remaining aware of historical

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<sup>5</sup> 일본 내 한류의 현황과 한일관계: 한류의 문화외교 기능을 중심으로  
한영균 - 국제학논총, 2020 - dbpia.co.kr





issues.” Professor Kim added, “Cultural consumption is an active process of interpretation and meaning-making. Broadening such cultural exchange can serve as a vital tool for dialogue and contribute to building a forward-looking bilateral relationship.”

The future of Korea–Japan relations lies in the hands of the younger generation. Yet this requires institutional support. During last year’s bilateral summits in

#### *Academic and Civil Society Collaboration*

Academic partnerships, student exchange programs, and sister city agreements have provided structural support for long-term cultural cooperation. Institutions such as the Japan Foundation and the Korea Foundation regularly sponsor language education, cultural exhibitions, and policy dialogues.

In many cases, geopolitics does not reflect friendship between nations but instead reveals the dynamics of power and influence. Nations often prioritize self-interest, even when they share historical or cultural similarities. South Korea and Japan, despite having interconnected economies and cultural exchanges, have struggled to build substantial cooperation at the national level in the cultural domain<sup>6</sup>. Historical tensions, rooted in colonial and wartime experiences, have shaped their contemporary diplomatic relations and continue to influence mutual perceptions.

Although both countries are active participants in global trade and share robust tourism and cultural industries, the development of a joint cultural community has been limited. For example, while economic cooperation is significant, cultural collaboration tends to lag, largely due to a desire to maintain national identity and cultural uniqueness. Japanese animation and Korean pop music (K-pop) have become defining elements of each country’s soft power strategy, widely recognized as global cultural exports. In 2020 alone, South Korea’s cultural content exports exceeded \$10.8 billion USD, and Japanese animation continues to be a major contributor to the country’s cultural economy.

From a critical geopolitical perspective, the export of popular culture is not just about entertainment or commerce, but also serves as a tool for cultural influence and soft power projection. This cultural competition—especially among younger generations—transforms media products into symbolic assets of national identity. The global prominence of U.S. pop culture throughout the 20th century, for example, illustrates how soft power can shape international perceptions and cultural trends.

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<sup>6</sup> Sami Moisiu, Anssi Passi. From geopolitical to geoeconomic. The changing political rationalities of state space. *Geopolitics*, 2013, 18(2): 267-283.



In the current geopolitical climate, territorial dominance has given way to competition over market influence. South Korea and Japan, while maintaining a shared interest in expanding their cultural reach, often find themselves in competition rather than collaboration. The fear of cultural homogenization and the loss of national identity poses a barrier to deeper integration. As a result, the formation of a unified East Asian cultural bloc remains a complex and distant goal.

Unlike the competitive dynamics often found in the realm of contemporary popular culture, traditional culture in East Asia has long been a platform for integration and mutual learning, particularly between South Korea and Japan. These two nations share deep historical roots in Confucian philosophy, which continues to shape their social norms and cultural frameworks. Confucian values—such as hierarchical family structures, respect for elders, and the concept of friendship based on shared aspirations—serve as a cultural bridge that fosters mutual understanding.

The establishment of Confucius Institutes and collaborative cultural initiatives reflect the willingness of both governments to engage in cultural diplomacy. Although originally associated with Chinese cultural outreach, South Korea's early adoption of Confucian institutions and its cultural proximity to Japan have made it a crucial node in regional philosophical continuity. Historical commonalities in traditions such as Buddhism, classical arts, and moral education have provided fertile ground for dialogue and cooperation.

Official policy documents, such as Japan's *Cultural Policy Framework* (2011) issued by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, explicitly acknowledge the importance of cultural exchange with neighboring East Asian countries, including South Korea. These efforts aim to enhance mutual understanding and solidarity through heritage-based collaboration. Joint forums focused on Confucianism, Buddhism, and traditional arts in the 21st century underscore a growing recognition by both governments of the importance of cultural heritage in regional diplomacy<sup>7</sup>.

#### *New Media and Popular Culture as Tools for Cultural Exchange*

The rise of digital technology and new media platforms has transformed the dynamics of cultural exchange between South Korea and Japan, particularly among younger generations. With the spread of high-speed internet and the proliferation of user-generated content platforms, individuals in both countries now have unprecedented access to each other's cultural products. Popular forms such as vlogs, food broadcasting ("mukbang"), and lifestyle videos allow for informal, everyday cultural exchange that deepens mutual familiarity.

In the post-COVID era, cultural sectors such as food and tourism are poised for renewed growth. Japanese and Korean food products, for example, maintain

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<sup>7</sup> Shin, J., & Ito, T. (2020). *Tourism Amid Tensions: Korea–Japan Relations in the 21st Century*. East Asia Forum Quarterly, 17(2), 65–74.



steady popularity in each other's markets, suggesting strong potential for continued economic and cultural synergy. In regions where cross-cultural influence is especially prominent—such as Busan and Fukuoka, which are geographically proximate and share active tourism links—digital promotion through new media can amplify tourism and cultural exchange initiatives<sup>8</sup>.

In addition to food and tourism, the realms of gaming, television, and film have also become areas of transnational collaboration. Multinational investments in these industries have been increasing, as both countries recognize the strategic importance of media content as a soft power tool. The cultural similarities between Japan and South Korea—ranging from aesthetic preferences to narrative themes—make their creative industries mutually resonant. These commonalities not only enhance the regional appeal of media products but also reduce the barriers to cross-cultural consumption.

As a result, the integration of traditional values with the innovative potential of new media offers a powerful mechanism for deepening cultural ties between South Korea and Japan. While historical tensions may persist, the expansion of soft power through digital and cultural exchange signals a promising path toward future cooperation.

#### Perceptions of Korea–Japan Cooperation by Sector: Public Opinion Trends

There is a broad consensus among the South Korean public on the need for close cooperation between South Korea and Japan in the fields of economy, culture and sports, and politics and diplomacy. However, opinions are divided regarding cooperation in military and security affairs.

Despite persistent concerns that Japan may pose a threat to South Korea's economy, national security, and prospects for inter-Korean unification, a parallel understanding has emerged that cooperation between the two nations is nonetheless necessary. Survey data reveal that a majority support close cooperation in economic (66%), cultural and sports (61%), and political and diplomatic (59%) domains. In contrast, views on the military and security sector are more polarized: 49% favor close cooperation, while 44% oppose it, indicating a relatively narrow margin<sup>9</sup>.

Support for Korea–Japan cooperation in the aforementioned non-military fields exceeds 50% across all age groups, ideological orientations, and evaluations of current bilateral relations. In contrast, perspectives on military and security cooperation vary significantly depending on demographics and political stance.

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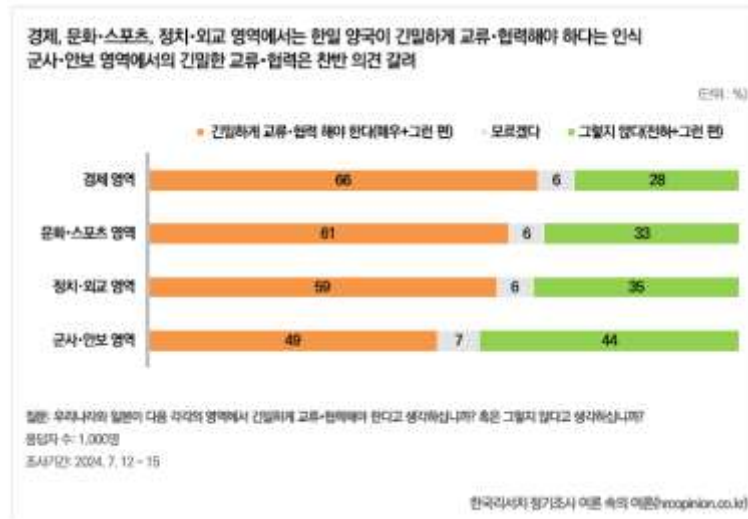
<sup>8</sup> 한일 풍속화 이벤트 전시를 통한 문화관광 교류 활성화 고찰  
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<sup>9</sup> <https://press.ajou.ac.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=10120>





Specifically, older respondents (aged 60+), conservatives, individuals who evaluate current Korea–Japan relations positively, and those with a high level of favorability toward Japan (over 51 points on a 100-point scale) tend to support such cooperation. Conversely, people in their 30s and 50s, progressives, those who view current bilateral relations negatively, and individuals with low favorability toward Japan (below 24 points) are more likely to oppose military and security cooperation.



## Conclusion

Cultural cooperation and tourism between South Korea and Japan offer valuable insights into the potential of soft power in international relations. By promoting people-to-people connections and fostering a shared appreciation of culture, both nations can contribute to regional stability and mutual growth. In an era marked by global uncertainty and digital transformation, cultural tourism stands as a promising avenue for sustainable diplomacy and economic collaboration.

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