

BEYOND SOFT POWER: *KPOP DEMON HUNTERS* AND THE RISE OF INCLUSIVE KOREANNESS

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This brief examines how contemporary Korean popular culture is reshaping global understandings of Koreanness through the case of the animated film ‘KPop Demon Hunters’ (2025). While debates about the Korean Wave (hallyu) have often been framed through the concept of soft power—treating Korean cultural products as instruments of national influence—this article argues that such a framework obscures the hybrid and transnational nature of contemporary cultural production. Drawing on scholarship by Michael Hurt, Kyu Hyun Kim and CedarBough T. Saeji, the brief proposes understanding “Korea” not primarily as a national origin but as a flexible cultural signifier. Through analysis of two central narrative elements—the transformation of the Honmoon (“Soul Gate”) from a protective shield into a welcoming “rainbow portal”, and the mediating figure of the tiger-cat Derpy—the film symbolically reimagines Koreanness as inclusive, hybrid, and relational. Although such representations may still reproduce forms of cultural nationalism, the film challenges the dominant soft-power paradigm by presenting Koreanness as a dynamic cultural signifier assembled through transnational cultural interactions rather than a fixed national essence.

Photo credit: Netflix

Introduction¹

The animated action-fantasy film *KPop Demon Hunters* (dir. Maggie Kang and Chris Appelhans, 2025; hereafter KDH) has become one of the most widely viewed original titles in the history of the streaming platform Netflix. The story follows a K-pop girl group Huntrix whose public life as global pop stars conceals their secret role as

demon hunters tasked with protecting the human world from supernatural threats. Combining the aesthetics of K-pop performance with elements of fantasy and Korean folklore, the film quickly attracted global attention.

Despite its immense popularity, KDH also sparked a debate—particularly in South Korea—about the

film’s “Korean” nature. Although the letter “K” in the title suggests a clear association with Korean popular culture, the film itself is a transnational production. It was produced by Sony Pictures Animation, based in Los Angeles, for distribution on Netflix. Neither of the directors was raised or professionally trained in South Korea, and the screenplay was written primarily in English rather than Korean. These circumstances raised questions about the authenticity and cultural ownership of the film.

As Korean film scholar Kyu Hyun Kim has noted, domestic Korean audiences were initially skeptical about the “authenticity” and cultural appropriateness of the film’s representations of Korean language and culture. Over time, however, many viewers appeared to accept the film’s portrayal of everyday life in contemporary Seoul as convincing and recognizable.² This brief does not seek to determine whether *KDH* should ultimately be considered “Korean” or not. Instead, it asks a different question: how do we define Koreanness in the first place? *KPop Demon Hunters* offers a particularly revealing case through which to examine how Koreanness is being reimaged in the context of globally circulating popular culture.

From Soft Power to Korea as Floating Signifier

I argue that the hesitation to recognize *KDH* as “Korean” is rooted in a broader tendency to approach Korean popular culture primarily through the framework of soft power. This framework has shaped much of the scholarly and public discussion surrounding the global success of the Korean Wave (*hallyu*). CedarBough T. Saeji, an expert on Korean popular culture, has pointed to the limits of this approach.³ She concludes that “[w]hile *hallyu* has succeeded brilliantly as nation branding, it appears to have failed to convert cultural attraction into political influence.”⁴ In other words, although Korean popular culture has generated immense

global visibility for South Korea, its ability to translate that cultural appeal into measurable political power remains limited.

Within the soft power framework, the letter “K” in labels such as K-pop, K-drama, or K-film primarily represents South Korea as a nation-state. From this perspective, Korean popular culture is often interpreted as a strategic tool that allows the country to expand its cultural influence abroad. As a result, many analyses focus on how Korean cultural products “conquer,” “penetrate,” or “capture” foreign markets. Such language reveals the competitive and sometimes militarized metaphors embedded in the discourse of cultural expansion. At the same time, this perspective tends to overlook the aesthetic and creative dimensions of Korean popular culture, as well as the complex transnational processes through which cultural products are created, circulated, and transformed.⁵

The comparative ethnographer Michael Hurt has sharply criticized the limitations of the soft power paradigm. Rather than treating Korea as a fixed national origin that produces cultural exports, Hurt proposes understanding “Korea” as a floating signifier—a flexible cultural label that can be adopted, reinterpreted, and recombined in different contexts.⁶ His critique highlights not only the aggressive metaphors embedded in soft power discourse but also its deeper conceptual limitation: the framework remains tied to the idea that culture must be understood primarily within the boundaries of the nation-state. Cultural processes that cross, ignore, or destabilize these boundaries therefore become difficult to recognize or interpret.

More than a decade ago, sociologist John Lie already emphasized that the “K” in K-pop does not necessarily refer to a stable or essential Koreanness. Instead, it functions largely as a marketing label that helps position Korean music within the global entertainment market.⁷ As Lie and others have shown, popular culture is inherently hybrid,

composed of elements that circulate internationally and are continually recombined in new ways. In this sense, the global success of Korean popular culture cannot be explained simply as the outward projection of a national culture. As Hurt succinctly puts it, “Koreanness is in the curation and assembly, not the content.”⁸

Nevertheless, the dominant nationalist soft power framework continues to shape how Korean popular culture is interpreted. It encourages us to imagine cultural influence as a unidirectional flow, moving outward from South Korea toward passive audiences abroad. This perspective acts as a conceptual blinder, reinforcing the assumption that Korean cultural products must represent a coherent and authentic national identity. As a result, cultural processes that cross boundaries or challenge the idea of cultural purity often become illegible within this framework.⁹

This brief therefore follows Hurt’s argument and approaches KDH not to examine its cultural authenticity but as an invitation to rethink Koreanness itself. Rather than treating Koreanness as a pure and stable essence, the film suggests that it may function as an inclusive signifier—dynamic, relational, and constantly in motion. To explore this argument, I focus on two key actants within the film’s narrative: the Honmoon (魂門, “Soul Gate”)¹⁰ and the tiger-cat character Derpy. Together, these figures structure the film’s cosmology and symbolically challenge narrow or exclusionary understandings of Koreanness.

Transformation of the Honmoon from Protective Shield to Welcoming Gate

In KDH, the cosmological structure of the story centers on the Honmoon, or “Soul Gate”, a mystical boundary separating the human world from the demon realm. The concept evokes other literary and mythological gateways between worlds—most famously the entrance to the underworld



Fig. 1: The Golden Honmoon as a protective barrier against the “other”

in *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri. In KDH, however, the Honmoon is not a static portal but a dynamic barrier that protects the human world from demonic threats.

At the beginning of the film, the Honmoon is visualized as a golden net-like membrane, reminiscent of modern defense systems designed to shield territories from external attacks (See Fig. 1). Kyu Hyun Kim describes it as an “enveloping, expanding membrane, fluid in shape and irregular and heterogeneous in form.”¹¹ This barrier is maintained by generations of demon hunters whose duty is to keep the two realms apart and prevent demonic forces from entering the human world. In a distinctive twist, the strength of the Honmoon is sustained not through weapons or technology but through music: the performances of the demon-hunting K-pop group reinforce the barrier and protect the human realm.

In this initial stage, the Honmoon represents a worldview based on clear boundaries between the pure self and the demonic other. The geographical center of KDH is Seoul, and the narrative situates the Korean capital as the focal point from which this protective order radiates. As Kim argues, one of the film’s central challenges is “to make Koreanness accessible and attractive to the rest of the world (in a non-imperialistic or neocolonial manner),”¹² while still positioning Seoul symbolically at the center of the narrative universe.

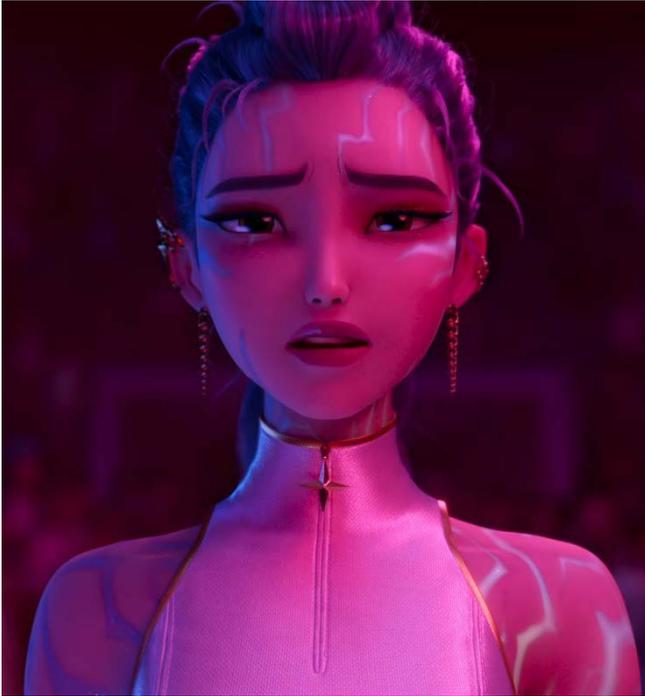


Fig. 2: Rumi's patterns that reveal her hybrid identity

This tension between purity and otherness is embodied in the character of Rumi, the lead singer of the demon-hunting group Huntrix. Patterns that appear on her shoulders and arms reveal that she carries both human and demonic traits (See Fig. 2). These markings signal her hybrid identity and complicate the strict boundary between the two realms. Viewers familiar with *Princess Mononoke* (1997) by Hayao Miyazaki may recognize parallels between Rumi's patterns and the cursed arm of Prince Ashitaka (See Fig. 3), which likewise embodies a dangerous but transformative



Fig. 3: Prince Ashitaka's cursed arm in *Princess Mononoke* (1997) by Hayao Miyazaki

connection to demonic forces.¹³ Such intertextual echoes highlight the broader influences of Japanese popular culture on KDH and underscore the film's hybrid cultural genealogy.

At the beginning of the story, Rumi attempts to conceal these patterns, hoping that they will disappear once the Golden Honmoon is perfected and complete. As the narrative unfolds, however, Rumi and her fellow hunters come to realize that the relationship between the human world and the demon realm cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between good and evil. The rigid logic of exclusion that sustains the Golden Honmoon ultimately proves incapable of producing lasting peace.

This shift becomes visible in the climactic transformation of the Honmoon itself. The once golden Honmoon evolves into a multicolored "rainbow" Honmoon (See Fig. 4), visually reimagining the boundary not as a defensive shield but as a space of interaction and inclusion. The transformation also reflects a broader ideological shift within the story. While Celine, the mentor of Huntrix, teaches her students that they must maintain purity by hiding fear and imperfection, Rumi ultimately rejects this doctrine. Instead, she embraces hybridity and argues that a Honmoon that suppresses diversity and difference cannot be sustained.

The transformation of the Honmoon—from



Fig. 4: The "Rainbow" Honmoon as an inviting gate

a protective barrier against the “other” to a welcoming “rainbow gate”—can therefore be interpreted as a metaphor for a broader shift in how Koreanness is imagined. In this sense, the narrative mirrors the movement from a nationalist soft power framework, which treats Korean culture as a bounded and exportable national product, toward the more flexible understanding of “Korea as signifier.” In the latter perspective, Koreanness is not defined by purity or exclusion but by its capacity to incorporate difference and create new cultural meanings across boundaries.

Derpy as the Symbol of Hybridity of Korean Culture

A key mediating figure in the narrative is Derpy, a tiger-like spirit that appears in the form of a cat and guides the protagonists in their encounters with the supernatural (See Fig. 5). Unlike the demon hunters, whose task is to defend the human



Fig. 5: Derpy who can move freely between the worlds on both sides of the Honmoon

realm against demonic threats, Derpy moves freely between the worlds on both sides of the Honmoon. This ability gives the character a unique position within the film’s cosmology: Derpy is not bound by the rigid separation between human and demon but instead embodies a form of liminal knowledge that connects the two realms.

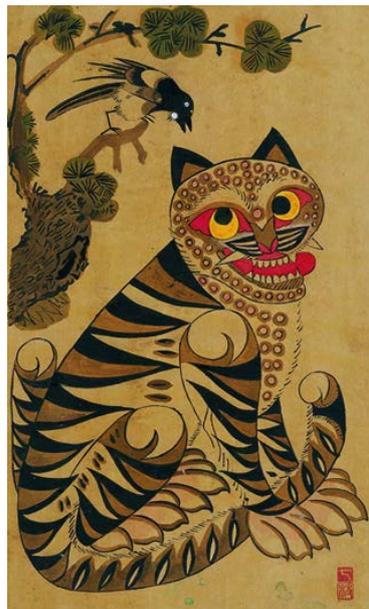


Fig. 6: Tiger and magpie in Korean folk painting

Like Rumi, Derpy bears distinctive patterns on its body that signal a connection to the supernatural. Yet the two characters respond to these patterns in very different ways. While Rumi initially attempts to hide her patterns and fears that they reveal an unacceptable demonic side, Derpy appears entirely at ease with its hybrid nature from the beginning. Even when the Honmoon still exists as a golden barrier separating the two realms, Derpy moves comfortably between them, suggesting that hybridity is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be embraced.

In this sense, Derpy can be understood as a symbol of the hybrid and multilayered character of Korean popular culture itself. The figure evokes multiple cultural associations that viewers may interpret differently depending on their background and cultural literacy.

Specialists of Korean culture might recognize echoes of the well-known “Tiger and Magpie” 虎鵲圖 motif from traditional Korean folk painting (See Fig. 6), in which the tiger often appears as a powerful but sometimes humorous figure interacting with other animals. Others may associate Derpy with



Fig. 7: Haechi, the mythical guardian creature that serves as an official mascot of the city of Seoul

Haechi, the mythical guardian creature that serves as an official mascot of the city of Seoul (See Fig. 7).

For viewers less familiar with Korean cultural traditions, however, the character may evoke entirely different associations. Derpy's mischievous smile and enigmatic presence recall the Cheshire Cat from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (See Fig. 8), while its playful ability to traverse space may remind audiences of the magical Catbus from *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988)¹⁴ by Hayao Miyazaki. These overlapping references underscore the transnational visual vocabulary from which KDH draws.

A closer comparison suggests that the creators of KDH intentionally designed Derpy in a way that allows viewers from different cultural backgrounds to interpret the character through their own frames of reference. Rather than relying on a single culturally specific symbol, the character operates as a multi-layered sign that can be decoded in several ways. This strategy reflects the broader dynamics of global popular culture, where meaning often emerges through the interaction of multiple cultural traditions.

At the same time, references in popular culture are not always experienced uniformly as pleasurable acts of recognition. Intertextual references can

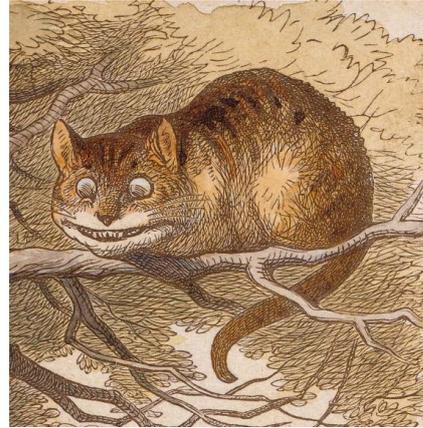


Fig. 8: Cheshire Cat from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



Fig. 9: Catbus from *My Neighbor Totoro* by Studio Ghibli

also produce frustration or alienation when audiences are unable to identify them. Viewers who do not recognize a reference may feel excluded from the interpretive community that shares this knowledge.¹⁵ By contrast, the multiple possible readings of Derpy reduce this risk of exclusion. Because the character resonates with several different cultural traditions, audiences are given multiple entry points through which to engage with the narrative.

Providing such interpretive flexibility can therefore be understood as a deliberate narrative strategy. By allowing Derpy to evoke several possible cultural lineages simultaneously, KDH creates a symbolic figure that mirrors the hybrid and globally circulating nature of Korean popular culture itself. In this way, the character functions not only as a

mediator between the human and demon worlds within the story, but also as a metaphor for the inclusive and plural forms of Koreanness that emerge within contemporary global K-culture. While the Honmoon must undergo a visible transformation—from a golden barrier to a rainbow gate—in order to move beyond the exclusionary logic of the soft power framework, Derpy already embodies this more inclusive paradigm from the beginning. Moving fluidly between cultural references and symbolic traditions, the character itself operates as a kind of floating signifier, illustrating how Koreanness can be assembled, interpreted, and reimagined across different cultural contexts.

Conclusion

The transformation of the Honmoon from a protective shield safeguarding a notion of pure Koreanness into a welcoming gate that invites diversity, together with the mediating figure of Derpy, suggests that KDH shifts from celebrating a singular and bounded Koreanness toward embracing the multiplicity and diversity of Korea. At the same time, this development should not be interpreted too uncritically. Kyu Hyun Kim cautions that such representations may ultimately reproduce a new form of pop nationalism or diasporic nationalism.¹⁶ This raises an important question: does this seemingly inclusive approach merely replace one notion of cultural purity with another?

In other words, is this more open version of Koreanness simply a new form of purity—what Koichi Iwabuchi describes as a “purity sustained by impurity”¹⁷—or does it represent what Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto calls “genuine hybridity?”¹⁸ While these questions remain open to debate, KDH nevertheless challenges the dominant soft power narrative that understands Korean culture primarily as a unidirectional flow radiating outward from South Korea to the rest of the world. Even if the film does not fully escape nationalist frameworks, it appears

to open a symbolic gate toward a more flexible understanding of Koreanness—one that allows greater diversity and acknowledges the complex interactions between self and other. In this sense, KDH invites viewers to rethink Koreanness not as a fixed cultural essence but as a dynamic and evolving signifier, mediated—much like Derpy itself—between different worlds.

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Endnotes

- 1 This work was supported by the Seed Program for Korean Studies of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2021-INC-2250001). I presented a shorter version of this brief at the 2025 International Conference of the Northeast Asian History Foundation, titled “Traversing Korean History: Ideas of the World, Exchange and Perception in Travel Narratives” at Freie Universität Berlin.
- 2 Kyu Hyun Kim, “Emanating From Seoul? The Honmoon, Geopolitical-Geocultural Imaginary of Globalization and Korean Identity in KPop Demon Hunters,” Presentation in the panel “‘I See Beauty in a Million Pieces of Glass’: Affective Strategies, Performing Bodies, Hybrid Identities, and Imagined Geographies in *KPop Demon Hunters*,” Annual Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, March 13, 2026, <https://cdmcd.co/Ed9mvk>.
- 3 CedarBough T. Saeji, “The Limits of Korean Soft Power,” *East Asia Forum Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (2026): 25–29, <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.T2026030300011190147732890>
- 4 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 6 Michael Hurt, “Denationalizing Korean Studies: Against the Soft Power Paradigm,” *KARSI – Korea Advanced Research Studies Institute* 1, no. 32, January 16, 2026, <https://www.karsi.org/articles/denationalizing-korean-studies-against-the-soft-power-paradigm>
- 7 John Lie, “What Is the K in K-pop? South Korean Popular Music, the Culture Industry, and National Identity,” *Korea Observer* 43, no. 3 (2012): 339–363.
- 8 Michael Hurt, “Denationalizing Korean Studies,” 17.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 7, 13.
- 10 Although the Chinese characters for this term are not given in the film, Kyu Hyun Kim suggests the likelihood that Honmoon is the Korean pronunciation of the Sino-Korean term 魂門, which can be translated as “Soul Gate”; Kyu Hyun Kim, “Emanating From Seoul?”.
- 11 *Ibid.*, conference slide.
- 12 Kyu Hyun Kim, “Emanating From Seoul?” conference slide.
- 13 I am grateful to Sierra Humbert for pointing this parallel out to me during a seminar on cultural heritage in Asia in the fall semester 2025 at the University of Copenhagen.
- 14 Sierra Humbert also pointed out the resemblance of Derpy to the Cheshire Cat and to the Catbus.
- 15 CedarBough T. Saeji and Barbara Wall, “The Role of the (Un)Knowing Audience in Transmedia Storytelling: Why Seventeen’s ‘Son Ogong’ Should Not Be Called ‘Super’ but ‘Monkey King’ in English,” in *Critical Approaches to Transmedia Storytelling in K-Pop*, ed. Nicholas Miller (New York: Bloomsbury), 65–66.
- 16 Kyu Hyun Kim, “Emanating From Seoul?” conference slide.
- 17 Koichi Iwabuchi. *Recentering Globalization* (New York: Duke University Press, 2020), 54.
- 18 Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, “Images of empire: Tokyo Disneyland and Japanese cultural imperialism,” in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. E. Smoodin (New York: Routledge, 1994), 197.