

***Opportunities and Challenges of Korean Politics with B-class Culture: A Case Study of Pengsoo's Political News***

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**Abstract**

For a long time, politics and popular culture have been intertwined and inseparable. In America, this connection has reached an unprecedented height in the Trump era. For this reason, press and social media seized the interest of the audience and published a large amount of content that combined politics and popular culture during the US election and the coronavirus pandemic. In South Korea, the combination of politics and B-class culture has also become mainstream. When politicians want to seek the support of young voters, they will advertise themselves as B-class figures. This trend reached its peak during the 2012 election. The combination of politics and popular culture uses entertainment to disrupt serious politics and attracts new voters, especially the younger generation. It becomes a way to increase the approval ratings of a leader or domestic support for a government, especially during the 2020 legislative election. However, entertaining politics also has side effects. Too much entertainment will be counterproductive and arouse public resentment. In the paper, the author will explain how politics and popular culture work together by analyzing B-class representative character, Pengsoo's political news from 2019 to 2020. Through sentiment analysis, Koreans are increasingly dissatisfied with the combination of Pengsoo and politics. Based on this analysis, this entertaining Korean politics is now facing both opportunities and challenges under the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the dual contradictions of B-class culture itself.

Keywords: Korean Politics, B-class Culture, Pengsoo, The Covid-19 Pandemic

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## **Introduction**

For a long time, politics and popular culture have been intertwined and inseparable. In the United States, entertainment magazines often report on the political news. "Rolling Stone" and "Playboy" always integrate politics and popular cultures. Since Obama became president, this connection has continued to strengthen. Bonnie Fuller, editor-in-chief of HollywoodLife.com, said: "The Obama family recognizes that in order to connect with ordinary Americans, they must use popular culture. They push the connection between politics and popular culture to a new level." (Bonnie, 2008)

In South Korea, the trend of politics combined with B-class culture has been growing, targeting potential young voters. This trend reached its peak during the 2012 election. Politicians are using B-class culture to disrupt serious politics and make them closer to young voters. The Korean National Assembly approved an electoral reform bill in late 2019 that lowered the voting age from 19 to 18 and enabled high school students to vote. Winning supports of these young generation plays an important part in increasing the approval ratings of a leader or domestic support for a government. However, every coin has two sides. Entertaining politics accompany opportunities as well as challenges.

The research used the narrative method to explain how popular culture and politics work together, with sentiment analysis to find Korean attitudes towards political news combined with popular culture.

## **South Korea and The MZ Generation**

South Korea, officially the Republic of Korea (ROK), is an East Asian country constituting the southern part of the Korean Peninsula. It is a developed country that ranks as the world's tenth-largest economy, that has the most advanced democracies in Asia, and that has been famous for its globally influential pop culture, particularly in music (K-pop), TV dramas, and movies, a phenomenon known as the Korean Wave. However, there are lots of social problems that lie in this country as well. One critical issue is increasing social inequality. According to an International Monetary Fund study in 2016, Korea has the highest income gap in the Asia-Pacific region. (Jae-won, 2016) The gap between rich and poor is widening these days. The poorer half of the population own only 2 percent of the country's assets. This gap is not only economical but also in all aspects of society. In Korea, all social interaction is dictated by the Confucian value of hierarchy, which has exacerbated social class inequality and education inequality. Thanks to growing social inequality, the new generation of South Korea has become victims, struggling to survive in a high-pressure society. They are the MZ generation, or those in their 20s and 30s, are known as the desperate generation, as their life savings are not enough for them to buy a single home and prepare for retirement.

The term "Hell Joseon" becomes the best description of their lives in South Korea. The term "Hell Joseon" is a term to describe the Korean dynasty of Joseon (1392–1897), during which society was highly structured in a feudal, class-based system. In Joseon society, the gap between the rich and the poor was extreme. For poor people in Joseon society, it was like living in hell, which resonates with many young people these days. It is widely said that those born wealthy get the best work and education while those born poor stay poor. Many young people suffer from high unemployment, challenging working conditions, and growing inequality in South Korea, making their days a "living hell." No matter how hard they try, it is difficult for them to step into the upper-class society. These severe living conditions caused them

dissatisfied with the existing social system and sought a culture speaking up for them. The MZ Generation are crazy about B-class products like "Gangnam Style" and Pengsoo, which resonates with their lives, making them the major consumer of B-class culture.

### **B-class Culture in South Korea**

B-class culture is a unique type of South Korean culture, gaining massive popularity among the MZ generation. The content of B-class culture is a blend of satire, retro, criticism, and humor, moving away from the minstream culture. Although it is difficult to define what a B-class culture is, it has its core feature. That is a strong sense of individualism, anti-authoritarianism, enthusiasm for popular culture, and dissatisfaction with the existing social system. Psy's song "Gangnam Style" is one of the best B-class productions in recent years. Gangnam is one of the wealthiest and most glamorous places in South Korea. It symbolizes upper-class life with considerable wealth and power. In the "Gangnam Style" music video, the cheesy "riding-horse" moves and the scenes in the music video, like streets, metro stations, and stables, are nothing like the Gangnam Style. Just like the singer Psy said: "Being like Gangnam style is not the point. The point is to mock the popular phenomenon of South Korean society advocating upper-class life." (ETtoday News, 2012)



Figure 1: Gangnam Style's Album Cover, Photo from Internet

Not to mention our case study subject-Pengsoo, a giant penguin character, came to attention in 2019, created and produced by the Korea Educational Broadcasting System (EBS). It is gaining attention among children and young adults as an "anti-hero" and relatable character. Many assume that its "substitute behavior" is the secret to its success. Pengsoo says and does just what it wants to say and do, making dissatisfied young people feel happy and relaxed. Pengsoo's most memorable moment is openly calling its boss's name, Kim Myung-joong, an action considered unacceptable and impolite in hierarchical Korean society. Age-based hierarchies play a significant role in social settings, schools, and workplaces. If Pengsoo is unhappy with the working conditions, it will refuse to work and greet others with "Peng-ha!" Young people are excited about the appearance of Pengsoo, who proudly rebels against "Kkondae Culture" (Kkondae is a term used in South Korea to denote a condescending person) and pursues a diverse culture.

Despite having a deep, rough voice that people often compare to a middle-aged male, Pengsoo is a child with no gender. It expresses a mixture of non-traditional identities. Pengsoo, according to Jeon (the editor of Nylon magazine), is pushing the limits of gender. She made a December 2019 edition of Nylon magazine, in which Pengsoo – who is often misidentified as male due to his short, rough voice – was seen wearing lipstick, skirts, and nail polish. (Jimin, 2020). When asked about gender issues, Pengsoo's response, "what is so important," is especially meaningful in the current social atmosphere. A growing backlash against conventional gender norms and gender conflict has emerged as an important social problem in Korea. Pengsoo inspires people to think about gender issues in a dichotomous way and dresses up in whatever they want. Many people say that Pengsoo has been a leader by defying societal standards. Regardless of the criticism, Pengsoo continues to break down these hierarchies and forge a new path for itself.



Figure 2: Pengsoo's Magazine Photo, Photo from NYLON Magazine

### **B-class Culture and Korean Politics**

In recent years, Korean politicians have put a greater focus on being "B-class." They are referred to as "Gangnam leftists," and they have a high social and economic status, as symbolized by "Gangnam" (Gangnam is one of the wealthiest and most glamorous places in South Korea). Meanwhile, they are politically progressive. When they want to win the supports of the 20s and 30s, they appear to mark themselves as supporters of B-class culture. Before the 2012 presidential election, "Park Geun-bikini hye's selfies" and "Moon Jae-abs in's photos" went viral on the Internet. Park Geun-hye appeared on the SBS talk show "Healing Camp" and showed photographs of herself in a bikini when she was younger, jokingly praising her figure, which later became a hot topic on social media. She was said to have used "nudity" on purpose to grab people's attention and achieve considerable popularity. Park Geun-hye once said that people were more interested in her bikini images than her political views.



Figure 3: Park in Bikini by Sea, Photo from Internet

During the 2012 presidential campaign, South Korea's president, Moon Jae-in, drew on comedy from various sources to attract voters. His abs photographs were revealed to the public during the filming of "Healing Camp," emphasizing his physical charm and challenging conventional political figures' images. In his novel, Lee Hyung-suk (Hyung-suk, 2013) wrote, "the gentlemanly Moon was once also a handsome man and an idol with wild muscles." His remarks represented Moon's B-class tactic in the election. However, every coin has two sides. Politics with B-class culture can be counterproductive and even arouse public resentment sometimes.



Figure 4: Moon Jae-abs in's Photo, Photo from Internet

### Sentiment Analysis of Pengsoo's Political News

Sentiment analysis is the most common text classification tool which analyzes an incoming message and determines if the underlying sentiment is positive, negative, or neutral. It has been applied as a Natural Language Processing task at different granularities. It began as a document-level classification tool (Turney, 2002), but it has now been used at the sentence level (Hu, 2004) and, more recently, at the phrase level (Wilson, 2005). With the fast development of social networks, microblogging applications, and forums, the role of sentiment analysis has grown substantially. Microblog data can be found on different social platforms, such as Twitter, where people exchange real-time responses and write comments on anything. Understanding collective human behavior can be aided by mining these opinions. Go et al. (Go 2009), Carvalho and Plastino, (2021, Carvalho) and others have published early and current sentiment analysis of Twitter data.

In this paper, the author presented a sentiment analysis of comments related to Pengsoo in political events. The author selected the most relevant four news and divided them into three groups, meeting with political figures, election propaganda, and congress proposals.

## Meeting with Political Figures

The author gathered 150 comments on two linked news articles on Naver and chose the top 100 comments. Two articles got 197 Likes and 124 Dislikes in total. The Hankkook Ilbo (Park, 2019) published an article titled "The triumph of Pengsoo in government offices has led to sickness." The other is from the Busan Ilbo (Jan, 2019) and is titled "Pengsoo paid a surprise visit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs." Kang Kyung-wha, the Foreign Minister, burst out laughing." Both pieces are pretty pertinent to the meeting between Kang Kyung-WHA and Pengsoo. The image below shows Kang Kyung-wha, South Korea's Foreign Minister, greeting Pengsoo, who visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to advertise South Korea and ASEAN's special meeting on June 6, 2019, at the Daoliandong building in Chung Lu District, Seoul.



Figure 5: Kang Kyung-Wha Said Hello to Pengsoo, Photo from Internet

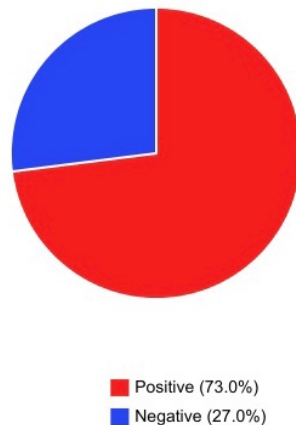


Table 1: Polarity of the News Comments of Meeting with Political Figures

According to the sentiment analysis results, the comments of this picture received a positive average of 73% and a negative of 27%; most of the comments were supportive and proud of it, only a few negative comments.

## Election Propaganda

SBS News published a new article titled "Pengsoo models for the Central Electoral Affairs Commission, assisting 140,000 younger voters" on February 5, 2020. It had 146 replies, 67 likes, and 223 dislikes. The author collected the top 100 comments on this article. Pengsoo was recognized in the news as a PR model for the Central Electoral Affairs Commission. According to an Electoral Affairs Commission officer, the voting age was lowered to 18 for the first time in 21 parliamentary elections. As a result of the collaboration with Pengsoo, the comprehension level of high school students' voters on the election has increased, and election precautions have been successfully communicated. After the start of the school year, the official Pengsoo campaign will begin. Social media, such as YouTube, which is easily accessible to youths, is aggressively organized. (SBS News, 2020)

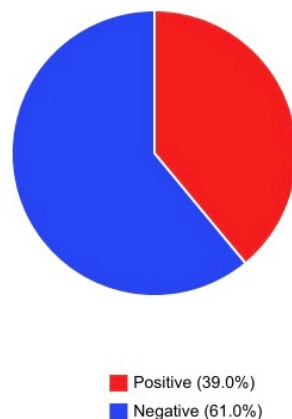


Table 2: Polarity of the News Comments of Election Propaganda

The relevant news sentiment results show that it received a positive average of 39% and a negative of 61%. The top 10 comments on the news were all negative, believing that the leftist politicians were using Pengsoo for their political purpose of attracting young voters, while others supported Pengsoo and believed that it was an excellent way to encourage teenagers to exercise the right to vote.

## Congress Proposals

On September 24, 2020, The Chosun Ilbo published an article headlined "Are you overworked, Pengsoo? Pengsoo was called to audit by the National Assembly ". It had 1780 likes, 42 comments, and 3855 dislikes. The author collected the top 100 comments on this article. Pengsoo, a genderless penguin who first debuted on the public television station EBS in April 2019, was asked to audit his company, South Korea's Educational Broadcasting System. According to the article, Pengsoo will be permitted to attend the court in character. Hwang Bo Seung-hee, a lawmaker with the main opposition People Power Party, stated that the National Assembly summoned Pengsoo to ensure that the penguin was not "exploited in the work environment." (Kim, 2020)

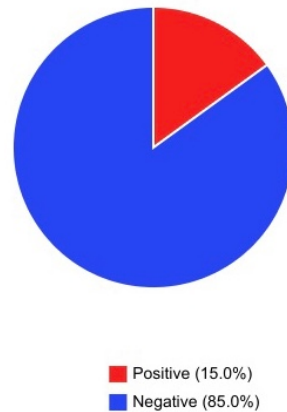


Table 3: Polarity of the News Comments of Congress Proposals

Based on the sentiment analysis results, the news received a positive average of 15 % and a negative of 85%. It also received 2855 dislikes with only 42 likes. The top 10 comments were showing strong negative attitudes towards the National Assembly, such as "The official is insane!", "Do not touch Pengsoo!" and "We people are not stupid!".

Through sentiment analysis above, Koreans are increasingly dissatisfied with the combination of Pengsoo and politics.

### **Opportunities of Korean Politics with B-class Culture**

While the rest of the world is keeping a careful eye on the latest coronavirus epidemic, the South Korean government has been able to keep the disease under control without paralyzing the country's health and economic systems. Compared to other nations, Korea's quarantine performance produced a positive change in people's attitudes toward the government, resulting in a substantial political triumph for the ruling party in the legislative election. South Korea held National Assembly elections in April, setting a clear example of holding a safe election during a pandemic. The outcome was the most remarkable turnout for legislative elections in over 30 years and a clear victory for President Moon Jae-in's Democratic Party. As people's support for the government increases, it creates a more inclusive ambience for political entertainment to grow.

Furthermore, public figures have a significant societal impact as well as behavioral demonstration effects. International experience has demonstrated that using celebrity impacts to raise public awareness of the pandemic and undertake epidemic prevention and control is a successful method of advertising. If the government can use public figures to relieve people's anxiety or increase people's health awareness during the epidemic, they will receive a better response.

Pengsoo, as a young people's idol, has a calming and encouraging influence to some level. Pengsoo posted a video on YouTube about preventing the Covid-19, which received millions of views and 40000 likes. In the comments area, netizens passionately support epidemic preventive efforts and express thanks for its encouragement, providing comfort and a sense of security.



Figure 6: Giant Pengsoo's TV, Photo from Internet

The COVID-19 epidemic has also had a significant impact on our lives. Many of us are confronted with situations that may be stressful, overwhelming, and trigger strong emotions in both adults and children. Public health measures, such as social distance, are required to slow the spread of COVID-19, but they can make us feel alone and lonely, as well as raise stress and worry. Severe limitations imposed by coronavirus have harmed the mental health of the South Korean population. In an online survey conducted by the Seoul Metropolitan Government between July and August, 40% or 1,489 respondents indicated their mental health has worsened since the COVID-19 outbreak. (Timothy, 2020)

Because of the COVID-19, the number of video plays and duration of watching videos has grown due to individuals staying at home for long periods. (Jang-won, 2021) As a result, consumption of programs such as Giant Pengsoo's TV has soared. Giant Pengsoo's tv is closely associated with the ideas of "social integration," "self-dignity and rational individualism," "anti-authoritarianism," and "gender equality," which people need in the post-Covid-19 period. Exciting and pleasant material provides those under enormous stress joy and laughter.

In the post-Covid-19 era, communities or governments can employ these well-known public figures to promote public awareness of the epidemic's risks. Simultaneously, they may use social media to engage with lonely people at home, relieving mental tension and providing spiritual comfort. They help to reduce social conflict, coordinate social relations, and maintain solidarity to some level.

### **Challenges of Korean Politics with B-class Culture**

However, not everyone is pleased with how the government has handled the coronavirus outbreak. Many medical professionals went on strike to protest the government's decision to hire more medical students rather than raise salaries. Furthermore, the South Korean government frequently publicly announces people who test positive, which some see as an invasion of personal privacy and an incitement to public bullying. Similarly, a recent study of South Koreans revealed that 40% felt the strict COVID-imposed limitations are detrimental to their mental health. Some organizations, such as the Sarang Jeil Church, are suspected of being responsible for thousands of COVID-19 cases in South Korea, have taken part in anti-government rallies. (Timothy, 2020)

Furthermore, studies have indicated that the public in South Korea deeply distrusts prosecutors, who are frequently perceived as doing the political bidding of whoever is in power. The South

Korean people felt gloomy in various ways, according to the Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey. Approximately six in ten (62%) disagreed with the statement "most elected officials care what people like me think," and over half (49%) disagreed with the statement "the state is run for the benefit of all people." Approximately seven out of ten South Koreans (68 percent) were pessimistic about the political system's functioning. There were ideological differences in these viewpoints: those on the right were 33 percentage points less positive about how the political system works than those on the left (15 percent vs. 48 percent) (Jeremiah, 2020). People's dissatisfaction with the government and politicians, which is not conducive to political entertainment development. Politics with B-class culture can be counterproductive and even arouse public resentment quite often under this environment.

Last but not least, B-class culture is a time bomb due to the duality of B-class culture's consumers- the MZ generation who dreams of possessing wealth and high social status in society while being dissatisfied with the existing social system led by wealth and power. Therefore, they are always on the edge of being divided. If young people find that politicians use B-class culture to show their empty political propaganda or hypocritical politics to gain popular support, it may exacerbate the MZ generation's internal division, making their anti-authoritative tendency more obvious. The stronger people counter authority, the stronger the anti-authority of B-Class Productions is, which will continue to deepen people's dissatisfaction with authority. It is a vicious circle.

## **Conclusion**

B-class culture is a unique type of South Korean culture, with its core features such as a strong sense of individualism, anti-authoritarianism, enthusiasm for popular culture, and dissatisfaction with the existing social system. Korean Politicians use B-class culture, including labeling themselves as B-class figures and cooperate with B-class productions to disrupt serious politics and make them closer to young voters. Due to the quarantine performance of Korea under the background of the Covid-19 pandemic, it induced a positive change in people's attitudes toward the government. If people's support for the government increases, people's tolerance of politics with B-class culture may increase. Moreover, if the government can use these B-class figures in proper political occasions like promoting public health awareness, it can improve the government's image and increase its approval ratings.

However, those dissatisfied with the government's COVID-19 response may take part in anti-government rallies. The public profoundly mistrusts prosecutors in South Korea who have corruption and political scandals quite often. Besides, B-class culture is like a time bomb. If politicians or governments use it wrong, then it makes it more anti-authoritative. These are the opportunities and challenges that Korean politics with B-class culture is facing.

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