The Rise and Challenge of South Korean Cultural Hegemony in Malaysia: Soft Power Dynamics, Cognitive Warfare, and the 'SEAblings' Uprising

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Abstract

The phenomenon of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) in Southeast Asia represents a methodically executed deployment of cultural soft power. Focusing on Malaysia as a primary case study, this paper examines the trajectory of South Korean influence from its inception under the state-mandated 1982 Look East Policy to recent digital friction in early 2026. Utilizing a qualitative methodological framework that triangulates policy documentation, media metrics, and digital discourse, this study maps cultural evolution against Gramscian Cultural Hegemony and digital information warfare frameworks. Findings indicate that early state-sponsored emulation provided the psychological pre-conditioning necessary for later cultural saturation; however, this influence faced increasing friction rooted in perceived developmental hierarchies and immigration disputes. When transnational Southeast Asian netizens rallied under the collective digital identity "SEAblings" following concert and travel controversies, their coordinated backlash signalled an active re-negotiation of soft power reception. Rather than marking an absolute decline, this paper demonstrates how networked counter-publics weaponize digital spaces to contest cultural hegemony, highlighting the limits of one-way soft power deployment in an interconnected digital landscape

Keywords: *Cultural Hegemony, Cognitive Warfare, Soft Power Dynamics, Digital Resistance, Korean Wave (Hallyu), Digital Discourse Analysis*

1.0 Introduction

The phenomenon of the Korean Wave represents one of the most successful and methodically executed deployments of cultural soft power in modern history [1], [2]. In Southeast Asia, particularly within the demographic and economic landscape of Malaysia, the reception of South Korean cultural exports evolved from a utilitarian, state-mandated economic alignment into an overwhelming cultural obsession that dominated media consumption for decades. However, to understand the meteoric rise and subsequent friction surrounding this influence, Hallyu must be analyzed beyond the confines of entertainment. Evaluated through the lens of information and media warfare, the trajectory of South Korean cultural hegemony in Malaysia illustrates a profound transition from state-led psychological conditioning to a volatile, grassroots counter-offensive in cognitive warfare [3].

To rigorously analyze these dynamics, this study draws on four core theoretical concepts. First, cultural hegemony, based on Antonio Gramsci's work, refers to the process through which a dominant group maintains leadership not merely through coercive state power, but also by manufacturing consent. Through this process, recipient populations may internalize external cultural values and hierarchies as natural, legitimate, or superior. Second, soft power and narrative friction, grounded in Joseph Nye's framework, emphasizes that soft power operates through attraction rather than coercion. Narrative friction emerges when cultural exports encounter localized normative boundaries, structural inequalities, or perceptions of condescension, potentially transforming admiration into skepticism. Third, cognitive and information friction describes the psychological and ideological tensions that arise when target audiences actively challenge, reinterpret, or reject dominant state-sponsored cultural

narratives within the digital information environment. Finally, digital resistance and networked counter-publics refers to decentralized grassroots collectives that use social media infrastructures to engage in "connective action," challenge established power hierarchies, and counteract one-way cultural flows.
The foundations of this cultural importation were established not by pop culture, but by the "Look East Policy" initiated by the Malaysian government in 1982 [4], [5]. Driven by an effort to emulate the post-war economic miracles of East Asia, this policy effectively functioned as a state-sponsored psychological operation. By positioning South Korea as a paragon of modernity, relentless discipline, and economic success, the state provided the "psychological pre-conditioning" that made the Malaysian populace highly receptive to South Korean cultural dominance in the ensuing decades [6].

As South Korean cultural dominance matured during the late 2010s and early 2020s, the state refined its strategic communication to mitigate sociocultural friction. Initial cultural exports occasionally triggered moral panics within conservative Islamic contexts (such as the 2015 B1A4 concert controversy), which precipitated state-sanctioned moral policing. In response, South Korea executed a strategic pivot: by collaborating with the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia to curate "Halal-Hallyu" products, the state successfully neutralized conservative resistance, facilitating the seamless integration of Korean soft power into mainstream Muslim consumption patterns.

Yet, as Antonio Gramsci's theory of Cultural Hegemony posits, dominance maintained through consent is fragile when the oppressed recognize the underlying power structures [7], [8]. The architecture of South Korea's cultural hegemony was built upon unexamined regional hierarchies, unreciprocated respect, and a brand of ethno-nationalism that masked deep-seated "ladder thinking". In this developmental hierarchy, modern South Korean ethnic nationalism often viewed Southeast Asian nations with condescension, treating them as secondary consumers or societal inferiors despite reaping billions in economic benefits from their adoration.

In early 2026, this fundamentally asymmetrical dynamic faced severe strain and active public contestation. Ignited by a string of systemic grievances; ranging from South Korea's stringent enforcement of the K-ETA immigration system against Thai nationals to racially charged online attacks following a "January 2026 Day6 concert incident" in Kuala Lumpur had led to a massive digital backlash erupted across the region. Abandoning historical squabbles, netizens from across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations united to form a collective digital identity known as the "SEAblings".

This rupture transcended a simple toxic fandom dispute; it represented a sophisticated counter-offensive in cognitive warfare [9].Southeast Asian netizens transcended conventional pop-cultural discourse to explicitly "weaponize societal metrics," such as South Korea's demographic collapse, mental health crises, and artificial beauty standards. By executing a highly coordinated cognitive attack without centralized leadership, the networked public effectively challenged the "psychological spell of Hallyu" [3].

By mapping the historical trajectory of South Korean influence in Malaysia against established theories in strategic communication, digital conflict, and cognitive warfare, this paper transitions from a regional case study into a robust analysis of modern digital warfare [10]. Ultimately, this study seeks to demonstrate how soft power can be systematically deployed by the state, and how digital counter-publics actively contest, negotiate, and induce friction against asymmetrical cultural dominance [11].

2.0 Methodology

To examine the historical trajectory of South Korean influence in Malaysia, a chronological methodological framework was adopted. This approach is employed to facilitate a systematic analysis of how processes and action systems evolve over time [12]. Within this context, the study assesses how the trajectory of South Korean influence aligns with established theories in strategic communication and information warfare. To ensure analytical rigor and support theoretical mapping, data were collected and triangulated across three distinct qualitative streams: policy and geopolitical documentation, media and economic metrics, and digital discourse analysis. This application of methodological triangulation is crucial, as it enhances the credibility, validity, and depth of research findings [13], [14], while providing a more comprehensive, multifaceted understanding of complex socio-political phenomena [15]. This multi-method approach remains consistent with established practices in the field [12], [16]. Figure 1 shows the Triangulated data collection framework.

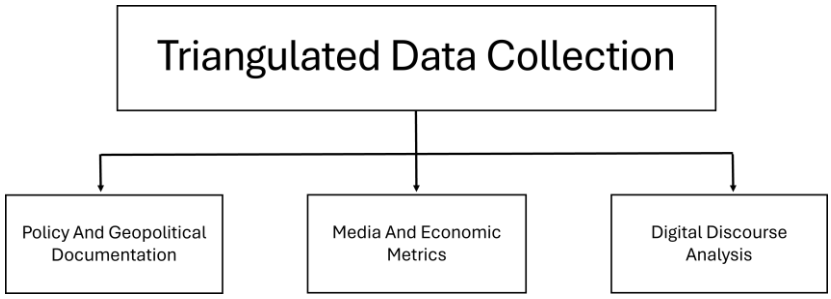


Figure 1. Three streams of data collection used in this study

Analytical Procedure and Triangulation Strategy

Data were systematically gathered and triangulated across three distinct qualitative streams to ensure analytical rigor and contextual validity (Table 1). The analysis proceeded through three interconnected stages. First, texts from all three data streams were coded using thematic analysis. The resulting codes were organized into four core categories: State Pre-Conditioning, Institutional Adaptation, Perceived Hierarchies, and Digital Counter-Discourse. Second, the digital discourse was examined through critical discourse analysis to identify underlying power dynamics, linguistic framing, and processes of collective identity formation. Third, cross-stream triangulation was conducted by pairing macro-level policy directives with cultural penetration data to establish the structural baseline of hegemony. These findings were then compared with micro-level digital discourse to identify points of friction, contestation, and resistance.

TABLE 1
Triangulated Qualitative Data Framework

Data Stream	Selection Criteria & Materials Analyzed
1. Policy & Geopolitical Documentation	• Bilateral agreements, state speeches, and policy frameworks (1982–2025). • **Focus:** Look East Policy, New Southern Policy, and Halal-Hallyu frameworks.
2. Media & Economic Metrics (Macro Indicators)	• Box-office reports, trade statistics, academic reception studies (2000–2026). • **Focus:** Film/TV distribution, tourism data, and industry expansion.
3. Digital Discourse Analysis (Micro Indicators)	• Public social media posts, viral threads, hashtags (#SEAblings, #Day6, #Knet) collected between Jan 31 – Feb 28, 2026. • **Focus:** Rhetorical themes, counter-graphics.

Limitations of Digital Data

Social media trends and viral hashtags offer detailed insights into the opinions of tech-savvy young people. However, these online discussions do not represent the entire population, nor do they mean that everyone is completely boycotting South Korean products. Therefore, this study treats digital backlash as an early sign of cultural friction and disagreement, rather than proof that South Korean influence has completely disappeared.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Stage 1: The Incubation Period and State-Led Emulation (1982–1999)

The initial entry of South Korean influence into Malaysia was not cultural, but rather industrial, economic, and political. To understand the highly fertile ground upon which *Hallyu* would later flourish, it is necessary to examine the geopolitical and economic strategies of the late 20th century. During this era, the cultural acceptance of South Korea was highly utilitarian, driven entirely by state directives rather than grassroots consumption.

The Look East Policy and Psychological Pre-Conditioning

In 1982, mere months into his tenure, Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, initiated the "Look East Policy". The policy represented a direct geopolitical pivot away from Western (specifically British) style of developmental models. This shift was precipitated by souring Malaysian-British relations in the wake of Britain's decision to raise educational tuition fees for foreign students and Malaysia's aggressive corporate takeover of the British-owned Guthrie plantation group[17]. Seeking an alternative blueprint for rapid modernization, the Look East Policy sought to emulate the post-war economic miracles of Japan and South Korea .

The primary objective of the policy was to decode the mechanisms of East Asian success and transfer those elements into the Malaysian workforce. The Malaysian government focused heavily on importing South Korean labor ethics, corporate management capabilities, technological foresight, and industrial morale. Bilateral relations were heavily promoted at the state level through a formal initiative of people-to-people exchanges [18]. The program began practically with the dispatch of 53 Malaysian trainees to South Korean industrial conglomerates, such as Hyundai Motor, marking the inception of deep industrial collaboration [19]. Subsequently, Malaysia sent thousands of students, engineers, and mid-career government officials to South Korea for industrial and vocational training.

In return, South Korea became a primary source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and a crucial trading partner for Malaysia. By 1983, the bilateral trade volume exceeded one billion dollars, and South Korea cemented its status as a top-tier investor in the Malaysian economy. By 2008, South Korea was Malaysia's 8th largest trading partner and 7th largest source of FDI, injecting $329 million into the local economy. Furthermore, military and private sector exchanges became customary, supported by high-level diplomatic visits; nearly every South Korean President has visited Malaysia since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1960.[20]

The Unintended Foundation for Cultural Importation

During the incubation period, the acceptance of Korean culture was strictly confined to the state, academic, and corporate elites. However, this era achieved a crucial psychological and sociological shift within the Malaysian populace. The Look East Policy, initiated by Prime Minister Mahathir in 1982 in response to Britain's withdrawal of educational subsidies and the Guthrie plantation episode, pre-conditioned Malaysian citizens to view South Korea as a paragon of modernity, relentless discipline, and economic success [18]. By establishing a narrative that South Korea was a developmental older sibling whose attributes were to be emulated, the Malaysian state, in partnership with Seoul had constructed a dense institutional architecture: the bilateral trade volume exceeded one billion dollars by 1983, and an extensive pipeline of industrial, vocational, and university-level training exchanges was formalized [18], [20]. Japanese and Korean language programs were embedded directly into national universities, including Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Institut Teknologi Mara (now known as Universiti Teknologi Mara), ensuring top-down ideological reinforcement [18]. This state-led scaffolding inadvertently lowered the psychological and cultural barriers for the mass importation of Korean consumer products in the decades to follow, barriers which, once removed, allowed Korean dramas, films, and pop songs to penetrate the Malaysian market with remarkable speed, with survey data indicating that 44.3% of Malaysians had watched Korean dramas and 30.6% of Kuala Lumpur residents had already purchased Korean goods [18]. The foundations of the Korean Wave in Malaysia were therefore not built on entertainment, but on a state-sponsored reverence for South Korean developmental supremacy.

Evaluated through the lens of strategic communication and information warfare, the Look East Policy functioned as a highly effective, state-sponsored psychological operation that laid the groundwork for Gramscian cultural hegemony [10]. Within this framework, a PSYOP operates by altering the perceptions, emotions, and behaviours of a target population through the systematic weaponization of institutional narratives [10]. While active engagement during this incubation period remained confined to academic and corporate elites, the Malaysian state achieved a critical sociological shift within the broader domestic populace. By systematically utilizing public education, government broadcasting, and industrial training programs to continuously praise South Korean development, the

state provided what can be described as the mandatory "psychological pre-conditioning" for the population [18].

This institutionalized narrative, communicated not as a neutral transmission but as a deliberately constructed set of meanings, power relations, and ideological articulations [21], conditioned Malaysian citizens to reflexively revere South Korea as an idealized baseline of modernization, work ethic, and economic supremacy. This state-sponsored reverence directly intersects with Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, which posits that geopolitical or class dominance is maintained not merely through coercive state force, but through the manufacturing of consent whereby a populace internalizes an external group's values and hierarchies as natural or superior [7]. Paradoxically, this consent was initiated by the recipient state's own leadership, and the policy reflected a deeper, racialized developmental hierarchy rooted in Social Darwinian frameworks that historically positioned non-Western societies along evolutionary stages of societal development [22].

By establishing an early regional hierarchy, the emulation policy inadvertently fostered "ladder thinking", an asymmetrical dynamic where the domestic populace viewed the external culture as societally superior [7]. Because this initial exposure is elite-driven, institutionally embedded, and ideologically sanitized through euphemistic state narratives that reframed economic competition as a moral developmental imperative [23], it bypassed the typical cultural friction or moral panics common to foreign media integration. This created an incredibly fertile ideological landscape that allowed South Korea to later transition its influence from a utilitarian economic partnership into an absolute asymmetrical cultural hegemony [18].

3.2 Stage 2: The Genesis of the Korean Wave and Societal Frictions (2000–2018)

Transnational Pop Culture vs. Local Conservatism: Strategic Communication and Narrative Friction

The transition of South Korean influence in Malaysia from a state-led industrial partnership to mass cultural consumption began at the turn of the millennium. Following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, South Korea systematically restructured its national economic blueprint, identifying cultural exports as high-yield vectors [24], [25]. In Malaysia, this paradigm shift was solidified in 2003 with the terrestrial broadcast of *Winter Sonata*, which projected a sanitized, family-oriented Asian modernity that circumvented the localized cultural friction typical of Western imports [18], [26].

By 2008, the advent of second-generation K-pop groups (such as TVXQ, Super Junior, and the Wonder Girls) expanded this footprint to youth demographics. This era marked the transition from top-down broadcasting to decentralized digital platforms like YouTube, integrating foreign aesthetics directly into the daily digital infrastructure of the domestic populace [10], [27], [28]. However, this "mediatization" process where media logic reshapes social interaction had bypassed state-curated cultural filters, leading to acute collisions with Malaysia's Islamic traditionalism [29], [30].

While dramas cultivated a sanitized, idealized image of East Asian modernity, it was the explosive regional proliferation of South Korean unscripted variety programming which was most epitomized by the series *Running Man* (launched in 2010) had deeply institutionalized *Hallyu* into the mundane, recurring media consumption habits of the Malaysian public. *Running Man* systematically altered local media diets by replacing traditional sitcoms and Western reality formats with a highly kinetic, slapstick, and deeply humanized style of entertainment.[31] Crucially, the show weaponized the concept of Parasocial Interaction (PSI), building intense psychological bonds of perceived intimacy between the foreign celebrity cast and Malaysian viewers [32]. This unscripted proximity normalized Korean social behaviours, linguistic catchphrases, and consumer products, driving local fan groups to self-organize massive physical gatherings and digital fan clubs. For local television conglomerates (such as Astro, 8TV, and digital streaming precursors), this unprecedented demand forced a restructuring of prime-time programming logic, embedding dedicated blocks and simultaneous broadcast subtitles exclusively for Korean unscripted content. Within an information-warfare framework, this variety-show boom successfully transformed passive consumers into an active, emotionally invested digital apparatus, integrating foreign ideological aesthetics directly into the daily digital infrastructure of the domestic populace.

The "2015 B1A4 Incident" and Institutional Backlash

A critical flashpoint occurred during a 2015 public fan-meeting in Kuala Lumpur featuring the boy band B1A4. Platonic gestures such as embracing and kissing the foreheads of young, *tudung*-wearing fans had triggered a severe domestic moral panic [33]. This incident was rapidly weaponized under digital narratives accusing the fans of "anti-Islamic" behavior [33], [34]. The response from religious authorities was swift: the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia and the Federal Territory Islamic Religious Department condemned the acts as a violation of Shariah public indecency laws, threatening the local fans with arrest and legal action [33], [34]. This friction exposed a "disjuncture" in the Korean soft power apparatus: without local narrative adaptation, its cultural reach faced a terminal firewall from conservative state institutions [35], [36].

The Strategic Pivot: "Halal-Hallyu" and Market Sanitization

In response to this institutional resistance and the broader potential for a "Hallyu backlash," the South Korean government and corporate actors initiated a highly deliberate pivot toward "Halal-Hallyu" alignment [37], [38]. Recognizing that religiosity is a primary factor in the consumption behavior of Malaysian Muslims, Seoul began integrating Halal certification into its food and cosmetic exports to align with Islamic rules [6], [39].

This strategy involved "K-Halal Food" policies and the promotion of "Muslim-friendly tourism" as a form of gastro-diplomacy to rehabilitate Korea's image in conservative markets [40], [41]. By 2017, the Moon Jae-in administration's New Southern Policy further institutionalized cultural diplomacy as a means to "Koreanize" Southeast Asian markets with a "Korean face" that appeared less threatening than Western "Americanization" [42], [43], [44]. Despite this, scholars note that such efforts remain a form of "propaganda" for Korean political and economic interests, often glossing over the complicated cultural differences that continue to fuel regional animosity [38], [45].

At this juncture, Malaysian society underwent a shift in perspective, moving from a foundation of economic partnership toward a state of contested integration. Cultural acceptance became highly pronounced yet deeply polarized across domestic demographics. On one end of the spectrum, mainstream youth and commercial markets demonstrated an unprecedented, fervent engagement with South Korean cultural products, driving economic saturation and fundamentally altering domestic media consumption habits. Conversely, domestic religious, legal, and conservative institutions regarded this external influx with significant ideological skepticism, interpreting unmediated transnational pop culture as a direct challenge to localized hegemony and subsequently deploying state mechanisms to monitor, moralize, and constrain its societal footprint.

3.3 Stage 3: The Zenith of Soft Power, State Propaganda, and Cinematic Dominance (2019–2025)

The period spanning from the late 2010s to the mid-2020s marked the absolute zenith of South Korean cultural hegemony in Malaysia. This era was characterized by highly deliberate statecraft, the strategic fusion of Korean soft power with local religious parameters to bypass conservative resistance, and an unprecedented string of box-office and streaming triumphs.

The Cinematic Explosion: Prestige, Horror, and Animation

Simultaneously, South Korean cinema transcended regional popularity to achieve unprecedented global prestige, utterly dominating Malaysian cinematic discourse and establishing absolute cultural saturation. The biggest early impact was Bong Joon-ho's dark comedy-thriller, *Parasite*, fundamentally redefined the commercial and critical trajectory of Korean cinema. The film won the prestigious Palme d'Or at the 72nd Cannes Film Festival in May 2019, received an eight-minute standing ovation, and accumulated a constellation of international honors including the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film in January 2020, the Screen Actors Guild Award for Best Cast in a Motion Picture, the BAFTA for Best Film Not in the English Language, and the 92nd Academy Award for Best International Feature Film at the 2020 Oscars [46], [47], [48], [49]. *Parasite* became the first Korean film to receive an Oscar nomination and the first non-English-language film to win Best Picture, an

accomplishment that became the single most analysed event in Korean film scholarship [46], [50], [51]. Representational readings of the film in Malaysian academia directly situate it as a benchmark of social allegory; Abu Bakar's "Road to Oscar Project" study, entrusted to FINAS by the Minister of Communications and Multimedia on 16 June 2020, uses *Parasite* explicitly as the comparator against which Malaysian cinematic aspirations toward international recognition are measured, in conjunction with the Malaysian submission *Roh* [49]. Rachman analyses the moral economy of the film as an Islamic-Christian comparative ethical study on the theme of greed [47], while Noviana and Simanjuntak read the film through Teun Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis and Spoon Class Theory to identify nonverbal communication stereotypes of social strata in contemporary South Korea [52], [53].

The "*Hallyuization*" prestige breakthrough represented by *Parasite* was not organic, but the product of two decades of state-supported industrial catalysis by conglomerates such as CJ Entertainment actively seeking penetration into non-traditional Asian and Western markets. Lee's comprehensive industry study demonstrates that Korean cinema's transition "from the festival circuit, art cinema and Korean diaspora audiences to the suburban multiplex" was an explicit strategic pivot accelerated by the failure of CJ's earlier Snowpiercer theatrical release, the same film whose saturation distribution by Netflix, coupled with *Train to Busan*, "had prepared the market for Korean cinema" so that *Parasite* could break through to mass acceptance [51], [54].

Following the critical success of *Train to Busan*, Yeon Sang-ho's stature as an auteur intensified. Academic literature has since examined how his career trajectory consolidated a "quality brand" of Korean cinema that secured significant validation from international critics and audiences [55].Following the global pandemic, this cinema achieved "further recognition and was transformed into one of the most important cultural content business sectors of all time," with Korea holding 2.8 percent of the global cultural content market share, making it the seventh-largest player in the world and OTT platforms completing the industry's transition into an ecosystem "no longer film-centred but media-content centred" [51].

Another movie title*, Exhuma* had also attained a significant critical and commercial apex. Jeong's study on regional reception substantiates the "unexpected box office success" of *Exhuma* within the Southeast Asian market, a performance that defied pessimistic pre-release projections which posited that international audiences would find the film's focus on Korean shamanistic traditions inaccessible. This achievement was particularly notable given the failure of Chinese distribution and the necessity of a deferred Japanese theatrical release, both attributed to the film's anti-Japanese thematic elements [56].

Jeong identifies six key factors driving *Exhuma*'s success in the ASEAN market: shared East Asian sensibilities regarding feng shui and shamanism, the casting of Hallyu stars, postcolonial historical narratives, the integration of Western horror tropes, the role of social media in fan engagement, and existing regional affinity for Hallyu content [56], [57]. Hong's analysis posits that the film intentionally embeds "visual cues" such as references to independence activists and the "Righteous Army" which function as digital hyperlinks. These encourage viewers to engage in "digging," a process of collaborative, fan-driven investigative decoding [57]. Jang argues that *Exhuma* transcends individual conflict to function as a "national ethnic allegory," transforming supernatural narratives into a collective story of resistance that resonates with Southeast Asian audiences familiar with colonial trauma [58], [59]. Hadiastuti's research confirms that *Exhuma* fostered cross-cultural dialogue by connecting the film's shamanic themes with indigenous spiritual traditions in Southeast Asia [60]. This success reinforced Yeon Sang-ho's status as a premier auteur, with academic text-mining confirming sustained scholarly focus on his theatrical and OTT works [61].

Besides real-life movie, the animation involving South Korea culture had also start to flourish. Following its June 2025 Netflix debut, the Sony Pictures Animation musical *K-Pop Demon Hunters* which was directed by Korean Canadian filmmaker Maggie Kang had emerged as a transnational phenomenon and a pivotal evolution in Korean Wave cultural representation [62]. The film highlights animation's efficacy as a medium for strategic cultural promotion, demonstrating an ability to synthesize entertainment value with authentic cultural motifs [62].

Critically, Kim and Kim's study confirms that the work is a "US-produced global content with Korean motifs and styles," using Kang's deliberate coinage "Koreanism" to describe how the work implements a "Koreanness" that exceeds prior Hallyu texts [63]. Park analyses the film's "hybrid imagination" of Korean culture: faithful realistic depiction, multi-form reflection, and hybrid mixture produce a representation that resists state-nationalist evaluation frameworks and instead presents "a new

form of identity in the modern era after discrimination and confusion" characterized by openness, solidarity, and recreation, a hybrid value that is "an important reconsideration of the value of hybridity in the glocal era" [64]. Ko and Park's study on the "contemporary transformation of traditional cultural motifs" illustrates how *K-Pop Demon Hunters* incorporates traditional elements specifically *hojakdo*, *irwolobongdo*, *dancheong* color schemes, *norigae* ornaments, and weapon motifs such as the *saingeom*, *daeshin kal*, and *gokdo* into a modern K-pop narrative. The authors argue that this synthesis demonstrates the "practical possibility for the application of cultural archetypes" by blending traditional symbolism with contemporary popular-culture codes [65]. [65]. Fan and Supalakwatchana's comprehensive representation theory analysis confirms that *K-Pop Demon Hunters* "interweaves contemporary K-pop performance aesthetics such as choreography, costumes, and concert cinematography with traditional Korean mythology, attire, and symbolic landscapes" while integrating Korean terms (*maknae, hoobae*) and pre-existing K-drama OSTs into the soundtrack, demonstrating that animation is now "an effective medium for cultural representation" capable of "merging entertainment value with strategic cultural promotion" [62].

At this juncture, the "Gauge of Cultural Acceptance" had reached its apogee. Korean cultural phenomena were no longer merely categorized as exogenous imports; rather, they had emerged as the predominant paradigm influencing domestic pop culture, sartorial trends, and lifestyle modalities. The synergistic alignment of state-facilitated Halal initiatives and the ubiquity of high-impact media ensured the seamless assimilation of Korean soft power into the Malaysian mainstream, largely precluding any significant organized resistance.

3.4 Stage 4: The Fracture and the "SEAblings" Uprising (2023–2026)

Beneath the glossy veneer of *Hallyu*'s absolute dominance, structural resentments had been quietly compounding. Southeast Asian audiences, who constituted some of the largest and most lucrative markets for Korean entertainment, had long endured subtle and overt racism from East Asian digital communities. The relationship was fundamentally asymmetrical: South Korea reaped billions in economic and soft-power benefits from Southeast Asian adoration, but domestic Korean attitudes frequently treated these fans as secondary consumers or societal inferiors. In late 2025 and early 2026, this fragile, unequal dynamic catastrophically shattered.

The Kindling: The Thai K-ETA Crisis and "Ladder Thinking"

The groundwork for the regional fracture was laid in 2023 and 2024 through severe tourism and immigration disputes between South Korea and Thailand. Despite the two countries formally designating 2023–2024 as a "Mutual Visit Year" through a Memorandum of Understanding commemorating the 65th anniversary of Korea–Thailand diplomatic relations in 2022, the South Korean Ministry of Justice rigorously enforced its Korea Electronic Travel Authorization system against Thai nationals [66], [67].

South Korean authorities justified these measures by characterizing Thailand as a leading source of illegal immigration. As described by Chan, an approximately 25,000 Thais work in South Korea under the Employment Permit System (EPS), but an estimated 140,000 Thai laborers are undocumented workers the community itself colloquially terms *khon phi*, or "ghost persons" [68]. Based on ethnographic research, the overstay phenomenon among the Thai laborers is structurally induced; upon contract expiration, EPS workers often transition to undocumented status, remaining indispensable to small and medium-sized enterprises while becoming invisible to state surveillance [68], [69].

Denney and Green corroborate this architectural vulnerability, noting that the E-9 visa held by these EPS workers has restrictions (the visa prohibits family reunification and limits extensions) and created this systemic instability [69]. Choi and Chung identify these policies as the institutional legacy of the Industrial and Technical Training System, which serves as a chronic driver of the undocumented population [70]. Driven by this punitive immigration stance, South Korean authorities began arbitrarily denying entry to numerous Thai travellers, including tourists, influencers, and business professionals holding valid K-ETAs and hotel reservations. This led to a significant digital backlash in Thailand under the hashtag #bankoreatravel (or #แบนเที่ยวเกาหลี in Thai language) [67].

This incident laid bare the racial and socioeconomic hierarchy deeply embedded in modern South Korean society, a phenomenon sociologists term "ladder thinking." Yu's ethnographic study demonstrates that an everyday hierarchy of ethnic/national migrant groups is established through a logic of class and conferred cultural values, determined largely by conceptions about the economic status of the migrants' country of origin [71]. Choi's investigation of everyday racialization explicitly identifies the conceptual worldview of *seonjinguk* (in Hangul: 선진국; developed/advanced country) versus *hujinguk* (in Hangul: 후진국; underdeveloped/backward country) as reinforcing Korean residents' feelings of numerical and developmental superiority over Asian migrants [72]. Kim's intersectional analysis further documents how foreign migrant workers and marriage migrants are stigmatized through the compounding logics of race, skin color, nationality, class, and gender [73].

As Lee et al.'s cross-sectional assessment reveals, this is not merely a discourse problem but a structural one: in 2023, the number of migrants with employment-purpose visas totalled 476,550, of which over 60 percent held the non-professional E-9 visa, and the proportion of undocumented migrants was estimated at 17.8 percent, markedly higher than the 12.3 percent recorded in 2012 [74]. Joyce's comparative regulatory study of South Korea's and Thailand's low-wage visa schemes frames this architecture as part of a "restrictive labour migration regime" intentionally structured to control migratory flows in patterns that systematically benefit employers over workers [75]. Collectively, these structures illustrate what Han terms "nouveau-riche nationalism," in which migrants are assessed based on their country's global developmental status. This framework, coupled with Minjok ethno-nationalism, drives the racialized stratification that the K-ETA crisis exposed [76], [77].

The Spark: The Day6 Concert Incident in Kuala Lumpur

The simmering regional tensions regarding discrimination and double standards exploded into an all-out digital war on January 31, 2026, at the Axiata Arena in Kuala Lumpur during a concert by the Korean rock band Day6. The venue's operational policies explicitly forbade the use of professional photography equipment. Whereas local Malaysian attendees adhered to these restrictions, several South Korean "fansites"; specialized enthusiasts who travel internationally to document idols for commercial and reputational gain had systematically disregarded the regulations, smuggling DSLR cameras with telephoto lenses into the arena and engaging in public confrontations with security personnel. In response, Malaysian fans documented these transgressions, circulating the footage online to highlight the perceived inequity in enforcement, where foreign visitors appeared exempt from the restrictions that necessitated the immediate removal of domestic audience members [78], [79].

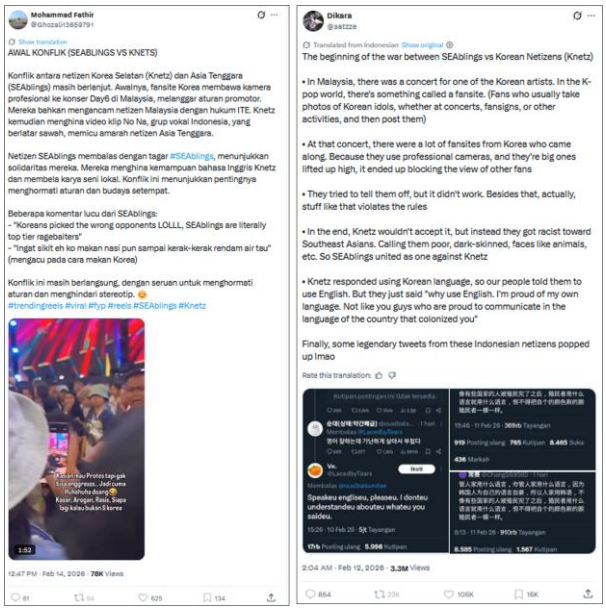


Figure 2: Digital discourse analysis of the Day6 concert conflict highlighting the emergence of SEAblings solidarity and the exchange of racialized tropes, February 2026

The Axiata Arena incident served as an immediate catalyst for the formation of the "SEAblings" identity, a process clearly documented in the social media discourse immediately following the concert (Figure 2). As evidenced by the viral threads analyzing the conflict, the backlash was not merely an aesthetic disagreement over concert photography, but a systemic rejection of the perceived superiority complex, termed "ladder thinking," exhibited by the visiting Korean fansites.

The digital discourse highlights a strategic escalation in the conflict: when Malaysian fans attempted to enforce local venue regulations regarding professional photography equipment, the defiant response from Korean fansites and the subsequent online defense by K-netz triggered an explicitly racialized counter-attack. This exchange, as summarized in Figure 2, demonstrates that the K-netz response relied on delegitimizing Southeast Asian identity by weaponizing historical and socio-economic tropes, such as mocking regional language proficiency and utilizing colonial-era rhetoric to disparage the "deservedness" of the Southeast Asian digital public.

Crucially, the Southeast Asian response was neither passive nor fragmented. Instead, it represented a textbook case of "active media diplomacy from below," where disparate regional netizens synthesized their grievances into a unified, cross-border counter-narrative. Southeast Asian netizens engaged in a sophisticated form of ideological reframing: they mirrored the accusations of "colonized mindsets" and societal inferiority directly back at the Korean interlocutors. This tactical reversal, shifting the conversation from "concert etiquette" to "structural racial hierarchy," effectively neutralized the K-netz attempt to gatekeep the digital space and served as the foundational moment for the "SEAblings" collective to reclaim their digital autonomy.

The Backlash: K-netz vs. The "SEAblings"

Instead of apologizing or acknowledging the breach of etiquette, South Korean online communities aggressively rallied to defend the fansites. The discourse rapidly devolved from a localized debate over concert rules into vicious, cross-border, racially charged attacks.

K-netz demanded that Southeast Asians "respect their idol-fan culture," told them to "mind their own business," and arrogantly suggested they "support artists from their own countries" rather than piggybacking on Korean superiority [80], [81]. Abd-Rahim's analysis of Hallyu fandom online documents exactly the dynamic at play in the Day6 incident: fandoms are not utopian egalitarian spaces but rather "social hierarchies where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom and status," with senior and powerful fans exercising control over the norms and practices of fellow fans [82].

Sociologically, the arrogance of the K-netz response was rooted in deep-seated cultural norms. Through the lens of Korean Confucian hierarchy, the K-netz felt they were the cultural "seniors" being unjustly and disrespectfully corrected by "juniors" [80]. Furthermore, due to Minjok ethno-nationalism, K-pop is heavily branded as uniquely and purely Korean; thus, K-netz perceived the Southeast Asian critique of Korean fan behavior not as a standard fandom disagreement but as a direct attack on the Korean national identity itself [76], [81].

However, the K-netz severely miscalculated the geopolitical and cultural shift occurring in Southeast Asia. Outraged by the blatant racism and the patronizing tone, netizens from Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam immediately abandoned their historical intra-regional squabbles [80], [81]. They united under a powerful new collective digital identity: the "SEAblings." Reminiscent of the Milk Tea Alliance movement of 2021, which scholars describe as a transformative regional protest wave requiring deeper comparative exploration and a transnational advocacy network implementing information, symbolic, leverage, and accountability politics to strengthen local advocacy across borders, the SEAblings leveraged their shared history of colonization, rapid economic growth, and the mutual pain of being continuously underestimated on the global stage to form a unified front against Korean cultural imperialism [80], [83], [84].

Critically, Ainslie's foundational interviews with over 70 dissatisfied Hallyu consumers in Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines show that the SEAblings reaction is not new but the tip of a much longer arc of growing animosity toward what these consumers describe as "colonial-esque attitudes and cultural imperialism from Korea"—an attitude the same study had already documented in 2017 [38]. Hashimoto, Weiss, and Lim's continuation of that line traces a similar reversal: post-2018

K-content consumption in the region dragged not because of quality decline alone, but because the medium itself became associated with condescension and structural disrespect [81]. Nadhifah, Budiman, and Tambunan's 2026 ethnography of K-pop fan solidarity in Indonesian social discourse confirms that the Day6 conflict was one of the most explicit recent activations of "fandom activism" as a "framework for resisting dominant powers," with Day6 fans explicitly identified among the dispute subjects, indicating that the Malaysian Day6 incident at the Axiata Arena must be situated within a wider, ongoing pattern of K-pop fan resistance to perceived dominance in the region, including the previously documented Day6 conflict with promoter Mecima Pro at the GBK Madya Stadium on May 3, 2025, in Indonesia [85].

Weaponizing Societal Metrics and the Collapse of the Hallyu Illusion

Refusing to be passive victims of "ladder thinking," the SEAblings launched a coordinated and devastating counter-offensive. They bypassed standard fandom arguments and directly attacked the structural vulnerabilities of the South Korean state. To shatter the manufactured, pristine, and idealized image of Hallyu, Southeast Asian netizens exhausted the cognitive terrain, highlighting South Korea's domestic societal metrics as a direct counter-narrative to the screen-soft-power consumer dream [3], [7], [9].

The counter-offensive quickly breached the boundaries of fandom and entered the realm of international public diplomacy. Calls to systematically boycott South Korean products, K-dramas, and K-pop music spread rapidly across the ASEAN digital sphere, activating what Ainslie had already documented in 2017 as an emerging, sustained regional skepticism toward what consumers describe as "colonial-esque attitudes and cultural imperialism from Korea" [38]. Mapped onto the cognitive-warfare framework, this represents a textbook case of cognitive counter-offensive by networked publics: a marginalized digital public weaponizing an information space to systematically shatter a state's manufactured psychological spell [3], [9]. Ainslie's Laos study documents the convergence on this same pattern through Southeast Asia's periphery, the Korean cultural diplomacy being received even at its most attentive as "propaganda" for Korean political and economic interests rather than genuine cultural exchange [38], [45].



Figure 3: Viral graphic campaigns on social media advocating for a comprehensive boycott of South Korean cultural, culinary, and tourism sectors, February 2026

The SEAblings counter-offensive represented a decisive shift from localized grievances to a coordinated, transnational campaign of economic and cognitive delegitimization. As illustrated in Figure 3, this movement rapidly weaponized the digital information space by transforming abstract calls for "dignity" into concrete, actionable boycott directives targeting the pillars of South Korea's soft power: tourism, entertainment exports, and culinary diplomacy.

The visual rhetoric employed by the SEAblings, as documented in Figure 3, demonstrates a sophisticated application of cognitive warfare techniques. By juxtaposing the ASEAN regional map with anti-Hallyu symbolism and slogans such as "Our dignity is not for sale," the digital public effectively inverted the established "psychological spell" of South Korean cultural dominance, reframing the consumption of Hallyu not as a gateway to modernity, but as a submission to an asymmetrical hierarchy. This discourse, which achieved millions of views across platforms, functioned as a "counter-hegemonic" tool that utilized the very networked infrastructure Hallyu had built to facilitate its own dismantling.

Furthermore, the imagery in Figure 3 highlights the shift toward "Connective Action". Rather than waiting for traditional media to cover their grievances, the SEAblings utilized high-impact graphic design and viral slogans to consolidate their collective digital identity. By explicitly calling for the boycott of Korean artists, dramas, and food, these digital actors moved beyond simple protest to actively weaponize the "societal metrics" of their own market power, signaling a fundamental, and likely irreversible, fracturing of the Hallyu illusion in Southeast Asia.

Academics and cultural commentators noted that while the immediate financial impact on the multi-billion-dollar K-pop industry might not be instantaneous, the psychological spell of Hallyu was irrevocably broken [3], [9]. Southeast Asian fans, who had spent decades acting as the bedrock of K-pop's global streaming numbers, algorithm manipulation, and touring revenues, began actively shifting their attention to emerging local pop cultures. This pivot is consistent with Park and Hashimoto's analysis of "anti-Korean Wave" discourse on YouTube, which demonstrates that digital fan activism increasingly functions as "active media diplomacy from below," producing public diplomacy effects "outside the typical information flows controlled by central state actors or formal institutions" [81].

4.0 Diagnosing the breakdown of hegemony

The evolution of the Korean Wave in Malaysia serves as a nuanced case study in the dynamics and boundaries of transnational cultural diplomacy. Evaluated through Gramscian and digital communication frameworks, this trajectory highlights a transition from state-facilitated cultural alignment to active digital negotiation and resistance.

In its earliest stages, South Korea's presence in Malaysia was heavily facilitated by the state, anchored in Mahathir Mohamad's Look East Policy (1982), which successfully branded Korea as an aspirational model of technological and industrial modernity. This early state-directed emulation functioned as a form of Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), providing the domestic populace with the "psychological pre-conditioning" necessary to reflexively revere South Korea as an idealized baseline. This utilitarian foundation paved the way for the organic, explosive growth of Hallyu in the early 2000s, driven by a process of Cultural Mediatization where incoming media logic fundamentally reshaped social interactions and everyday life.

Despite severe localized Narrative Friction with Islamic conservatism, most visibly evidenced by the 2015 B1A4 moral panic and the subsequent threats of utilizing the Sedition Act, the South Korean government adeptly navigated these waters. Through the New Southern Policy, state actors utilized Strategic Communication and Narrative Adaptation to engineer strategic "Halal-Hallyu" alignments. This effectively sanitized their cultural exports, neutralizing conservative backlash and embedding Korean products into the daily lives of Muslim Malaysians. By the mid-2020s, supported by record-shattering animation hits like *K-Pop: Demon Hunters*, South Korea's soft power in Malaysia seemed absolute and unassailable. This era represented the zenith of Gramscian Cultural Imperialism, effectively "manufacturing consent" and cementing an asymmetrical dynamic where the domestic populace internalized the external culture as inherently superior.

However, the significant digital friction surrounding this relationship in early 2026 underscores a vital geopolitical and sociological lesson: soft power cannot be sustained indefinitely on a foundation of structural racism, unreciprocated respect, and unilateral cultural extraction. The "SEAblings vs. K-

netz" conflict was not an isolated incident of bad concert etiquette; it was the explosive release of years of compounded discriminatory practices, such as the K-ETA rejections of Thai tourists. It exposed the rigid, hierarchical "ladder thinking" embedded in Korean ethno-nationalism, which demanded adulation from Southeast Asians while simultaneously viewing them as developmental inferiors.

By abandoning historical divisions and uniting under the SEAblings banner, Southeast Asian nations demonstrated a profound maturation in their media consumption habits. Examined through the framework of Connective Action and Networked Publics, these digital citizens self-organized without centralized leadership to form a highly coordinated collective digital identity. They signaled that they are no longer passive consumers willing to endure systemic condescension in exchange for high-quality entertainment. Instead, they launched a grassroots counter-offensive in Cognitive Warfare, weaponizing information to shatter the psychological spell of Hallyu. As a result, South Korea's carefully curated, multi-decade soft-power empire in Malaysia has deeply fractured, representing a successful execution of Gramscian Counter-Hegemony. This prompts a definitive regional pivot toward domestic and neighboring cultural industries, serving as a stark warning to global exporters of culture regarding the catastrophic limits of unilateral hegemony.

4.1 Implications for Malaysian and Southeast Asian Youth

The emergence of the "SEAblings" discourse carries significant cultural, socio-political, and behavioural implications for youth across Malaysia and the broader Southeast Asian region. First, it marks a fundamental shift from passive cultural consumption to critical media agency. Young Southeast Asians are no longer uncritical recipients of imported pop culture; instead, they demonstrate heightened media literacy by continuing to enjoy cultural products while actively challenging perceived condescension, racial stereotypes, or systemic inequalities embedded within foreign soft power exports. Second, this digital mobilization has fostered an unprecedented form of transnational regional solidarity. By setting aside historical national rivalries, youth across ASEAN are leveraging shared social media platforms to build a unified identity that asserts collective dignity in the global digital sphere. Finally, this shift creates a new framework for foreign cultural exporters, signalling that long-term soft power reception among Southeast Asian youth now requires mutual respect, genuine two-way cultural exchange, and ethical representation rather than one-way influence.

4.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies in this area should further investigate the mechanisms of digital mobilization and the formation of transnational regional solidarity, particularly exploring how shared digital identities emerge independently of historical national rivalries. Furthermore, research in this domain would benefit from expanding beyond the entertainment and pop-culture lens to examine how these grassroots digital counter-movements intersect with broader societal spheres, such as political discourse, regional trade, public diplomacy, and cross-border civic engagement

5.0 Conclusion: The Limits of One-Way Soft Power

The trajectory of South Korean cultural hegemony in Malaysia spanning from the state-led utilitarian emulation of the 1980s to the absolute media saturation of the early 2020s reveals the inherent fragility of unilateral soft power [3], [7]. As the structural collapse witnessed during the 2023–2026 SEAblings uprising demonstrates, global cultural influence cannot be sustained indefinitely through top-down state propaganda. The rapid dismantling of Hallyu in the ASEAN region highlights three critical limitations of state-sponsored cultural imperialism.

First, soft power rooted in cultural extraction and embedded structural racism, lacking genuine reciprocity, is fundamentally unstable [3], [7]. For decades, South Korea used strategic communication and narrative adaptation such as partnering with local Islamic authorities for "Halal-Hallyu" initiatives to sanitize exports and neutralize domestic religious friction [37], [40], [41], [42]. Yet this asymmetrical dominance relied on an institutionalized regional hierarchy, described by Yu and Choi as a *seonjinguk/hujinguk* worldview, which demanded absolute consumer adulation while subjecting Southeast Asian populations to systemic developmental condescension and discrimination, most

notably through stringent K-ETA immigration enforcements and digital hostilities [67], [71], [72]. Choi argues that Asian migrants in Korea "are made into moral and economic inferiors through silence, ambivalence, and othering," confirming that the cultural apparatus of "Koreanness" remains anchored in everyday racial hierarchy [72], [73]. This lack of mutual respect, codified by restrictive labor migration regimes that Joyce identifies as designed to benefit employers over workers, rendered South Korea's cultural empire highly vulnerable to systemic shock [68], [69], [75].

Second, asymmetrical cultural hegemony can collapse with unprecedented rapidity when challenged by a mobilized, transnational networked public [3], [9]. The emergence of the "SEAblings" identity marked a decisive shift from passive consumption to active digital resistance, illustrating a sophisticated application of Gramscian counter-hegemony and Connective Action [7], [83], [84]. Abandoning intra-regional squabbles, Southeast Asian digital citizens launched a grassroots counter-offensive in cognitive warfare, weaponizing the hegemon's own digital apparatus against it [3], [10]. By bypassing traditional pop-culture discourse to amplify counter-narratives focused on the hegemon's structural vulnerabilities, they effectively turned the narrative infrastructure in reverse. As Rushing, Hersch, and Xu observe, "the information environment is now the battlespace, and populations are the targets and vectors" of both offensive and defensive operations [9]. Park and Hashimoto identify this as "active media diplomacy from below," an operations-level shift outside of state control that adversely affects Korean diplomatic and soft-power interests [81].

Third, top-down statecraft has strict limitations in the digital age [9], [10]. Initial reverence, such as that established by the Look East Policy, is easily overwritten when the target populace experiences compounding, unreciprocated grievances; even in 2023, Seoul's attempts to reactivate this legacy failed against a cognitively literate public [4], [18], [19], [81]. Furthermore, these findings highlight a generational shift among Southeast Asian youth toward greater digital agency, where shared regional identity and critical media engagement reshape how foreign cultural exports are consumed and contested. While the Moon Jae-in administration's New Southern Policy succeeded in expanding cultural commerce, it failed to address the underlying developmental hierarchy, particularly the *hujinguk* morality identified by Choi [42], [43], [72]. Ultimately, while online resistance shatters the notion of passive cultural reception, it represents a dynamic process of contestation, negotiation, and potential soft power erosion rather than an immediate or total end to cultural influence. Long-term cultural reception in an interconnected world depends on genuine reciprocity, cultural humility, and sustained mutual respect.

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