

## Research Article

### The Modern Transformation of “Shin-to-Buli”: The Duality of Korean Cultural Identity and Its Exploration of Global Development

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#### Abstract

“Shin-to-Buli” has played multiple roles in Korea’s modernization process. It has not only promoted Korea’s economic development, effectively responded to development crises, and facilitated the overseas dissemination of local culture, but also, due to extreme interpretations of the concept, has given rise to issues such as social discrimination and cultural centrism. In the context of globalization, facing the dual demands of open development and the preservation of locality, Korea needs to promote the modern transformation of “Shin-to-Buli,” realizing a shift in industry from protection to cooperation, in social identity from blood-based connection to the cohesion of shared values, and in culture from exclusivity to the integration of diverse civilizations. While maintaining local cultural characteristics, it should actively integrate into the global multicultural system and explore a balanced development path between locality and openness.

#### Keywords

Shin-to-Buli, Korean culture, national identity, globalization, cultural development

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## 1. The Historical Evolution of “Shin-to-Buli”

“Shin-to-Buli” originates from Buddhist scriptures, and its original meaning is that “the body and the land from which one is born are inseparable.” Its core is to emphasize the symbiotic relationship between humans and their place of birth, advocating that local products

are naturally compatible with the human constitution. This concept has undergone three important transformations at different stages of Korea's historical development, gradually breaking through the religious domain and becoming an important symbol carrying national sentiment and cultural essence.

From the late Joseon Dynasty to the period of Japanese colonial rule, the connotation of "Shin-to-Buli" continuously expanded, extending from emphasizing the compatibility between products and the human body to the recognition of national identity. After World War II, with the implementation of an export-oriented economic development strategy, "Shin-to-Buli" was endowed with connotations of economic development. Through the promotion of organizations such as the National Agricultural Cooperative Federation of Korea, it became a social consensus encouraging citizens to consume domestic products and support the development of local industries[1]. Entering the 21st century in the era of globalization, "Shin-to-Buli" has undergone a third transformation, presenting a distinct dual internal and external characteristic: externally, as a core concept of Korean cultural export, it supports industries such as the Korean Wave and K-beauty in going global and has become an important foundation for the international dissemination of Korean culture; internally, due to the excessive emphasis on the uniqueness of national culture, it has generated a certain degree of xenophobic sentiment and cultural centrism, and its duality has become increasingly prominent in the context of globalization.

Although existing studies have conducted extensive discussions on Korean society from perspectives such as national identity and globalization, systematic analysis of how the concept of "Shin-to-Buli" simultaneously functions to promote social cohesion and construct identity boundaries in the modern context remains relatively insufficient. Therefore, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: How is "Shin-to-Buli" reconstructed in contemporary Korean society? How does it generate exclusionary effects while promoting social integration? And in the context of globalization, how should this concept achieve transformation?

## **2. Theoretical Perspective: "Ethno-symbolism" and the Construction of Identity in "Shin-to-Buli"**

In order to explore the reasons for the formation of the duality of this concept, this paper draws on the theory of "ethno-symbolism" proposed by Anthony D. Smith. This theory holds that the cultural identity of modern nations does not arise out of nothing, but is the result of selecting, reorganizing, and reinterpreting in modern terms the symbols, myths, memories, and historical territories of pre-modern "ethnic groups." Among these, the "ethnic core"



contains two key elements: “bloodline continuity” and “sacred homeland.” These two elements provide a profound emotional foundation and cultural legitimacy for the construction of national identity, while also forming identity boundaries between different ethnic groups[2].

The evolution of the concept of “Shin-to-Buli” is a typical practice of the theory of “ethno-symbolism” within the context of Korea’s historical development. This concept closely integrates “body” and “land,” that is, the cultural identity of individuals and the nation with the historical territory of the Korean Peninsula, thereby successfully constructing a strong national cultural identity. The source of its cohesive function lies in effectively activating and utilizing the emotional resources of the “ethnic core,” tightly binding patriotic sentiment, demands for economic development, and cultural pride with the local “land” and national “identity.”

However, its exclusivity originates from an excessive adherence to “ethnic boundaries.” When the connection between “bloodline” and “land” is absolutized, it easily leads to a tendency to exclude foreign cultures and fosters cultural centrism. The cross-regional flows of people, capital, and culture brought about by globalization continuously challenge these fixed boundaries of “body” and “land.” This also constitutes the core issue faced by the concept of “Shin-to-Buli” in its contemporary development, and the following discussion will proceed based on this perspective.

### 3. The Centripetal Force of Cultural Identity: The Positive Practice of “Shin-to-Buli”

#### 3.1. Identity Motivation in Economic Takeoff

In the 1960s, South Korea implemented an export-oriented economic development strategy, supporting the rapid development of a number of local enterprises such as Samsung, Hyundai, LG, and SK through policies such as low-interest loans, tax incentives, and export subsidies, thereby forming large enterprise groups with global competitiveness[3]. The rise of these enterprises benefited not only from the support of national policies, but also from the national recognition of local consumption stimulated by the concept of “Shin-to-Buli.”

We can further verify the role of “Shin-to-Buli” in promoting the economy based on the following table. The specific core data are as follows:

**Table 1**

*Global Market Position of Major Local Enterprises in South Korea*

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Company Name	Key Data and Market Position
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Samsung Electronics	Semiconductors: global market share of 7.5% in 2023 (second place); Smartphones: global market share of 19.4% in 2023 (second place)
Hyundai Motor Group	Global automobile sales: more than 7.3 million units in 2023, ranking as the third largest automobile manufacturer in the world
LG Group	Electric vehicle batteries: global installed capacity of 84.8 GWh in 2023, with a market share of 13.6%, ranking third
SK Hynix	Server DRAM: ranked first in the global market share in the DRAM field in Q3 2023 (49.6%)

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The national consensus consolidated by “Shin-to-Buli” has provided a profound social foundation for the development of local enterprises in South Korea and has served as an important cultural driving force behind the realization of the “Miracle on the Han River,” playing a key role in consolidating social development synergy and stimulating economic vitality.

### 3.2. National Cohesion in Crisis Response

During the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, South Korea faced severe challenges in economic development, including currency depreciation and economic stagnation. Against this background, a spontaneous gold donation movement emerged across the entire society, with citizens donating gold items. Within just three months, a total of 226 tons of gold were collected, with a value of approximately 2.2 billion US dollars. Although this movement did not completely resolve the financial crisis, it, through practical cultural action, interpreted the core spirit of “Shin-to-Buli,” namely that individual development and national destiny are closely connected and share weal and woe.

The gold donation movement effectively alleviated the foreign exchange reserve crisis at that time and further strengthened the national memory of “the people and the nation being in the same boat,” making “Shin-to-Buli” an important cultural symbol for consolidating national development forces and demonstrating the important role of cultural identity in responding to development crises.

### 3.3. Identity Dissemination in Cultural Output

With the advancement of South Korea’s “cultural nation-building” strategy, the cultural industry has become a strategic pillar industry of national economic development. Korean Wave cultures such as Korean dramas, K-pop, beauty, and fashion have rapidly spread on a global scale, forming the widely influential K-Culture brand.

Globally renowned Korean entertainment groups such as BTS and BLACKPINK have

continuously broken records through their world tours. Among them, BLACKPINK's BORN PINK world tour, with a box office revenue of 78.5 million US dollars, became the highest-grossing tour by a female group in the world, serving as an important microcosm of the global dissemination of Korean Wave culture. It is worth noting that the international dissemination of Korean culture is not a simple accumulation of commercial symbols, but rather integrates the concept of "Shin-to-Buli," realizing the modernization and transformation of national cultural elements.

Taking BTS's IDOL as an example, its choreography incorporates the rhythmic characteristics of traditional Korean mask dance; its styling adopts modified hanbok embroidered with patterns from the Joseon Dynasty along with the traditional "gat" (Korean hat); its background integrates the architectural style of Korean "eight-sloped roof" structures; and its composition combines the rhythm of traditional Korean rap pansori with electronic music. The tiger element appearing in the music video, as an important symbol of Korean national culture, echoes the expression of "self-identity" in the lyrics. The work combines local cultural foundations with modern individual identity, not only expressing the self-value propositions of Korean youth, but also, through the innovative form of "traditional symbols + popular media," enables the core connotation of "Shin-to-Buli"—that "local culture nourishes individual identity"—to transcend regional limitations[4]. In this way, global audiences, in the process of consuming popular culture, subtly experience the characteristics of Korean culture, thereby realizing the transnational dissemination of local cultural identity.

#### **4. The Exclusivity of Cultural Identity: Negative Manifestations of Shin-to-Buli**

When "Shin-to-Buli" is interpreted in an extreme manner, its underlying exclusivist characteristics gradually emerge, hindering South Korea's cultural development and social progress. South Korea's national cultural identity took shape against the historical backdrop of resisting the encroachment of foreign cultures, endowing it with a certain exclusivist gene[5]. The long-held notion of a "single ethnic group" in South Korean society has further reinforced this tendency, which is specifically reflected in the following aspects.

##### **4.1. Social Exclusivity and Inadequate Protection of Rights and Interests**

Extreme interpretations of "Shin-to-Buli" have fostered xenophobic tendencies toward migrant workers in South Korean society. Many migrant workers from Southeast and South Asia face unfair working conditions and inadequate protection of their rights and interests in South Korea. Mostly engaged in low-wage, high-intensity labor, they lack effective safeguards concerning leave entitlements, bonus benefits, personal safety, and other related

areas. Such problems have persisted for a long time without fundamental solutions.

According to media reports, many migrant workers live in poorly conditioned temporary accommodations, and employers may deduct high fees for food and accommodation from their wages, leaving migrant workers in a vulnerable position economically and in daily life. Some female migrant workers also face risks of violations to their personal rights, which has drawn international attention to the issue of protecting the rights and interests of migrant workers in South Korea.

These problems stem partly from systemic flaws in South Korea's migrant worker employment system — for instance, migrant workers are not allowed to change employers within a prescribed period, making it difficult for them to defend their rights when treated unfairly. At a deeper level, however, the root cause lies in the culture-centric perception formed by the radicalization of “Shin-to-Buli”, which regards foreign laborers as a threat to the “purity” of local society. This ignores the objective laws of cross-regional labor mobility in the era of globalization and runs counter to the developmental demands of a pluralistic society.

## 4.2. Regional Conflicts and Group Polarization

The regional rivalry between the Yeongnam and Honam regions in South Korea has persisted for many years, with obvious divergences between the two areas in cultural identity, social development and other aspects. Regional origins even affect people's daily choices such as marriage and employment[6]. This regionalism is essentially a micro-level alienation of the “Shin-to-Buli” concept, which narrowly reduces the “land of the nation” to the “land of a specific region” and claims that “the land of one's own region nurtures the most authentic culture and identity”. Such a one-sided perception has intensified the polarization of social groups, resulting in social division and internal resource friction, which is not conducive to the overall development of society and the enhancement of social cohesion.

## 4.3. Obstacles to Multicultural Integration

As the number of transnational marriages and foreign immigrants increases, South Korea is gradually transforming from a single-ethnic society to a multi-ethnic society. However, the one-sided logic in the “Shin-to-Buli” concept that “bloodline is absolutely bound to the homeland” still hinders multicultural integration. Some children from multicultural families have experienced school bullying and social isolation due to differences in appearance, language, and cultural background[7]. Relevant surveys and media reports both show that adolescents with multicultural backgrounds face obvious identity dilemmas in South Korean society. The essence of this problem lies in cultural essentialism brought about by the

extremization of “Shin-to-Buli,” which simplifies national identity to bloodline identity, ignores the development trend of cultural diversity in modern society, and violates the basic concept of multicultural coexistence.

#### 4.4. Cultural Particularism in Cultural Exchanges

The kimchi translation dispute in 2024 and the cabbage crisis in 2025 epitomize the particularist tendency of “Shin-to-Buli” in the cultural sphere. As a traditional Korean food, kimchi is an important symbol of Korean culture. When a Netflix variety show translated kimchi as “spicy cabbage”, it triggered public dissatisfaction in South Korea. Behind this incident lies the tendency of some citizens to regard the cultural symbol of kimchi as exclusively local, ignoring the laws of integration and evolution that dietary culture undergoes in the process of cross-border communication.

In 2025, a sharp decline in domestic cabbage production in South Korea led to a surge in prices. Some think tanks and civil groups advocated “rejecting Chinese cabbage”, elevating the import of a common vegetable to the level of cultural orthodoxy, pressuring the government to suspend imports of Chinese cabbage. This eventually resulted in factory shutdowns among kimchi producers and public panic buying of kimchi. In reality, 99% of South Korea’s annual cabbage imports come from China, and domestic production capacity cannot meet domestic demand, forcing the government to lift the ban and resume emergency imports.

The essence of this crisis is the conflict between the exclusivity of “Shin-to-Buli” and the realities of economic and social development. It arbitrarily links “local ingredients” to “cultural purity”, ignoring industrial realities such as South Korea’s limited arable land and high agricultural costs. It also confirms that a closed mindset of cultural protection is infeasible in the era of globalization.

### 5. Exploration of the Transformation Path of “Shin-to-Buli” in the Context of Globalization

In the contemporary era of in-depth global integration, the dualistic conflicts of the “Shin-to-Buli” concept have become increasingly prominent. South Korea has not only achieved rapid economic and cultural development relying on globalization but also attempted to safeguard its local cultural identity through “Shin-to-Buli”. This contradiction of “relying on globalization while being vigilant against it” is precisely the root cause of the dual nature of the concept[8]. Therefore, South Korea needs to innovate and transform “Shin-to-Buli” to achieve the unity of locality and openness, and explore a development path suitable for the era

of globalization.

## 5.1. Industrial Sector: From Protectionism to Global Cooperation

The concept of Shin-to-Buli once provided important social support for the development of South Korea's domestic industries and played a key protective role in the early stage of industrialization. However, under the current deep integration of the global industrial chain, simple industrial protectionism is no longer sustainable. The industrial development of any country cannot be isolated from the context of global cooperation, and global competition is reshaping the development pattern of South Korea's domestic industries.

A 2023 comparison of industrial competitiveness between China and South Korea shows that South Korea is facing increasingly fierce global competition in many traditionally advantageous fields: in the electric vehicle battery sector, China's global market share is three times that of South Korea; in shipbuilding, China holds an advantage in new orders for most ship types, while South Korea only maintains leadership in high-end sectors such as LNG carriers; in semiconductors, although South Korea dominates the memory chip market, it is being caught up globally in semiconductor equipment, mature manufacturing processes and other fields.

Facing the new landscape of global industrial competition, South Korea needs to promote the transformation of the "Shin-to-Buli" concept in the industrial field, shifting from traditional protection of domestic industries to active global industrial cooperation. While upholding the core competitiveness of domestic industries, it should integrate into the global industrial and innovation chains, and achieve industrial upgrading and sustainable development through international cooperation. The core connotation of "domestic industries serving national development" should thus be transformed into a new practice of "developing domestic industries through global cooperation".

## 5.2. Social Sector: From Bloodline Identity to Value Identity

In the era of the knowledge economy, talent constitutes the core competitiveness of national development. Yet the exclusivity resulting from the radicalization of "Shin-to-Buli" has become an obstacle for South Korea in attracting international talents. According to the 2025 World Talent Ranking by the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Lausanne, Switzerland, South Korea ranked 37th among 64 economies, far behind other Asian economies such as Singapore and Hong Kong, China. This ranking directly reflects the negative impact of cultural exclusivity in South Korean society on international talent attraction. Amid intensifying global competition for talents, upgrading "Shin-to-Buli" from "bloodline identity" to "value identity", breaking the one-sided constraint of "ethnic purity",

and shifting the basis of social identity from shared ancestry to common values including democracy, innovation and inclusiveness has become a crucial task for South Korea to achieve sustainable development.

Meanwhile, the concept of “Shin-to-Buli” is also challenged by an intergenerational identity gap. The younger generation of Koreans is growing increasingly distant from the binding logic of “bloodline–land–nation”, undermining its social foundation as a core element of Korean culture. A 2024 survey by the Korea Youth Policy Institute showed that only 29.5% of young people regarded marriage as “necessary”, merely 19.8% insisted that “having children is a must after marriage”, 60.6% accepted “children born out of wedlock”, and 89.4% were willing to consider adoption. These figures indicate that young people prioritize individual fulfillment and diverse lifestyle choices, and share little emotional connection with narrow ideas such as “purity of local bloodline” or “exclusive ownership of domestic resources”. Some young people even view such ideas as symbols restricting personal development.

The intergenerational identity gap fundamentally stems from conflicts between globalized values and rigid traditional local perceptions. On the one hand, through social media and cultural exchanges, Korean youth have been widely exposed to global multiculturalism, developing values centered on cultural inclusivity and individual priority, which clash with the collectivist and locally exclusive tendencies of radicalized “Shin-to-Buli”. On the other hand, in education and publicity, “Shin-to-Buli” has not been effectively integrated with the developmental needs of young people, remaining confined to superficial symbols such as hanbok and kimchi, thus failing to resonate emotionally with the youth.

If the intergenerational identity gap remains unaddressed, the core role of “Shin-to-Buli” as a source of cultural cohesion in South Korea will gradually diminish. It will struggle to rally social forces for development in the globalization era, fail to form a sustainable core for cultural export, and further intensify tensions between cultural preservation and global openness. Therefore, promoting a modern interpretation of “Shin-to-Buli” and aligning it with young people’s needs for individual growth and global participation is essential for the inheritance and evolution of the concept.

### **5.3. Cultural Sector: From Cultural Protection to Civilizational Exchange**

South Korea’s modern “de-Sinicization” movement is a typical practice of cultural particularism. This movement attempted to strengthen local cultural identity by eliminating the influence of Chinese culture, but its practical results fell into a contradictory dilemma:



ancient documents are difficult to interpret due to the lack of knowledge of Chinese characters; when applying for cultural heritage status, it has to rely on Chinese character historical materials to prove historical origins; cultural inheritance in fields such as traditional medicine and architecture has also experienced interruptions due to the severance of historical roots[9]. This case profoundly shows that interpreting “Shin-to-Buli” as exclusive cultural protection will only damage the integrity of cultural inheritance. True cultural confidence is not closed self-protection, but open exchange and innovation. Therefore, promoting the transformation of “Shin-to-Buli” in the cultural field can be carried out from the following three aspects:

First, expand the awareness of cultural community from “geographical territory” to “value territory”. Elevate the symbiotic concept in “Shin-to-Buli” from the national level to the global level, and transform the symbiotic concept of local culture into the value pursuit of global development. Second, inject “symbiotic values” into cultural export. South Korea should integrate global values such as openness, symbiosis and sharing into its cultural export, allowing local culture to develop in exchanges with diverse world cultures, and enhancing the sustainability and international recognition of cultural communication. Third, upgrade cultural development from “national independence” to “global contribution”. South Korea should contribute to global progress in light of the needs of human common development; establish transnational cultural exchange mechanisms, such as the China-South Korea-Japan Cultural Industry Forum and the East Asian Traditional Crafts Alliance, to promote cultural exchanges in East Asia and even the world; transform “K-Culture” from a cultural symbol “unique to South Korea” into a cultural resource “shared by East Asia”, and extend the core spirit of “Shin-to-Buli” from serving national development to promoting the diverse integration of human civilizations, thereby expanding broader space for South Korea’s cultural development.

## **6. Conclusion**

As the core concept of South Korea’s cultural identity, the historical development and contemporary practice of “Shin-to-Buli” reflect the common development challenge faced by East Asian countries in the era of globalization: how to embrace the diverse cultures of the world while upholding their own cultural characteristics, and achieve a balanced development between locality and openness.

In South Korea’s modernization drive, “Shin-to-Buli” has played an irreplaceable positive role. It has consolidated national cultural identity, provided spiritual motivation for economic take-off, and supported the realization of the “Miracle on the Han River”; promoted the modern transformation and international dissemination of local culture, making K-Culture

a globally influential cultural brand; and rallied social forces in times of development crises, becoming an important cultural pillar for national development. However, at the same time, due to the extreme interpretation of the concept, “Shin-to-Buli” has also given rise to problems such as social xenophobia, cultural particularism, and regional conflicts, becoming an obstacle for South Korea to integrate into global development. Its dual characteristics reflect the contradiction between South Korea’s cultural development and its integration into the global community.

Therefore, the modern transformation of “Shin-to-Buli” does not mean abandoning the traditional concept, but rather innovating and transforming its core connotation and reshaping its value. At the industrial level, it is necessary to move from closed local protection to open global cooperation, and build the core competitiveness of local industries in the global industrial chain. At the social identity level, it is necessary to move from the one-sided binding of blood and region to the cohesion of common values, and build an open and inclusive pluralistic society. At the cultural level, it is necessary to move from exclusive cultural protection to diverse civilizational exchange, and actively participate in global cultural integration while adhering to the roots of local culture. At the development level, it is necessary to move from a single national independence to diverse global contributions, and integrate local development with the common development of humanity.

The vitality of national cultural identity lies not in closure and exclusivity, but in actively absorbing the achievements of advanced world civilizations while adhering to local roots, so as to achieve diverse integration and innovative development. In an era where globalization and cultural diversity coexist, only by finding a balance between adhering to local culture and pursuing global open development can we realize the sustainable development of national culture, make local culture radiate new vitality in global exchanges, and contribute unique value to the integration and development of the world’s diverse civilizations.

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## Data Availability

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