

# Cultural Imperialism of the Korean Wave and its Impact on Thai Society

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## Abstract

*As the Korean Wave in Thailand continues to gain sensational popularity, along with the development of the Korean Wave, the negative influence of the Korean Wave in Thailand has also been highlighted. The beauty of Korean-style whitening provides a new symbol of beauty in Thailand, and the desire to unconsciously imitate Korean beauty can be said to have political implications that go beyond simply personal desires and superficial issues. This research analyzes how the whitewashing of K-pop as a cultural imperialist element of the Korean Wave is affecting Thai society. Specifically, in-depth interviews were conducted with Thai Korean Wave fans who envy K-pop idols. Based on the interview results, it analyzed Thai beauty standards and perceptions of whitewashing that have become typical through K-pop and the political meaning of the stereotypical beauty standard of “white skin” and its influence on Thai society.*

**Keywords:** Korean Wave, K-pop, Whitewashing, Whitening, Thai society.

## Introduction

It has been 20 years since Korean Wave or Hallyu began to attract people’s attention in Thai market. In Thailand, favorable feelings for Korean culture and the consumption of Hallyu contents are high, which means Thailand is the region where the power of Hallyu is most strong (Butsaban, 2020). In K-pop, Thai idols such as BLAKPINK’S Lisa, (G)-IDLE Minnie, KISS OF LIFE Natty are gaining huge popularity and they are contributing to promoting Thai Wave in Korean society and the world. Entertainment companies began recruiting Thais to idol groups in Korea through a localization strategy, one of the success factors for K-pop, and formed a huge fan base in Thailand (Butsaban, 2023, 4).

Most studies so far have highlighted the excellence of Korean culture and the positive aspects of soft power when discussing the Korean Wave. However, behind the success of the Korean Wave, there are various evaluations of the Korean Wave, and among these, voices expressing concern about the problems and negative effects of the Korean Wave are emerging.

What does whitening mean? Whitening is a common and key element of k-beauty shown in Korean media. The whiteness embodied by drama actors and K-pop idols is the image of Korean stars and is distributed as a content product. This study examines the problems that exist behind the positive evaluation of the Korean Wave, particularly how the Korean whitewashing controversy affects Thai society. In other words, it aims to examine the fundamental meaning and problems of whitening as seen in Korean culture and its influence on Thai society. The specific purpose and significance are summarized as follows.

First, this study examines the cultural imperialistic elements of the Korean Wave. In detail, it analyzes the colorism or ‘Whitewashing’ of being consumed as a standardized image among Thai fandoms. It empirically verifies how Hallyu stars influence major fandoms in Thailand and analyze the image created by K-POP idols and the phenomenon of K-beauty being consumed as ‘whitewashing’ in Thai society.

Second, it aims to predict how the cultural imperialistic elements of Hallyu will affect the sustainable development of Hallyu in the future, and to provide implications for the development of Thai Wave.

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## Literature Review

With the development of the Korean Wave, many Korean Wave studies have been accumulated. As the influence of the Korean Wave expands globally, countermovements against it are also increasing. Representative examples include the anti-Korean wave in Japan and the anti-Korean wave in China, which reflects the fact that the Korean wave has progressed one-sidedly and is viewed as an impediment to the cultural development of host countries. 'Culture tends to flow from the powerful to the powerless.' The term comes from highlighting the cultural imperialistic aspect of the Korean Wave. Whether the Korean Wave can truly be viewed from a cultural imperialist perspective has been at the center of debate. The perspectives on the Korean Wave can be broadly divided into two:

First, the cultural imperialist influence of the Korean Wave. Cultural imperialism is a theory often discussed in the field of popular culture when popular culture from other countries is introduced into one's country. Cultural imperialism is used as another expression for cultural exchange policy, that is, an active cultural foreign policy that seeks to more or less consciously implant one's own culture into other cultural areas (Kim et al, 2020). Kang(1993) focused on the correlation between cultural imperialism and the phenomenon of cultural dependence. As a developed capitalist country forms a relationship of domination and subordination with a relatively low-growth country, the cultural diversity of the region is at risk of becoming homogenized and standardized due to the expansion of global communication. Lim (2009) also raised the possibility that the Korean Wave could take the form of cultural imperialism.

Second, it is a perspective that views the Korean Wave based on transnational universality. Kim (2018, 8) criticizes the cultural imperialist perspective of the Korean Wave, saying that the Korean Wave goes through a hybridization process through the periphery's resistance to the cultural coercion of the center, transculturation, and then creates a relationship between the center and the periphery. He said that it was a cultural result of the intersection of the two cultures through cultural exchange and negotiation. Lee (2016, 6) believed that the Korean Wave had a strong effect of referencing and modifying American and Japanese styles rather than creating Korea's unique cultural identity. Lee (2006, 45) also said that the Korean Wave is a marginalization of global cultural forms by imitating and transforming them, and Kim (2014, 88) said that the Korean Wave is a multinational cultural product involved in a global production process that transcends national borders, and that K-POP is. They argue that it should be viewed as a result of multinational characteristics rather than based on Korea's unique culture.

As can be seen from many previous studies, there is a heated debate on whether to view the Korean Wave based on cultural imperialism theory, natural economic comparative advantage, or a regionalization phenomenon based on the hybrid nature of the Korean Wave.

This study viewed the imperialistic element of the Korean Wave as 'uniform beauty', created by K-POP stars and consumed by Thai fans. Existing research related to this includes a study by Park (2020), which raised issues about colorism in Korean media and the beauty industry. The cultural meaning and power implied by K-beauty's 'whitening' was analyzed.

From a cultural imperialist perspective, this study seeks to analyze how the images created by K-POP stars affect the Thai fans who consume them and what kind of cultural imperialist power they can manifest.

## Research Methodology

This study conducts literature and empirical research to achieve the research objectives presented above. In the literature study, it refers to domestic and foreign papers and academic journals related to the theory of cultural imperialism, fandom's identification, and consumption behavior. In the empirical study, it conducts in-depth interview with people over 18 and in their 20s who are the fans of K-POP idols to find out general perceptions of Hallyu, consumption behavior, and the general beauty standards. Thai men and women over the age of 18 and in their 20s, those who like Hallyu stars were taken as a sample group. Since age group 10-20s use the media the most and communicate through online spaces, it can be said that the ripple effect

of their thoughts has great influence. In conclusion, the interview is conducted to prove that the fandom identifies the image created by Hallyu stars, leads to consumption behavior, and establishes itself as the norm of a society.

### *Korean wave and Whitewashing*

Whitewashing was used in Hollywood movies to refer to a situation where a white actor plays a non-white character, but overseas K-pop fans gave it a new meaning by naming the act of whitewashing and retouching idol photos as whitewashing. The gist of the criticism is that whitening correction is an act that denies 'Asian authenticity' by internalizing white-centric or Western-centric beauty norms. In Korean media, directing and correcting a star's image to be bright and white is a commonly implemented aesthetic and media grammar. The photos taken by the so-called 'home master', the operator of the homepage who continuously uploads photos of idols, as well as other fans, are also produced with transparent and whitened skin through the use of filters or post-processing. However, when the image enters the gaze of overseas fans, it can become an unsettling and disturbing image. It is in this context that some overseas fans began criticizing the photos distributed by domestic home masters, calling them 'whitewashing.'

### *The Cultural and Political Implications of K-Beauty's Whitewashing*

The influence of the Korean Wave through media is expanding globally, and the Southeast Asian market in particular is where the influence of Korean Wave content is the highest. Hallyu stars have become the driving force behind the pan-Asian fandom phenomenon. The success of K-POP has increased foreigners' interest in Korean fashion, food, medicine, and language. Among them, K-beauty is a topic that deserves attention in that it not only has industrial effects, but also directs and expresses identity through the body. K-Beauty is connected to the international community's imagination about Koreans or Asians in that it is Korean beauty that is distributed and consumed overseas. In particular, whitening, which forms the core of K-beauty, is a topic that requires discussion about gender and racial identity surrounding skin color. In the West, skin color is treated as an issue of power that divides whites and colored people (Herring, 2003; Hunter, 2005). White skin is an indicator that guarantees a higher class, more capital, and more power in society, and has also served as an element of purer and more beautiful femininity for women (Hunter, 2002).

'Whitening' is a universal and core element of Korean media culture. Actors in dramas appear with flawlessly clean, bright-toned skin, and idol singers who appear on music shows literally radiate light in lighting effects that create special textures. The light and color of whitening are accepted as the unique charm that makes up Korean stars, and are distributed globally as a type of Korean Wave content called 'K-Beauty'. In this way, the reproduction of Korea's ideal beauty is always based on white and clear skin. Korean content is receiving global attention, and K-beauty is even being promoted as a tourism product. Whitening is very important as a beauty norm in Korean society.

The charm of the faces of the stars portrayed by the Korean Wave has an immediate appeal to overseas Korean Wave fans. The star's face, created through makeup, procedures, plastic surgery, aesthetic technology, video technology, storytelling, etc., is recognized as a specific cultural identity by overseas audiences (Hong, 2013). K-beauty refers to embodied beauty rather than Korean beauty itself. In response, a criticism called whitewashing emerged. K-Beauty is not only raising racial and ethnic debates, but is also acting as an element of cultural imperialism in Thailand. A book that asks fundamental questions about whitening, "Whitening: The Cultural Politics of Skin Color (Culture Look, 2022)" has been published. This book begins with the basic question, "What is whitening?" and delves into whitening by asking questions at various levels. Through this, we look into the desires and power surrounding whitening, issues of the body and identity, and micro-politics. Through this book, author Park So-jeong, who studied Korea's whitening culture, unfolds the postcolonial and feminist imagination of Korean cultural studies. In addition, it reminds us how Korean Wave research should have a critical political stance toward colonial desires within the Korean Wave in the future. "Whitening: The Cultural Politics of Skin Color" explores the everyday beauty practice of whitening through postcolonial discourse. Whitening has many properties and varies depending on each individual's experience.

Through the concept of ‘arrangement’ presented by Deleuze and Guattari, it examines the elements of whitening that are scattered and exist in various material and immaterial forms. The media often gives superior status to white people in developed countries. White power, created over the past hundreds of years, operates unconsciously. If discriminating based on skin color is racial discrimination, whitening goes beyond the desire to pursue beauty and implies class desire. Whitening is reorganizing the racial and ethnic status of Koreans by moving up and down the skin color ladder that exists globally. While there are overseas fans who look at BTS's whitening correction photos and voice concerns that they are following white beauty standards, there is a desire to resemble Koreans, along with the interpretation that the beauty of Korean-style whitening provides a new symbol of beauty. It is also found all over the world. Whitening is already a phenomenon that goes beyond the problem of ‘epidermis’. Whitening is not simply an individual's aesthetic desire, but also has multi-layered cultural and political implications.

This is the process in which Korea's beauty and entertainment industries meet global audiences. Korea is the country that performs the most plastic surgery in the world, but the distinguishing feature of K-beauty is its skin care and whitening lines, as evidenced by the increase in exports. Even setting aside discussions about plastic surgery standards or how Western the appearance of beautiful Korean Wave stars is, the issue of whitening cannot avoid racist implications. Beyond the universal connotation that white skin has as a sign of no labor, makeup, photography, and lighting techniques that correct natural skin color to make it whiter have become hallmarks of the Korean Wave, causing conflict with audiences around the world online. There is a conflict between excessive whitewashing of idol face photos, called 'whitewashing', and 'Yellowwashing', where the world's audience re-corrects this to a primary or darker color, and a debate is taking place over which of these is more racist. It's reality. Agencies have already introduced many foreign members and are even creating K-pop groups without Koreans, but some inmates make racially hateful comments about them based on their appearance.

#### *K-Beauty Being Consumed as 'Whitewashing' among Thai Fandoms*

The in-dept interviews were carried out in May 2024 with five participants.

**Table 1. In-dept interview participants**

Gender	Age	Occupation	Consumption of Korean Wave Contents
Female	10s	Student	Passionate users (prefer Korean products and contents in daily life and frequently use them)
Female	10s	Student	Intensive users (using one content such as K-POP or K-DRAMA)
Female	20s	Student	Low users (rarely use)
Male	20s	Office worker	Passionate users (prefer Korean products and contents in daily life and frequently use them)
Male	20s	Student	Intensive users (using one content such as K-POP or K-DRAMA)

The interview participants are all K-pop fans and friendly toward Korean culture, although there are differences in whether they frequently watch Korean cultural contents and their level of favorability. And they are very interested in Korean beauty and often purchase cosmetics or watch beauty-related content, so they are familiar with Korean beauty.

Interviewees' understanding of K-beauty is white skin. It is very common to think that the basis of Korean celebrities' beauty is white skin. They also answered that because they want to resemble Korean celebrities with white skin, they buy Korean cosmetics or look up information on cosmetics used by Korean celebrities.

“Koreans have exceptionally white skin. I don't know if white skin is a symbol of beauty in Korean society,

but it seems that all Korean idols are white and there is no one with dark skin. to become an idol in Korea, one must have white skin.”

“Thai society also likes white skin. However, in Korea, white skin seems to be a requirement, not an option. When I go to Korea, I sometimes feel people looking at me because my skin color is different.”

“I want to have white skin, so I buy Korean cosmetics even though they are expensive.”

“It's not that I don't like my skin color, but I don't think it's pretty. Isn't it natural to want to have as white skin as possible?”

Thai idols who are popular in Korea are also becoming increasingly whiter, and it is thought that only Thais with white skin can be K-POP idols. It is natural to think that one can be popular in Korea only if one has white skin and does not look like a Thai person, as shown in Korean media. In fact, whenever Korean media mentioned the successful Thai idol Lisa, they always mentioned her appearance and skin color, and netizens also responded by saying that they did not know she was Thai because her skin color was white (Butsaban, 2019, 430).

“I think one of the reasons Thais can succeed as K-pop idols is because their appearance is similar to that of Koreans.”

“Lisa is Thai, but people don't really know she's Thai and think she's Korean. Because I think Lisa is decorating herself much whiter than when she debuted.”

There were various opinions regarding the whitewashing problem seen in Korean Wave content.

“I think it's natural to make idol photos whiter. Because the whiter it is, the more popular it is. I don't think whitewashing is a problem at all.”

“It is not right that only people with white skin succeed as idols. Skills and performance are more important. However, in Korean society, people with white skin are preferred in terms of appearance, so the social phenomenon is understandable.”

## Discussion

Results from the interview demonstrate how people understood and defined K-beauty and its impact on Thai society. There appears to be a widespread perception that white skin is a symbol of success and a prerequisite for beauty that should be idolized. People recognize that white skin is an essential condition. This is especially because, in addition to being beautiful, it is also a must-have qualification not only for success as an idol, but also for success in any social position. And it can be seen that there is a very high tendency to purchase cosmetics used by Korean idols not only as K-pop fans but also because they want to have white skin, and there is a natural desire to become like them. People believe that using Korean cosmetics makes them prettier, and they have a strong belief that even if Korean cosmetics are expensive, they can become like their favorite celebrities by using the cosmetics they use. This belief naturally leads to consumption and such behavior is justified. The biggest problem is that they are ashamed of their skin and think that they will be discriminated against by comparing themselves to white skin. It was also discovered that whitewashing in Korean society is not considered a major problem. It is natural to think that you cannot be successful because you do not have white skin. Rather saying that the social atmosphere that promotes whitewashing is wrong, there is a widespread perception that one should work hard to achieve white skin. Participants basically believe that whitening is a universal and core element of Korean media culture. Whitening is a unique charm that makes up Korean stars and is distributed worldwide, and everyone agrees that the reproduction of Korea's ideal beauty is always based on white and clear skin.

## Conclusion

Throughout history, white power, which was created over hundreds of years and granted a superior position to white people in developed countries, has operated unconsciously. The ruling structure of power based on skin color, which was created over hundreds of years, is now at work in Asia. Whitening is a desire to pursue beauty and is reconstructing the racial and ethnic status of Koreans. The desire to resemble Koreans can also be found in Thailand. A hierarchy of beauty in Asia is created based on Korean beauty standards, and discriminatory logic based on skin color emerges as hegemony. The whitening shown through the Korean Wave can be seen as a newly formed desire and cultural phenomenon among Thai people, and at the same time, it can also be seen as the imperialistic desire of the newly formed Korean Wave.

Thailand is already the largest market for K-pop. There are many young generations who follow their favorite K-pop idols and consume a lot of Korean content in their daily lives. However, at the same time, K-pop has a great influence on the perception of Thai people in Thai society. Although the interview results cannot be generalized, they only show a cross-section of Thai society, but if these perceptions become widespread, it can be a factor that can hinder the development of Thai wave in the future. Soft power is a strategy to influence the world through charm rather than force, and all influence comes with responsibility. The Korean Wave will not be able to avoid responsibility for the negative impact that K-pop's standardized image causes Thai consumers to accept and follow for granted.

## Acknowledgement

This study is supported by Fundamental Fund, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.

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