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CULTURAL IBERISM AND ITS APPLICABILITY TO THE KOREAN PENINSULA

JIEUN KIM
cozo223@gmail.com
Lecturer at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (Seoul, Republic of Korea). She received her doctoral degree from the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in comparative literature. She translated Fernando Pessoa and Florbela Espanca into korean.

Abstract

Fernando Pessoa envisioned "Iberismo" (or Iberism) not as a project of political federation or economic union, but as a form of cultural cooperation rooted in shared historical and spiritual traits. For Pessoa, one of the defining characteristics of Iberia is its "non-Latinity" — a disposition that distinguishes it from Latin Europe by embracing Arab and Islamic influences and fostering openness toward the Other. This openness is also evident in Portugal's historical role as a mediator and exchange hub among Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe through the Atlantic Ocean, reflected in the Portuguese people's "plasticity" and "cosmopolitanism." This study has sought to explore the applicability of Iberism as an analytical framework for models of unification on the Korean Peninsula. While political unification remains the normative ideal pursued by both Koreas, the prolonged reality of division has led to a growing proportion of South Korean citizens adopting increasingly pessimistic views toward political integration. Economic federation, in turn, represents an even more challenging domain of cooperation, given the stark structural contrasts between the two systems—capitalism and socialism, open free trade and a closed, state-led industrial model. Moreover, the economic gap between North and South Korea continues to widen, further constraining the feasibility of economic integration. With respect to cultural cooperation, which constitutes the primary focus of this study, existing forms of exchange have largely been temporary and event-driven in nature. In response, this article proposes more sustained collaboration in the fields of cultural heritage research and transmission, areas that can make substantive contributions to a shared understanding of Korean identity. Finally, affective forms of integration, as captured by the notion of -philia—denoting mutual affection toward the other—must be regarded as the least attainable form of integration in the contemporary Korean context, where enduring ideological conflict continues to foreclose the possibility of socially legitimate cross-border affinity.

Keywords

Iberism, Unification, Korea Peninsula, Iberia Peninsula, Cultural cooperation.

Resumo

Fernando Pessoa concebia o «Iberismo» (ou Iberismo) não como um projeto de federação política ou de união económica, mas como uma forma de cooperação cultural enraizada em traços históricos e espirituais comuns. Para Pessoa, uma das características definidoras da Península Ibérica é a sua «não-latinidade» — uma disposição que a distingue da Europa latina ao abraçar influências árabes e islâmicas e ao promover a abertura para com o Outro. Esta abertura é também evidente no papel histórico de Portugal como mediador e centro de intercâmbio entre África, as Américas, a Ásia e a Europa através do Oceano Atlântico, refletido

na «plasticidade» e no «cosmopolitismo» do povo português. Este estudo procurou explorar a aplicabilidade do Iberismo como quadro analítico para modelos de unificação na Península Coreana. Embora a unificação política continue a ser o ideal normativo perseguido por ambas as Coreias, a realidade prolongada da divisão levou a que uma proporção crescente de cidadãos sul-coreanos adotasse visões cada vez mais pessimistas em relação à integração política. A federação económica, por sua vez, representa um domínio de cooperação ainda mais desafiante, dados os contrastes estruturais marcantes entre os dois sistemas — capitalismo e socialismo, comércio livre aberto e um modelo industrial fechado e liderado pelo Estado. Além disso, o fosso económico entre a Coreia do Norte e a Coreia do Sul continua a alargar-se, limitando ainda mais a viabilidade da integração económica. No que diz respeito à cooperação cultural, que constitui o foco principal deste estudo, as formas existentes de intercâmbio têm sido, em grande parte, de natureza temporária e motivadas por eventos pontuais. Em resposta, este artigo propõe uma colaboração mais sustentada nos campos da investigação e transmissão do património cultural, áreas que podem dar contributos substanciais para uma compreensão partilhada da identidade coreana. Por fim, as formas afetivas de integração, tal como captadas pela noção de -filia — que denota afeto mútuo pelo outro —, devem ser consideradas como a forma menos alcançável de integração no contexto coreano contemporâneo, onde o conflito ideológico duradouro continua a excluir a possibilidade de uma afinidade transfronteiriça socialmente legítima.

Palavras-chave

Iberismo, Unificação, Península da Coreia, Península Ibérica, Cooperação cultural.

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JIEUN KIM

Introduction

Iberismo, or Iberism, which advocates for the union or integration of the two nation-states located on the Iberian Peninsula—Spain and Portugal—can be historically traced back to the medieval *Reconquista*. During this period, the shared struggle against Moorish rule, conducted under a Catholic ethos aimed at territorial reclamation, contributed to the consolidation of a common Catholic identity across the peninsula. In the nineteenth century, the unification movements in Italy and Germany once again influenced political and intellectual currents within the Iberian Peninsula. Toward the late nineteenth century, the strategic significance of cooperation between Spain and Portugal became evident during the guerrilla warfare waged jointly to resist Napoleon's invasion of the peninsula.

Entering the twentieth century, Iberism was increasingly articulated within cultural and intellectual spheres. Modernist writers and artists such as Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) and Almada Negreiros (1893-1970) promoted Iberist ideas by emphasizing cultural exchange, shared historical consciousness, and the potential for a broader Iberian unity. Their contributions reframed Iberism less as a purely political project and more as a cultural and civilizational one.

Analytically, Iberism is commonly divided into three interrelated dimensions: political Iberism, economic Iberism, and cultural Iberism. Political Iberism encompasses a wide spectrum of proposals, ranging from the complete assimilation of the two nations to various forms of federal unification that preserve the sovereignty of each state. Certain strands of political Iberism adopt a mergerist or absorptionist perspective. A notable example is Spanish Secretary of State Pío Gullón's *La Fusión Ibérica* (1861), which proposed the incorporation of Portugal as a province of Spain. Such positions, however, have historically provoked strong resistance from the Portuguese perspective and highlight the asymmetrical power relations embedded within some Iberist discourses.

Economic Iberism is most clearly exemplified by proposals for an Iberian customs union, such as the Iberian Zollverein advocated by the Spanish diplomat Sinibaldo de Mas. In the contemporary context, Spain and Portugal's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC)—the precursor to the European Union—has institutionalized forms of economic cooperation, including customs integration, within a broader European

framework. This development has effectively embedded Iberian economic collaboration within supranational structures rather than bilateral unification projects.

Cultural Iberism refers to initiatives and discourses that emphasize cultural exchange, mutual recognition, and shared heritage between Spain and Portugal. While culture cannot be analytically separated from political and economic contexts, cultural Iberism is often distinguished as a separate category because it is the preferred framework of those who reject political unification while nonetheless advocating for intensified cultural interaction as beneficial to the overall development of the Iberian Peninsula (Isasi 72). As Isasi notes, cultural Iberism remains organically linked to political and economic forms of Iberism, despite claims to its autonomy (Isasi 68).

In addition to these categories, Isasi proposes a further conceptual distinction: lusophilia and hispanophilia, referring to individuals who express sustained admiration for and intellectual engagement with the culture of the neighboring nation (Isasi 68). Broadly construed, this orientation may also be understood as a form of cultural Iberism, insofar as it embodies affective and cultural investment in transnational Iberian exchange. Spanish novelists such as Juan Valera (1824-1905) and Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) are frequently cited as representative lusophiles. Valera, in particular, founded *La Revista Peninsular* in 1856 and contributed extensively to discussions of the cultural and intellectual traditions of both Spain and Portugal, thereby fostering a trans-Iberian cultural dialogue.

Thus, from the past to the present, Iberism has evolved and transformed in various forms. Among these, cultural Iberism, which particularly emphasizes cultural exchange and cooperation, has contributed to differentiating and redefining the cultural identities of the two Iberian nations from other European countries. This paper examines the basis for Fernando Pessoa's advocacy of cultural Iberism and its key characteristics, exploring the possibility of applying it to the Korean Peninsula. Of course, it is fair to say that the Iberian Peninsula and the Korean Peninsula share almost no commonalities beyond their geographical status as peninsulas. While the two nations of the Iberian Peninsula have long maintained distinct national identities, the Korean Peninsula is a single nation divided only since 1945 through the Korean War. Although they share an identity based on a common history and ethnicity, over 80 years of division have led to a persistent lack of exchange. Consequently, differences now outweigh similarities in many areas, including political systems, economic systems, and culture. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to explore how cultural Iberism might influence cultural exchange on the Korean Peninsula.

Iberism: Cultural Exchange and Identity Exploration

Iberia between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic

Fernando Pessoa defines the Iberian Peninsula as "the Iberian spirit is a fusion of the Mediterranean spirit with the Atlantic spirit" (Pessoa 1980:12). Here, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, its defining characteristics, can be seen as representing European tradition and cosmopolitan spirit, respectively. If the Mediterranean Sea, which served

as the conduit for the Roman Empire into the Iberian Peninsula, represents the peninsula's past—transmitting civilizations like Catholicism and Latin—then the Atlantic Ocean can be seen as the future space: a springboard toward new continents and a symbol of adventure into the unknown world. Orlando Ribeiro also highlights Portugal's unique geographical position, bordered by both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, as crucial to understanding the nation in his work Portugal, o Mediterrâneo e o Atlântico (2011). According to Ribeiro, the Mediterranean is a space enabling coexistence between refined Europe and vast Africa, extending the spirit of that coexistence across all of Europe, while the Atlantic embodies the meaning of an open path leading anywhere in the world (Ribeiro 143).

The most crucial requirement of Iberism, as emphasized by Pessoa, is precisely the Atlantic. In the poem "Atlantimo," he writes:

> *Iberian Hegemony.*
>
> *The Atlantic conception of life.*
>
> *Spiritual imperialism*[1]*.*

For Pessoa, the Atlantic is more than a mere geographical feature. As mentioned earlier, if the Mediterranean represents the European tradition linked to Greco-Roman culture, the Atlantic is the conduit where the self and the other, Europe and non-Europe, meet. As Boaventura explains, Portugal has served as a conduit for encountering diverse nations across the globe, differing in race and culture, and bringing their cultures to Europe. Portugal perceived itself as possessing an "open border(fronteira aberta)"(59) and viewed its society as deeply imbued with 'internationalism' and 'exoticism' (Boaventura, 2013: 59). As Jieun Kim also highlighted the symbol of the Atlantic derived from this is largely connected to three characteristics of Portugal and the Iberian Peninsula: "non-Latinity," "plasticity," and "cosmopolitanism" (Kim 2025).

Iberity and non-Latinity

First, "non-Latinity" refers to the Islamic-receptive culture of the Iberian Peninsula. Both Portugal and Spain are the only nations on the European continent to have embraced Arab culture. Pessoa defined Iberity(*Iberidade*) as "Ibero-Roman-Arabic" (Pessoa 1980:16), emphasizing the 'Arabic' element. Regions of Portugal and Spain, subjected to centuries of Arab Moorish rule, were profoundly influenced by Arab culture in architectural styles, linguistic elements, and emotional sensibilities. This perspective is reflected in the passage from "Atlanticism": "*We are against Rome, because Rome came to destroy within paganism the lucid vision of life*"[2] (Pessoa 1979:76).

[1] *Hegemonia Ibérica/ A concepção atlântica da vida/ O imperialismo espiritual*. (Pessoa, 1979, p. 76).
[2] *Somos contra Roma, porque Roma veio destruir no paganismo a visão lúcida da vida*. (Pessoa, 1979:76)

Particularly in the essay "The Non-Latin Nature of Iberia" (*A Não-Latinidade da Ibéria*), he refutes the common designation of Iberia as part of the 'Latin cultural sphere'. He argues that while it did derive from the Roman Empire, Iberia possesses its own distinct culture, differentiated from that of Italy and France. Pessoa questions why Portugal and Spain are called Latin nations based on 1) etymological reasons (their linguistic origins in Latin) and 2) geographical reasons (their Mediterranean location), while countries like France, Romania, Italy, Greece, and Turkey are not. Instead, Pessoa proposes a new classification for European nations, arguing that the Latin nations inheriting Roman civilization are France and Italy. According to his classification, Europe can be broadly divided into Slavic, Germanic, Latin (Italy, France), Oriental (Greece, Turkey, Russia, Persia, the Balkans), and Iberian (Spain, Portugal). Through this classification, Pessoa seeks to avoid confining the Iberian Peninsula solely to the 'Latin' label, which would limit it to Catholicism and the Latin cultural sphere. His argument can be interpreted in two ways: first, as an exploration of the distinctive identity shared uniquely by the Iberian Peninsula. Indeed, the influence of Islamic-receptive culture remains evident in architectural styles and other aspects to this day.

The second reason can be seen as a reaction against and a check on the so-called Latin cultural sphere countries like France and Italy, which held cultural hegemony at the time. Indeed, in his poem "Atlanticism," Pessoa referred to 'Rome' and 'Paris' as "enemies."

> *We are against Rome, because Rome came to destroy the lucid vision of life in paganism. We are against England, because England came to destroy, [...]. We are against France, because France came, with its democratism and its plebeian liberalism, to destroy the remnants of paganism that existed among us*[3]*.*

The term 'Latin' is also particularly relevant to the Latin American region. It is widely acknowledged that the common designation of Latin America as 'Latin America' stems from the influence of the 19th-century French political scientist Michel Chevalier. When Chevalier used the term 'Latin America,' he considered France part of the 'Latin' cultural sphere and created it to highlight similarities between 'Latin America' and France. (Mignolo 2005:77-80) In other words, he used the term 'Latin America' to legitimize France's influence and intervention within the region. Pessoa, seemingly in opposition, emphasizes the distinctions between the Iberian Peninsula and 'Latinness'. He argues that Latin America is a region where 'Iberianness' is stronger than 'Latinness', seeking to justify cultural imperialism there. His aim was to expand the sphere of influence of Iberian culture across this vast region and use it as a springboard to build a more powerful Iberia.

> *(1) the spiritual domination of Central and South America, and thus cultural imperialism in the New World, (2) the definitive conquest of North African*

[3] Somos contra Roma, porque Roma veio destruir no paganismo a visão lúcida da vida. Somos contra Inglaterra, porque Inglaterra veio destruir, [...]. Somos contra França, porque a França veio, com o seu democratismo e o seu liberalismo plebeu, destruir os restos de paganismo que havia entre nós. (Pessoa 1979:76)

> *territories, where our kinsmen, the Arab and Berber races, reside [...]; (3) the military destruction of France (and Italy)*[4].

Meanwhile, plasticity and cosmopolitanism are also concepts linked to non-Latinness. As Boaventura noted earlier, Portugal, with its 'open borders,' possesses plasticity between the familiar and the foreign, tradition and change, Europe and other cultures, Christianity and other religions. (Boaventura 2013:64) Pessoa also views Iberia's characteristic as a society where culture has developed by embracing polytheistic cultures and coexisting with others.

Thus, in the process of understanding the Iberian Peninsula's cultural characteristics that differentiate it from other European nations, we see Iberian identity being newly defined. Cultural Iberianism thus contributes to conceptualizing and rethinking the identity of the Iberian Peninsula. This aspect is also applicable to the situation on the Korean Peninsula. For cultural exchange between South and North Korea, it is necessary to first identify the cultural commonalities between the two Koreas. In this process, one is led to reconsider the unique characteristics of the Korean Peninsula that differentiate it from other nations and reveal its distinct differences.

Possibility of Adaptation in Korean Peninsula

Four types of unification model

As explained earlier, applying Iberian nationalism from the Iberian Peninsula to the Korean Peninsula is unrealistic in many respects. First, the two nations on the Iberian Peninsula have maintained distinct national identities since Portugal's founding in 1139. In contrast, Korea was a unified dynastic state from Unified Silla (676-935) through the Korea Dynasty (918-1392) to the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), only to become divided in 1948 when the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea established separate governments. The Korean Peninsula is currently in a state of armistice, and the Constitution of the Republic of Korea defines North Korea as part of its territory.[5] This represents a significant difference in perspective: whether it is a federation of separate nations or the reunification of a formerly unified country. Nevertheless, applying cultural Iberism to various unification policies for the Korean Peninsula could contribute to establishing and advancing realistic and effective unification strategies based on the cultural commonalities and similarities inherent to the peninsula.

Just as Iberism is classified into four types, the unification models for the Korean Peninsula can also be categorized into four types. We will examine the policies for each, their respective meanings, and their effectiveness. Classifying the Korean Peninsula unification models according to the four types of Iberism yields: political unification, economic unification, cultural unification, and affection for the counterpart (pro-

[4] (1) o domínio espiritual das Américas do centro e do sul, e assim o imperialismo de cultura no Novo Mundo, (2) a conquista definitiva dos territórios do Norte de África, onde vi vem os homens nossos parentes, as raças árabes, berberes, [...]; (3) a destruição militar da França (e da Itália) (Pessoa, 1980:13).
[5] "The territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean Peninsula and its adjacent islands." (Article 3 of *the Constitution of the Republic of Korea*).

North/pro-South). First, political unification is fundamentally what the South Korean government aims for. South Korea has maintained a dedicated Ministry of Unification within its executive branch since 1969, demonstrating the national-level oversight and management of the task of 'unification'. In every presidential election, candidates invariably present unification-related policies toward North Korea alongside economic, livelihood, and welfare policies. This underscores how crucial political integration is as a task for South Korea.

South Korea's unification policy has shifted direction slightly with each change of government. During the First Republic, immediately following division, North Korea was not recognized, and the government advocated for 'absorption unification' and 'unification by force'. However, by the Third and Fourth Republics, North Korea began to be recognized and viewed as an entity for peace and coexistence. The 1972 'July 4 North-South Joint Statement' agreed upon during this period established the three major unification principles of independence, peace, and national unity. However, in reality, it was also a period of confrontation between North and South Korea under authoritarian regimes. Entering the Sixth Republic, discussions on implementing concrete unification policies began through the 1991 "Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, Exchange, and Cooperation between the South and the North (Inter-Korean Basic Agreement)."(National Archives of Korea, 2018) In 1994, the Kim Young-sam administration announced the 'Plan for Reunification Based on a Community of the Korean Nation'. This remains the official reunification roadmap to this day. It proposes three stages: First, through reconciliation and cooperation, restore national homogeneity. Second, establish a North-South Union, creating a dialogue mechanism via a summit meeting body between the two Koreas. The final stage involves completing a unified nation, enacting a unified constitution, and establishing a single-state, single-government system through general elections.(Ministry of Unification, n.d.) Above all, it emphasizes peace, prioritizing unification achieved through autonomous and democratic consultation rather than war or force. In 2000, the Kim Dae-jung administration realized the first inter-Korean summit, pledging peaceful coexistence and exchange through the 'June 15 Joint Declaration'. The Kim Dae-jung administration is also credited with introducing a new paradigm in inter-Korean relations by implementing its North Korea policy, known as the Sunshine Policy. Since then, inter-Korean summits have been held a total of three times. The second summit took place under the Roh Moo-hyun administration in 2007, and the third under the Moon Jae-in administration in 2018.

Meanwhile, North Korea advocates a federal unification plan based on the three unification principles of self-reliance, peace, and national unity outlined in the July 4 North-South Joint Statement. However, South Korea's analysis indicates that North Korea internally still characterizes inter-Korean relations as hostile, maintaining an adversarial view of unification.(North Korea Information Portal, 2024)

After 80 years of division, the reality is that many South Koreans today hold negative perceptions of unification. According to the 2024 'Unification Awareness Survey' statistics from Seoul National University's Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, negative perceptions toward unification are increasingly on the rise. Notably, among those in their 20s, only 22.4% responded that 'unification is necessary,' while 47.4% answered that it is 'not necessary.' Similarly, among those in their 30s, 23.9% responded that unification

is necessary, while a significantly higher 45.0% responded that it is not necessary. (Institute for Peace and Unification Studies 9)

Limitations and Possibilities of Economic Union

With regard to the second category—economic unification—the Iberian case and the Korean Peninsula present markedly different structural conditions. While Spain and Portugal have sustained economic cooperation within the institutional framework of the European Union, including participation in a customs union and, for Spain and Portugal alike, the adoption of a common currency, the establishment of comparable economic arrangements between North and South Korea remains highly constrained. In the Korean context, the formation of institutions such as a customs union is rendered nearly impossible by the fundamentally divergent economic systems of the two states.

South Korea operates under a capitalist economic system characterized by a private-sector-led market economy, where private property ownership is legally guaranteed and resource allocation is largely mediated through market mechanisms. In contrast, North Korea adheres to a state-led socialist planned economy in which private property ownership is prohibited, all productive assets are owned by the state, and economic resources are allocated administratively by central authorities. These internal structural differences are further reinforced by opposing external economic orientations. South Korea actively pursues trade liberalization and integration into the global economy, whereas North Korea maintains a largely closed economic structure, marked by limited engagement with international trade and foreign capital.

Perhaps most salient is the magnitude of the economic disparity between the two Koreas. As of recent estimates, South Korea's gross national income per capita stands at approximately 47.25 million won, while that of North Korea is estimated at 1.59 million won, reflecting an income gap of nearly thirtyfold.(KBS, 2024) South Korea's contemporary economic position is the result of rapid industrialization and export-oriented development policies implemented in the aftermath of colonial exploitation and the devastation of the Korean War. Policies facilitated what has been widely described as the "Miracle on the Han River," transforming South Korea from one of the world's poorest countries into a high-income industrialized economy.

By contrast, North Korea persisted in a rigid socialist economic model and maintained a closed stance toward international exchange even as other socialist and post-socialist states initiated economic reforms and integration into the global economy from the 1980s onward. This path dependency has resulted in chronic economic stagnation and increasing marginalization within the global economic order. Consequently, the structural asymmetries between the two Koreas far exceed those observed between Spain and Portugal prior to their integration into European economic institutions.

A comparison of key economic indicators for South and North Korea in 2023 further illustrates the depth of these disparities, underscoring the structural obstacles that limit the feasibility of economic unification on the Korean Peninsula.

Table 1. Major Economic Indicators of North and South Korea (2023)

Category	Population (thousand persons)	Nominal GNI (trillion KRW)	GNI per capita (million KRW)	Economic Growth Rate (%)	Total Trade Volume (billion USD)	Government Budget (billion USD)
North Korea (A)	25,708.8	40.9	158.9	3.1	27.7억	91.3억
South Korea (B)	51,712.6	2,443.3	4,724.8	1.4	12,748.0억	3,418.0억
(B/A)	2.0		29.7	-	460.4	37.4

Source: Bank of Korea (2024, July 26)

Due to this overwhelming economic disparity, South Korean public opinion has increasingly identified the anticipated economic burden of unification as the primary reason for opposing reunification (Institute for Peace and Unification Studies 15). According to survey results from 2024, economic burden ranked first at 33.9 percent, followed by concerns over social problems that might emerge after unification at 27.9 percent. Differences in political systems between the two Koreas ranked third at 19.2 percent, while socio-cultural differences ranked fourth at 14.6 percent.

Despite these substantial constraints, several models of inter-Korean economic cooperation have nonetheless been explored. Among the most prominent examples are the **Kaesong Industrial Complex** and the **Mount Kumgang Tourism Project**. The Kaesong Industrial Complex originated from agreements reached in 2000 and entered full operation in 2005, following the provision of electricity, telecommunications connectivity, and infrastructure construction by South Korea. By approximately 2015, a total of 123 South Korean firms were operating in the complex, employing 54,988 North Korean workers. The project aimed to designate Kaesong as an international free economic zone and develop it into a central economic hub in Northeast Asia. However, due to escalating security concerns—most notably North Korea's nuclear tests and long-range missile launches—the South Korean government suspended the operation of the complex in 2015.

Similarly, discussions surrounding the Mount Kumgang Tourism Project began in 1998, and in 2002 North Korea designated the Mount Kumgang area as a special tourism zone. The introduction of overland travel in 2003 significantly increased visitor numbers. However, the project was indefinitely suspended following the fatal shooting of a South Korean tourist in 2008. Prior to its suspension, the cumulative number of visitors had nearly approached two million.(National Archive of Korea, 2018)

Both projects were implemented through agreements between South Korea's Hyundai Group and North Korea's Asia-Pacific Peace Committee. The institutional arrangements of these initiatives further highlight the structural differences between the two economic

systems: while private enterprises played a leading role on the South Korean side, the North Korean side operated under direct state control.

Figure 1. Kaesong Industrial Complex

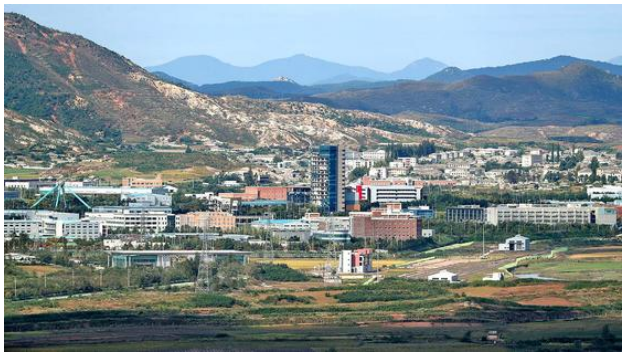

Figure 2. Mount Kumgang Tourism Project

Source: The Joongang (2024, July 4), Hankyoreh (2019, October 19)

The Realities and Prospects of Inter-Korean Cultural Exchange

Inter-Korean cultural exchange and cooperation have taken place across a range of fields, including music, performing arts, sports, and cultural heritage preservation. In the South Korean context, cultural exchange initiatives have also been implemented through government-affiliated institutions, such as agencies under the Ministry of Unification, which operate various cultural experience programs. Nevertheless, these exchanges have largely remained event-driven and short-term in nature, lacking institutional continuity and sustainability. Although there appeared to be renewed momentum for cultural exchange following the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics and the inter-Korean summits, such efforts have since stagnated, and cultural interaction between the two Koreas remains limited.

Within Iberist discourse, cultural Iberism is often presented as a more pragmatic and feasible form of integration than political Iberism. In the Korean case, however, this logic does not readily apply. According to a 2024 survey asking South Korean respondents what they most strongly associate with the concept of "unification," the majority (62.3 percent) identified unification as the political integration of North and South Korea into a single state. The second most common response (19.8 percent) defined unification as the free movement of people and goods across the border, while 11.6 percent associated unification with intensified economic cooperation between the two Koreas. By contrast, only 6.2 percent of respondents conceptualized unification in terms of cultural convergence, such as the narrowing of differences in values, culture, and education (Institute for Peace and Unification Studies 12).

Table 2. South Korean people's perception of unification (2024)

Image of Unification	2024 (%)
political integration	62.3
unification with intensified economic cooperation	11.6
unification as the free movement of people and goods across the border	19.8
unification in terms of cultural convergence (differences in values, culture, and education)	6.2
others	0.1

Despite limited institutionalized exchange, a significant number of North Korean residents are exposed to South Korean popular culture. Although the North Korean authorities regard the consumption of Hallyu as a threat to regime stability and impose severe sanctions, South Korean films, television dramas, and music continue to circulate through illicit streaming channels and informal distribution networks. Exposure is not merely passive; North Korean youth, in particular, demonstrate strong enthusiasm for South Korean popular culture. As Taekbin Kim's research indicates, South Korean dramas and films represent one of the few accessible windows to the outside world for North Korean residents (Kim 2025: 185). However, the growing popularity of Hallyu has been accompanied by intensified state surveillance and censorship. In 2024, testimonies emerged alleging that individuals were executed for distributing and viewing South Korean television dramas. (YTN News 2024, July 29)

With regard to music and live performances, inter-Korean exchange was relatively active in the period following the implementation of the Sunshine Policy, particularly from 1998 through the early 2000s. A notable feature of these exchanges was that performances were primarily organized and led by South Korean private broadcasting companies and cultural institutions. In 1999, major South Korean broadcasters such as SBS and MBC hosted performances in North Korea featuring then-popular idol groups, mainstream singers, and ballet companies. Throughout the early 2000s, South Korean artists continued to perform in North Korea, including joint concerts in which performers from both Koreas shared the stage. Prominent South Korean singers such as Kim Yon-ja, Lee Mi-ja, and Cho Yong-pil also held solo concerts. These cultural exchanges declined following the fatal shooting of a South Korean tourist at Mount Kumgang in 2008 but were partially revived in 2018 in conjunction with the inter-Korean summit meetings, which included renewed performances in North Korea.

Thus, cultural exchange has been significantly influenced by political circumstances and security issues. In South Korea specifically, cultural exchange tended to increase during the presidencies of progressive parties and decrease during those of conservative parties. There was also a tendency for cultural exchange to temporarily increase when global sporting events like the Olympics or World Cup were held in Korea.

Persistent Ideological Conflict and the Impossibility of -philia

Unlike cases of *lusophilia* or *hispanophilia*, expressions of affection or admiration across the Korean divide are subject to intense ideological scrutiny. In the Korean context, for a South Korean to express positive sentiment toward North Korea—or for a North Korean to express affinity for South Korea—constitutes a politically sensitive act that may trigger accusations of ideological deviance or disloyalty. Although South Korea formally guarantees freedom of thought and ideology, enabling the expression of pro-American, pro-European, or pro-Chinese orientations, the articulation of a pro–North Korean stance (*ch'inbuk*) remains effectively proscribed in practice.

This asymmetry reflects the persistence of ideological conflict between the two Koreas, even more than eighty years after national division. The enduring legacy of the Cold War, reinforced by ongoing security tensions and divergent state ideologies, continues to structure the boundaries of permissible affect, identification, and cultural orientation. As a result, the emergence of affective dispositions analogous to *lusophilia* or *hispanophilia*—grounded in mutual admiration and cultural affinity—remains severely constrained on the Korean Peninsula.

This structural constraint can be further understood through the lens of affective nationalism and securitized identity formation. In divided societies, affect is not merely a private disposition but a politically regulated domain, in which emotional orientations toward the "other side" are subject to surveillance and moral judgment. On the Korean Peninsula, expressions of sympathy, admiration, or cultural affinity toward the opposing regime are frequently interpreted through a security-centered framework, wherein affective attachment itself becomes politicized and securitized.

From this perspective, the near impossibility of *-philia* in the Korean case is not simply a matter of individual prejudice or public opinion but the outcome of a historically entrenched regime of ideological boundary-making. The prolonged division, sustained by military confrontation and antagonistic state narratives, has produced rigid symbolic boundaries that delimit not only political allegiance but also permissible forms of emotional identification. Consequently, positive affect toward the other Korea is readily conflated with ideological betrayal or national disloyalty, thereby foreclosing the emergence of socially legitimate forms of cross-border admiration.

This stands in sharp contrast to the Iberian case, where *lusophilia* and *hispanophilia* could develop as culturally sanctioned orientations despite historical conflict and rivalry. In Iberia, the absence of an unresolved military standoff and the gradual normalization of interstate relations allowed affective affinities to be articulated within literary, intellectual, and cultural fields without being framed as threats to national security. In Korea, by contrast, the unresolved armistice and the persistence of mutual securitization have prevented affect from being disentangled from ideological allegiance.

Moreover, the asymmetry between the two Koreas further complicates the emergence of *-philia*. While South Korean society formally upholds freedom of expression, the legal and discursive legacies of anti-communism continue to restrict the social legitimacy of pro–North Korean sentiment. In North Korea, state control over ideology and cultural consumption entirely precludes the open articulation of admiration for South Korea. As a

result, even when cultural fascination or curiosity exists—particularly among North Korean youth exposed to South Korean popular culture—it remains confined to the private or clandestine sphere and cannot crystallize into a publicly recognized or institutionally supported form of *-philia*.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that cultural affinity alone is insufficient to generate durable forms of transnational affect in the absence of political and ideological de-securitization. Unlike the Iberian context, where cultural exchange could precede or substitute for political integration, the Korean case demonstrates that sustained ideological confrontation fundamentally constrains the social conditions under which affective orientations such as *-philia* can emerge. Any discussion of cultural rapprochement on the Korean Peninsula must therefore account not only for cultural policy or exchange mechanisms but also for the deeper structures of ideological governance that regulate affect, loyalty, and belonging.

Conclusion: Practical Suggestions for cultural cooperation and its obstacles

As discussed earlier, the concept of cultural Iberism articulated by Fernando Pessoa functioned as a means of re-examining national identity by reflecting on the commonalities shared by the two states of the Iberian Peninsula. Going beyond the cultural realm, Pessoa sought to elevate characteristics distinctive to Iberia—such as *plasticity* and *cosmopolitanism*—to the level of a civilizational project. This intellectual endeavor must be understood within the historical context of the early 1910s, a period marked by the intensification of nationalist sentiment and a widespread aspiration to build strong and prosperous nation-states.

In contrast, as demonstrated by contemporary South Korean perceptions of unification, many Koreans today no longer regard unification as an imperative grounded solely in the idealized notion of a shared ethnic identity (*Han minjok, Han* ethnicity). Instead, public attitudes toward unification are increasingly shaped by pragmatic considerations, including security threats and anticipated economic burdens. Under these conditions, cultural exchange can be understood as a practical and comparatively low-cost mechanism for reducing the immediate burden associated with political unification, while simultaneously mitigating the sense of disconnection between the two Koreas.

Among the various forms of cultural exchange, cooperation in the field of cultural heritage holds particular potential for contributing to the reconstruction of national identity on the Korean Peninsula. Despite their current political division, North and South Korea share a long historical trajectory and a common body of cultural heritage. Through cultural heritage exchange, the two Koreas can identify and reaffirm their cultural and historical commonalities while minimizing the disruptive effects of ideological conflict. Such cooperation also enables joint efforts in the preservation and transmission of shared cultural assets.

In particular, the domain of intangible cultural heritage—including social customs, seasonal rituals, traditional attire, and foodways—offers significant opportunities for collaboration. Even without framing such initiatives explicitly as preparatory steps toward

unification, joint research and exchange in this area can substantially enhance mutual historical understanding. In this regard, Donghwan Yun argues that North and South Korea should pursue concrete outcomes such as the joint inscription of shared intangible cultural practices on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Yun 2018: 135). Similarly, Lee Gui-young emphasizes the importance of establishing physical spaces dedicated to the transmission and performance of intangible cultural heritage. He proposes the creation of exchange venues—potentially within or near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)—where recognized heritage practitioners from both Koreas could engage in sustained and substantive interaction (Lee 2021: 198).

From a policy perspective, Jeong Eun-mi of the Korea Institute for National Unification offers three key recommendations directed toward South Korea's newly inaugurated Lee Jae-myung administration. First, she advocates for a model in which civil society organizations and local governments take the lead in socio-cultural exchange initiatives, as government-led programs are more susceptible to ideological controversy and partisan conflict. Second, she emphasizes the need for a phased roadmap accompanied by clearly defined channels of communication to ensure the continuity of cultural exchange. Finally, she underscores the importance of institutional support, including legal and administrative reforms, to guarantee the stability and sustainability of such exchanges over time (Jeong 2025: 3–4).

As many experts have observed, inter-Korean cultural exchange continues to depend heavily on the orientations and political will of incumbent leaders. As a result, such exchanges tend to take the form of temporary, event-driven initiatives. For this reason, it is essential to establish mechanisms that enable sustained and institutionalized cultural exchange, insulated from changes in political leadership and fluctuations in ideological conflict.

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