

From folklore to dance: Global expansion and potential of K-dance through cultural content “Dokkaebi (Goblin)”

So-Jung, Chang^{1*}

¹Chung Ang University, Seoul, Korea; stingo1@naver.com (S.J.C.).

Abstract: Korea's traditional culture and the folklore element "Dokkaebi" have long inspired creativity with their historical depth and imaginative appeal, serving as a basis for various cultural and artistic content. This study aims to apply the Theory of Possible Worlds to "Dokkaebi," transforming it into a new form of K-dance and exploring its potential for global expansion. By reinterpreting "Dokkaebi" as a creative and modern cultural content, the research seeks to highlight the diversity and creativity of Korean culture on the global stage. The study focuses on three key objectives. First, it utilizes the Theory of Possible Worlds to analyze "Dokkaebi," expanding the boundaries of culture and knowledge. Second, it creates innovative K-dance movements inspired by traditional folklore, thereby diversifying the genres within the Korean Wave (Hallyu). Third, it explores creative storytelling and choreography, extending beyond conventional methods to develop performances suitable for global audiences. This research is expected to serve as foundational material for the development of K-dance and the broader cultural content industry.

Keywords: Cultural arts, Cultural contents, Folk materials, K-dance, Theory of possible worlds.

1. Introduction

Culture is central to the development of nations and societies, and cultural heritage represents the transmission of cultural elements from one generation to the next. Cultural heritage has evolved alongside the history of nations, encompassing universal values that transcend borders and are shared worldwide. It can be broadly categorized into intangible heritage, tangible heritage, folk cultural heritage, and documentary heritage, with each reflecting the unique social and cultural contexts in which it exists. Among these, folk cultural heritage plays a critical role in expressing a society's cultural identity, incorporating elements of daily life, belief systems, and rituals. It also has a profound influence on the development of contemporary cultural content [1]. Building on cultural heritage, K-dance represents a form of cultural content that reimagines Korean traditional culture through the language of dance, showcasing its potential for global expansion. The "dokkaebi", a symbolic figure in Korean folklore, exemplifies this potential. Its mysterious and transformative nature makes it an ideal character for merging traditional cultural elements with the innovative and dynamic movements of K-dance. As a complex representation of good and evil, the dokkaebi holds the potential to convey new cultural values when its folklore characteristics are reinterpreted in a modern context [2]. K-dance has the power to go beyond merely preserving tradition by contributing to the revitalization of creative dance ecosystems and driving cultural innovation. Folk themes such as dokkaebi serve as valuable cultural assets. When these themes are integrated into modern dance forms, they enable the reinterpretation of traditional culture for contemporary audiences. The dokkaebi, with its blend of good, evil, transcendence, and ever-changing imagery, embodies Korean identity while offering a fresh lens through which to view traditional culture. The globalization of cultural content facilitates cross-cultural exchange and mutual understanding, fostering respect for cultural diversity and promoting harmony. Within this framework,

the dokkaebi, as a quintessential figure of Korean tradition, holds significant potential to resonate on the global stage through K-dance. The study of the dokkaebi has continued from 1968 to the present, highlighting its enduring cultural significance. In the cultural and artistic realms, the dokkaebi has become a central symbol of Korean traditional culture. For instance, artist Oh Yun used the dokkaebi as a symbolic critique of oppressive systems, moving beyond simplistic dichotomies of good versus evil [2]. The popular drama *Dokkaebi* emphasized the transcendental attributes of the dokkaebi and its original soundtrack (OST) heightened the emotional depth and situational context of the characters. This demonstrated how the traditional folk motif of the dokkaebi could be transformed into globally relevant cultural content through modern interpretation. In the dance field, works such as <Dokkaeba! Dokkaeba!> by the Seo Ballet Company reinterpreted Dokkaebi in various forms by mixing natural and mystical elements, and choreographer Chang So-jung also created a comical version of <Dokkaebi> in <The Hunchbacked Old Man>. In this way, Dokkaebi expands artistic expression and melt in works the possibility of Dokkaebi adapting to new creative contexts. These cases show how Dokkaebi, rooted in folklore, has come to have important symbolic meaning in the fields of art and culture, and provide a foundation for cultural synergy in the global market [3].

The purpose of this study is to reinterpret the cultural content of the "dokkaebi" (goblin) within the context of K-dance and to explore its potential for expansion in the global market. Specifically, the study examines how the traditional characteristics of the dokkaebi can be reimagined through the creative and contemporary dance language of K-dance, transforming it into content that resonates on a global stage. To achieve this, the research applies Possible World Theory as a framework for creatively transforming the dokkaebi's various attributes and symbolic meanings into choreography [4]. This research aims to contribute to the globalization of K-dance by presenting creative strategies to transform the dokkaebi, a figure rooted in Korean folklore, into a modern and globally recognizable form of cultural content. By blending the traditional image of the dokkaebi with the dynamic movements of K-dance, the study offers a fresh perspective on how Korean traditions can be redefined with new cultural values. This endeavor represents a significant step in creatively expanding K-dance and enhancing its recognition on the international stage.

2. The Folk Characteristics of Cultural Content 'Goblin'

Dokkaebi column [5] quintessential figures in Korean folklore, have been deeply ingrained in the lives and emotions of the Korean people for centuries through oral traditions, folk beliefs, and artistic expressions. These entities have transcended their mythological status, being interpreted and expressed diversely across different eras, regions, and media. This study focuses on elucidating the essence of dokkaebi by analyzing their folkloric characteristics from visual, symbolic, and cultural perspectives. The research methodology comprises three main approaches: First, an exploration of the visual imagery of dokkaebi based on academic papers and literary sources. Second, an analysis of the symbolic meanings of dokkaebi through narratives found in folktales and traditional literature. Third, an examination of the role of dokkaebi from a cultural standpoint. The visual representation of dokkaebi is diverse in traditional literature and artworks. Classical dokkaebi are typically depicted as towering figures, standing 8-9 feet tall, with large eyes and sharp teeth. This imposing appearance symbolizes formidable strength and dignity, occasionally featuring horns or surrealistic hand and foot formations. The imagery of dokkaebi is accentuated as supernatural beings through their bizarre yet distinctive forms. In traditional Korean paintings and crafts, dokkaebi were often portrayed as entities capable of evoking both fear and amusement simultaneously [5]. These visual representations convey not merely a frightening presence but also incorporate elements of playfulness and familiarity. This duality in their depiction reflects the complex role dokkaebi play in the Korean cultural imagination, embodying both the mysterious and the relatable aspects of supernatural entities. The physical characteristics of dokkaebi exhibit diverse variations across regions and time periods, reflecting the rich folkloric culture of Korea.

In Gangwon Province, dokkaebi are depicted as having a close relationship with nature and possessing human-like appearances. They are portrayed as friendly beings who hide in forests and assist lost travelers, emphasizing a companionable image rather than instilling fear of supernatural entities.

In the southern regions, dokkaebi are often described as strong male figures who enjoy wrestling and playing games with humans. This representation demonstrates that dokkaebi transcend mere mythical beings, embodying a familiar image that reflects human life and recreational activities.

The appearance of dokkaebi is not limited to masculine forms. According to various literary sources, dokkaebi can manifest as children, giants, elderly individuals, young men, or maidens, thereby capturing the unique characteristics of different eras and regions [6]. The image of the goblin does not solely exist in a form resembling humans. Along the western coast, goblins often appeared as Will-O'-The-Wisps, actively intervening in human life. This demonstrates that goblins serve as an original visual expression symbolizing the coexistence of nature and human life.

According to Lee Hae-young's research, the most common image of goblins among modern individuals resembles a human-like figure, characterized as familiar, approachable, and even endearing. Furthermore, a survey of adjectives associated with goblins in 15 books on the subject revealed that the most frequently chosen descriptors were "Korean," "active," and "cheerful [7]. Currently, the visual image of dokkaebi can be seen as in a transitional stage, combining traditional characteristics with modern interpretations. Occasionally, dokkaebi are depicted as the fearsome and intimidating oni of Japan. However, Korean dokkaebi generally reveal their unique folkloric characteristics through humorous, human-like, and versatile appearances. Secondly, to understand the folkloric characteristics of dokkaebi, we examined their symbolic meanings through narratives in folktales and traditional literature. In the "Comprehensive Collection of Korean Oral Literature," there are recurring scenes of dokkaebi creating treasures using their magical clubs. In "The Dokkaebi's Club," when a dokkaebi wields its club, objects and wealth are generated. Additionally, in "Dokkaebi and Money," dokkaebi provide people with money or wealth through their clubs, changing human lives. Thus, dokkaebi are symbolically expressed as examples that fulfill human desires in folktales through the medium of their clubs. However, they also embody the dangers of excessive pursuit of desires. While dokkaebi symbolize material abundance and luck, they are also portrayed as beings that test human greed, teaching that excessive human desire ultimately leads to consequences. Dokkaebi reveal their unique folkloric characteristics by constructing symbolic images with moral implications. In tales like "The Dokkaebi Who Tamed the Unfilial Son" and "The Grateful Dokkaebi," where they discipline sons who mistreat their parents and secure promises of filial piety, dokkaebi play a crucial role in helping human society develop and achieve, going beyond merely offering a helping hand. Moreover, dokkaebi are depicted as symbolic beings of important Korean values such as "filial piety," "gratitude," and "the virtue of giving." Dokkaebi also play a symbolic role as mediators between nature and the transcendent world. Living in nature, they help those who suddenly lose their way or assist the elderly, breaking down barriers between nature and humans and acting as mediators through harmonious relationships. Bremond described a chain of punishment, improvement, and reward starting from wrongdoing in French folklore, presenting an ethical model [8]. This ethical principle is inherent in the image of dokkaebi, symbolic beings representing folkloric characteristics. Dokkaebi stories have a similar structure, following an ethical flow of punishment for wrongdoing, resulting change, and ultimate reward. Dokkaebi can be seen as symbolic beings reflecting folkloric characteristics, embodying social norms and morals themselves. Lastly, we aim to examine the folkloric characteristics of dokkaebi from a cultural perspective.

The patterns of dokkaebi are widely discovered on traditional buildings such as gwimyeonwa (roof tiles with face designs) and jangseung (village guardian posts). Gwimyeonwa is a culture that reflects the thoughts and folkloric customs of ancestors, embodying the belief of predecessors who sought to prevent village calamities from the Three Kingdoms period to the present.

The dokkaebi patterns, serving as talismans to ward off disasters, were beings that protected the human world and maintained balance, functioning as mediators connecting human society and the supernatural world.

Moreover, dokkaebi's folkloric characteristics are manifested in the festivals and games of our ethnic community culture. Tug-of-war, one of the traditional Korean games, is a folk game designed to cultivate community cooperation, containing meanings of preventing bad luck and ensuring good harvest. At that time, dokkaebi were also considered symbols that brought good harvests and drove away negative energies. In this way, dokkaebi were expressed as socio-cultural actors praying for good harvests and prosperity.

The humorous and witty folkloric characteristics of dokkaebi are primarily displayed in festivals and games. The appearance of dokkaebi in mask dances or Rat Fire Play play delivers laughter to people and generates harmony among them. Dokkaebi demonstrate that they have acted as crucial mediators in community culture, transcending mere entities that fulfill individual desires.



Figure 1.
Gwimyeonwa, Jangseung.

3. Expansion of 'Dokkaebi' into K-Dance through Possible Worlds Theory

Possible Worlds Theory is a philosophical theory that explores various potential realities by positing real and alternative worlds and is utilized in modal logic and narratology. Philosopher David Lewis emphasized that possible worlds could exist as independent and complete worlds separate from the real world we live in and saw this as enabling creative narrative expansion. This concept of Possible Worlds Theory can be a useful methodology when reinterpreting traditional Korean cultural content in a modern way or planning new creations. Dokkaebi are described in Korean folklore as beings with mysteriousness, mischievousness, and supernatural abilities, serving as an attractive theme in artistic expression. Not simply understood as fictional beings, dokkaebi have multi-layered meanings that can be interpreted as mythical, cultural, and psychological symbols. These characteristics provide possibilities for artistic experimentation and various interpretations, opening up room for creative reconstruction in art performance for the global advancement of K-dance.

K-dance is a genre that seeks to express traditional identity and global universality simultaneously, and the surreal and multi-dimensional characteristics of dokkaebi blend well with the experimental and creative direction of K-dance. In particular, the subject of dokkaebi, which contains folkloric elements, can function as a medium connecting tradition and modernity by combining with stage, music, and global storytelling. Through this, K-dance utilizing dokkaebi can secure the possibility of universally appealing to a global audience while maintaining its identity. Dokkaebi, moving between the human world and the mythical world, aligns with the core concepts of Possible Worlds Theory. Possible Worlds Theory explores narratives that transcend reality and imagination, and by implementing them on stage, provides the audience with unique and multi-dimensional experiences. Based on Possible Worlds Theory, dokkaebi can undergo various changes in K-dance and provide a transcendent world.

The symbolic dokkaebi possesses the potential to express diverse and implicit meanings. Below are the results of summarizing movements expressing the possibility of dokkaebi's transformed forms after an FGI (Focus Group Interview) with dance professionals (modern dance, ballet, Korean dance,

practical dance). However, this is only a part, and more possibilities can be created based on the methodology of Possible Worlds Theory.

3.1. Examples of Visual Image Changes of Dokkaebi

Replace the playful image of masculine dokkaebi with inherent folkloric tendencies with the image of delicate dokkaebi with many feminine movements. Instead of tense or sudden bursting movements, emphasize seductive movements by emphasizing female dancers' use of pelvis, shoulders, and fingers. Psychologically, rather than being frightening but playful, reveal movements utilizing Possible Worlds Theory by seductively expressing repressed desires or taboos. Dokkaebi's movements attempt changes with unpredictable abstract movements by having two dancers move as one or changing the choreography composition.



Figure 2.

A mesmerizing dokkaebi with alluring movements that accentuate the use of the pelvis and fingers.



Figure 3.

Two dancers expressing the form of a single dokkaebi.

3.2. Examples of Changes in the Symbolism of Dokkaebi

The will-o' the-wisp, with its strong folkloric tendencies, symbolizes the cooperative life between nature and humans. The will-o' the-wisp not only extends a helping hand to human society but also

plays an important role in aiding the development and achievement of human society. Based on Possible Worlds Theory, the symbolic meaning of dokkaebi fire can expand the exploration of unknown realms and human imagination and can also emphasize the transcendent attributes of dokkaebi. To express this symbolic image of dokkaebi's abilities, in K-dance, it can be creative to express the transcendent attributes of dokkaebi by maintaining long airtime for each of the dokkaebi's movements, and rather than showing movements that seem to stop, drawing the image of a dokkaebi that suddenly appears by abruptly changing directions.

Dokkaebi are scary and mischievous but have goodness. They are also angry but simple, and foolish but warm. As a result of discussing dance movements based on Possible Worlds Theory for these folkloric, human-like dokkaebi, it was suggested that scary and mischievous dokkaebi can be expressed by creatively composing intentionally heavy and unbalanced movements, while human-like dokkaebi can be portrayed as playfully imitating humans using light foot-stomping or fast and bouncy movements. Also, foolishness and goodness can be expressed through the use of curved trajectories and elegant hand and body gestures that seem to glide.

In this choreography process, opinions were presented that it is possible to diversely visualize will-o'-the-wisp by using scientific technology or stage devices such as holograms and LEDs, and that the use of materials like fabric or small mirrors could emphasize the liveliness of the sparkling will-o'-the-wisp. In this way, the expanded symbolism and image changes of dokkaebi will stimulate and express imagination about exploring unknown realms through K-dance movements.

3.3. Examples of Changes in the Cultural Aspects of Dokkaebi

In Korean folklore, dokkaebi are beings that ward off disasters, promote community cooperation, and pray for good harvests and prosperity. Dokkaebi patterns found on gwimyeonwa (roof tiles with face designs) and jangseung (village guardian posts) serve as talismans and have functioned as protectors of the human world and mediators with the supernatural world. These folkloric characteristics of dokkaebi are also prominently displayed in community festivals and games. For example, tug-of-war is a traditional game with meanings of preventing bad luck and ensuring good harvests, where dokkaebi were considered symbols of bringing good harvests. Thus, dokkaebi were beings that went beyond simply preventing disasters, strengthening community cooperation and performing socio-cultural roles.

From the perspective of Possible Worlds Theory, dokkaebi have the potential to be newly applied to K-dance by reinterpreting their folkloric characteristics in a modern way. For instance, in scenes emphasizing the mediator role of dokkaebi, lighting and projection mapping can be used to visually express changes in the boundaries between the human world and the supernatural world [9, 10]. Changes in lighting colors and gradual transitions of stage space can effectively convey the transcendent identity of dokkaebi to the audience. Also, when expanding the communal attributes into modern choreography including folkloric tendencies, audiences will have a new experience regarding the symbolism and cultural roots of dokkaebi. The use of music plays an important role in K-dance and can express the cultural characteristics of dokkaebi. For example, by combining modern rhythms based on the rhythms of traditional Korean instruments, the unique folkloric image of dokkaebi can be reconstructed with a modern sensibility. This musical approach provides audiences with both familiarity and novelty, allowing them to naturally accept the cultural changes of dokkaebi.

In choreography, the humorous and witty characteristics of dokkaebi can be expressed through the dancers' movements. Dokkaebi transform into natural objects like stones and trees, as well as everyday items like brooms and rags. Playful movements can be created or reinterpreted based on traditional games like tug-of-war or mask dances, where dokkaebi seem about to lose against humans but then transform into objects, or they can be produced as warm choreography containing messages of cooperation and harmony. The movements can simultaneously express the versatile nature and communal symbolism of dokkaebi through corps de ballet where dancers form a single formation with identical movements and then disperse. The cultural aspects of dokkaebi can serve as an important

medium connecting tradition and modernity in K-dance creation. By combining folkloric symbolism and supernatural narratives with modern stage technology, music, and movements, dokkaebi can expand beyond simply being folkloric entities of the past to become global content providing new cultural experiences to audiences worldwide.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the possibility of reconstructing the traditional characteristics of dokkaebi based on Possible Worlds Theory into K-dance and developing it as an expandable cultural content in the global market. Dokkaebi, as significant symbolic beings in Korean folklore, are unique characters with playful, mysterious, and versatile images. These folkloric characteristics of dokkaebi hold special value when expressed in the form of K-dance.

Dance, as a comprehensive art form combining music, lighting, and choreography, is a suitable medium for conveying the diverse characteristics of dokkaebi. By expressing the playful nature, mysterious transformations, and emotional depth of dokkaebi through dance movements, it can provide audiences with a sensory and immersive artistic experience. Through this, Korean material such as dokkaebi has the potential to be more attractively conveyed to global audiences through K-dance. The expansibility of K-dance and dokkaebi content are complementary. By showcasing dokkaebi stories through dance, leveraging the worldwide popularity of K-pop and K-dance, Korean unique culture can be effectively promoted. This requires research into creative choreographic methods that transform the folkloric features of dokkaebi into modern dance language, and efforts to realize the surreal characteristics of dokkaebi on stage using advanced technologies (augmented reality, virtual reality, etc.).

Additionally, K-dance content should be expanded through global collaborations, such as partnerships with international dance companies, and continuous expansion of cultural content should be sought by unearthing and reinterpreting various Korean folkloric content beyond dokkaebi from multiple modern perspectives.

The work of reinterpreting folkloric material through dance is a creative attempt to connect tradition with contemporary art and is an important strategy for enhancing the global expansion potential of K-dance. It is hoped that such research will become more active in the future, further promoting the uniqueness and universality of Korean culture.

Funding:

His work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (Grant Number: 20240990).

Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Copyright:

© 2025 by the authors. This open-access article is distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

References

- [1] D. H. Yoo, "The current situation and the task of developing the national cultural heritage contents," *Korean studies*, vol. 1, no. 12, pp. 5–50, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.36093/ks.2008.1.12.001>
- [2] J. M. Bae, "Oh yun's work - skulls and goblins," *Korean National Research Center for the Arts*, vol. 33, pp. 167–192, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.20976/kjas.2021..33.008>
- [3] J. Y. Yoo, "Stage costume design of 'dokka! dokka!' as a pansori ballet through storytelling," *The Journal of the Convergence on Culture Technology*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 399–406, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.17703/jcct.2023.9.3.399>

- [4] S. J. Oh, "The world of classical narratives and cultural content narratives through the theory of possible worlds: A proposition for exploring the 'korean-nesses of k-culture,'" *Semiotic Inquiry*, vol. 75, pp. 91–123, 2023.
- [5] Dokkaebi column, "Note: Reference from the minjok medical news's our culture, our science," Retrieved: <https://www.mjmedi.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=2029&uttm>, n.d.
- [6] H. S. Kim, "Dokkaebi in Korean folklore," *Korean Language and Literature in International Context*, vol. 3, pp. 69–94,, 1982.
- [7] H.-Y. Yi, "Research of image recognition of the feature expression of dokkaebi," *The Journal of the Korea Contents Association*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 79–87, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.5392/JKCA.2019.19.02.079>
- [8] C. Bremond, "The morphology of the French fairy tale: The ethical model," *Patterns in Oral Literature*, pp. 49–76, 1977. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110810028.49>
- [9] J.-Y. Mok, "The conceptual stances and backgrounds about taeguk expression of the projection mapping at the opening ceremony of pyeongchang winter olympic-focused on the mapping image of< taeguk: harmony of the cosmos," *Journal of Communication Design*, vol. 64, pp. 195–208, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.25111/jcd.2018.64.15>
- [10] E. S. Kim, "Trend analysis of event space applied with the projection mapping," *Korean Institute of Interior Design Journal*, vol. 11, pp. 143–147, 2013.