

No Country for Blue Helmets: South Korean National Identity on the Screen in 'Descendants of the Sun'

Patrick Flamm

Summary

This paper provides a contextualized reading of the South Korean 2016 hit drama 'Descendants of the Sun', the most prominent pop cultural manifestation of the Republic of Korea's rising status as a global middle power. Through linking the fictional peacekeeping mission to a confidently nationalist conception of South Korean identity, the drama normalizes troop deployments by circumventing traditional narratives for legitimation. This argument rests on observations concerning the omission of any historical and UN context for the deployment, the Othering of the United States as main antagonist, and the unchallenged sense of righteousness and morality displayed by the main protagonists in an otherwise passive local setting.

Keywords: South Korea, Korean wave, national identity, peacekeeping, military

Introduction

When former South Korean President Park Geun-hye met South Korean United Nations (UN) peacekeepers in South Sudan in May 2016, she praised them as the "real descendants of the sun"¹ in front of media cameras, alluding to the very popular TV drama of the same name. *Descendants of the Sun* (henceforth *DotS*) aired in early 2016 on KBS2 and follows the unfolding love story between a South Korean elite soldier and a doctor.

However, the most interesting aspect of *DotS* is that the protagonists are deployed as peacekeepers and medical volunteers to a fictional and distant post-war country. The drama is thus noteworthy as the first major Korean drama to prominently feature peacekeeping operations (PKO) and South Korea as a global foreign policy actor in a distant land. Because of the drama's great success in Korea and other parts of East Asia, and its immediate entry into political discourse as illustrated by Park's comment, a closer look at this pop cultural artefact is warranted. In this article, I follow an increasing body of critical research in the field of International Relations on the link between world politics and popular culture² in the wake of the so-called "aesthetic turn", where popular texts are not only seen as reflecting political reality, but also as shaping social reality, cultural meanings, values, identities and consequently governmental policies and world politics.³

President Park Geun-hye Praises Peacekeepers in South Sudan as 'Real Descendants of the Sun'

Apart from cultural representations manufactured explicitly for political purposes, Grayson et al. point out that "[b]eyond formal policy statements, press interviews and traditional forms of propaganda, popular

culture draws attention to how understandings of world politics and the legitimation of policy postures can be generated.”⁴ Consequently, politicians have to draw from cultural resources to make sense of political options and decisions, for themselves but also for their constituencies.⁵ These approaches focus on examining the workings of power involved in the production of meaning through cultural artefacts, in which a text can both support and/or subvert established power relations.⁶ Not only is social and political reality discursively constructed through pop culture, these constructions assume significance through their subtle omnipresence, “constitut[ing] our everyday common sense.”⁷ Most International Relations literature on the link between world politics and popular culture so far has focused on analyzing visual, cultural, and textual representations.⁸

Given the injunction to study “the object closely to see what aspects of our reality it might normalize, or reinforce, and what others it might delegitimize, or encourage to change,”⁹ I read *DotS* within the context of South Korea’s current global foreign policy. Doing so is significant for at least two reasons: first, the International Relations literature on world politics and popular culture offers few analyses of non-Western cultural productions and, second, overseas troop deployments are sensitive and often contentious issues, which demand heightened efforts for legitimization and political support. This is also the case in South Korea, where Hong has observed a tension domestically between a “paying back syndrome” to the international community for the UN support for the South in the Korean War and a “Vietnam syndrome” about the infamous participation by South Korean troops in the U.S. war against the Vietcong.¹⁰ Against this historical background, Hong sees the legitimization of peacekeeping operations as a major political challenge.

After providing background on the show’s

production and an overview of South Korea’s involvement with international security and peace efforts, I analyse representations of Korea as an international agent of peacekeeping and developmental cooperation in *DotS*. I also look at how the drama portrays encounters with various Others, most importantly the fictional host country Uruk, and the United States of America. My main argument is that the construction of the Korean Self in Uruk serves to normalize South Korean military deployments overseas through framing them outside narratives usually employed to justify such sensitive political decisions.

National Identity and Peacekeeping in History and Fiction

During the 20th century, the Korean Peninsula was colonized, divided into North and South, ravaged by war, and became the site of one of the first UN interventions as well as subsequently locked into a Cold War stand-off that continues to this day despite the 1953 armistice. Hence, South Koreans have often perceived their nation as a ‘shrimp amongst whales’, a small country with limited agency in its own affairs. This view has been changing slowly for South Koreans with its rapid economic development since the 1970s and subsequent democratization from the late 1980s. In 1996 South Korea became a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and has been invited to G20 meetings since 2006, a development which is seen as marking a transition for the nation from a ‘rule taker’ in international affairs to becoming a ‘rule maker’.¹¹

The country, however, is still recalibrating its regional and global roles in an ongoing process, with its underlying collective self-understanding also “at a crossroads,”¹² feeding the hopes of some that South Korea will help serve as a cornerstone of the international

liberal order.¹³ A South Korean nationalism related to its successes in sport and the Korean Wave has also emerged,¹⁴ as well as President Lee Myung-bak's 2008 national security strategy with desires for a 'Global Korea' to act as an influential, strong, and responsible member of the international community. The goal of these efforts is to leave the status of a less developed country (*hujin'guk*) behind and move over the threshold to become an "advanced country" (*sŏnjin'guk*).¹⁵

Also, in the last 15 years Seoul has been investing heavily in the creation of pop cultural content, especially TV dramas, to promote Korean products and tourism and to connect audiences abroad positively with South Korea and its culture.¹⁶ Few studies that bridge International Relations (IR) and Korean Studies, however, have thus far addressed the cultural underpinnings of this new, rising Korea as an agent in international affairs beyond the North-South conflict or Seoul's bilateral relations with Beijing, Tokyo and Washington. The link between world politics and popular culture, with *DotS* as an obvious testing ground, offers a different way to address these underpinnings.

DotS' first season screened in 16 episodes from Feb. 24 to Apr. 22, 2016 and was an instant success not only in Korea, where it scored a consistent audience share per episode of around 30 percent, but, more surprisingly, in other parts of East Asia. Fans pointed to its original storytelling, well-crafted dialogue, strong acting and an unusual, pre-recorded production style.¹⁷ The latter aspect is noteworthy for its contrast to the usual practice of scripting and filming only a few days before broadcast to reduce production costs and to change storylines according to audience reaction in the hope of boosting ratings.¹⁸ *DotS*, however, was also supported and nearly simultaneously broadcast by a Chinese network, for which prerecording was crucial to win approval from the Chinese

authorities.¹⁹ The drama's production was supported by the South Korean army as well as the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, and filming took place in 2015 in South Korea and, for scenes shot outdoors, in Greece.

KBS World Trailer for 'Descendants of the Sun'

The show's writer, Kim Eun-sook, a veteran screenwriter mostly known for romantic plots centred on the theme of pure love overcoming adversity, revealed that the Uruk mission in *DotS* stands as a symbol for Seoul's troop deployment to Iraq in 2004. Critical commentators have also been quick to interpret the show as a fictional attempt to "overcome the sense of historical inferiority of the Korean people,"²⁰ while especially appealing to the younger *shinsedae* (new generation) demographic that is said to be conservative on issues of security but more confidently nationalist than previous cohorts.²¹

Many military-themed Korean dramas have focused on the more glamorous aspects of spies, intelligence, special ops and international crime in South Korea, such as *Iris* (2009) and its spinoff *Athena: Goddess of War* (2010), but these productions have mostly drawn on the North-South conflict rather than comparably uneventful regular peacekeeping. In fact, the first Korean network presented with *DotS* declined it, because its focus on foreign war and disasters was not seen as a likely success. Reportedly, there were also concerns that a drama in which most protagonists wear military uniforms would not allow ready use of product placement.²²

In contrast to the British miniseries *Warriors*

(1999), however, one of the few television series primarily concerned with peacekeeping, which tried to make sense of British deployments to the Balkans in the 1990s, *DotS* is anchored in the romantic genre, with the peacekeeping serving as background. Zarkov, in a study of representations of British and Balkan soldier masculinities,²³ shows how *Warriors* constructs distinctive and opposing ontologies of moral British and dehumanized Serb/Croat soldiers, which reflects Western debate about intervention in the Balkans at that time.²⁴ Even though a study of militarized masculinity in *DotS* and its reception in Korea and China would also be illuminating, I limit my analysis here to the representation of Korea as an international agent and Uruk as well as the United States as Others.

From Uruk to the world: A New Korean Self

The main protagonist of *DotS* is Captain Yu Si-jin, an Alpha team leader in an elite counterterrorism unit that is presumably the greatest Special Forces asset of the ROK Army. After defusing a hostage crisis with UN workers in Pakistan borderland areas in Episode 2, Alpha team is deployed to the fictional country of Uruk, located in the Balkans, where they expect to enjoy less demanding, regular army work as part of UN peacekeeping forces. Apart from this fictional place, the drama's geography is set in reality. It has to be noted, however, that there was an ancient Sumer city-state called Uruk in what is modern day southern Iraq. Historical Uruk was the city of the warrior-king Gilgamesh whose deeds are the subject of one of the earliest surviving works of literature. In this famous epic, the hero Gilgamesh, a semi-god, wanders distant lands protected by Shamash, the sun god and god of justice,²⁵ and therefore the title '*Descendants of the Sun*', the chosen setting of Uruk, and the main protagonist, the heroic

soldier Captain Yu deployed overseas, appear to clearly reference this ancient tale and its themes of power, glory, friendship, love and death.

At the core of the different *DotS*' storylines is the unfolding romance between Captain Yu and the leader of the medical volunteers, Dr Kang Mo-yŏn. The main subplots involve disaster relief at a South Korean built solar power plant in Uruk after a major earthquake, a battle against a deadly local virus epidemic, and emergency surgery performed on the Chairman of the Arab League, who is visiting Uruk. Alpha team and the medical volunteers also have to deal with local gangsters exploiting the inhabitants, especially children, as well as international gangsters, most prominently the villain Ryan Argus, a former US soldier who now deals arms and assists in staging a coup d'état in the neighbouring state of North Uruk.

As I will show below, however, the representation of South Korea as a global foreign policy actor in Uruk results in the normalization of overseas military troop deployments, by circumventing the traditional narratives in such policy debates and thus supports a confident conception of Korean national identity that focuses on present-day political and economic achievements. My argument rests on the omission of any historical or UN context for the deployment, the Othering of the United States as the main antagonist, and the unchallenged sense of righteousness and morality displayed by the protagonists.

Historical omissions and political achievements

Traditionally, overseas troop deployments have been a sensitive matter for South Korean

decision makers. Given the military threat from North Korea, defence posture has focused on security on the Korean peninsula. The few overseas military deployments undertaken in the last decades have supported either South Korea's main ally and protector, the United States, in war theatres such as Vietnam or Afghanistan, or UN-led peacekeeping missions to, for example, Lebanon or South Sudan.

Domestic support for these measures has been gained either through reference to alliance considerations or through identity narratives that frame the ROK as a "child of the UN."²⁶ Many Koreans agreed that support from the United States and the UN during and after the Korean War made these deployments important to ensure national security through strong ties with Washington or to show gratitude to the international community. The political left, however, has viewed Korea's infamous participation in the Vietnam War and more recent U.S. interventionism in the Middle East as military adventures that should be avoided. While most South Koreans today understand their country's involvement in the Vietnam War as having offered a way to strengthen the US alliance as well as to benefit from the war economy,²⁷ critics point to massacres such as that at Ha My, when South Korean troops rounded up and killed 135 unarmed villagers.²⁸ Thus, the major challenges for any troop deployment decision involves balancing a wish to repay historical debt to the international community and fear of yet another military adventure.

In 2009, with the 'Global Korea' National Security Strategy, President Lee promoted the vision of a broader international role for South Korea, with international peacekeeping, sustainable development and official development assistance (ODA) identified as key areas for such global aspirations. South Korea had only become a member of the United Nations in 1991 and mostly contributed medical and engineer units to peacekeeping

operations until 2007, when the first robust combat troops with the *Tongmyŏng* Unit were deployed as part of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

In *DotS*, however, these historical contexts are omitted and even inverted. The drama provides neither mention of Korea's history as the venue of fratricidal war and a subsequent UN intervention nor a narrative of repaying a debt to the international community for the help received during the Korean War. On the contrary, the marginal representation of the UN and the limited interaction between Korean and non-Korean non-local characters avoids these historical links. For example, the Korean peacekeepers are never seen as iconic Blue Helmets: they never wear the UN blue on their own helmets, scarves or badges, and viewers never encounter non-Korean peacekeepers or UN personnel. Alpha team's peacekeeping work consists of operations such as protecting civilians, clearing mines and stopping arms traders, but the mandate of their mission is never explicitly stated, debated or challenged.

UNIFIL Ghanaian and South Korean peacekeepers during the first the all-women foot patrol in Rmeish, south Lebanon. December 13, 2017.

The only other international actors prominently portrayed are the United States, through CIA and Delta Force special ops, and the sympathetic, Nobel Prize-winning Chairman of the Arab League, Mubarat, who hails from the royal family of Abu Dhabi. His organization appears as a powerful, peace-seeking transnational network, in contrast to the often discordant and politically toothless real-life Arab League. Herman's brief discussion of the

political signs of *DotS* plausibly attributes this Middle Eastern theme to an attempt to strategically reach out to the Arab World, as a venue for products of the Korean Wave.²⁹ The Middle East is also a key developing market for Korean public diplomacy and brand promotion³⁰ and *DotS* fits this purpose well, as seen in the positive depiction of Mubarat and references to Korean construction projects in the region in the 1970s, which constitute the first large-scale modern encounters between South Koreans and Arabs.

Furthermore, participation in the Vietnam War, the other major example of overseas South Korean military troop deployments, only features in a brief sanitized reference without any context. When Captain Yu and Sergeant Sō joke in Episode 16 about enriching their routine mission reports with entertaining fictional elements, they discard the 1980s film *Rambo* (which is in part about the Vietnam War) as a fitting template because the weaponry used in it is outdated. However, more than 300,000 South Korean soldiers were sent to Vietnam, a force second only to the United States, and they are known to have committed war crimes, which made the screening of *DotS* controversial in Vietnam. While younger Vietnamese generally were attracted to the high-quality production with top actors and a compelling storyline, older citizens argued that the drama promoted the South Korean army and should not be watched without keeping history in mind.³¹

The past is largely absent in *DotS*' representation of Korea, but this representation revolves around today's achieved status and development, with no explicit juxtaposition against South Korea's postcolonial and impoverished past as a proverbial 'shrimp amongst the whales', with which it is usually contrasted in political discourse. For example, when a large earthquake strikes Uruk (in Episode 6), the only disaster site shown is the collapsed

Korean-built power plant. This choice opens up several interesting perspectives: what matters in the story is only the Korean power-plant and Korean workers and no other areas of Uruk, which are presumably similarly affected by the earthquake. Further, the power plant has been built as a development project by the fictional Haesung chaebōl, which also owns Haesung Hospital, from which the medical team is sent. Most workers there are Korean and the project is framed as a testament to South Korean international success, as the bid for it was won against German competition.

This situation therefore offers a parallel to South Korea's successful 2012 bid to host the Green Climate Fund (GCF), a UN fund intended to facilitate the adaptation and mitigation of climate change, beating out Germany. Furthermore, the power plant is a high-tech solar (and thus green) facility, which is underscored by its futuristic, awe-inspiring look. The plant is an interesting choice on the part of the drama's producers for the disaster site, as the South Korean government has sought to establish the country as a leader in sustainable development and a bridge between the developed and the developing world.³²

Certainly, the drama attempts to project a favourable image about Korea to the outside world, in line with recent nation-branding campaigns by Seoul to turn a perceived 'Korea discount' into a national 'premium brand'.³³ As noted above, the drama's production was supported by the South Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. Lead actor Song Joong-ki, who plays Captain Yu, had already been made the face of an international tourism promotion³⁴ and *DotS* even earned criticism for "blatant product placement."³⁵

Of course, omission of reference to South Korea's poor, conflict-ridden and less glamorous past can be explained by such marketing and nation-branding purposes. However, linking the peacekeeping mission to a

self-understanding of Korea as a developed global power also normalizes troop deployments in everyday domestic discourse. The Korean Self constructed in *DotS* is present in Uruk, just because ‘it can’ and because such presence is seen as the typical behaviour of developed countries. Korean script (*han'gŭl*) and South Korean military troops in distant lands become a ‘normal’ reflection of the country’s status and need no further explanation.

Encountering Others: Uruk as a stage and the United States as the antagonist

As I will elaborate, two further observations support the above reading: both the simplistic and antagonistic representations of Uruk and the United States as well as the protagonists’ displayed sense of righteousness and morality hint at a developed and advanced Korea whose presence in Uruk as a peacekeeping, benevolent power indicates the ‘natural’ place of the nation in the world.

We learn next to nothing about the fictional history of Uruk. Evidently, however, North Uruk, supported by Russia, started the war that preceded the peacekeeping mission in the focus of *DotS*. The parallels to the Korean War are obvious: North Korea, supported by the Soviet Union, invaded South Korea in 1950. Interestingly, the black-green-red flag of (South) Uruk vaguely recalls the flag of the Afghan Islamic Republic, where South Korea had been engaged in establishing a post-conflict order from 2001-2007 and 2010-2014 as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

Overall, the representation of Uruk draws on an eclectic fusion of stereotypes that include the Balkans and the Middle East, among other regions: locals speak little in general but when they do, we hear Arabic as well as Russian. Signage is generally in Greek. Indeed, Uruk

appears to be ethnically diverse: there are dirty and poor white children, Indian workers, and overseas Koreans from Canada as well as the former Soviet Union. The gang members, consisting of local youth and international gangsters, are led by Ryan Argus, a Korean-American ex-Delta Force Special Forces captain, whose life once was saved by Captain Yu himself. Some Uruk women wear the hijab, while a Russian barmaid is depicted as stereotypically sexy and tough. Notable, though, is the absence of explicit reference to the local culture of Uruk, rendering the place beautiful but sparsely populated and a cultural blank slate.

Most interaction between Koreans and the local population occurs through children who tend to need protection, whether they have to be saved from lead poisoning or forced prostitution. In Episode 9, for example, a group of war orphans sick with measles is found at a makeshift camp constructed from rags. Remnants of war haunt the scenic coastal location: ruins of tanks, shipwrecks, mines, and gangs that terrorize the population, trade arms, and pimp young girls to local, corrupt police officers.

Apart from local thugs and landmines, Uruk does not seem dangerous for the dispatched soldiers and medics. Political conflict between North Uruk and South Uruk seems dormant. The protagonists can travel freely between the little secured camp and local towns, and when outside of the camp do not need extra security or clear visibility as UN troops to mark them as neutral to both conflict parties. Because the peacekeeping deployment is so safe for the soldiers and medics, this representation counters real world concerns by the South Korean public about the dangers peacekeeping units are exposed to, and thus reinforces the impression that Korean deployments have been normalized.

In consequence, Uruk serves as little more than a stage on which the main love story unfolds

and does not really qualify as a significant Other. This antagonistic role is reserved for the United States through the character of Argus, a dishonourable former US soldier, and more indirectly through the United States' interventionist and secretive Middle Eastern policy. It is the United States against which the Korean Self in *DotS* is constructed as a more benevolent power in Uruk. Given the historical context, this portrayal of the United States emancipates South Korea from its former protector and ally.

Although the relationship between the South Korean Special forces and the U.S. Delta Force is represented as that of close partners and rivals who compete as equals, the main antagonist of Captain Yu is the arms trader and ex-Delta Force soldier Argus, who embarked on a criminal path after the end of his active duty. At one point, Argus engages in an immoral and illegal collaboration with the CIA to stage a pro-US coup d'état in North Uruk. In order to then make himself effectively untouchable for Captain Yu as a US-allied, South Korean soldier, Argus kidnaps and threatens to kill Dr Kang, forcing Yu to give in (at least initially) to Argus' blackmail.

Noticeably, no standout positive American figure counterbalances this impression. The negative view of the US becomes more obvious in the character of another Korean-North American, Daniel Spencer, a rich philanthropist and humanitarian doctor, who is treated in very positive terms, but tellingly, comes from Canada. In general, despite the ostensibly equal footing of the South Korean and U.S. military in the drama, Korea rises above its old protector, through *DotS*' representations of Korea as benevolent and the US as an immoral meddler (through the CIA and Argus, the ex-soldier) in North Uruk's affairs.

Displayed righteousness and morality

The display of righteousness and morality by the Korean main protagonists further supports the notion of a distinctly different Korean self-understanding in *DotS* in comparison to both South Korea as a notorious military power abroad in, for example, Vietnam, and the US as an immoral actor in the Middle East. No soldier or medical team member challenges Korean intervention in Uruk, and the benefit of their work to Uruk locals and its moral good is never questioned. Whether the soldiers are facing off gang members or Dr Kang is caring for the health and education of children, Korea's presence in Uruk is never treated as problematic or unjustified, in contrast to that of the US, which is engaging in unethical secret deals done via Argus. When the medical team first visits the power plant under construction, they explicitly voice their positive emotions and patriotism in full view of Korean signage in this distant land.

Likewise, in Episode 3 when Dr Kang wanders around the base camp after arrival, she eventually bumps into a group of dirty, poor and hungry children. The *han'gŭl* on their donated t-shirts shows the asymmetry between them and privileged, benevolent Dr Kang who happily photographs them when she recognizes the origin of the shirts. In addition to two local girls wearing shirts with *han'gŭl* print, the scene features a boy wearing a jersey of the Korean Football Association, referencing, for example, TV images from war zones in Iraq or Syria of children wearing football jerseys from FC Barcelona, Real Madrid or Manchester United. The jersey of the Korean national football team presents Korean soft power as equal to that of European football brands.

Throughout the series, Yu becomes a virtual national embodiment as 'Captain Korea' and is shown as a shining example of human achievement, soldierly sacrifice and moral responsibility. According to the show's program director, the cryptic title of the drama alludes to how, as the sun burns itself to provide

warmth for others, soldiers and those in the medical professions sacrifice themselves for others.³⁶ Captain Yu lives according to a code of honour, even disobeying orders from superiors when his moral code compels him to do so, but importantly he also does not shy away from taking personal responsibility afterwards. He often risks his life for others in difficult situations, not sending subordinates where he would not go himself first. The one scene in which we see him in despair is after he has shot Argus dead and sits alone crying over Argus' moral fall and a lost friendship with a fellow special forces soldier.

The representation of the military as a caring and life-changing institution is noteworthy here. Its parental function is most prominently manifested in the success story of the character Private Kim Ki-bum. We first meet Kim as a troubled pickpocket in Episode 1, but he is then taken under the wing of Alpha team, and grows into a respectable army cook in Uruk and in the ultimate episode is promoted to Staff Sergeant and drills new army recruits. When Private Kim sits his final high school exam in one of the last episodes, his Alpha Team comrades surprise him at the school gate with sweets and advice, filling a parental role for their young ward. Because of *DotS*' portrayal of the military as a nurturing family built on incorruptible values, even the Chinese People's Liberation Army praised the drama as a recruitment tool.³⁷

Alpha team filling the parent role for Private Kim Ki-bum

All in all, Uruk and its population serve as props through which the Korean protagonists reassert themselves as 'good' through their

bravery, caring and sacrifice. The transformation in Uruk of Lee Ji-hun, a young doctor, is a further case in point. Lee is son of the chaeböl family behind Haesung Hospital, and struggles to become a 'real' doctor, especially in the eyes of a patient he had cowardly abandoned in the collapsing ruins of a power plant after the earthquake. In the end, he proves himself worthy after exerting himself physically and risking a deadly virus infection to save another patient, who is rude and egoistic. Notably, this is the only transformation of a character in the whole drama series; everyone else is either clearly 'good' or 'bad' from their first introduction. Even the most prominent North Korean protagonist, a Special Forces soldier, is shown throughout as an honourable patriot who goes out of his way to rescue Captain Yu in the series' finale.

Conclusion

Descendants of the Sun stands out as a mainstream pop cultural imagination of South Korea's global standing, treating the nation as standing tall in the developed world and acting as a peacekeeper in a distant country. In the drama's representation, the Republic of Korea is a rich and morally good member of the international community, naturally contributing to the security and development of Uruk. Accordingly, reading the drama in the context of the 'real world' South Korean global politics and focusing on Self-Other constructions offers insights into the (pop) cultural underpinnings of current South Korean national identity and global foreign policy.

As I have shown above, the representation of South Korea in *DotS* focuses on current political and economic achievements while omitting historical context that frames actual policy debates. Such a representation normalizes overseas military troop deployments. Korea's own history as the venue

of fratricidal war and a subsequent UN intervention, and the narrative of paying back to the international community as a child of the UN is not mentioned. On the whole the UN is only present through some flags in the background; but most noticeably there are no iconic Blue Helmets in Uruk, from South Korea or elsewhere. Even though these omissions can be explained in part by nation branding or marketing, more significant issues are at play here. Through linking the peacekeeping mission to a self-understanding of Korea as a developed and globally intervening power, *DotS* also normalizes troop deployments in common-sense domestic discourse about Korea's place in the world: the Korean Self present in Uruk is there naturally, undoubted and unchallenged, with no further explanation needed. Korean script and South Korean military troops in distant lands are treated as reflections of the country's risen status. This interpretation is supported by the antagonism toward the US, which signifies an emancipatory development from the former protector and significant Other. Moreover, Uruk is nothing more than an essentially empty signifier, an insignificant, distant and fictional space without substance, that focuses audience attention on the performance of Korea and Yu, as 'Captain Korea', on this stage.

This proud achievement-based representation of Korea in *DotS* is in line with the political implications concerning less 'victimized' narratives of Korean self-understandings that critical commentators of *DotS* have already hinted at³⁸ and mirrors insights from national identity surveys, which have observed a "new nationalism in an era of strength" and concluded that "[a] strong and prosperous South Korea is starting to think and act as such."³⁹ Indeed, according to a recent study by Emma Campbell, "for young people, pride in ROK's achievement and its growing international importance is a key part of their national identity, and as such they demand appropriate recognition for South Korea and

respect from the international community."⁴⁰

Culture-oriented analyses of world politics like that above derive their force from examining the workings of identity and power involved in the production of meaning through cultural artefacts, from which political actors have to draw, to make sense of political options and to legitimate their decisions before their constituencies. In a way, such cultural analyses can highlight changes in the constitution of identity and power relations before these are tapped into and activated in political discourse. In this light, former President Park Geun-hye's reference to the 'real descendants of the sun' during her visit to South Korean peacekeepers has to be seen as an attempt to tap into this new Korean self and the normalized image of South Korean peacekeeping for legitimization of the real world PKO mission. The question to keep in mind for upcoming debates about future peacekeeping deployments is which cultural resources political agents draw from when making the case for sending troops abroad.

Regardless of the volatility of geopolitics on the Korean peninsula, observers of South Korean foreign policy behaviour should note possibilities of a more assertive, nationalist and ambitious South Korean role in the world beyond a junior alliance partner or global model citizen. This emergence of a new South Korean nationalism also raises the question about the possible role of a reunified Korea in the world. Given the traditional anti-imperialist, militarist and isolationist North Korean foreign policy, one might wonder to what extent a unified Korean state will be inclined to perform international roles as a global model citizen or middle power within the current alliance system and international order.

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Notes

¹ Yonhap News TV, '[Pak taet'ongnyōng, hanbippudae kyōngnyō...'chintcha t'aeyangūi huye'](#)' ([President Park Praises Hanbit Unit ... 'Real Descendants of the Sun'](#)), 27 May 2016. Last accessed 13 April, 2018.

² For an extensive overview see Nicholas Kiersey, '[Popular Culture and International Relations](#),' *Oxford Bibliographies*, 28 September 2016. Last accessed 13 April, 2018.

³ Roland Bleiker, 'The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory,' *Millenium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 509-533.

⁴ Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies and Simon Philpott, 'Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum,' *POLITICS* 29, no. 3 (2009): 159.

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