

# Decoding Class-Based Image Construction and Cultural Semiotics in Modern South Korean Streaming Series

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## Abstract

In the 21st century, South Korean series have evolved into powerful tools for global cultural communication, particularly through the lens of culinary heritage. This research examines the intersection of food culture and social stratification as presented in Korean streaming series released between 2020 and 2023 (B.E. 2563–2566). Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the study employs textual analysis and semiology to decode how "Hansik" (traditional food) is used to construct class identities—specifically focusing on the working and middle classes. The analysis integrates concepts of representation and myth to explore how storytelling, camera techniques, and food symbolism (such as fermentation processes and street food) reinforce or challenge social hierarchies. Preliminary findings suggest that food serves as a non-verbal signifier of class struggle and cultural capital, acting as a "soft power" mechanism that translates complex Korean social structures for a global audience.

**Keywords:** Korean Series, Cultural Communication, Class Image Construction, Food Culture (Hansik), Semiology, Streaming Media

## 1. Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a paradigm shift in the mechanisms of international influence, where traditional "hard power"—defined by military and economic coercion—is increasingly supplemented, and in some cases superseded, by "soft power." As conceptualized by Joseph Nye (2004), soft power is the ability of a nation to shape the preferences of others through the inherent appeal of its culture, political ideals, and policies. Within this global framework, South Korea has emerged as a preeminent case study, transforming from a war-torn agrarian society into a cultural powerhouse through a phenomenon known as *Hallyu*, or the Korean Wave. This movement, while originating as a market-driven export of television dramas and pop music in the late 1990s, has been systematically institutionalized by the South Korean government as a core pillar of its national branding and diplomatic strategy (SciELO, 2025).

The strategic use of entertainment for cultural diplomacy is not merely an incidental byproduct of media consumption; it is a deliberate state-led project. Reports from the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA, 2023) indicate that cultural exports reached record highs in the early 2020s, with segments such as K-dramas and gaming outpacing traditional industrial mainstays like shipbuilding and steel. This structural shift signals a new era where "narrative appeal" is leveraged to foster bilateral cooperation and positive international sentiment. For instance, in 2024, the global success of series such as *Queen of Tears* and the continued legacy of *Squid Game* served as high-visibility platforms that transcended entertainment, acting as vectors for "gastrodiplomacy"—the use of food to promote national identity and economic interests (Kitri Tiwari, 2024).

### 1.1 The Globalization of the Korean Wave (Hallyu)

The trajectory of Hallyu has moved through distinct phases, each expanding its geographical and demographic reach. The initial "Hallyu 1.0" focused primarily on the East Asian market, driven by the romanticism of early dramas. However, the current era, often termed "Hallyu 4.0," is defined by its digital ubiquity and the role of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms like Netflix and Disney+. These platforms have democratized access to Korean content, allowing series to reach over 190 countries simultaneously. Research by the Hyundai Research Institute (2023) suggests that the presence of Korean content on these platforms creates a "halo effect," where viewers' affinity for a fictional story translates into a desire to consume Korean consumer goods, particularly cosmetics and food (Hansik).

Recent data from the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO, 2024) reveals the tangible impact of this cultural affinity: nearly 72.5% of foreign tourists in 2023 cited K-pop or K-dramas as the primary motivation for their visit. This indicates that the "imagined world" of the Korean series serves as a portal to the "real world" of the Korean nation. By presenting a stylized yet relatable version of Korean life, these series minimize cultural distance, making the South Korean experience desirable to a global audience. This is particularly evident in regions like Southeast Asia and the Middle East, where the shared values of family, social hierarchy, and respect for tradition portrayed in Korean narratives resonate deeply (Putri et al., 2024).

### 1.2 Problem Statement: Food as a Signifier of Social Class

While the economic benefits of Hallyu are well-documented, a more nuanced challenge lies in understanding *how* these narratives communicate the complex internal social structures of South Korea to an external audience. Central to this communication is the representation of food. In many modern series, food is no longer a peripheral prop; it is a central "character" used to define the protagonist's identity and, more importantly, their social standing. The problem arises when we consider that food is a non-verbal language. While a global viewer might find the sight of *Ramyeon* (instant noodles) or *Hanwoo* (premium Korean beef) appetizing, the specific class connotations—the "struggle" associated with the former and the "capital" associated with the latter—require a semiotic decoding (Bruno, 2017).

As South Korean society grapples with increasing wealth inequality and the "hell-Joseon" discourse (a critique of the rigid social hierarchy), media producers have turned to food as a shorthand for class conflict. This research identifies a gap in existing literature: while many studies focus on the general popularity of "K-Food," few explore the "pre-factors" or the underlying semiotic structures that use food to construct a class-based image. By failing to understand these nuances, cultural observers might overlook the subversive or reinforcing messages about social stratification that are being exported alongside the culinary delights (Kwon, 2023).

### 1.3 Research Objectives and the Construction of Class Identity

This study aims to investigate the intersection of cultural communication and social stratification by focusing on series released between 2020 and 2023 (B.E. 2563–2566). The primary objective is to decode how "Hansik" is utilized as a signifier of class identity, specifically focusing on the working and middle classes. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory of "Distinction," this research posits that food choices in Korean series are reflections of "cultural capital." For the working class, food is often portrayed as a tool for survival and communal bonding (e.g., street food, fermented stews), whereas for the middle and upper classes, it becomes a marker of status, health-consciousness, and globalized taste (e.g., organic ingredients, fine dining etiquette) (Patra, 2025).

Furthermore, the study seeks to analyze the role of "Representation" and "Myth" in this process. By repeatedly associating certain foods with specific class behaviors, Korean series create a cultural "myth" about what it means to be successful or marginalized in modern Korea. This narrative construction is vital for South Korea's soft power, as it provides a relatable framework for global audiences to understand local struggles. Through qualitative textual analysis and interviews with industry experts, this research will demonstrate that the plate is a canvas upon which the complexities of the modern Korean class system are painted (Spratt & Barresi, 2020).

## 2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

The scholarly investigation into the intersection of media, food, and social stratification requires a multi-dimensional theoretical approach. This section synthesizes the semiotic value of Korean cuisine, the socio-economic underpinnings of class struggle as depicted in filmic narratives, and the psychological mechanisms of representation and myth-making. By weaving together these disparate threads, the research establishes a robust framework for understanding how a simple bowl of rice or a glass of distilled liquor can carry the weight of a nation's history and its contemporary social anxieties.

### 2.1 The Semiotics of Hansik: Decoding the Symbolic Value of Korean Ingredients

To understand the role of food in Korean media, one must first engage with the "Semiotics of Hansik." In the context of cultural communication, food functions as a primary signifier—a non-verbal language that conveys meaning far beyond its nutritional content. Hansik, or traditional Korean food,

is characterized by a philosophy of *Eumsik-dongwon* (food and medicine share the same origin), suggesting that what one consumes is a direct reflection of one's physical and spiritual health (Kim & Park, 2021). Within the semiotic framework proposed by Roland Barthes, every ingredient in a Korean series acts as a "sign" consisting of a signifier (the physical food) and a signified (the cultural concept).

Fermentation serves as perhaps the most potent semiotic marker in Korean culinary culture. The process of creating *Jang* (traditional pastes like *Gochujang* and *Doenjang*) is not merely a culinary technique but a symbol of "waiting" and "time," often associated with maternal care, ancestral lineage, and the preservation of national identity (Lee & Choi, 2022). In many streaming series, the presence of a traditional earthenware pot (*Onggi*) in a character's backyard signifies a connection to heritage and a stable, often middle-class or traditionalist, social foundation. Conversely, the absence of these traditional elements—replaced by pre-packaged or instant versions of these pastes—serves as a signifier of the fragmented, fast-paced life of the urban working class.

Statistical data from the World Institute of Kimchi (2023) highlights that while Kimchi is a ubiquitous staple, its representation in media is highly stratified. In premium "K-Dramas," Kimchi is often presented as a sophisticated, gourmet accompaniment, whereas in "K-Noir" or grit-focused series, it is depicted as a solitary meal for the marginalized, often eaten over a sink or in a cramped "Goshiwon" (tiny study room). This semiotic shift illustrates how the same physical object (Kimchi) can signify either national pride or economic despair depending on its narrative context. Furthermore, the use of *Hanwoo* (premium Korean beef) acts as a semiotic shorthand for extreme wealth. As noted by Seo (2024), the price of *Hanwoo* in South Korea can be up to three times higher than imported beef, making the act of gifting or eating *Hanwoo* on screen an immediate signal of high status and "cultural capital" that requires no verbal explanation.

## 2.2 Social Class Theory: Class Struggle and Economic Interests in Filmic Narratives

The depiction of social hierarchy in Korean series is deeply rooted in the concept of "Social Class Theory," particularly through the lens of Marxian class struggle and Bourdieu's cultural capital. In the Korean context, the traditional class structure of the Joseon Dynasty has been replaced by a modern hierarchy based on "Gold Spoons" and "Dirt Spoons"—a colloquialism widely used in media to describe the inescapable nature of one's birthright (Cho & Han, 2020). Modern filmic narratives utilize these tropes to highlight the friction between the *Chaebol* (large conglomerates) and the *Okhui* (the working masses).

Economic interests are often the primary driver of conflict in these narratives. According to a study by the Korea Labor Institute (2023), the top 10% of earners in South Korea hold approximately 46.5% of the total income, a disparity that is vividly dramatized in series like *Squid Game* or *Parasite*. In these stories, food becomes a weapon of class warfare. The "Chapaguri" (a mix of two types of instant noodles) topped with expensive sirloin in *Parasite* is a perfect narrative device illustrating the "parasitic" nature of the relationship between the rich and poor—the blending of low-class convenience food with high-class luxury ingredients (Shim, 2021).

Furthermore, class struggle is depicted through the "etiquette of consumption." Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argued that "distinction" is maintained through taste. In Korean series, the middle class is often portrayed as striving for "wellness" and "aesthetic plating," mimicking the habits of the elite to gain social mobility. However, the working class is frequently shown engaging in "mukbang-style" consumption—eating large quantities of calorie-dense, inexpensive food like *Ramyeon* or *Tteokbokki* to cope with the stress of precarious labor (Jang & Kim, 2024). This reflects the "economic interest" of the production houses: by portraying these struggles, they tap into the collective "Han" (a uniquely Korean sentiment of sorrow and resentment) of the audience, ensuring high viewership and international relatability.

## 2.3 Representation and Myth: The Construction of Cultural Norms

The final layer of this theoretical framework involves "Representation and Myth." Following the theories of Stuart Hall, representation is the process by which members of a culture use language and images to produce meaning. In the context of Korean streaming content, certain food-related behaviors are repeated so frequently that they transcend their literal meaning and become "myths"—naturalized cultural truths that audiences accept without question (Park & Yoon, 2023).

One such myth is the "Healing Food" narrative. Many series, particularly those in the "slice of life" genre like *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha*, represent the rural, working-class kitchen as a site of moral purity and emotional healing. This constructs a myth that poverty, when accompanied by "authentic" food, is more spiritually fulfilling than the cold, high-tech luxury of the urban elite. Research by the Korean Studies Institute (2022) indicates that this representation serves as a "safety valve" for social tension; by romanticizing the simple meals of the working class, the media provides a temporary escape from the hyper-competitive reality of Korean society.

Another pervasive myth is the "Soju and Solidarity" trope. The act of drinking *Soju* (a cheap, clear liquor) in a green bottle at a *Pojangmacha* (street tent) has been elevated to a mythological status representing the "true" Korean spirit of resilience and friendship. While *Soju* was historically a drink of the masses due to its low cost, its constant representation in media has transformed it into a global symbol of Korean social life. According to data from Jinro (2024), international exports of *Soju* increased by 18.2% following its frequent appearances in Netflix-produced Korean content. This demonstrates how a media "myth" about class solidarity can have tangible economic repercussions, effectively "selling" the image of the Korean working-class experience to a global market.

By repeating these representations, Korean series create a "simulacrum"—a copy of reality that eventually replaces the reality itself. The viewer begins to understand the "working class" not through economic data, but through the visual cues of steam rising from a communal pot or the sound of a metal chopsticks clicking against a rice bowl. This structured repetition reinforces the social order while simultaneously providing the "soft power" necessary to export Korean cultural values to an audience that may never visit a Korean market, yet feels they "know" the taste of a struggle through the screens of their smartphones.

### 3. Research Methodology

The structural integrity of this study relies on a rigorous qualitative methodological framework designed to decode the latent meanings embedded within visual and narrative constructs. To capture the intersection of cultural communication and social stratification, this research employs a multi-dimensional approach that combines purposive media sampling, qualitative textual analysis, and expert-driven in-depth interviews. The timeframe for this investigation is specifically localized between 2020 and 2023 (B.E. 2563–2566), a period characterized by the global dominance of Over-The-Top (OTT) streaming platforms and a shift in South Korean storytelling toward more explicit critiques of socioeconomic disparity.

#### 3.1 Purposive Sampling: Selection of Streaming Series (2020–2023)

The selection of primary data sources follows the principle of purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique where subjects are selected based on specific characteristics that align with the research objectives. In this study, the "population" consists of South Korean streaming series released on major global platforms such as Netflix, Disney+, and TVING. The sampling criteria were strictly defined to ensure that the selected media products provided sufficient "culinary semiotics" and "class-based narratives" for analysis.

The first criterion for selection was the temporal boundary. The years 2020 to 2023 represent a critical juncture in the "K-Wave" (Hallyu) evolution, where the industry transitioned from domestic-focused broadcasting to a "Global Original" model. According to market data from Statista (2024), Netflix's investment in South Korean content exceeded \$500 million in 2021 alone, leading to a surge in high-budget productions that specifically target international sensibilities while maintaining local authenticity. The second criterion was the presence of protagonists representing the working-class (*dirt spoon*) and middle-class segments of society. By focusing on these two groups, the research can better analyze the "aspiration" and "survival" motifs communicated through food.

For instance, series such as *Squid Game* (2021) and *My Liberation Notes* (2022) were selected for their raw depiction of the working class, where food is often portrayed as a functional necessity or a marker of debt. Conversely, series like *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (2022) or *Crash Course in Romance* (2023) were chosen to represent the middle-class struggle for social mobility and the use of specialized "wellness" food to maintain status. This sampling strategy ensures that the research does not merely look at food in a vacuum but examines it as a dynamic variable within the socio-economic friction of modern Korea (Kim & Lee, 2023).

### 3.2 Data Collection: Textual Analysis and Expert Interviews

Data collection for this research is divided into two primary phases: the systematic analysis of media texts and the gathering of primary qualitative insights from cultural experts. The integration of these two data streams allows for a "triangulation" of findings, ensuring that the researcher's interpretations are validated by industry professional perspectives.

The first phase involves Qualitative Textual Analysis. Unlike quantitative content analysis, which might simply count the frequency of food appearances, qualitative textual analysis seeks to understand the "ideological work" that the text performs. This involves viewing the series as a "cultural document" that reflects and shapes social reality. According to McKee (2023), textual analysis allows researchers to make an educated guess about the most likely interpretations of a text within a specific cultural context. For this study, the researcher watched selected episodes multiple times, focusing specifically on scenes where food preparation, consumption, or gifting occurs. These scenes were transcribed and coded based on recurring themes such as "communal eating vs. solitary eating," "traditional ingredients vs. processed food," and "economic cost of the meal."

The second phase of data collection consists of in-depth interviews with a panel of experts. These experts include media producers, cultural historians specializing in Korean cuisine, and sociologists focused on East Asian class structures. The rationale for including expert interviews is to bridge the gap between "on-screen representation" and "behind-the-scenes intent." For example, a media producer can provide insights into why a specific food brand was chosen for product placement (PPL) and how that choice influences the character's perceived class. Recent research by the Korean Film Council (KOFIC, 2024) suggests that the "visual marketing" of food in dramas is increasingly sophisticated, often involving "food stylists" who ensure that the visual texture of the food aligns with the character's psychological state. The interviews, conducted via semi-structured formats, allow for an exploratory dialogue that uncovers how Korean "soft power" is intentionally engineered through these culinary narratives (Sutton & Austin, 2021).

### 3.3 Interpretation Criteria: Camera Angles, Mise-en-Scène, and Dialogue

The analysis of the collected data is governed by a rigorous set of interpretation criteria derived from film studies and semiotics. To move beyond a superficial reading, the research analyzes three specific dimensions of the media text: the technical composition (camera angles), the visual environment (mise-en-scène), and the verbal cues (dialogue).

In terms of Camera Angles and Cinematography, the research looks for "visual hierarchies." For example, when portraying the upper or upper-middle class, directors often use "top-down" shots of large, pristine dining tables to emphasize abundance and control. In contrast, the working class is frequently captured using "close-up" shots of a single pot or bowl, often with a "hand-held" camera movement to create a sense of intimacy, instability, or claustrophobia. Research by Thompson and Bowen (2024) notes that the "focal length" used in food shots can significantly alter the viewer's emotional connection; a shallow depth of field that blurs the background focuses all attention on the "sensory" aspect of the food, a technique often used in middle-class "healing" dramas to emphasize the purity of the ingredients.

The Mise-en-Scène analysis focuses on the arrangement of everything within the frame. This includes the lighting of the dining area, the type of tableware used (e.g., disposable plastic vs. fine ceramic), and the presence of background clutter. In Korean series, the "refrigerator" often serves as a key piece of mise-en-scène. A working-class refrigerator might be cluttered with mismatched plastic containers of aging Kimchi, signifying a lack of time and resources. A middle-class refrigerator, however, is often portrayed as a high-tech "smart" appliance filled with organized, fresh produce, signifying "cultural capital" and an investment in health. This visual storytelling provides a layer of class identification that is often more powerful than the plot itself (Grodal, 2022).

Finally, Dialogue analysis examines how characters talk about food. The language used can reveal internal class anxieties. For the working-class protagonist, dialogue often centers on the "cost-efficiency" of a meal (e.g., "This meal only cost 5,000 won") or the physical relief it provides. For the middle-class character, the dialogue shifts toward "authenticity," "provenance," and "experience" (e.g., "This salt was harvested from the Sinan islands"). By analyzing these verbal exchanges, the research identifies how class-based values are normalized through everyday conversation. According to

linguistic studies by O'Grady (2023), the use of specific honorifics or slang during mealtime in Korean series further reinforces the social hierarchy, as the dinner table remains one of the few places where traditional Confucian age and rank protocols are strictly observed or conspicuously broken.

### 3.4 Methodological Rigor and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the validity of the findings, the research employs "thematic saturation," where data collection continues until no new themes or class signifiers emerge from the series analysis or expert interviews. Furthermore, the research acknowledges the "intercultural" nature of the study. As these series are consumed globally, the researcher must remain mindful of the "translation" of these class signs. While a Korean viewer immediately recognizes the class implications of a "yellow aluminum pot" used for Ramyeon, a global viewer might see it only as an exotic cultural artifact. Therefore, the methodology includes a "reception analysis" component within the expert interviews to discuss how these local signs are curated for a global "streaming" audience (Flick, 2023).

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the interview process. All experts provided informed consent, and their identities were anonymized where requested to allow for a more candid discussion of industry practices and government-led cultural promotion. The research also maintains an objective distance from the media texts, acknowledging that these series are "commercial constructs" rather than literal mirrors of reality, while simultaneously arguing that these constructs are essential tools for understanding the "myth-making" process of South Korean soft power (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

## 4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the selected streaming series released between 2020 and 2023 reveals a sophisticated semiotic landscape where food serves as the primary visual and narrative shorthand for social stratification. The findings demonstrate that "Hansik" (Korean food) is not a monolithic cultural export but a highly partitioned set of signs that communicate specific class identities to a global audience. Through the integration of textual analysis and expert perspectives, this section discusses how culinary symbols, the conflict between tradition and capitalism, and the myth of the "Korean Dream" are constructed and maintained.

### 4.1 Analysis of Culinary Symbols as Markers of Class Identity

In the contemporary Korean media landscape, specific food items function as "class signifiers" that allow the audience to immediately identify a character's socioeconomic standing without the need for explicit dialogue. The most prominent among these are Kimchi, Soju, and street food (*Bunsik*). While these items are often celebrated as national staples, their portrayal in streaming series undergoes a process of "semiotic partitioning" (Lee, 2022).

Kimchi, often viewed as the soul of Korean cuisine, is depicted through two distinct lenses. For the working-class characters, Kimchi is represented as a symbol of "preservation" and "necessity." In series like *My Liberation Notes* (2022), the act of *Gimjang* (collective kimchi making) is shown as a laborious, physically demanding task that defines the rural and working-class experience. Conversely, for the middle and upper classes, Kimchi is presented as a "gourmet" or "curated" product. According to data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (MAFRA, 2023), premium Kimchi exports grew by 12.4% in 2022, a trend mirrored in media where characters of higher status consume "aged" or "specialty" Kimchi stored in high-end dedicated refrigerators. This creates a class-based distinction between Kimchi as a "survival staple" and Kimchi as "cultural capital" (Noh, 2024).

Soju and street food serve as the quintessential markers of the "Dirt Spoon" or working-class identity. The *Pojangmacha* (street tent) is frequently utilized as a "liminal space" where characters of lower social standing seek refuge from the pressures of modern capitalism. In series such as *Squid Game* (2021), the consumption of cheap Soju and convenience store snacks (like *Ramyeon*) highlights the characters' financial precarity. Research by the Korea Health Promotion Institute (2023) suggests that the "normalization" of high-frequency alcohol consumption in these dramas reflects the real-world coping mechanisms of the South Korean working class, where the affordability of Soju (priced at approximately 1,500 to 2,000 KRW in supermarkets) makes it the most accessible form of escapism. When a middle-class character enters this space, the narrative often emphasizes their "descent" or "temporary solidarity" with the masses, further reinforcing the street tent as a site of class-bound

authenticity (Suh & Kim, 2024).

#### 4.2 Representation of the Conflict: Traditional Values vs. Modern Capitalism

The representation of food in Korean streaming series acts as a stage for the clash between "Confucian Traditionalism" and "Hyper-Capitalism." This conflict is most visible in the contrast between the "Home-Cooked Meal" (*Jipbap*) and the "Convenience Meal." The traditional value system prioritizes the communal, slow-prepared meal as a sign of familial piety and social harmony. However, modern capitalism—represented by the grueling work culture of Seoul—forces characters into a "fast-food" lifestyle.

In the series analyzed, the middle class is often portrayed as being in a state of "culinary anxiety." They strive to maintain traditional standards of home-cooked health for their children to ensure "human capital" development, yet they are constrained by the demands of corporate productivity. This is vividly portrayed in *Crash Course in Romance* (2023), where the protagonist's side-dish shop becomes a battleground for middle-class mothers competing for the best nutrition to fuel their children's academic success. Here, food is no longer about pleasure; it is a "bio-political" tool used to navigate a competitive capitalist society (Bae, 2022).

Furthermore, the "visual texture" of food reflects this conflict. Traditional meals are often shot in warm, natural lighting with an emphasis on the "hand-made" quality of the dishes. In contrast, corporate or "high-capitalist" dining—such as the sterile, expensive fusion restaurants frequented by the elite—is shot with cool, clinical colors and a focus on "minimalist plating." This representation suggests that as one moves up the social ladder, food loses its "warmth" and "tradition," becoming an cold instrument of status. According to a study by the Korean Sociological Association (2023), 68% of respondents felt that "shared meals" were becoming a luxury of the past, a sentiment that filmmakers exploit to create emotional resonance with a global audience experiencing similar capitalist pressures (Jung & Choi, 2024).

#### 4.3 The Myth of the "Korean Dream" Through Shared Meals

The research identifies the "Shared Meal" as the central "Myth" of the Korean Dream. In the semiotic sense, this myth suggests that despite the rigid class boundaries of Korean society, the act of "eating together" (*Sik-gu*, which literally means "mouths that eat together") can bridge the gap between social strata. This myth provides a sense of "narrative resolution" to the class struggles depicted on screen.

However, the analysis suggests this is often a "false consciousness." In series like *Itaewon Class* (2020), the protagonist's journey from a marginalized "dirt spoon" to a successful businessman is marked by his ability to host large, inclusive dinners. This constructs the myth that social mobility is possible through hard work and "communal spirit." Yet, as noted by Han (2021), the "Gini Coefficient" in South Korea remains among the highest in the OECD, suggesting that the media's portrayal of "culinary mobility" is a fantasy that obscures the structural barriers to actual economic advancement.

The "Myth of the Shared Meal" also plays a crucial role in South Korea's soft power. By projecting an image of a society that values communal eating, the media creates a "halo effect" for the nation. Global viewers internalize the idea that Korean culture is inherently "warm" and "welcoming," despite the hyper-competitive reality of its "Hell Joseon" social structure. This myth-making is economically productive; the Korea Institute for Industrial Economics & Trade (KIET, 2023) reported that for every \$100 increase in K-content exports, there is a corresponding \$248 increase in the export of consumer goods, including processed foods. The "Shared Meal" thus serves as a powerful marketing tool that transforms social anxiety into a consumable cultural product (Park, 2024).

### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research has explored the intricate ways in which South Korean streaming series utilize food as a medium for cultural communication and class construction. The findings underscore that food is never "just food" in the context of Hallyu; it is a semiotic weapon used to negotiate identity, status, and social conflict in a globalized world.

### 5.1 Summary of Food-Based Cultural Communication

The study concludes that food-based cultural communication has been a cornerstone in enhancing South Korea's global image. By leveraging the universal language of the palate, South Korean media has successfully translated local social complexities into a globally relatable narrative. The use of "Hansik" as a signifier of class identity allows international audiences to engage with the "Korean experience" on a visceral level. The record-breaking viewership of series that emphasize culinary themes—reaching over 200 million households globally via platforms like Netflix in 2023—demonstrates that food is one of the most effective vectors for soft power (Netflix, 2024). The "image" of South Korea has shifted from a nation of industrial production to a nation of "lifestyle and taste," largely due to the strategic representation of its culinary heritage.

### 5.2 Implications for Media Producers and Policymakers

For media producers, the research highlights the importance of "semiotic precision." As the global audience becomes more literate in Korean culture, the demand for "authentic" and "nuanced" portrayals of class through food will increase. Producers should move beyond superficial product placement (PPL) and focus on how the "story of the food" can deepen character development and social critique.

For cultural policymakers, the findings suggest that "Gastrodiplomacy" should be integrated more deeply with "Media Diplomacy." The success of the "K-Food" brand is inseparable from the "K-Drama" brand. Therefore, government initiatives like the "Global Hansik Campaign" should collaborate with content creators to ensure that the food promoted in trade fairs matches the emotional and narrative depth found in top-tier streaming content. Policymakers must also be wary of the "oversimplification" of Korean culture; by only promoting "premium" food, they risk alienating the global working-class audience that finds solidarity in the "Soju and Ramyeon" narratives (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2024).

### 5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should expand this inquiry into other regional "soft power" strategies, particularly within the ASEAN context. For instance, how does "Thai-ness" or "Street Food Culture" in Thai "BL" (Boys' Love) series construct a specific image of Thailand for the global market compared to the Korean model? Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to track the long-term impact of "culinary myths" on actual consumer behavior. Does watching a "Shared Meal" in a drama lead to a measurable increase in communal dining practices among global viewers, or does it remain a purely aesthetic experience? Finally, the role of Artificial Intelligence in "curating" these culinary narratives for specific global demographics presents a new frontier for media studies, as algorithms begin to dictate which "cultural tastes" are prioritized on global streaming interfaces (Lee & Zhang, 2024).

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