

Crash Landing on You and North Korea: Representation and Reception in the Age of K-Drama

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Abstract



Crash Landing on You (Sarang-ui bulsichak), a 16-episode drama on South Korean cable channel tvN in 2019-20 that was also released on Netflix, has drawn broad attention for its storyline featuring a South Korean heiress stranded in North Korea who falls in love with an elite military officer. Though the show invokes many formulae of South Korean dramas, it also offers a detailed portrait of North Korea, and, as such, is a crucial text for evaluating ongoing change in South Korean popular representations of its neighbour. Indeed, given the concerted use of North Korean backdrops in Crash Landing on You and the size and global extent of its audiences, the show is likely the most noteworthy South Korean popular culture representation of North Korea yet produced. In this article, we first consider the drama and its depictions of North Korea and then discuss groupings of Korean and international responses to the show. In doing so, we extend our work on the confluence of South Korean pop culture representations of North Korea with developments in information and communication technologies and the

surrounding media environment. We also add to a growing body of scholarship that situates South Korean dramas within broader social and political contexts.

Keywords: Crash Landing on You; K-drama; Hallyu; South Korean popular culture; North Korean defectors; talbukja; Hyun Bin; Son Ye-jin

Crash Landing on You (Sarang-ui bulsichak), a 16-episode drama on South Korean cable channel tvN featuring top stars Hyun Bin and Son Ye-jin, has drawn broad attention for its unusual storyline: a South Korean chaebol heiress, stranded in North Korea after a paragliding mishap, falls in love with a Korean People’s Army officer from an elite Pyongyang family. The first episode aired on 14 December 2019, and the show wrapped up on 16 February 2020. Over the course of its tvN broadcast, viewership rose week by week and the show’s finale achieved almost a 22% audience share in South Korea, the second highest ever for a cable drama to that date.¹ Equally notably, the near immediate subtitled Netflix release of each episode in multiple jurisdictions proved a clear success with overseas viewers. Interest grew further as the drama attracted new audiences amidst pandemic lockdowns around the world, with articles about the show then appearing in such prominent outlets as The Washington Post (Kim and Denyer 2020), Al-Jazeera (Kasulis 2020), The Guardian (Walker 2020) and NBC News

(Suliman and Kim 2020).

Although *Crash Landing on You* invokes many formulae of South Korean dramas in its tale of a star-crossed love, it blazed new ground with individuated Northern characters and diverse North Korean settings that conveyed authentic details of daily life above the 38th parallel. Attempts to create verisimilitude in depicting the North (albeit amidst the less-than-realistic conventions of romantic comedy) thus make the show a crucial text for evaluating ongoing change in South Korean popular representations of its neighbour. The drama provides some of the strongest evidence to date that media developments of the last decade are affecting the South Korean public's understandings of North Korea and that the rise of variety and reality shows featuring resettled North Koreans living in the South, together with self-broadcast from this community of *talbukja* (lit. "those who have left the north")² via platforms like Afreeca.tv and YouTube, are encouraging ever more realistic and detailed pictures of the country's people and its social and economic structures. Indeed, given the concerted use of North Korean backdrops in *Crash Landing on You* and the size and global extent of its audiences, the show can readily be considered the single most noteworthy South Korean popular culture representation of life within North Korea ever produced.

Perhaps naturally, however, in handling such a polarising subject as North Korea, *Crash Landing on You* (henceforth *Crash Landing*, in preference to CLOY, its usual but unfortunate acronym) has also provoked divergent responses among its various audiences. As we discuss below, although a broad swath of the South Korean populace is seemingly content to view North Korea in nuanced hues, others reject depictions of its neighbour that deviate from black-and-white portraits. Moreover, reactions to the show from not only native-born South Korean viewers but also *talbukja* and

those outside Korea point to the ever-expanding realms of reception and dialogue in which South Korean dramas find themselves embedded. *Crash Landing* therefore is playing (or at least has the potential to play) an important role in the non-linear process of transforming North Korea in both the domestic and global imagination from a rogue state ruled by crazed despots to yet another country with its own particular histories, strengths and weaknesses.

Accordingly, we first briefly consider the show itself, focusing on aspects of how a drama produced amidst the sociocultural and geopolitical frameworks of the 2018-2019 period portrays North Korea and a North Korean protagonist, as well as the attitude the show evinces towards North Korean society more generally. We then discuss distinct groupings of responses to the show: media articles and statements from conservative South Koreans; *talbukja* commentary on YouTube; and international reactions from the press and fans engaging in online fora. In doing so, we extend our work on the confluence of South Korean pop culture representations of North Korea with developments in information and communication technologies and the surrounding media environment (Epstein and Green 2013; Epstein and Green 2019), and add to a growing body of scholarship that situates South Korean dramas within broader social and political contexts (e.g. Elfving-Hwang 2017; Flamm 2018; Yi 2018).

Mixing Pop and Politics

Television rom-com dramas may not seem an obvious site of international relations, but consumption of popular culture has come to play a key role in shaping interactions between countries in East Asia in recent years as transnational media flows surge, including between North and South Korea (Kim 2019). As widely reported, *Hallyu*, the spread of South

Korean popular culture, is acting as a pull factor in encouraging migration from the North (Lee 2019). Meanwhile, South Korea's popular narratives about North Korea, far from unified, embody the country's many aspirations, desires, and fears concerning its neighbour and impinge upon domestic mass sentiment. The images found in broadly consumed cultural texts such as *Crash Landing* therefore refract and generate ongoing changes in inter-Korean relations, even if their effects are elusive, unpredictable and occasionally contradictory.

In also breaking ground with its portrayals of North Korea at an international level, *Crash Landing* deserves notice for its role in a savvy, globally aware cultural industry that increasingly takes as much heed of audiences beyond its borders as it does of domestic viewers. In this sense *Crash Landing* goes beyond a South Korean drama addressing a locally relevant theme, and functions very much as a "K-drama," that is, a Hallyu product intended to generate revenue overseas while enhancing the prestige of the South Korean nation, but one that does so through the unusual and compelling medium of featuring a local take on North Korea. Over the last decade various South Korean dramas such as *Iris* (2009), *Athena: God of War* (2010), *Spy Myong Wol* (2011) and *The King 2 Hearts* (2012) have featured North Korean characters, but none have had similar reach or treated the country itself in anything like the same detail as *Crash Landing*. And although the show's use of North Korea as a backdrop in *Crash Landing* can also be situated within South Korean drama's employment of "exotic" locales to engage viewer interest,³ the North's special status vis-à-vis the South endows *Crash Landing*'s settings with unusually resonant meanings. As we argue below, however, as South Korea's cultural industries contribute more and more to the nation's drive for soft power, they also interact, and skirmish at times, with the fractious and contested domestic politics of South Korea and the unstable, high-stakes

geopolitical environment in which the Korean peninsula is embedded.

Crash Landing was planned, shot and eventually broadcast during an especially noteworthy period in inter-Korean relations, one particular to the volatile climate of the Moon Jae-in administration's diplomatic dance with Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un. Moon had assumed the presidency in mid-2017 amidst sharply heightened US-DPRK tensions, which even provoked fears that war might break out. By year's end, however, North Korea was telegraphing a move to dialogue, with the US as the ultimate target. Seizing the opportunity offered by Pyongyang's willingness to use engagement with Seoul to shift gears with Washington, the South held secretive talks with the North that November. The Pyeongchang Winter Olympics of February 2018 provided a stage for the public performance of inter-Korean friendship, and the presence of combined teams in a handful of sports, as well as a cheering squad of North Korean women, and visits of groups of Northern musicians to South Korea helped lead to a thawing of the frosty diplomatic climate. In April, Moon and Kim held a summit at the truce village of Panmunjeom that riveted the world, and at a second surprise meeting there the following month, Moon appeared to help Kim rescue his endangered June summit with Trump. Reinvigorated inter-Korean relations continued through the summer, and grand plans for heightened co-operation made frequent headlines. Kim and Moon met again for a third summit in Pyongyang at the end of September.

Many observers, perhaps naively, felt that Moon's commitment to reviving a version of the Sunshine Policy of his liberal predecessors Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun was bearing fruit, and development of *Crash Landing* appears to have begun in earnest in 2018 amidst an atmosphere of highly favourable public opinion about the government's approach towards the

North (Kim, Kang and Ko 2019; Shin and Moon 2019: 39; BBC 2020). The almost unprecedented South Korean optimism about relations with its neighbour (and an administration keen to foster that optimism) played a role in encouraging a drama with North Korean settings and an attitude of sympathy towards many of its Northern characters. Unfortunately, this propitious climate did not last, and in 2019 South Korea's relationship with North Korea experienced a major downturn; the more usual state of tension had returned before the show received an opportunity to crash land on anyone's screen.⁴ The show's representations and its variegated receptions need to be understood, then, in the context of these cycles of anxiety followed by relief and raised hopes for improved relations that are subsequently dashed.

North Korea in a K-Drama Lens

Although *Crash Landing* is striking for its strenuous efforts to populate North Korea with clearly distinguished, genuine-seeming and even compelling characters, it inevitably does so not merely from a Southern perspective, but from one situated within a mass entertainment industry. The evocative opening sequence that provides viewers' initial encounter with the drama's world repays analysis for its divisions of North and South that invoke contrasts of socialism and capitalism, simplicity and sophistication, militarism and consumption.

The first frames present two hands reaching across to the centre of the screen to pull back curtains that reveal, in parallel, views outside a window: a humble cluster of village homes on one side, and a row of sleek high-rises on the other. The camera cuts to a traditional Korean dwelling, and then swiftly rises above its roof, transferring the setting to a panorama of Seoul with bridges, the Han River and densely

grouped high-rise apartments. The following 20 seconds rely largely on a split-screen technique to introduce us to the respective Southern and Northern protagonists, Yun Se-ri and Ri Jeong-hyeok, presenting stark distinctions between them that touch on such primary areas of cultural expression as food, clothing, shelter, and transportation.⁵

Nevertheless, although aspects of their nurture speak to difference, the juxtapositions also hint at the two as matched in diligence, determination, attentiveness to grooming, and possessing a solitary nature that will soon bring them together in a deep bond. Indeed, when the pair first relate their full names to each other, a deep irony presents itself: she is a Haeju Yun, a clan originally from the northern seaside town of Haeju, and he is a Jeonju Ri by lineage, with roots in the southern agricultural city Jeonju. The exchange conveys both interchangeability and the arbitrariness of fate. Likewise, perhaps the most striking segment of the opening occurs as the two, in their usual attire, walk in their respective home turfs toward the centre of the screen, now split into three, pass each other in an undetermined foreign location (Zurich, to be precise), and then re-emerge, with Se-ri in North Korea transformed by simpler clothing into a local resident, and Jeong-hyeok now in the South, a dapper local. The ease of the transformation not only foreshadows the ability of each to adapt in the other's country but also highlights destiny's mysterious workings.

Like many Korean dramas, *Crash Landing* takes knowing pleasure in its own fable-like qualities and campier aspects. As we soon learn upon the unfolding of the narrative, Se-ri is a chaebol heiress who has independently built a burgeoning fashion empire. Shortly before she is set to take over stewardship of the family conglomerate (much against the wishes of her half-brothers and their wives), she goes paragliding but is caught in a whirlwind, à la Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* and blown to a

land beyond—the North Korean side of the Demilitarised Zone. The drama pays whimsical homage to this cinematic link by depicting a bicycle and livestock (as well as a distinctively North Korean tractor) swept up with Se-ri in the CGI sequence of the storm. After Se-ri crash lands, she falls from the tree in which she and her paragliding gear have become entangled into the arms of Jeong-hyeok, and their first encounter, which blends playful humour and a sense of tension, suggesting the chemistry between them. Jeong-hyeok protects rather than reports her, and over time their relationship blossoms into love despite the extraordinary obstacles the pair faces that help constitute the drama’s plot.

Jeong-hyeok, as we discover, is the son of the head of the General Political Department of the Korean People’s Army (*chongjeongchigukjang*), an extremely powerful position in the North Korean hierarchy.⁶ He is also a gifted pianist and had studied in Basel, Switzerland (a resonant location, given that Kim Jong Un himself studied in the capital, Bern) and had once looked forward to a bright career in music. It rapidly becomes clear, however, that Ri’s family is embroiled in the potentially lethal competition of elite North Korean politics. Upon the assassination of his older brother, Jeong-hyeok abandons his musical ambitions, returning to North Korea to take up a military position similar to the one his deceased sibling held.

The idealised portrayal of Jeong-hyeok merges high social status in the North with typically desirable traits of masculinity in recent South Korean dramas, which grow evident over several episodes: unusually fine looks, attention to appearance, compassion, intelligence, reserved demeanour but emotional sensitivity, and devotion to one true love. This depiction draws on and recapitulates a striking fad that emerged in several films of the early 2010s in which North Korean spies became

sympathetically portrayed as “handsome, daring, patriotic and multilingual elite fighters who dodge bullets while remaining loyal to their women and families” (Jung 2013). More fully over the last decade, the South Korean popular imagination has seen a noteworthy move from the longstanding trope of *namnam bungnyeo* (“Southern Man, Northern Woman”), which focuses on imagining matches between a good-looking man from South Korea and an attractive Northern female counterpart, to a tendency to treat North Korean men themselves as compelling, in a trend we might instead term *bungnam minam* (“Northern Man, Handsome Man”). The trend, however, draws on a paradox: North Korean fictional males become appealing not only because they are depicted as maintaining a dashing ideal masculinity, but because they are actualised by performance and embodiment from favoured Southern celebrities. To be sure, much of the buzz that accompanied *Crash Landing* arose from the casting of Hyun Bin, who had starred in not only *My Lovely Sam-soon*, *Secret Garden* and *Memories of the Alhambra*, three of South Korea’s most successful dramas, but also 2017’s *Confidential Assignment* (*Gongjo*) as the North Korean head of an investigative team.

The approach to North Korea in *Crash Landing* engages a heteronormative female gaze in awakening romantic longings towards Jeong-hyeok. The high status of both Se-ri and Jeong-hyeok within their societies make them equals of a sort, but alliance of viewers with the perspective of a South Korean self involves a shift from common past representations of a masculine Southern protagonist taking the lead with a feminine Other towards its converse. This shift responds to both changing gender roles in South Korean society and recognition of domestic and global consumption patterns for drama: recent texts suggest that educated, professional young women (like Se-ri) are seeking (and increasingly finding) more empowering and gratifying narrative identifications.⁷ In this sense, *Crash*

Landing also fits comfortably with recent representations of talbukja males visible in a spectrum of cable television entertainment shows and educational broadcasts in which they are treated as having an appealing masculinity that recalls more traditional Korean qualities, but eschews authoritarian behaviour (Epstein and Green 2019).⁸

As a device to gain viewer attention, then, the portrayal of Jeong-hyeok specifically, and North Koreans and North Korea more generally in *Crash Landing*, tries to accomplish a variety of tasks simultaneously, which do not always neatly come together: the show strives for a romanticised and vaguely exotic hero as an object of fantasy, but then seeks to render the country as a concrete and realistic backdrop and humanise its populace, all whilst accentuating North Korea's idiosyncratic aspects for dramatic effect. In its first half, *Crash Landing* takes Se-ri as a lone female and places her, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, with a set of lovable, if less commanding, male companions in the form of Ri's platoon of soldiers, who attempt to return her home and protect her against powerful evil forces in a foreign land. In doing so, the show offers a potent set of quasi-mythical elements.

Simultaneously, however, Se-ri's shock at suddenly becoming a stranger in a strange land at the end of Episode 1 elicits frightening and viscerally powerful features that point to political realities: the absence of electricity in the dark village that Se-ri finds herself in marks it as backward, as does a man leading an ox who passes her with a blank, arguably fearful, expression. The calisthenics that the villagers engage in shortly thereafter may strike some as a welcome collective gathering; others, who identify with Se-ri as an onlooker here, may find them regimented and unnerving. Likewise, the children who set off for school in lockstep while singing a pro-regime song, evoke a palpable atmosphere of totalitarianism. Se-ri is not in Kansas—or Gangnam—any more.

“It’s Grim Up North”?

But *Crash Landing* seeks to be relatively even-handed in its portrayals, and, as such, Se-ri's initial shock at the society in which she has crash landed soon yields to curiosity. A scene from Episode 2 typifies how the show attempts to bring North Korea to life for its urban Southern audiences and make the country compelling (a tactic that also led to controversy, as we discuss below).

Together with Se-ri, nominally cosmopolitan but ignorant of Korean traditions, viewers see meat kept in a salt crock so that it won't spoil and are then led to a dug-out kimchi cellar, with which Se-ri is unfamiliar. She does not even recognise the term for it, gimchium. When Corporal Kim Ju-meok of Ri's troop unit expresses surprise that she doesn't know it, Se-ri exclaims that of course she does not (moreuji!); a subtitled gloss makes clear the expectation that South Korea's domestic audience will be similarly unaware. Se-ri reacts with delight as Ju-meok explains that the cellar not only prevents the food from going bad, but allows it to ferment in especially tasty fashion. She perceives the traditional method as “organic” and “hip,” and her use of the two English words leaves her interlocutor looking puzzled. North Korean underdevelopment here is refashioned into trendiness in an era of slow food and entreaties to return to sustainability and simplicity.

Likewise, as Ri roasts meat over a charcoal briquette, Geum Eun-dong, the sweetly innocent youngest member of his corps, marvels because he has never seen a briquette before, having only used fallen twigs and weeds for fuel in his village. Ri offers a bit of compassionate modernising discourse, promising that Eun-dong's village will soon have briquettes as well, not unlike South Korean films of the late 1960s such as *School*

Excursion (Suhak yeohaeng), in which urban residents encourage belief in the spread of development nationally.⁹ Se-ri, sophisticate that she is, can scarcely believe what she hears; her smirk, as she muses how advanced a gas burner would seem, provokes an exasperated sigh from Ri. However, the tables are soon turned, and it is Se-ri's turn to marvel when she discovers the deliciousness of "clam bulgogi," which Jeong-hyeok and his men cook by placing the shellfish on the ground and setting it aflame with petrol.

Se-ri comes to admire much that she finds in the North as she appears to engage with a more authentic version of herself. Conversely, though, much is made of the North's fondness for South Korean popular culture, and encounters with its presence titillate and flatter the domestic South Korean audience, who are encouraged to see their own desirability in Northern eyes. While overplayed, *Crash Landing* does reflect media consumption in North Korea, with one study suggesting that up to 88% of defectors accessed "forbidden foreign media" prior to departure (Lee 2019: 96-7).¹⁰ The presence even serves as a plot device: in the first episode Ju-meok misses Se-ri sneaking past his guard post because he is engrossed in watching the Southern drama *Stairway to Heaven*. He later bonds with her, eager for information on plotlines. Upon initially bidding farewell from North Korea, Se-ri offers him as a gift a choice between the television in the room (which, comically, in fact belongs to Ri) and a lunch date with Choi Ji-woo, star of *Stairway to Heaven*, when unification occurs or he finally arrives in Seoul. His preference for the seemingly unlikely latter foreshadows Choi's cameo appearance in Episode 13, which playfully reconstitutes the iconic scene that Corporal Kim had been watching. Similarly, in Episode 7, Se-ri exploits Northern fascination with Southern popular culture to ingratiate herself with a young fan of K-pop boy band BTS, who designates herself "the biggest A,R,M,Y. in North Korea." Her

humorous citation of the name of the group's international fan club dubiously suggests knowledge of internet and fandom culture, as well as the incongruity of the term in the highly militarised state.

Crash Landing sets before the audience a wide swath of contemporary North Korea, portraying men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, as well as rivalries and friendships of multiple hues, structures of power and social mores. The drama shows a spectrum of Northern values, evoking, for example, a deep sense of filiality, as Eun-dong wells up with tears while reading a letter from his mother, or we witness Jeong-hyeok interact with his infrequently seen parents. A final dinner before Ri is discharged from the army to try to revive his music career becomes an opportunity to celebrate North Korea's maintenance of jeong, a key emotion in South Korean discourse, which highlights a sense of affection regarded as marking Korea's traditional ethnic identity. Same-sex solidarity comes to the fore as the village women circle the wagons around Se-ri when they feel she has been wronged by Jeong-hyeok in Episode 6. As Se-ri is urged to pull a rival's hair in a fight, she muses to herself in an amusing aside that "we really are the same minjok (ethnos), after all."

North Korea's curiosities, as seen through a Southern lens, provide opportunities for displays of local foibles but also glimpses into the North's mushrooming entrepreneurial energy: a night-time household inspection (sukbak geomyeol) humorously turns up a smuggled South Korean rice cooker in one home, and an adulterer, hiding under his lover's bed, in another. The errant husband pleads loneliness as a result of his wife's lengthy absences as a tradeswoman, which points to North Korea's own changing gender dynamics as women take a much larger role in market sector economic activities, but the self-criticism session that he faces reminds viewers of coercive social controls still in place.

Local colour appears further with small-town marketplace vendors and hair salons, and the department stores and eating establishments of Pyeongyang. A bargaining taxi driver, adamant that the desired destination of Seo Dan, to whom Jeong-hyeok is betrothed, is too far, the journey too rough and the possibility of a return fare nil, refuses to take her until her offered price reaches a point that makes him succumb. The contrast of the two in the car as the driver sings along with gusto to a regime song and Seo Dan tunes him out with classical music on headphones suggests social divides in the country.¹¹ Seo Dan's mother herself becomes a comic figure for her nouveau riche trappings as a member of North Korea's merchant class seeking to be cosmopolitan but failing, a mother as concerned for her family's status as her daughter's happiness. Her lack of sophistication, even as a member of Pyongyang's elite, resonates with a South Korean tendency to consider Northerners as bumpkins (*chonseureopda*).

Other particulars represent the hardships of daily life, from a lack of supplies in hospitals to the poverty that forces people into lawlessness. We encounter petty thieves of various stripes: marketplace pickpockets, beggar children who pilfer clothes from rural washing lines and windshield wiper thieves at Pyongyang's international airport. Greater complexity arises in portraying good people trapped within an inhumane system: among the drama's most compelling characters is "the Rat," a wiretap operator who straddles the murky divide between the North Korean regime and its people. The Rat is haunted by grief when he has no choice but to pass on crucial information that facilitates the assassination of Ri Jeong-hyeok's brother, one of the few people who has been kind to him.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, as a drama, *Crash Landing* also foists upon the audience characters who appear almost unremittingly evil and become ready targets of hatred, such

as Jo Cheol-gang, linked to North Korea's detested intelligence services, who sets out to destroy Ri's family for personal gain. However, the show insists that evil is not confined to north of the 38th parallel: Se-ri's siblings and sisters-in-law, all of sharp-elbowed chaebol stock, mirror their Northern counterparts in ruthless competitiveness, insatiable greed and willingness to abuse power. Alliances of common humanity (and inhumanity) are presented that cut across the North/South divide in defiance of a simplistic anti-communist or anti-capitalist frame.

Glamorising North Korea?

Although the detailed and diverse portrait of North Korea has driven much of the interest in *Crash Landing*, it has also prompted controversy. Early news of the drama and its general concept stirred anticipation, given a strong cast that again brought together Hyun Bin and Son Ye-jin, co-stars in the 2018 film *Hyeopsang* (*The Negotiation*), and a production team that included Park Ji-eun. However, by the time of the show's release, the changed tenor of inter-Korean relations made media discussion more ambivalent. [Director Yi Jeong-hyo had urged audiences](#) in a pre-broadcast press conference to accept North Korea as a backdrop to the protagonists' romance and a situational element for fun, but his request largely fell on deaf ears, and reviewers (*An 2019; Yi 2019*) were explicit: although the drama received positive responses (*hopyeong*), it also occasioned discomfort (*bulpyeon*).

Media coverage took particular note of Episode 2, broadcast on December 15, as problematic in depicting North Korean society (*Oh 2019*). Some commentators argued (*Gang 2019; Yi 2019*) that although viewers might wish to treat the show as escapist drama, the timing of its release amidst uncertainty over whether Kim Jong Un would follow through on rhetoric about delivering a "Christmas present" (feared to

portend a destabilising missile test, but in fact a policy change articulated in a party plenum speech) willy-nilly forced consciousness of reality upon the public. Under such circumstances, it was suggested that having a Northern elite soldier as protagonist, no matter how chivalrous, kind and handsome, became uncomfortable for many, and the prevailing atmosphere made it difficult to accept the exhortation to simply watch a drama as a drama. Indeed, Mun Ji-yeon, [in an article for Sports Chosun](#), a tabloid associated with the conservative Chosun Ilbo, published as Crash Landing was approaching its finale, claims, with no obvious evidence beyond her own convictions, that the drama only shook off controversy and achieved a snowballing viewership by inserting increasing reminders of the regime's brutality.

Negative attention for Crash Landing reached its zenith when the show became embroiled in South Korea's combative domestic politics. Three weeks into the broadcast, the minor Christian Liberal Party (gidokjayudang, henceforth CLP) issued a statement criticising tvN for its "glamorisation" (mihwa) of the rebel North Korean authorities (Dong 2020). The CLP even asserted that the show violated South Korea's anti-communist security law.¹² In a strictly legal sense, the CLP was correct: the 1948 National Security Act makes praise (chanyang) or propaganda (seonjeon) for North Korea a crime under any circumstances,¹³ and the drama's portrayal of certain elements of daily life in North Korea, especially traditional ones, could be regarded as favourable. But many other television programmes, from dramas and variety shows to educational broadcasts, have painted ordinary North Koreans and aspects of North Korea in a neutral or even positive light, and, as noted, the overall portrait that emerges in Crash Landing does not glamorise the North.

Thus, the drama's possible violation of South Korea's anti-communist statute hardly explains

the CLP statement. Though the CLP notes the show's popularity with dismay, the primary target of the statement is clearly the Moon administration itself, which it improbably accuses of sedition. "Nobody calls North Korea the main enemy now," it laments, pointedly referring to the debate over the validity of designating North Korea as South Korea's main enemy (jujeok) that resurfaces whenever the Ministry of National Defence publishes a white paper. The statement ends by accusing the Moon administration and only secondarily tvN of wrongdoing. The CLP was therefore deploying Crash Landing as a weapon in the battle over incumbent President Moon Jae-in's leadership, especially his administration's North Korea policy. Its vociferous denunciation in 2020, amidst resumption of antagonistic inter-Korean relations, to a drama that responds to a high point of engagement is unsurprising. The more noteworthy aspect of the furore is the way the CLP statement underscores the rising salience of, and contestation over, representations of North Korea and North Koreans not only in South Korean politics and society generally, but in South Korean popular culture.

Talbukja Responses

We have discussed elsewhere the disproportionate role of North Korean defectors in the South Korean imagination, and how the talbukja community has taken advantage of developments in media technology to engage effectively in self-broadcast (Epstein & Green 2019). Several of its members have now uploaded to YouTube assessments of Crash Landing, some attracting hundreds of thousands of views. As Yun In-gyeong (2020) notes in an article for the BBC, a YouTube search for Crash Landing on You in the eyes of North Korean defectors ("talbungmin-i bon sarang-ui bulsichak") yields dozens of videos. Even those that have drawn less attention

remain of interest given the role that talbukja play in framing North Korea for those outside the DPRK.

The most viewed such clip, with almost 600,000 views by the show's completion in mid-February, comes from Kang Nara. Kang rose to prominence as a guest on the reality show *Namnam bungnyeo* (Ormiston 2018; Kim and Yoon 2019) and now regularly appears on YontongTV, a YouTube channel run by Yonhap News' Unification Media Institute. Her minor celebrity and behind-the-scenes knowledge of the show as a consultant caused her commentary to also be picked up by Koreaboo (2020), a key website for English-speaking Korean pop culture fans. Kang has thus become an interpreter of the show at a larger global level.¹⁴ She laughingly refers to herself as a native speaker (*woneomin*) of "North Korean" both in her review and another video assessing South Korean actors' linguistic performances as North Koreans,¹⁵ a term that has a slightly sardonic quality given the rhetoric of a single ethnic nation divided. She praises Hyun Bin's Pyongyang accent, while criticising that of Seo Ji-hye, the actress who plays Seo Dan. She also notes with approval the drama's use of terms for "comrade" (*dongmu*; *dongji*) and the nostalgia they evoke within her. She commends too its vivid depiction of North Korean marketplaces (*jangmadang*) with only minor criticisms, such as the absence of Kim family badges on some characters' lapels.

Other talbukja commentators with clips that had been viewed over 200,000 times by the time the show ended include Yu Hyeon-ju, a mainstay of the Channel-A show *Now on My Way to Meet You*; BJ Ipyeong, perhaps the most popular male talbukja self-broadcaster; and Lee Han-song, whose personal YouTube channel has well over 100,000 subscribers. In acting as gatekeepers and verifying or rejecting the authenticity of the drama for non-North Korean viewers, these talbukja reviewers share several

characteristics. Most praise the drama's concerted attempts to convey North Korean life, citing positively the sets, characterisations, and attention to linguistic detail. Yu offers a spirited defense of the show's representations of North Korea, and chides those who insist on black and white portrayals. Like Kang, she praises the show's ability to awaken nostalgia in her. The delight she expresses at encountering long-unheard North Korean drinking terms (e.g. *jjung naeja* and *jjiuja*, equivalents of "cheers") make apparent how the show tugs at defectors' heart strings.

Talbukja reviewers do, however, criticise unlikely elements of the plot. Not one thinks that Ri, given his elite background, would ever be deployed near the inter-Korean border. Lee also notes the implausibility of any North Korean sheltering a South Korean given the danger that doing so would bring, and finds the relative health and attractiveness of the North Korean soldiers unrealistic, while Ipyeong regards Hyun Bin's fashion as too Southern, especially when he appears in a cardigan, an item of clothing that he never saw in the North. Yet even amidst these critiques lies awareness that television dramas aim at entertainment and are hardly an ideal vehicle for complex and earnest messages about North Korea. All therefore accept the occasional lack of realism and the influence of other factors for directorial choices, as when Lee comments on the beef that the soldiers barbecue after Se-ri requests meat: "Pork would have been more realistic...but the beef does look delicious!"

Some talbukja, however, viewing the show differently, argue that North Korean life should not be taken so lightly. Ordinary non-elite North Koreans suffer greatly, and in the context of Korean ethnic nationalism, such sufferings become the sufferings of the entire nation. For these viewers, *Crash Landing*, in not depicting North Korea as unremittingly

grim, is, by definition, inappropriate. Of particular note in this category is a clip uploaded to YouTube by Kang Chol-hwan, the co-author of *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, a popular account of his imprisonment in a North Korean labour camp. Kang now heads an NGO hastening to bring down the Kim regime in part by smuggling external media into North Korea on USB sticks. As Kang speaks, subtitles with the NGO's bank account details seek supporters and donations as they proclaim a mission: "Using the power of outside information to bring down Kim Jong Un's dictatorial regime."

Kang rebukes the production team of *Crash Landing* on the grounds that treating North Korea lightly is never acceptable. In common cause with the religious conservatives of the CLP, Kang feels that the show idealises life there. He does, however, note with ironic self-awareness his pleasure at the representation of North Korean males as attractive, especially through the portrayal of Hyun Bin, which he mentions no fewer than three times in the brief clip. Nonetheless, for Kang, *Crash Landing* has sacrificed principle for commercial success and conveys a false impression of the country. He argues that despite the popularity of South Korean dramas in North Korea the show would not resonate with viewers there, because it does not speak meaningfully to their situation, and compares it unfavourably with the 2014 blockbuster film *Ode to My Father* (Gukje shijang). Kang asserts that both defectors and North Koreans find the latter appealing because of historical passages that show South Koreans living in conditions that in some senses resemble North Korea today.

Kang's denunciation of *Crash Landing* highlights the diversity of opinion among the growing community of talbukja, confounding presumptions of homogeneity and showing their varied concerns about perceptions of the North. Some talbukja are content to regard the

text from a distance and do not expect faithful reproduction of reality, while those most concerned with North Korea's human rights abuses treat the country with utmost seriousness. The ratings for *Crash Landing*, meanwhile, suggest that most viewers, domestically and globally, accept the show's premise within the suspension of disbelief that romantic comedy requires and enjoy the unusual setting as something to be savoured and observed closely.

International Responses

What noteworthy features have arisen in how overseas viewers react to *Crash Landing*, given the issues raised for domestic audiences? The embedding of South Korean popular culture in interwoven webs of contested reception has been a striking feature of the world's movement to ever more interconnected media production, consumption and pop cosmopolitanism (Lee 2018). By the end of the 1990s, dramas had become a key component in the growing popularity of South Korea's cultural products around East Asia, and by the 2000s were being licensed internationally and achieving surprising successes, from, e.g., the phenomenon of *Winter Sonata* in Japan to the popularity of historical dramas *Dae Jang Geum* and *Jumong* in Iran, both of which garnered local viewer ratings of over 85% (Kang 2016).

These developments have continued apace, and with the rise of streaming services like Hulu, Viki and now especially Netflix, which has signed contracts with Korean companies for the production of original series (Lee 2020), Korean dramas have well and truly entered the global cultural mainstream. As YouTube user Deemalovesdrama notes in a review of *Crash Landing*, the arrival of Netflix as a platform has had an enormous impact upon her watching experience; the vastly improved image quality brings further life to the enjoyment of online audiences.

The presence of Korean dramas on Netflix has given the genre a further push amidst the coronavirus crisis as housebound viewers across the globe looked online for new content, and *Crash Landing* has been by far its most noteworthy beneficiary. Although viewership data from Netflix has been difficult to obtain (Katz 2019), in February 2020 the show held the top spot on Netflix in the Philippines, and in May 2020 in Japan (MBN 2020); one source cites it as the 3rd most watched show on Netflix in March 2020 in the US (Ockoala 2020). As an alternate metric for the relative success of its overseas audience and the level of engagement, as of June 1, 2020, *Crash Landing on You* had some 11,600 viewer ratings on Google, five times as many as its nearest competitor among Korean dramas, *World of the Married* (available on Viu through much of Asia, but not on Netflix) with 2250 reviews, and in contrast to roughly 1800 for *Kingdom*, 1000 for *Descendants of the Sun* and 400 for *Sky Castle*, other notably popular Korean dramas internationally.

To be sure, the intriguing subject matter of *Crash Landing* and the glimpses it offered into North Korea early on played a key role in attracting viewers in typical Hallyu target markets around Asia such as the Sinophone locales of Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the PRC Mainland itself, and Southeast Asian nations like the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand. Media articles, especially as the show moved towards its finale attested to its broad regional success. Much commentary on the show evaluated it positively, and the combination of favourable review and reporting on a phenomenon to be taken note of undoubtedly fuelled further audience growth. Journalists from around the region regularly pointed to interest in the depiction of North Korea, with a nod to the emotive qualities that the show engaged, as for example a *Straits Times*' piece that quoted a Singaporean fan on how the show awakened awareness "of the sadness and longing that

Koreans who have family or friends on the other side of the DMZ...must be feeling" (Kiew and Low 2020). Such media reviews often convey a local flavour in their invocation of shared, transnational consumption that links viewers to the region's popular culture superpower, as in the following comment from online Philippines news website Rappler: "Everyone from your best friend, to your neighbor, to your tita, to your doctor, and even to your doctor's secretary is obsessed with South Korea's latest television hit, *Crash Landing On You*." (Adan 2020).

Many viewers took notice of *Crash Landing* as a cultural phenomenon, which generated further interest. Currently, *Crash Landing* still carries a striking 5.0 rating among its Google reviews, and several commenters make a direct declaration of the show's popularity in their country. In part, such statements mark the author's own engagement with the show, but they also indicate a desire to situate their own nation within a global community that is linked to the Korean Peninsula. Several, whether hyperbolically or not, rate *Crash Landing* as the best (and at times first) Korean drama they had ever watched, such as the top Google review, which has been liked over 500 times, from user Varsha ranu kh, whose LinkedIn profile indicates 30-something woman working in digital media in Mumbai: "Best best best show! I have got so many of my Indian friends addicted to this show! It's flawless! What chemistry!! It's like u r in a dream! Imagine having Hyun bin character in real!" The effervescent approval testifies to the drama's spread in a major country in which a significant part of the population now accesses Korean productions through English subtitles.

Certainly, although international viewers were fascinated with the window into life in North Korea, because they live outside the direct consequences and impacts of the Korean Peninsula's political realities, as the above comment indicates, their reactions to the show

often differ. In particular, long-time followers of Korean dramas as a subcultural genre often focus on the stars involved, the chemistry between the leads, and textual aspects of the show itself and how they relate to conventions of K-dramas. Popular fan fora on the show, such as that of *Soompi*, one of the largest and longest-running internet websites devoted to Korean popular culture, now run to several hundred pages. A great deal occurs in blog format, and the 17,600-word review (almost twice as long as this article) by kfangurl on thefangirlverdict.com, among the more popular Korean drama blogs, serves as a marker of engagement and fandom. The language typifies K-drama fan discourse, with multiple usages that signal and accentuate in-group identity among fellow fans:

One thing that Show does really well, is poke fun at drama tropes as a whole, and bring the funny doing that, while serving up drama tropes in its own story, and bringing the feels with those. For new drama viewers, this is quite a special two-way indoctrination. Like, first, let me show you what's so cliched about drama tropes, and oh, by the way, this is why you'll love 'em so much: Feeelzzz. Ha.

Many non-Korean fans of South Korean drama understand that the action on screen may not reflect Korean culture accurately, but rather presents a fantasy version of it, much as fictional productions from their own countries do. As a result, many seek interpreters with insider knowledge to aid in their interpretations of what they are watching (Schulze 2013). In this regard, diaspora Koreans and English-speaking Koreans become valuable sources in internet fora and via user-generated video review, but a level of complication is added with *Crash Landing*, as viewers are set at an additional remove from the South Korea that they are more familiar with. The YouTube channel Duckhu TV, for

example, presents two young South Korean women who speak enthusiastically about the show. They serve as intermediaries in having the English skills to be able to address a global audience directly but recognise that their own knowledge has limitations. Although one states “I don't know if international viewers were able to catch this but some of the actors' North Korean accent sounded so legit,” the pair immediately call themselves back and recognise that, in this case, their sense of legitimacy is not the same as that of a *talbukja*.

In a Twitter thread, Subin Kim, the author of a BBC World Service article on the show, had asked if his followers had questions for his upcoming interview with a member of the show's writing team, a North Korean defector whom Kim described as “the one who brought such compelling details on the life and socio-political structure of North Korea.”¹⁶ His tweet received over 13,000 likes and almost 3000 retweets and hundreds of comments, many expressing curiosity about the show's authenticity and the extent to which various details reflected the defector's own experience. Amidst their specific queries, many paused to comment on the quality of the drama and their enjoyment, again often declaring national origin. Comments arrived not only in English but in Spanish and Indonesian, and from fellow journalists and academics. Kim, evidently overwhelmed at the response, himself commented in an interaction with a follower from the Philippines: “What an era we're living in in which we can talk about an ongoing TV show three thousand kilometers away!” And, indeed, there is something exciting about the creation of new global cross-cultural communities via technological platforms that remain relatively new and the role of South Korea as a nation that has moved from the periphery to the centre of popular culture production. At the same time, *Crash Landing* also demonstrates that the North Korean experience has been co-opted and transformed

into a bankable commodity that functions as an element of Hallyu and the expansion of South Korean soft power.

Conclusion

Like the metropolitan Seoul housing market, Hallyu continues to defy predictions of declining value, and has gone from strength to strength in recent years. From the historic Oscar awards for *Parasite* to the successes of K-pop groups like Blackpink and BTS, whose ARMY fan club recently made news with its million-dollar contribution to the Black Lives Matter movement (Kwon et al. 2020), South Korean popular culture continues its spread and influence. Dramas have long played a crucial role in fostering Hallyu, and their global reach expands with each passing year. The success and spread of *Crash Landing* draws upon developments in which high-quality streaming services like Netflix take up South Korean content and encourage viewer-determined binge watching of subtitled versions (Ju 2019), as became even more apparent with the coronavirus crisis. The resulting eager international audience speaks to changing patterns in media consumption and a level of awareness of Korean cultural products that is growing unabated and now makes them a central component of the global entertainment industry.¹⁷

But a K-drama set in North Korea is not able to exist solely as part of a cosmopolitan cultural mainstream. *Crash Landing* reflects a set of complex political phenomena. It enters international circulation as both an instrument of soft power and as a contested text that responds to social change, geopolitics, and cultural consumption, as well as the predilections of multiple discrete audiences. The show's representations and their domestic reception reflect the fortuitous and yet also necessarily difficult timing of the show's creation and release: sketched out by its

producers amidst unprecedented excitement over inter-Korean relations, the ultimately short-lived nature of this optimism means that the product at times appears incongruous.

Regardless, and in spite of determined, albeit fringe, opposition at home, *Crash Landing* can be perhaps considered the fullest, most varied, and even most sensitive portrayal of North Korea yet seen in South Korean popular culture. Many viewers will readily perceive a gulf in the portrayal of North Korea in *Crash Landing* with that of Hollywood films such as *The Interview*, which persist in one-dimensional, demeaning and Orientalising representations. *Crash Landing* recognises that North Koreans may generally be poor and life may be harsh, but strives to avoid stale tropes such as empty boulevards, goose-stepping soldiers and military parades with mock nuclear warheads. The show notes the presence of shortages from consumer products to hospital supplies, that blackouts are a regular occurrence and that food is simple fare. But it also acknowledges that few are truly hungry, though they exist, too, as a pair of beggar siblings in the marketplace attest. We encounter Pyongyang residents, and not just the highest elite, in department stores, coffee shops and beer halls rather than on the streets waving flags hysterically for passing members of the Kim family. While geopolitical manoeuvring beyond the show's control may have diluted the impact of its pedagogical inclinations, *Crash Landing* succeeds on multiple levels as an entertaining, well-made drama with a subtly educational mission, even if it ultimately reveals more about contemporary South Korean understandings of North Korea than North Korean life itself.¹⁸

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Notes

¹ In May 2020, *Crash Landing on You* was surpassed by JTBC’s *World of the Married*, and currently has the third highest audience share rating.

² For a more detailed discussion of this term, see Epstein and Green (2013).

³ For example, Quebec City in *Guardian: The Lonely and Great God (Dokkaebi)*, 2016), Granada in *Memories of the Alhambra (Alhambra gungjeon-ui chueok)*, 2018-19), Havana in *Encounter (Namja chingu)*, 2018-19) and even the imaginary war-torn country Uruk in *Descendants of the Sun*, as discussed by Flamm (2018).

⁴ Even so, in early 2020, after *Crash Landing* had completed its run, Park Ji-eun, the show’s highly regarded scriptwriter, author of some of South Korea’s most successful dramas (*My Love from the Stars*; *My Husband Got a Family*), was designated Person of the Year by the Unification Ministry in South Korea for her contribution to “unification education” (Suliman and Kim 2020).

⁵ We first encounter the two preparing themselves for the day ahead with Jeong-hyeok shaving, and Se-ri carefully applying make-up. Upon departing their homes, Jeong-hyeok, in Northern military uniform, drives a jeep, whereas Se-ri is chauffeured in the back seat of a sedan going through files: a successful businesswoman. At their desks, Jeong-hyeok sits among a stack of documents, the North Korean flag prominently displayed at his side, and portraits of ruling dynasty figures behind him. In contrast, Se-ri sits at a desktop computer, its large monitor embossed with a designer emblem, in bright, airy surroundings. Shots then show each alone at the table: Jeong-hyeok consumes traditional local fare in plain white bowls with a spoon, while Se-ri wields a fork and knife as she eats a variety of aesthetically presented Western-style dishes. Jeong-hyeok drinks from a simple cup, perhaps holding water or barley tea, as Se-ri accompanies her meal with a glass of red wine. Jeong-hyeok, departing work, strides past a propaganda poster and buildings that imply a low level of development, while Se-ri, sporting expensively tailored business attire, passes high-end clothing and accessories shops.

⁶ The position of *chongjeongchigukjang* has in recent years been filled by such prominent figures as Hwang Pyong So and Choe Ryong Hae. After the term appeared in *Crash Landing*, it trended in South Korean search engines. (See, e.g., *Joongang Ilbo*, December 18, 2019.) Such a pedigree for Ri undermines the realism of *Crash Landing*’s depictions of North Korea. Thae Yong-ho, the former deputy head of the DPR Korean embassy in London, and now a prominent *talbukja* elected to public office in South Korea’s April 2020 legislative elections,

noted in a newspaper column that the son of the *chongjeongchigukjang* would certainly not serve near the DMZ (Thae 2020). As a bachelor, Ri would also not receive standalone housing, much less the relatively comfortable lodgings that he occupies in *Crash Landing*.

⁷ An article in Vogue Japan (Jibu 2020) notes that a key reason for *Crash Landing*'s success there is that Jeong-hyeok functions as a post-#MeToo era hero, complementing Se-ri as an independent and successful careerwoman.

⁸ One might contrast the immaculately groomed but despicable second brother or Se-ri's good-hearted but meek, subservient and disheveled underlings.

⁹ For *School Excursion*, see [here](#).

¹⁰ It is impossible to ascertain accurate viewing numbers for the North Korean population as a whole (as opposed to those who defect), but according to Kretchun and Kim (2012), a "substantial, consistently measurable portion of the population has direct access to outside media." Five years later, Kretchun et al. (2017) found a "continued broadening and deepening of media access in North Korea during the Kim Jong Un era." At least some North Koreans are likely to seek out *Crash Landing* despite risks in doing so.

¹¹ The driver sings "Daehongdan Potato" (*Daehongdan gamja*), whose lyrics tout the virtues of potatoes as an alternative to rice for a population suffering from food shortages.

¹² Article Three of the Republic of Korea's constitution stakes a claim to the territory of the entire Korean peninsula. Accordingly, the North Korean regime is officially regarded as a rebel occupier.

¹³ For the wording of the National Security Law, see [here](#) and [in English](#).

¹⁴ Kang notes that she served as a consultant for *Crash Landing*, and her name appears in the show's credits. Several other prominent defectors, including Kang Mi Jin of specialist media *Daily NK*, are also listed as consultants.

¹⁵ Source [here](#).

¹⁶ Source [here](#).

¹⁷ In this regard, it is worth reflecting how such developments affect our work as researchers: not long ago we'd have either needed to wait for a DVD release or use streaming sites of dubious quality and/or legality. Now, the challenges with a 16-episode drama are finding the time to watch it in its entirety and, as we work from home amidst family and the radical changes that have been induced by the pandemic, opportunities and space to write.

¹⁸ We would like to express our appreciation to Patrick Flamm, Roald Maliangkay, Sokeel Park, Rumi Sakamoto, Jacco Zwetsloot and especially Marion Schulze for reading earlier drafts of this essay and offering useful feedback that has helped improve it substantially.