

Korean Popular Culture & Media

ASIA-3020 (3 credits)

South Korea: Society & Culture

This syllabus is representative of a typical semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

Course Description

This course examines Korean popular culture and media as lenses into society, identity, and everyday life. Students analyze how K-pop, K-dramas, cinema, comics (*manhwa*), and webtoons represent themes of gender, class, family, and generational change, and how these cultural forms both reflect and shape Korean values. The course places popular culture and media in critical perspective, exploring issues such as the global commodification of K-culture, the politics of representation, the pressures of the idol system, and the tensions between cultural pride and soft power projection. Students also consider how audiences interpret and participate in media culture, from domestic fandoms to the global reception of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*). Case studies highlight both celebrated works and controversies, while field visits to cultural institutions and fan communities provide firsthand perspectives on the lived experience and contested meanings of K-culture.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Analyze how Korean popular cultural texts (e.g., K-dramas, films, music videos) represent and engage with complex social themes, including gender, class, family dynamics, and generational conflict.
- Critically evaluate the relationship between cultural content and social values, assessing how K-culture both reflects existing Korean societal norms and actively shapes new values and identities.
- Distinguish and debate key critical issues within the K-culture landscape, such as the global commodification of culture, the politics of representation, and the ethical pressures inherent in the idol system.
- Integrate course readings with firsthand observations and reflections from field visits to cultural institutions or fan communities to construct an evidence-based argument related to the complexities of K-culture.

Language of Instruction

This course is taught in English.

Instructional Methods

This course is designed around the principle that learning is an active, holistic process that extends well beyond the classroom. Seminars introduce key concepts and interpretive frameworks that are then examined, complicated, and enriched through direct engagement with people, places, and contexts — field visits, expert briefings, guided observation, and community-based learning. Field-based learning is integrated into course design rather than treated as enrichment: faculty prepare students for each engagement, guide interpretation on location, and facilitate the reflection that connects experience to course themes. Students move through cycles of experience, observation, and analysis, progressively taking greater ownership of their own inquiry. This process is not always linear, and that is by design — developing the capacity to learn from unpredictable, context-dependent situations is itself a transferable skill and a foundation for lifelong learning.

Required Texts

To be assigned by course instructor

Assignments and Evaluation

Assignment Descriptions and Grading Criteria

Participation 10%

Participation is assessed based on consistent, informed engagement in class sessions, simulation activities, and experiential learning. This includes preparation for discussions, constructive collaboration within teams, and professional conduct during site visits and guest engagements. Students are expected to contribute thoughtfully, listen actively, and engage respectfully with peers and external partners throughout the course.

K-Culture Reflective Essays 15% (3 essays, 5% each)

Students will select and analyze three distinct K-Culture artifacts or representations (e.g., a specific song, a brand, a retail space, or a community event). Students will focus on one artifact per essay. For each of the three submissions (5% each), students will write a focused 1-2 page reflection that first describes the selected text and its immediate context. The reflection must then use the chosen artifact to illustrate and define one specific, fundamental concept or key term related to the course. Students must draw from and reference the course readings and discussions.

Debate 20% (participation in debate, 10%; individual position paper 10%)

As a class, students will choose a critical issue related to the course to debate. In groups, students will prepare for a structured, in-class debate, being assigned to one side of the issue. Following the debate, each student individually submits a position paper that integrates and synthesizes the core arguments, clearly distinguishes between the positions, and presents their final, evidence-based stance on the issue, citing academic readings and real-world

examples. Their position in the paper does not need to align with the side they were on in the debate.

Critical Media Deconstruction Project 25%

Students select a single cultural text (a K-Drama episode, a K-Pop music video, a webtoon chapter, or a film scene) and perform a detailed, frame-by-frame or panel-by-panel critical deconstruction. The final product is either a narrated video essay (3-5 minutes) or an interactive live presentation that uses annotations and visual evidence to analyze how the text *represents* one specific social theme (e.g., class struggle, redefined gender roles, or generational anxiety). The analysis must reference course theories and terminology.

Final Portfolio 30%

Throughout the program, students will develop and maintain a multi-media portfolio of reflections, photographs, notes, and artifacts from field visits and course discussions and assignments. The final assessment is an Evidence-Based Argument crafted through their portfolio. Students must choose a specific complexity of K-culture (e.g., the difference between online and physical fan engagement, or how a museum frames Hallyu history) and integrate their direct observations and artifacts with at least five specific course readings to construct a novel, evidence-based argument.

Assessment

Participation 10%
Reflective Essays 15%
Debate 20%
Media Deconstruction Project 25%
Final Portfolio 30%

Grading Scale

94-100%	A	74-76%	C
90-93%	A-	70-73%	C-
87-89%	B+	67-69%	D+
84-86%	B	64-66%	D
80-83%	B-	Below 64	F
77-79%	C+		

Note on Attendance and Participation: Consistent participation in classes, site visits, and required program activities is essential to the academic experience. Students are expected to participate fully and may not opt out of required components, as these activities are integral to course learning and collective discussion. If circumstances such as illness affect attendance,

students must communicate promptly with the Center Director or a designated staff member. Absences may affect academic performance and course grades, and repeated or unexcused absences may result in additional academic or programmatic consequences. When absences are unavoidable, alternative academic work may be required.

Program Expectations

To support a respectful, engaging, and academically rigorous learning environment, students are expected to approach this program with professionalism, preparation, and openness. Because this is an intensive, field-based program, individual conduct directly shapes the quality of the shared academic experience.

- **Learning Community:** Students are expected to engage respectfully with differing perspectives, including those of classmates, guest speakers, and local partners. Agreement is not required, but attentive listening, intellectual openness, and respectful dialogue are essential.
- **Content Considerations:** Course materials and activities may engage sensitive or challenging topics. The classroom is a space for thoughtful, respectful engagement with complex ideas. When possible, faculty will flag particularly intense content in advance. Students who find that course content affects their ability to participate or keep up with coursework are encouraged to communicate with faculty and seek appropriate support.
- **Participation and Engagement:** Students are expected to come prepared and to engage actively in classes, discussions, and site-based learning. This includes contributing thoughtfully to discussion, asking questions, and engaging respectfully with faculty, peers, and guest speakers. Meaningful participation supports collective learning and is an essential part of the program experience.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Because this is a multi-country, field-based program, schedules and activities may change in response to local conditions or logistical realities. Students are expected to approach such adjustments with flexibility and professionalism. Adaptability is considered part of meaningful engagement in the program.
- **Academic Integrity:** Students are expected to complete all work honestly and ethically, in accordance with academic integrity standards outlined in course and program policies.
- **Managing Academic Work:** Students are responsible for maintaining reliable access to their academic work by keeping multiple copies using secure storage methods (e.g., cloud-based platforms or the learning management system). Technical issues such as lost files or device failures do not excuse late or missing work.
- **Personal Technology Use:** Personal devices may be used for note-taking and course-related activities. Off-task use is not acceptable, particularly during discussions, site visits, or guest presentations, as it detracts from collective engagement.
- **Course Communication:** Course materials, assignments, and updates will be posted on Canvas. While the course calendar provides a general structure, adjustments may occur based on program flow or site-based learning opportunities. Students are

responsible for checking the course site regularly and communicating promptly about access issues.

- **Recording Policy:** To support open discussion, recording of classes or program activities is not permitted without prior written approval from the instructor. Approved recordings are for personal academic use only. Documented academic accommodations may supersede this policy.

SIT Policies and Resources

Please refer to the [SIT Study Abroad Handbook](#) and the [Policies](#) section of the SIT website for all academic and student affairs policies. Students are accountable for complying with all published policies. Of particular relevance to this course are the policies regarding: academic integrity, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), research and ethics in field study and internships, late assignments, academic status, academic appeals, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and misconduct, and the student code of conduct.

Please refer to the SIT Study Abroad Handbook and SIT website for information on important resources and services provided through our central administration in Vermont, such as [Library resources and research support](#), [Accessibility Services](#), [Counseling Services](#), [Title IX information](#), and [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) resources.

Credit Hours: SIT adheres to the standard that 1 credit hour equals no less than 45 hours of coursework. The calculation is based on the standard 50-minute academic hour. The number of credits each course carries determines how many total hours each course involves in a semester. Of the 45-hours for 1-credit hour, one third is designated for direct faculty instruction. Direct faculty instruction includes all learning activities led by the faculty whether in the classroom or in the field — lectures, guest speakers, site visits, hands-on field activities, etc.

Note on Late Assignments: Because this program integrates classroom learning with site visits and debriefs, assignments are designed to build on one another and connect directly to learning on location. *Timely submission is therefore important for maintaining continuity and full participation in the academic experience.* Extensions may be granted *in limited circumstances and on a case-by-case basis* with approval from the Program Director or a designated staff member. Requests should be made in writing as early as possible and no later than 12 hours before the posted due date. Students are expected to communicate proactively if challenges arise. Work submitted after an approved extension period may receive a reduced or failing grade, depending on the circumstances.

Note on the Use of Generative AI Tools: In this course, students may use generative AI tools only in ways that support their own intellectual work. Acceptable uses may include brainstorming questions, organizing notes, clarifying concepts, or supporting revision at the sentence or structure level. Students may not use AI tools to generate substantive analysis, strategic arguments, written sections, or oral responses that are presented as their own work.

Because assignments emphasize applied reasoning, comparative judgment, and place-based analysis, students are expected to remain the primary source of ideas, interpretation, and decision-making.

Expectations for AI use may vary by assignment and will be discussed explicitly with faculty. In some cases, students and faculty may collaboratively establish guidelines for appropriate AI use for a particular task. Students are responsible for following the agreed-upon expectations and for seeking clarification if boundaries are unclear.

When generative AI tools are used in the preparation of an assignment, students are expected to acknowledge their use clearly and transparently, noting the tool used and the nature of its contribution (e.g., brainstorming, outlining, or language revision). This acknowledgment supports academic transparency and does not, on its own, imply inappropriate use. Policies on AI use may differ across courses and instructors within the program. Students should attend carefully to course-specific guidance and understand that responsible AI use is defined at the course level.

Sample AI Acknowledgment Statement: I used [tool name] for [purpose, e.g., brainstorming or sentence-level revision]. All analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are my own.

Course Schedule

**Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lecturers' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs*

Module 1: Foundations — The Korean Wave, Theory, and Audiences

This module establishes the historical, theoretical, and industrial foundations of the course. Students trace the emergence of Hallyu from the late 1990s through its current global reach, situating K-culture within Korea's compressed modernity and the political economy of cultural exports. Students are introduced to the core analytical frameworks - cultural studies, media theory, and audience reception - that will guide inquiry throughout the semester. The module also examines how Hallyu has been framed as both soft power and cultural commodity, raising opening questions about who benefits from the Korean Wave and whose voices and experiences it renders visible or invisible.

Session 1: Course Overview — Korean Popular Culture in Global Context

Possible topics include:

- Overview of course
- Korea's historical trajectory and the emergence of Hallyu

- Defining popular culture and media as analytical categories

Required Readings:

- Jin, D. Y., & Yoon, T.-J. (2017). The Korean Wave: Retrospect and prospect. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 2241–2249.
- Kellner, D. (2012). Cultural studies, multiculturalism, and media culture. In G. Dines & J. M. Humez (Eds.), *Gender, race, and class in media: A critical reader* (3rd ed., pp. 7–18). SAGE.
- Park, J. S.-Y. (2026). Commentary: Can the Korean Wave save the world? *Signs and Society*. pp. 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2026.10048>.

Session 2: The Korean Wave — Origins, Industry, and Soft Power

Possible topics include:

- From Asian financial crisis to global cultural export: the making of Hallyu
- The role of the state and industry in promoting K-culture
- Who owns the Korean Wave?

Required Readings:

- Kim, T. (2025). How diplomacy matters to cultural production: A case study of China's Korean limitation order and Korean television. *Media, Culture & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437251353045>
- Oh, I., Seol, D.-H., & Hwang, H. (2026). South Korea or bust: From fan nationalism to pop culture migration through new media. *Emerging Media*, 4(1), 102–128.

Possible Field Visit: *HiKR Ground* - a multi-level, interactive, and immersive Korean pop culture pavilion offering an experiential entry point into Hallyu's global reach and brand identity.

Session 3: Media Theory, Cultural Analysis, and Fandom

Possible topics include:

- Key concepts: representation, ideology, hegemony, and the male gaze
- Applying Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to Korean media
- Fan labor, participatory culture, and the global K-pop fandom ecosystem
- Digital platforms, social media, and the transformation of fan engagement

Required Readings:

- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, Media, Language* (pp. 128–138). Hutchinson.
- Joo, M. J., Chu, L., Han, I. I., & Jeon, J. S. (2020). K-Pop and Koreaboo: A feminist analysis of the racial and sexual politics of the transnational media fandom. In *Research Handbook on Feminist Political Thought* (pp. 350–366).

Module 2: K-Drama, K-Pop, Webtoons, and Korean Cinema

This module examines the major forms of Korean popular culture — K-drama, K-pop, webtoons and manhwa, and cinema — analyzing how each constructs and contests narratives of romance, aspiration, identity, and social critique. Students consider how production logics — from the idol training system to platform-driven drama formats — shape what stories get told and how. Field visits to production studios, entertainment companies, and film industry institutions bring students into direct contact with the industries they are studying.

Session 4: K-Drama and K-Pop

Possible topics include:

- The K-drama format: genre conventions, melodrama, and narrative structure
- Romance, class, and aspiration in K-drama storytelling
- The K-pop industrial complex: training systems, management, and labor
- Constructing the idol: image, performance, and the costs of perfection

Required Readings:

- Maliangkay, R. (2023). Sticking it to the man: Early neoliberalism in Korean pop music. In S.-Y. Kim (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to K-pop* (pp. 11–27). Cambridge University Press.
- Choi, S. (2023). K-pop idols: Media commodities, affective laborers, and cultural capitalists. In S.-Y. Kim (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to K-pop* (pp. 131–154). Cambridge University Press.

Possible Field Visit: *Studio Mir (Seoul) - a leading Korean animation studio whose work spans major K-drama and international co-productions, offering insight into the production side of Korean screen culture.*

Session 5: Webtoons, Manhwa, and Korean Cinema

Possible topics include:

- The rise of the webtoon: digital platforms and new storytelling forms

- Manhwa traditions and their relationship to manga and global comics cultures
- A brief history of Korean cinema and global recognition

Required Readings:

- Jang, W., & Song, J. E. (2017). Webtoon as a new Korean Wave in the process of glocalization. *Kritika Kultura*, 29. <https://archium.ateneo.edu/kj/vol1/iss29/9/>
- Kim, K. H. (2021). The virtual feast: Mukbang, con-man comedy, and the post-traumatic family in *Extreme Job* (2019) and *Parasite* (2019). In *Hegemonic mimicry: Korean popular culture of the twenty-first century* (pp. 164–194). Duke University Press

Module 3: Social Themes — Class, Gender, and Ethics in K-Culture

This module turns to the substantive social questions that K-culture both reflects and generates. Students examine how popular texts represent class inequality, shifting gender norms, and the ethical contradictions of an industry built on extraordinary pressure and global consumption. From the class anxieties staged in *Parasite* to the feminist currents running through recent K-pop, students assess what K-culture says about Korean society — and what it refuses to say. Field visits to fashion districts and beauty industry sites ground these theoretical discussions in the material spaces where gender ideals are produced and consumed. The module also addresses the ethical responsibilities of audiences and scholars engaging with cultural forms produced under conditions of labor exploitation and intense surveillance.

Session 6: Social Class and K-Culture

Possible topics include:

- Representing inequality: how does K-culture stage class difference?
- The ‘dirt spoon’ generation (heuksu-jeo): economic precarity and youth culture
- Aspirational consumption, brand culture, and the performance of class mobility
- Class critique and its limits in mainstream Korean popular culture

Required Readings:

- Han, B. (2023). Cultural specificity, hybridity, and transnationality in *Squid Game*. *Post45*. <https://post45.org/2023/02/cultural-specificity-hybridity-and-transnationality-in-squid-game/>
- Shin, H. (2023). Itaewon class, Gangnam style, and Yeouido star: The industrial revolution of Korean pop in the 1990s. In S.-Y. Kim (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to K-pop* (pp. 28–46). Cambridge University Press.

Possible Field Visit: *Dongdaemun Design Plaza and the Dongdaemun District (Seoul) — Seoul's center of fashion, textiles, wholesale, and retail.*

Session 7: Gender, Sexuality, and K-Culture

Possible topics include:

- Feminism and K-pop: from #MeToo to feminist idol politics
- Masculinity, beauty, and the rise of the 'flower boy' (kkotminam) aesthetic
- LGBTQ+ representation and erasure in Korean popular media
- The body as site of contestation: beauty standards, cosmetic surgery, and resistance

Required Readings:

- Ji, S. (2025). #MeToo in an AI-generated deepfake sexual violence era in South Korea. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 112, 103146.
- Kim, K. H. (2021). The souls of Korean folk in the era of hip-hop. In *Hegemonic mimicry: Korean popular culture of the twenty-first century* (pp. 85–117). Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478021803-004>
- Moon, M. (2024). Digital sex crime, online misogyny, and digital feminism in South Korea. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 25(1), 186–192.

Possible Field Visit: *The Saem International Co. (Seoul) - a visit to this cosmetics company offers firsthand exposure to the K-Beauty industry, grounding classroom discussions of beauty standards, self-presentation, and the commodification of gender ideals in a live corporate context.*

Session 8: Ethics and K-Culture

Possible topics include:

- Labor, mental health, and the human costs of the idol system
- Cultural appropriation, globalization, and questions of ownership
- The responsibilities of the critic: who gets to analyze K-culture and how?

Required Readings:

- Saeji, C. T., & Epstein, S. (2018). Regulating the idol: The life and death of a South Korean popular music star. *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 16(13). <https://apjif.org/2018/13/saeji>

- Joo, M. J., Chu, L., Han, I. I., & Jeon, J. S. (2020). K-Pop and Koreaboo: A feminist analysis of the racial and sexual politics of the transnational media fandom.

Module 4: K-Culture, Politics, and Course Synthesis

This module examines the political and contested dimensions of the Korean Wave, from geopolitical flashpoints to domestic controversies over representation and free expression. Students engage in a structured debate on a critical issue of their choosing and reflect on K-culture's navigation - and sometimes generation - of political conflict at home and abroad. A visit to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) anchors the module's exploration of how national division, historical memory, and political constraint shape what Korean culture can and cannot say. The module culminates in a Teach-In and Final Portfolio presentations, inviting students to bring their field-based experience and analytical frameworks into dialogue in the spirit of collective inquiry.

Session 9: Politics, Controversies, and the Future of Hallyu

Possible topics include:

- K-culture and geopolitics: THAAD, the China ban, and regional tensions
- Censorship, self-regulation, and the limits of expression in Korean media
- Backlash, cancel culture, and accountability in K-pop fandoms
- The future of Hallyu: saturation, competition, and the next wave

Required Readings:

- Kim, K. H. (2021). Korean meme-icry: Samsung and K-pop. In *Hegemonic mimicry: Korean popular culture of the twenty-first century* (pp. 195–219). Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478021803-008>
- Kim, S. (2016). Crossing borders: A feminist history of "Women Cross DMZ." *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 40, 133–154.

Possible Field Visit: Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) — a guided visit to Imjingak Park, the Bridge of Freedom, the 3rd Infiltration Tunnel, and Dorasan Observatory offers students a visceral encounter with the political realities of national division and the ways in which the Korean War's unresolved legacy shapes cultural production, censorship, and collective memory on both sides of the border.

Assignment Due: Position Paper (following in-class debate)

Session 10: Teach-In and Course Reflections

- Student teach-in presentations: Critical Media Deconstruction Projects and Final Portfolio Evidence-Based Arguments

- Peer Q&A and discussion across themed panels
- Course synthesis: how is K-culture a lens into contemporary Korean society?