

Now On My Way to Meet Who? South Korean Television, North Korean Refugees, and the Dilemmas of Representation

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Introduction

In 2011, the recently established South Korean broadcasting network Channel-A launched *Ije mannareo gamnida* (*Now on My Way to Meet You*), a program whose format brings together a group of a dozen or more female *talbukja* (North Korean refugees)² on a weekly basis. These women interact with host Nam Hui-seok, an additional female co-host (or, in the earlier episodes, two), and a panel composed of four male South Korean entertainers. Episodes typically open in a lighthearted manner, with conversation about daily life in North Korea alongside mild flirtation between the Southern male and Northern female participants, often involving song and dance, but climax with a *talbuk seuteori*, an emotionally harrowing narrative from one of the border-crossers detailing her exodus from North Korea. Via this framework *Ije mannareo gamnida* attempts to nurture the integration of North Korean refugees into South Korean society; personalization of their plight occurs in conjunction with reminders of a shared Korean identity maintained despite the regime they have fled, which is depicted as cruel, repressive and backward. The show has proven a minor hit within South Korea and received coverage from local and global media (see, e.g., Kim 2012; Choi 2012; Noce 2012).

The unusual subject matter of *Ije mannareo gamnida* itself renders the show worthy of analysis; equally significantly, it offers a useful window into attempts to address South Korea's increasingly diverse society, which now includes a large number of North Koreans, as well as media practice in the face of this

demographic shift. Nevertheless, other than journalistic treatment, only a limited number of South Korean scholars (e.g. Tae and Hwang 2012; Oh 2013) and Western academic bloggers (Draudt and Gleason 2012) have thus far investigated the show and its larger social ramifications. In this paper, we ask how *Now on My Way to Meet You* is to be understood within the contexts of South Korean society, its evolving media culture, and developments in South Korean popular representations of North Koreans. We offer close readings of segments from *Ije mannareo gamnida* in order to elicit motifs that recur as it pursues its stated goal of humanizing North Korea for a South Korean audience and giving defectors a voice amidst the general populace. Given that the show's very title intimates that a genuine encounter is about to take place, one might reasonably ask how successfully *Ije mannareo gamnida* establishes a meeting point for South Koreans with these recent arrivals from North Korea: in other words, does the show fulfill its stated aim of breaking down prejudices against North Korean refugees and supplying them with a vehicle that allows self-expression?³ Or, alternatively, does it reinforce, even if unintentionally, pre-existing regimes of knowledge and actually impede understanding of North Korea and its people? As we will argue, given the broader sociopolitical context, the show's desire to reinforce elements of commonality between North and South while illuminating life in North Korea leads to a double bind: viewers are encouraged to recognize homogeneity with the newcomers based on a shared ethnic and cultural identity, even as the conversations and editing techniques applied to the material often

represent the Northern panelists as Others.

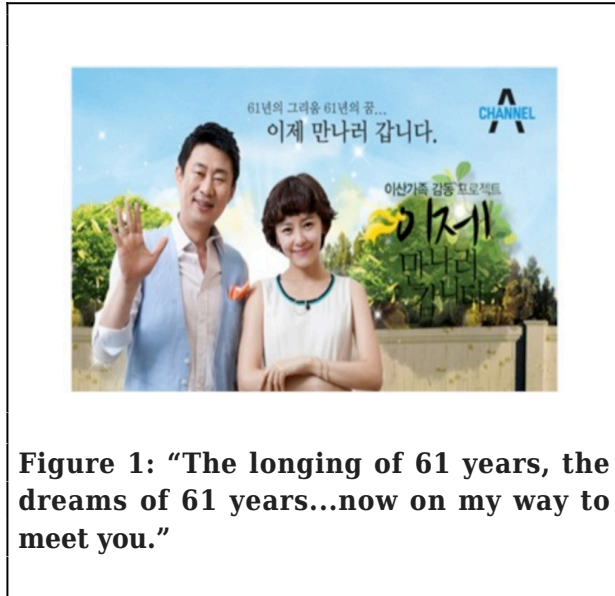


Figure 1: “The longing of 61 years, the dreams of 61 years...now on my way to meet you.”

Now on Our Way to *Ije Mannareo Gamnida*

The debut of, and attention accorded to, *Ije Mannareo Gamnida*, or *Imangap*, as it has come to be nicknamed, rely on phenomena that have made the show compelling to audiences now when its very appearance could scarcely have been imagined even a decade ago. Perhaps most importantly, the size and demographic profile of the defector population within South Korea has undergone significant change in recent years. Stirred initially by the disastrous North Korean famine of the 1990s, the number of *talbukja* arrivals grew steadily to one to two thousand each year between 2002 and 2005, and then climbed to an annual level of two to three thousand in the period between 2006 and 2010. This rapid growth has been accompanied by a marked shift in the gender distribution of refugees.⁴ Although the majority of defectors were male up through the end of the twentieth century, as the trickle of those escaping from North Korea grew into a steadier flow, more North Korean women began to cross into China (Lankov 2006). Most have stayed in China or returned to North Korea, but many have travelled on to South Korea. As of 2013, there exists a substantial community of roughly

25,000 *talbukja* in South Korea; among these, approximately 70% are female (Kim 2013).

This explosion in the number of North Koreans living in South Korea has coincided with significant developments in governmental approaches to the North. The Sunshine Policy, under which South Korea adopted a more open approach toward North Korea between 1998 and 2008, laid the groundwork for new understandings of the North-South relationship and how this relationship might be portrayed in popular culture (Kim 2007; Bevan 2010). Until then, Southern portraits of North Koreans had been almost inevitably monochromatic, treating counterparts across the 38th Parallel as virulently evil Communists or downtrodden, brainwashed automatons. From around the turn of the millennium, though, such depictions began to encompass ever more multifaceted and sympathetic renderings of the life worlds of North Koreans, most notably in the blockbusters *Shiri* (1999) and *J.S.A.: Joint Security Area* (2000). As discussed by one of the co-authors for this journal (Epstein 2009a), frequently light-hearted modes of presentation also surfaced, which included a number of B-movie comedies that envisioned romances between Northern and Southern protagonists, such as the 2003 movie trio *Namnam bungnyeo* (*Love Impossible*), *Geunyeoreul moreumyeon gancheop* (*Spy Girl*) and *Donghaemulgwa baekdusani* (*North Korean Guyz*). The simultaneous appearance of these films, though seemingly coincidental, clearly responded to an atmosphere of hopefulness about North-South reconciliation after the 2000 summit meeting between former leaders Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il.

Ironically, however, another corollary effect of the warming at the state level was to move troubling issues involving defectors out of policy discourse. Both the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations avoided shining too bright a light on the sufferings of incoming North Koreans out of a concern that doing so

might cause the North Korean government to protest strenuously and retreat from engagement. Politically prominent defectors who might otherwise have acted as leaders of the fledgling defector community, most notably former Workers' Party International Secretary Hwang Jang-yop, were restricted in their movements, partly for their own security.

In late 2007, however, the South Korean public voted in Lee Myung-bak and a far more conservative administration. The subsequent shooting of a Southern civilian by a DPRK soldier at the Mt. Geumgang tourist resort zone in summer 2008 then pushed the new government into an even harder stance against North Korea than most had anticipated. North Korea's second nuclear test in 2009, the March 2010 sinking of a ROK Navy vessel, and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island that November, which brought two civilian deaths, heightened skepticism throughout society about possibilities for rapprochement with Pyongyang.

Moreover, such events have spurred a renewed focus on North Korean refugees and expedited the increasing influence of those working to raise awareness of their plight. This trend has led, for example, to defector Cho Myung-chul, former director of the Institute for Unification Education, becoming a lawmaker in the National Assembly. There he has found a like-minded colleague in Ha Tae-kyung, the controversial founder of Open Radio for North Korea, a Seoul-based shortwave radio station that broadcasts across the border on human rights and related issues. It also has meant that former espionage agent Kim Hyeon-hui, imprisoned for the bombing of a Korean Air jet in 1987 but now rehabilitated and highly critical of the North Korean regime, could appear in the media where once she was kept out of the public eye. Meanwhile, the National Human Rights Commission began documenting abuses suffered by North Koreans within the DPRK in a deliberate infringement of North

Korean state sovereignty.

A recent significant change in the structure of South Korea's media has also played a critical role in the arrival of *Ije mannareo gamnida*: a controversial bill passed under the Lee government in 2009 granted permission for the first time to print media companies to operate television networks. Furthermore these new comprehensive broadcasting channels (*jonghap pyeonseong cheneol*, or *jongpyeon* for short) have extended operational powers that allow them to create educational and publically oriented programs to be disseminated more broadly and thus make them more similar to large terrestrial networks than other cable channels. The Kim and Roh administrations had maintained the state regulation of a previous era; given the finances of the South Korean mediascape, the companies best positioned to take advantage of any such modification would have been far from progressive. While consideration of the many issues occasioned by this change and the bitter debate that they have aroused within Korea lie beyond the scope of this paper (for more see T. Kim 2011), for our purposes it is important to note that the palette of South Korean television now incorporates within its pigmentation such outlets as Channel-A, owned by the conservative Dong-A Ilbo, and TV Chosun, affiliated via its parent company with the Chosun Ilbo, widely recognized as the nation's most notable right-wing daily. Both have maintained close relationships with the Lee and Park administrations and strive to highlight North Korean refugee issues.⁵ Their activity contributes to a media environment in which criticism of North Korea is now less likely to be blunted than it had been, but also more likely to convey the authenticity of first-hand reportage and therefore frequently controversial.⁶

These developments have not gone unnoticed by the DPRK itself, which recently launched a scathing attack in the *Rodong Sinmun* on South

Korean media treatment of defectors, particularly females:

The south Korean puppet group is resorting to the smear campaign against the DPRK, trumpeting about the "human rights record" in the north, Kang Kyong Suk noted, and went on:

The group set up even a TV channel specializing in conducting an anti-DPRK smear campaign, letting "defectors from the north" appear in programs.

It went the lengths of bringing together those "who were not defectors from the north" and staging such burlesque as an art performance by a "group of beautiful girls, defectors from the north," in the heart of Seoul as part of the smear campaign against the north.⁷

This counteroffensive suggests a reframing of North Korea's own representations of South Korea. Where focus once centered upon South Korea's sufferings under American imperialism, now defectors in South Korea themselves are drawing attention, with their lives described for the North Korean audience in a demeaning way that displaces the humiliations of capitalist society onto former DPRK compatriots, with a forceful message that those who remain behind indeed have "nothing to envy." This evolving strategy offers indirect, but ample, proof that the barriers preventing information about the outside world from entering the DPRK are becoming increasingly porous. The Dong-A Ilbo has recently reported that a young elite North Korean woman studying in Beijing defected as a result of watching *Imangap*. If verified, this claim would reaffirm the urgency of this reframing.⁸

There appears little doubt as well that the lopsided demographics of the refugee community have driven increasingly gendered depictions of *talbukja* in South Korean media and popular discourse, and although there has been a recent spate of sympathetic fictionalized treatment of Northern male spies in South Korean film (Jung 2013; Kwon 2013), actual border-crossers are now overwhelmingly represented with a female face. While the Korean phrase "*namnam bungnyeo*" (lit. southern man, northern woman) predates the division of the peninsula, the existence of this trope suggesting the most desired origins for each member of a Korean couple has fostered an exoticization of Northern women, who are often depicted as retaining a traditional, wholesome beauty lost by their Southern counterparts (Epstein 2009a). Such female *talbukja* are subject to ambivalent responses in South Korea, however: they may be denigrated as the recipients of a blinkered education in the North that has left them ignorant, or patronized as trafficking victims during their transit through China, a characterization that not only carries with it stigma but takes little account of the agency evinced by many in seeking to improve their lives and those of their families via marriage brokers (Kim 2013; Ryang 2012). Unsurprisingly, the ideological and cultural gulf that has arisen across the 38th Parallel over the course of almost 70 years has meant estrangement and difficulties in adaptation for these border-crossers, both in terms of their own abilities to cope with the new environment and the attitudes of the host society.

However, *Imangap* should not be understood through the inter-Korean lens alone, for the show also reflects South Korea's growing diversity. The number of foreigners living in Korea as of June 2013 topped 1.5 million, roughly 3% of the population.⁹ Of course, the process of integrating foreign residents into South Korean society has not always been smooth. The government has devoted the

majority of its attention to female marriage migrants, whom it has strived to assimilate within the national fabric. Nonetheless, many of these initiatives, though explicitly heralding a new era of multiculturalism and aimed at ensuring proper access to South Korean social infrastructure, have featured a heavy-handedness that attempts to convert incoming individuals into proper South Korean subjects, and has led to efforts to, if not erase, then at least subordinate pre-existing non-South Korean identities (Lim 2009; Watson 2010).

Media examples of such top-down responses have included shows like KBS' *Love in Asia*, which features the appearance of married couples in which one partner, almost invariably the wife, is foreign. Typically, the members of the couple discuss their lives and are filmed in their homes, and a trip is made back to visit the wife's family in her country of origin. Images repeated from show to show reinforce a narrow set of conceptions: that the husband hails from South Korea's lower socioeconomic strata; that the wife has come from an even poorer nation; that painful family separations are to be endured for the chance of a better life in wealthy South Korea, where the wife works diligently to accommodate herself to local mores; and that, for the most part, those in the family's immediate orbit respond with displays of the affectionate solicitude known in Korea as *jeong* to the new arrival. Though empathetic, such treatment has also been criticized for being patronizing or ignoring the diversity among immigrants to Korea (Jeong et al. 2011). The recurrent themes suggest an effort on the part of government-sponsored media to offer not only reassurance that the nation is being a welcoming host as its demography evolves but also reminders that further education remains necessary in the face of reports that newcomers encounter prejudice. One might readily argue that *Imangap*, whose production is openly supported by the Ministry of Unification, stems from a similar desire to almost will into being the acceptance and

assimilation of North Koreans.

The Chatter of (North Korean) Beauties

The attention accorded to *Now on My Way to Meet You* derives, then, in part from its intersection with current political and sociocultural trends. A crucial further factor, however, in the show's ability to garner an audience, especially locally, is its engagement with prevailing tastes in contemporary South Korean television. As a *yeneung* (variety entertainment) program, it draws on an omnipresent talk-show format, in which a group of several figures who are already, or are poised to become, familiar to viewers gather with a host or two and occasionally an additional panel to laugh, joke and discuss.¹⁰ In this regard, *Imangap* deliberately mimics KBS' *Minyeodeul-ui suda* (*Global Talk Show*, more literally "The Chatter of Beauties"), or *Misuda*, as it was commonly known, a popular program that aired between 2006 and 2010 and featured a group of young, female foreign residents discussing their lives in South Korea in Korean, with a presenter and a panel of local males who ensured a flirtatious subtext. Several of the women on the show appeared weekly, with some becoming regulars in domestic advertisements and on South Korean television's variety show circuit.

The influence of *Misuda* on *Imangap* is underscored not only in the prosody of their nicknames, but also in the fact that the two share the same primary host, Nam Hui-seok, and that a *Misuda* panelist, Bronwyn Mullen, acted initially as co-host on *Imangap*, although she was later dropped. The regular praise that the *talbukja* guests on *Imangap* receive as endearing beauties (*minyeo*) further reinforces this connection, as does the show's subtitle, *talbuk minyeodeul-ui hamkke-wa haneun isan gajok gamdong peurojekteu*, an exceedingly difficult phrase to translate idiomatically. (A literal rendering leads to the tongue-twisting "Separated family emotion project together

with Northern escapee beauties.”)¹¹ Both shows have frequent recourse to conversations about cultural difference, a fondness for quiz-like games to pique audience interest and elicit information about such difference, and a studio arrangement in which the presenters, female panelists and male panelists are seated separately around a central floor area for performance.



Figure 2: KBS’ Global Talk Show and its North Korea-focused imitator *Now on my Way to Meet You*.

The format of *Ije mannareo gamnida* thus operates within a tested formula of chat with attractive women who are intriguingly foreign but able to engage with South Korean society. Personalities emerge with whom viewers are encouraged to form an imagined affective bond through regular contact. Each show’s popular panelists refer upon occasion to their own Internet “cafés,” a specifically Korean type of social media site that allows interaction between celebrities and their fans. Like *Misuda*, *Imangap* reflects the growing prominence of young women within South Korea’s societal fabric and its media-saturated consumer capitalism that values youthful femininity as a commodity that can be converted into cultural content (Y. Kim 2011).

However, one should not go too far in pushing the parallels between *Misuda* and *Imangap*: the northern origins of the guests on the latter show inevitably lend it a serious undercurrent absent from its more resolutely upbeat forerunner, whose immigrant panelists arrived

in Korea under happier, entirely voluntary circumstances, and whose occasional travails in Korean society as foreigners are offset (or superseded) by special treatment accorded to celebrities in the making. While most commentators have noted the salient links between *Misuda* and *Imangap*, fewer have noted another source of genetic material for the latter show: KBS’ long-running *Geu sarami bogo sipda* (lit. “The Person I Miss”), which relied on riveting narratives of anguish from those seeking to locate loved ones from whom they had been separated and in the process opened remarkable windows of oral history onto South Korea’s recent past. The already cited subtitle of *Imangap*, with its explicit pointer to divided families and meetings after a long absence, suggests a clear connection to *Geu sarami bogo sipda*, which converted painful personal narratives into grist for the collective understanding of South Korea’s frequently traumatic development experience (cf. Tae and Hwang 2012).¹²

Geu sarami bogo sipda ran for several years, and as time passed the pool of those searching for family members with whom they had lost contact shrank: the show made its way through the backlog of people wanting to appear, and others presumably conducted their own successful searches as Korea became highly digitized. An increasing percentage of those who made their way on to the show were international adoptees, an evolution that encouraged a consciousness that the unhealed wounds of South Korea’s past were progressively being played out beyond its borders. Likewise, other programs that involved tearful tales of separation and reunion among Korea’s immigrant community, such as *Love in Asia*, *Sadon cheoem boepgesseumnida* (*Meet the In-Laws*) and the “Asia! Asia!” segment on *Neukkimpyo* (*Exclamation Point*), further fostered a sense that the nation had itself outgrown these problems, become more prosperous, and was now standing in a hierarchical relationship to less developed

neighbors, toward whom viewers could feel a mixture of sympathy in remembering South Korea’s own similar tales, and relief in an acknowledgment that the nation was moving on (Epstein 2009b).



Figure 3: Screenshot of “The Person I Miss” (*Geu sarami bogo sipda*) featuring an American adoptee seeking relatives in Korea

Joint Insecurity Area

In order now to flesh out observations sketched above, let us consider in detail characteristic segments of *Ije mannareo gamnida* that demonstrate the show’s strategies in representing North Korea and North Koreans to a South Korean national public. In tracing how the show moves from lighthearted opening to more serious finale, we have chosen to focus first on a close reading of Episode 45, broadcast in October 2012, not least because Channel-A has uploaded a number of segments of this particular show on YouTube and their availability will allow readers to assess our interpretations independently.¹³

The episode starts in a conversation with the so-called “S4,” the show’s quartet of featured Southern male panelists, and the news that one

of its regular members will soon be marrying a woman seven years his junior. This announcement leads to words of teasing congratulation from one of the North Korean female panelists and well illustrates the show’s favored opening tone of light banter that often features romance and matchmaking as a subtext.

This interchange continues with the introduction of actor Kim San-ho, a handsome new male panelist. For his debut on *Ije mannareo gamnida*, he performs “Sandy” from the musical *Grease*, eventually crossing the stage to serenade Shin Eun-ha, characterized on the show as one of its two most notable *minyeo*. The attention that Kim lavishes upon her provokes embarrassment, though not displeasure; editorialized subtitling reinforces the pseudo-romantic atmosphere (“the moment Eun-ha falls in love” reads one caption as Kim kneels by her side and sings).¹⁴ Embarrassment is an emotion that the show plays to, as do many Korean entertainment programs (and social occasions in which icebreaking is desired), in an attempt to create a sense of intimacy by breaking down barriers that arise from the stern maintenance of *chemyeon* (face). Here the ploy takes on additional piquancy from the way that it attempts to break down boundaries between North and South but also suggests that a shyness born of unfamiliarity and lifetimes of preconceptions impedes freer interaction. The insistent recourse to the *namnam bungnyeo* trope is difficult to ignore.

Remaining equally good-natured but shifting towards quasi-burlesque, the spotlight moves to panelist Jo Se-ho, a rotund comedian, who mimics the stretching exercises performed by children on North Korean television as they mobilize the DPRK in daily calisthenics. Shin Eun-ha and her sister Shin Eun-hui, also a

panelist on the show, join him. As they stretch, a caption declares, “From Daehongdan potato to rhythmic gymnastics challenge.” The allusion to Daehongdan County in Ryanggang Province would likely occasion a nod of ironic recognition from *talbukja* viewers to whom the site is well known for a visit from Kim Jong-il at the peak of the 1990s famine, during which Kim declared that potatoes are equal to rice, putting a cynically favorable spin on the desperate need to substitute potatoes for the nation’s preferred staple.¹⁵ Regular viewers of the program would also recognize the reference, as two earlier episodes, numbers 32 and 41, had made digs at the sophistry of regime rhetoric. The former, which came from North Korean television, displayed a young boy singing an ode, in typically studied North Korean style, to the marvels of the Daehongdan potato (“Daehongdan potatoes are so huge you can’t finish an entire one”), and, by extension, the pleasures of life under Kim Jong-il.¹⁶ The latter had Jo reprise the boy’s performance in a routine where he too sings about the remarkable tuber and provokes hearty laughter from all other participants on the show.¹⁷

Here in Episode 45, Jo tells us, in humorous self-deprecation, that he rehearsed until 4 a.m. the previous evening with the Shin sisters in order to be able to produce the well-choreographed routine that we are to witness. First, a clip is played of children performing the stretching exercises in a park outside Mangyongdae Schoolchildren’s Palace in Pyongyang, with a subtitle that informs the audience that Kim Jong-il instituted the exercise regimen in 1994. The program thus offers an opportunity for deeper understanding of North Korean society; however, delivery of this information is unlikely to register uppermost in viewers’ minds: Jo’s incongruous imitation of the children’s shorts and knee-high socks turns the sequence into an entertaining vignette that renders the North endearingly quaint. Furthermore, multiple cutaways to the

bare legs and lower body of Shin Eun-ha as they perform these calisthenics suggest that, above all, the show’s producers simply recognized an opportunity to draw attention to the participants’ attractiveness in a mildly titillating fashion.¹⁸

Such strategies exemplify how Episode 45 pursues the show’s stated goals of combating stereotypes and allowing empowering forms of self-expression, but in ambivalent form. Similar ambiguities arise in the following segment. The audience now meets Choe Geum-sil, a guest panelist who will later be featured in the episode’s *talbuk seuteori*. Choe is treated as a celebrity, in that she recently won a regional heat of a long-running amateur singing contest televised by KBS, “*Jeon-guk norae jarang*” (lit. “Nationwide Song Pride”). Given that *talbukja* make up only a small, if noteworthy, fraction of the total population, its successes usually summon the attention of both the South Korean and international media.¹⁹ A natural performer, Choe introduces herself in the brashly confident manner that is *de rigueur* for Korean TV competitions, albeit with the addition of Northern declamatory mannerisms, and then offers the audience a brief rendition of the song that gained her first prize.

The *yeneung* program format urges singing, dancing, and demonstrations of athleticism generally. *Imangap* appears to favor such vignettes more than most, however, not only because the North Korean education system attempts to instill these skills in its people, but because artistic display provides a relatively innocuous method for allowing difference to shine through, while nonetheless encouraging feelings of warmth.²⁰ Few episodes go by without multiple songs, the majority of which relate to either the glory of the Kim family and/or a tenet of North Korean socialist morality.²¹ In this case, the traditional Korean style of the song that Choe performs transcends the history of division in reflecting

the shared culture of North and South, but the revelation that Choe honed her vocal and oratorical prowess, of which she also gives a sample, as part of a propaganda troupe in a North Korean military unit has the opposite effect. The dissonance is further emphasized by a caption stating that the overall effect actually resembles watching a North Korean broadcast (“*jeongmal bukhan bangsong boneun neukkim*”). Drawing viewers closer and then pushing them away in this manner exposes dilemmas at the show’s core: elements expressing shared traits or heritage as Koreans are juxtaposed with those that highlight divergence.

The program then moves on to its regular segment of informative discussions of daily life in the North, still enlivened with a sprinkling of humorous vignettes. In this episode the audience is treated to discussion of the North Korean state food distribution system, and dialogue about items eaten in the North generates further cognitive dissonance. All the Northern women acknowledge an unwelcome familiarity with *kangnaenggibap*, a ubiquitous mix of corn and rice eaten as a rice substitute during hard times. Not one of the South Korean cast, by contrast, has previously tried it. The host, Nam Hui-seok, now parodies the presenter of another Channel-A TV show, *Meokgeori X-Pail* (“The Culinary X-Files”), as northern food items are trotted out for a taste test. Upon sampling the uninspiring blend, Nam states drolly, “It’s alright now, but after a year things would be a bit different.” The segment also carries a discussion of differences between Southern and Northern varieties of kimchi, but dialogue, and ability to offer insight, stalls at the absence of seasonings other than salt available to add flavor to the staple. Nam utters a simple declaration upon tasting the dish: “*Jjamnida*” (“It’s salty.”).

The show continues its discussion of the DPRK’s state distribution system with a focus

on the mundane products that people receive through it. Such discussion segues into reminders of impoverished and difficult lives. One of the most popular panelists, Kim Ara, relates a story about waking up once in her North Korean home with blood trickling on her face as a result of nocturnal visitations of mice. Ominous background music as she speaks builds mock-horror film suspense, while cutaway shots to the disgusted expressions of South Korean panelists underscore that the narrative is meant to be viscerally affecting and alien to contemporary South Korean middle class experience, while those born in the North react with nods of recognition. Despite an avowed desire to break down barriers, editorial intervention, then, points up Otherness.

At this point, the show makes a transition toward discussion of food shortages in more serious fashion and presents archival footage of the *Gonan ui haenggun* (“Arduous March”). Recapitulation of the famine is introduced with a caption that speaks of the Arduous March as “the period in which North Korea’s total distribution society collapsed.” Slowly, but insistently, the episode prepares for a heart-rending climax as production techniques work to engage sympathy. As video clips recall the disastrous floods and droughts of the era, dramatic strings, leaden drumbeats and special sonic effects build tension. Shots of starving children, disseminated worldwide since the 1990s, appear, as do South Korean newspaper headlines. Inset shots of the panelists’ expressions emphasize the similar response of those from both North and South; host Nam adds occasional narration. The message is clear: the famine, though having taken place in the North, should be regarded as a tragedy for the entire Korean *minjok* (“race” or “people”).



Figure 4: A segment on the Arduous March. The caption reads "People who were helpless to avoid starvation as the 100% state distribution system collapsed."

Although the emotional manipulations are palpable, they fall readily within local traditions of melodrama and are not merely expected but even perhaps desired; rather more troubling is a cavalier attitude towards documentary accuracy in the montage: the footage of one woman in the piece comes from the end of the 2000s,²² suggesting that the show's producers were more concerned with images of suffering in the DPRK than historical veracity. Hackneyed shots of goose-stepping soldiers are included as well, carrying with them the implicit subtext that the decisions of an uncaring regime to prioritize military needs extended the scale of disaster. As the montage ends, a caption "*nunsiuri bulgeojin talbuk minyeodeul*" ("the reddened eyes of refugee beauties") drives home the cruelty of visiting human-created catastrophe upon the innocent, who also happen to be—lest the viewer has forgotten— attractive young women, while the studio camera pans to shots of the *talbukja* panelists composing themselves as the film clips fade. The video returns to discussion of the Arduous March period through the memories of the panelists, and does not stint on

a continued backdrop of sentimental music to tug at viewer heartstrings. The show takes advantage of personal tales of food deprivation and malnutrition to render the suffering viscerally affecting; Jo hangs his head in dismay when he hears from a panelist that of the forty children in her school class, fully fifteen could not attend school because of hunger.

Now on Our Way to Meet Who?

The inherent contradictions in the core characteristics of *Imangap* become perhaps most evident when one examines the strategies used for the final minutes of each episode. For the most part, the culmination has been marked by a *talbuk seuteori* ("defection story"), and even though they are presented in manipulative fashion, it would require a heartless viewer indeed not to be moved by these powerful narratives. In a recent paper, however, Oh (2013: 319) brings together a focus group of *talbukja* to discuss their perceptions of how border-crossers are presented in South Korean media, and their discussion of *Imangap* in particular suggests that the show is a target for substantial criticism among the defector community precisely for how it portrays them as objects of pity. Many of Oh's interviewees feel that *Now on My Way to Meet You* willfully, if not maliciously, misrepresents them: "If [South Koreans] see that, they'll likely say that the women left North Korea because they couldn't live there, couldn't adapt [to the changes in North Korean society]" one interviewee comments. "It'd be good to go to Channel-A and ask them to stop the show. Too many lies," adds another. Indeed, dominant media representations of North Koreans in South Korea fail to acknowledge that a substantial percentage of border-crossers actively select both the time and place of their departure from North Korea, and that they do so to meet specific life goals, such as obtaining education in South Korea, and utilize the human capital they have available to access opportunity in

China and South Korea (Kim 2013).

Many recent episodes of *Imangap*, however, have taken a different approach to the final moments of the show and bring before the audience narratives of *talbuk seonggong* (“refugee success”) rather than the typically heart-rending tales that focus on the process of flight from North Korea itself. Regardless of whether the show’s producers have been consciously responding to criticism from South Korean academics and the media, *talbuk seonggong* narratives patently do return agency to defectors instead of painting them as downtrodden victims. In this section a regular panelist, or, more frequently, a third party, explains what she (or even, occasionally, he) has achieved since arriving in South Korea, and how. For example, Episode 41 introduces a woman who owns and operates a Korean restaurant with a menu of 160 dishes, and Episode 46 presents another who, driven by the desire to provide her young daughter with a better life, worked night and day to build up a micro-empire of convenience stores.²³

To conclude our analysis of the show, let us juxtapose these divergent concluding strategies, one in which defection is marked by desperation, suffering and a lack of the exercise of free will, and the other in which it encompasses successful transition to neoliberal subjectivity and acquisition of economic benefits in South Korea. The lurching between the two poles highlights the broader uncertainties that underpin *Imangap*.

The *talbuk seuteori* of Lee Sun-sil in Episode 28 is anomalous for a variety of reasons.²⁴ Lee is older (and considerably heavier) than the typical *minyeo* panelist; importantly, too, she hails from Pyongyang. Refugees rarely come from the North Korean capital, and those that do find themselves viewed with suspicion within their community, facing assumptions that that they must have done something wrong

that made them feel a need to escape the showpiece capital (Green and Park 2012).

The incongruity in Lee’s defection story is highlighted by the opening question from one host, who asks why she chose to defect given that she had been living a comparatively comfortable life, doing work for the Korean People’s Army that was not onerous, and was blessed with good *chulsin seongbun*, the system through which the perceived loyalty of a North Korean citizen to the regime is classified. Lee answers that the money she earned from her daily work with the military had become insufficient to buy even a kilo of rice on the open market. Furthermore, she suffered from domestic violence at the hands of her husband. As a result of the growing divergence between market prices and her income, Lee and her younger sibling were driven slowly into poverty and, ultimately, forced to embark on a beggar’s life (*kkotjebi saenghwal*). Upon mention of how Lee turned to begging for survival, the show’s producers raise the level of emotional intensity, bringing in piano accompaniment as she comments that everybody in North Korea, from children to the elderly, will have experienced *kkotjebi saenghwal* at some point in their life. An on-screen caption, “*eorinaibuteo noinkkaji haruachime kkotjebiga doeneun sinse*” (“hard life where anyone from young to old can become a beggar in an instant”), reinforces the hyperbolic point.

The high emotional tenor of the narrative, which is packed with tragic events, continues as Lee reveals how she had to give birth on the street near a train station in a Ryanggang Province border city. Moreover, she claims to have been forcibly repatriated no fewer than nine times, a point highlighted in the titling of this segment, “Lee Sun-sil, Nine Times Repatriated” (“*ahop beon bukseong doen isunsil*”). On each occasion, she notes, she faced torture at the hands of the DPRK’s security apparatus and speaks of the beatings

she received in detail, noting how her child wept as it was forced to watch these wrenching scenes. Menacing sound effects are added, and periodic cutaways engage empathy for the pathos of her narrative: the horror of the hosts, the pensive, downcast expression of her South Korean husband in the audience, and abundant tears and the shock on the faces of her fellow panelists all suggest that her story is unusually distressing, even for those who have fled North Korea.

Lee explains how she was eventually able to cross into China for good. Sharp intakes of breath from others in the studio audience, however, elevated in the mix, greet the news that she immediately fell victim to human traffickers, and was deceived into selling her child for a trivial sum. The narrative then moves to South Korea, whereupon Lee attempts to convey the ongoing nightmare that her life has become as a result of her experience of defection, repatriation, torture and the loss of her child in China. She states that her pains are not hers alone, claiming that 80% of defectors also live with similar psychological hardship.

Lee's account climaxes, as do other examples of *talbuk seuteori*, with the display of a "gift" for an absent loved one. Regardless of whether the women choose the items on their own or are guided to an appropriate concept by the show's producers, the embodiment of longing for missing family members in a physical object inevitably provokes moments of high emotion, and when Lee displays the intended gift of a mother and child teddy bear pair, there is scarcely a dry eye to be seen in anyone present in the studio. The display of the gift also cements a narrative moral framework.²⁵ In Lee's case, the point is that mothers belong with their children come what may, but division has rendered this natural state of affairs impossible. At this point Lee turns away from the host and directly to the camera and apostrophizes her absent daughter,

underscored by subtitles that follow her words and make an explicit connection between her incompleteness and that of the nation: "I miss you. I want to see you wherever you are. Like the heart of your mother who longs for unification to happen soon, please wait for unification and your mother. I love you." In this respect, *talbuk seuteori* share similarities with the narratives in *Geu sarami bogo sipda*, each of which can be read at the level of national allegory. At a more personal level, however, narratives in *Geu sarami bogo sipda* are characterized by more ambiguous and abstract senses of separation, in that many people are trying to reconstruct dim memories of how they came to be separated from other family members. In *Imangap* separation is recent and sharp, the grief often searingly fresh.



Figure 5: Presentation of a gift to an absent loved one. The caption reads "A box of rice cakes filled with yearning for a daughter."

The presentation of *talbuk seonggong* narratives also follows a regular pattern; however, the formula differs markedly from that of the defection stories. Rather than sitting in a panelist's chair, the protagonist of the success story stands at a lectern, which is placed apart on the stage, as in a formal talk or a university classroom. Cameras are also positioned differently: for the success story, the

main angle is from below and enhances the speaker's authority, whereas in coming from above in the tale of defection and looking down upon the speaker, camera angles intimate powerlessness. *Talbuk seonggong* stories rarely speak of the time spent in North Korea, whereas a *talbuk seuteori* is about little else. Instead of a gift for a missing loved one, those who deliver *talbuk seonggong* narratives, if they display an object at all, show one that represents their *bigyeol* ("secret to success"). For example, one successful woman reveals that she has hundreds of bank accounts, the better to build her savings, and presents her many bankbooks as evidence.

The tale of Kim Su-jin in Episode 46 offers a representative example of *talbuk seonggong*. Kim explains her desire to appear on the show as she begins to speak: her goal is to convey a sense of resilience and empowerment to her fellow refugees from the North, giving them evidence that even ordinary people like herself can succeed if they try ("*hamyeon doelsu itda*"). Nonetheless, she says nothing about her former life in North Korea or her defection process. Rather, she focuses solely on her arrival in South Korea with very little, and her subsequent step-by-step building of a profitable convenience store business. She relates how after she left Hanawon, the state-run resettlement training center for North Korean defectors, she received a government-allotted apartment from the South Korean government, as do other refugees, and then worked at her first job as a gas station attendant for three months. During this period she claims that both she and her young daughter felt content. However, a problem arose in that whenever her child visited a friend's home, she would return to ask why her home only had a couple of rooms and her family didn't own a car. Perturbed that this state of affairs suggested that she was not fulfilling her duties as a mother properly, Kim soon persuaded the owner of a small convenience store to let her manage the establishment, and has since gone

on to operate a string of similar stores.

Although one may quarrel with the message that status and wealth, as measured by large apartments and private cars, mark out the boundaries of "success" in South Korea, this partial rechanneling of the show's energies has led it to broadcast interpretations of resettlement in South Korea that highlight personal triumph rather than trauma. The shift represents a rejoinder to many of the critiques cited earlier in Oh (2013). These new elements in the show are now presenting a vision of how the integration of that community into South Korean society might be achieved.

Conclusion

Imangap has yet to escape controversy. Given heavy-handed government media initiatives promoting a limited vision of immigrant integration and South Korean multiculturalism, active Ministry of Unification support for the production of *Imangap* and other shows concerning North Korea hardly inspires confidence that a balanced portrayal of North Korean people, including those who have made their way across the border, will result. Moreover, in South Korea's polarized political and media climate, shows about North Korea-related topics unavoidably risk distrust. *Imangap* is broadcast under the auspices of the staunchly conservative *Dong-A* media conglomerate, and criticism of the show has been launched by *Hankyoreh*, the standard-bearer of the left, for converting North Korean reality into entertainment (Choe 2012). Certainly, the daily *Dong-A Ilbo*, and its ideological brethren, the *Chosun Ilbo* and *Joongang Ilbo*, are drawn to material about *talbukja*: tales about refugees suggest not merely compassion for a struggling minority, but awareness that details of cruelty and hardship in North Korea buttress a historical anti-communism. The ongoing repetition of these details has experienced a noteworthy recrudescence in such everyday practices as

television consumption since the demise of the Sunshine Policy. This phenomenon reminds us of the functioning of banal examples of collective identity formation (Billig 1995) in South Korea that rely upon North Korea as an Other against which visions of the nation can take shape, even as its demographics evolve.

Our analysis of segments from the show partially reinforces concerns about a lack of balance in representation: *Imangap* plays up the *namnam bungnyeo* trope, depicts North Korea alternately as a quaint backwater and a ruthless dictatorship, and seeks to arouse sympathy for the people of North Korea even at the expense of accuracy. For these reasons, among others, some *talbukja*, including a former panelist interviewed by one of the co-authors, feel that the show ought to leave the 1990s and early 2000s in particular where they are: times of great hardship in North Korea, but bearing little relation to what occurs today. The informant avoids appearing on the show now, citing concerns over the image of defectors and the defection process that it fosters. And yet, as the juxtaposition of *talbuk seuteori* and *talbuk seonggong* suggests, it is equally possible for *Imangap* to give more balanced, nuanced and non-judgmental portrayals of North Koreans. The show has proven that it does not inherently require that defectors be portrayed as downtrodden victims, the better to emphasize the evils of the North Korean government.

In short, *Imangap* evinces palpably schizophrenic attitudes. On one hand, it clearly wishes to highlight a *dongjilseong* (homogeneity) of the peoples of the two Koreas. In contrast to *Misuda*, its presentation of its panelists as intriguingly exotic objects of desire can also draw on imaginations (and displays) of linguistic, cultural and genetic commonality to foster closeness. In similar fashion, the show tries to offer a special place for North Korean border-crossers in the face of South Korea's newfound multiculturalism and to suggest that

the common heritage of the past may allow for a common future should reunification eventuate. Like such programs as *Love in Asia*, then, *Now on My Way to Meet You* contributes to developing a discourse of diversity that both acknowledges and supports changes in the fabric of South Korean society during the second decade of the 21st century. An essential difference, however, lies in the ability of *Imangap* to call upon sites of shared cultural memory as glue for binding North Korean migrants more tightly to the host community. In this sense, the show's exposition suggests a belief that tales of trauma can push the nation toward catharsis in the spirit of *Geu sarami bogo sipda*.

Nonetheless, by insistently returning to points of enormous difference in order to make the women's stories attention-getting and render the show compelling, *Imangap* reminds its viewers that a genuine appreciation of the experience of *talbukja* will remain beyond their grasp. This strategy intersects with the *namnam bungnyeo* trope to, quite literally, engender a hierarchical Othering (*tajahwa*) that emphasizes the yawning gap that remains between North and South and encode it as a difference between a strong masculine nation seeking to play the role of protector and its weak feminine counterpart. The two overarching approaches are scarcely compatible.

This schizophrenia is not merely a product of media manipulation, although such manipulation is a concern. Rather, it points to deeper societal quandaries. In the last 15 years, South Korea experienced a decade of the Sunshine Policy, under which previously unimaginable depictions of North Korea and North Koreans emerged. More recently, the country lived out five years of rigidly conservative government, with the prospect of five more under the current administration. This latter era has seen a return to suspicion of North Korean motivations at the highest levels

of South Korean government, and with just cause; Pyongyang has frittered away much of the lingering sympathy it retained in South Korean society through repeated provocations. Recent spy films including 2012's *Gancheop (The Spy)* and 2013's record-breaking *Eunmilhage, Widaehage (Secretly, Greatly)* suggest that although the national imaginary continues to wish for the possibility of identification with Northerners as individuals, consciousness of the North as threat has made a significant return.

Ultimately, fluctuations in media images of North Koreans have not brought South Korea closer to coming to terms with its internal social divisions, much less the division with its northern neighbor. The inability of *Imangap* to convey a unitary approach toward North Korea is a reflection of not just contestation but confusion and ambivalence in South Korean society. The Sunshine Policy may have opened up new vistas for screen representations of North Koreans in South Korea, but it did not answer a more serious question: in the twenty-first century, following several decades of historical divergence and with distance increasing year by year, does South Korea as a whole truly desire reunification with its troubled neighbor, or would it rather relegate it to the status of another country altogether?

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Notes

¹ A version of this article was presented at the 'Years of Radical Change' conference held at the University of London's School of Oriental

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² In this article we use *talkbukja* in preference to *saeteomin* (“new settlers”) for the sake of consistency rather than to make a political statement about terminology that is often fraught. Although *talbukja* is no longer the officially sanctioned designation, it is the term most frequently used in everyday discourse. Conversely, for the sake of variation in English and to suit context, we have been less strict in switching between “refugee”, “border-crosser” and “defector.”

³As producer Lee Jin-min stated in a June 2012 interview with the Los Angeles Times, “The defectors say that they feel anonymous, like a seed of grain dropped from the sky in a foreign place when they first arrive in South Korea. Hearing the stories from such people makes it more personal and can call attention to the fact that war and separation is an ongoing issue” (Choi 2012).

⁴ See further the Ministry of Unification’s [website](#).

⁵ The Ministry of Unification’s acknowledgement of Channel-A’s work in highlighting defector issues and its intention to support that work underscores the close relations between the show and the South Korean authorities. See “[Tongilbu, tongil-nambukgwangye gwannyeon eollonindeul-ege gamsa-ui maeumeul jeonhada](#)” [Ministry of Unification conveys thanks to media figures involved with unification and inter-Korean issues], Ministry of Unification press release, November 14, 2012.

⁶ Controversy over the broadcasting standards

that Channel-A and TV Chosun apply in reporting on North Korea arose again in May 2013, when both networks gave extended airtime to the claim that North Korean commandos had entered Gwangju in 1980 to incite the 5.18 democratization protests by, among other things, shooting local civilians. South Korea’s Communication Standards Commission forced both to apologize for inaccurate reporting (Lee 2013). For more, see Green and Denney (forthcoming).

⁷ “[Round-table Talks Held with Inhabitants of DPRK upon Their Return Home from South](#),” Rodong Sinmun (online), May 20, 2013.

⁸ Defection broker Kim Yong-hwa corroborated the defection story on September 15, 2013. However, only a Dong-A Ilbo story on the subject has thus far included mention of *Imangap*; it has not been independently confirmed. For the original story, see “[Buk bowigigwan gowijik ttal talbukhu hangukhaeng](#)” [Daughter of high-level DPRK security agency official South Korea-bound after defection], Dong-A Ilbo, September 16, 2013.

⁹ “[Jeryu oegugin 150-man myeong cheot dolpa...damunhwa-dainjonghwa gasok](#)” [Resident foreigner numbers break through 1.5 million for first time... multicultural and multiethnic society accelerates], Yonhap News (online), June 10, 2013.

¹¹ Indeed, Channel-A itself has referred to the show explicitly as “*talbuk-ui minyeodeul-ui suda*.” See 0:51 of [this video](#), which excerpts the network’s program *Jamgeum Haejae 2020 (Unlock 2020)*.

¹² *Imangap* has recently added segments in which North Korean non-panelist guests appear on the show and seek help in searching for family members they have been separated from in the process of coming to South Korea, thus rendering the connection to *Geu sarami bogo sipda* much more explicit.

¹³ Virtually every episode supports our arguments equally well, but access for most requires a subscription to Channel-A. We have created a YouTube playlist for Episode 45 as well as other segments discussed in this article, which is available [here](#). The clips, it should be noted, are not subtitled.

¹⁴ Shin’s “fan café,” which is shared with her sister Shin Eun-hui, can be found [here](#).

¹⁵ See Kim, So-yeol, “[Potatoes at the End of the Earth](#),” *Daily NK* (online). April 9, 2012.

¹⁶ See [here](#)

¹⁷ See [here](#).

¹⁸ See [here](#).

¹⁹ See, e.g., “[Seoul’s Defector Girl Boxer Stars in Rare Triumph for Refugees](#),” an article published by Bloomberg in June 2013 that mirrors the usual treatment of refugee success; domestic South Korean media offer a similar approach.

²⁰ Episode 34, e.g., focuses on sports, as the title *Bukhan eun seupocheu ui modeun geot* (“All about North Korean Sports”) conveys. See [here](#).

²¹ These performances also usually involve impressive demonstrations of musical talent on the part of the *talbukja* participants. [Episode 33](#),

for example, includes an excellent accordion rendition of *Yeoseongeun kko-chirane* (“Women Are Flowers”), an alleged favorite of Kim Jong-un, while in [Episode 54](#) one of the regular panelists offers a note-perfect version of *Gaseumui pumeun sarang* (“Heart Full of Love”), the theme song to the 2003 South Korean movie *Seontaek* (*The Road Taken*).

²² Kang, Won-cheol, “[Destitute TV Girl Finally Died of Starvation](#),” *Daily NK* (online), December 9, 2012.

²³ For this latter clip, see [here](#). Instances can be considerably multiplied: Episode 47 introduces a mathematics teacher who, increasingly unable to tolerate the non-meritocratic nature of North Korea society, escaped and went on to establish an ‘alternative school’ in the South for refugee children. Dr. Lee Ae-ran relates in Episode 50 how she became the first female North Korean refugee to obtain a doctorate from a South Korean university, while in Episode 54 Kim Yu-seong, father of Kim Jang-ok, one of the regular participants, explains his successful mushroom export business.

²⁴ Lee Sun-sil’s defection story is available [here](#).

²⁵ Rather differently, the rice cake gift that accompanies the *talbuk seuteori* of Choi Geum-sil in Episode 45, conveys the message that South Korea is a land of capitalist milk and honey, where such items can be had for as little as 1,000 won, although in North Korea such things are often unobtainable.