

**“Becoming” North Koreans: Negotiating Gender and Class in Representations of North Korean Migrants on South Korean Television**

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**Abstract**

This article examines how North Korean migrants become subjects of their own narratives in South Korean society, with a focus on gender and class divisions as represented on television programs such as *Now on My Way to Meet You* (*Ije mannarō gamnida*, 2011–present), *Moranbong Club* (*Moranbong k’ülöp*, 2015–present), and *Unification of Love: Southern Men, Northern Women* (*Nam-nam-buk-nyō*, 2014–2017). These shows aim to depict perfectly assimilated migrants who embody the South Korean government’s image of an ideal citizen and thereby introduce an impression of “North Korean-ness” in the absence of input from the North Korea, a closed country. North Korean migrants “become” North Koreans within the programs’ formats, with mixed results. On the one hand, a “double-paned window” perspective, which relies on the North Korean panelists’ testimonies, complicates the programs’ intended narrative of exemplary migrants. On the other hand, North Korean panelists actively fortify the binary gender frame of South Korean society. For example, North Korean male panelists become antagonists when their rough and unsophisticated characteristics appear to confirm South Korean men’s superiority. These South Korean television programs focus on the polar concept of “Southern men and Northern women,” thereby marginalizing North Korean male migrants and South Korean females. Such a stratified gender structure supports South Korean males’ authority and strengthens the heteronormative structure of South Korean society.

Keywords: North Korean migrants, South Korean television, *Now on My Way to Meet You*, *Moranbong Club*, *Southern Men Northern Women*, gender, class, South Korean conservatism

More than thirty thousand North Koreans lived in South Korea in 2016, according to the Ministry of Unification (2016). The period following the mid-1990s mass exodus from North Korea has led to a considerable increase in representations of North Korean refugees and migrants in the South Korean media (Cho 2017, 9).<sup>1</sup> Because North Korea has closed its borders, South Korean audiences cannot verify the authenticity of North Korean defectors’ testimonies. However, regardless of their authenticity, these secondary representations in film, literature,

visual media, and public speeches have succeeded in creating a strong impression of “North Korean-ness.”

This article analyzes how South Korean television introduces representations of “North Korean-ness” in the absence of the “real” North Korea. The article explains how North Korean migrants are placed on a path to become the North Koreans that the television programs’ producers demand. In some programs, the North Korean migrants play an important role in the viewer’s perspective, which eventually distorts the picture intended by the producers. South Korean serial programs, such as *Now on My Way to Meet You* (*Ije mannarŏ gamnida*), *Moranbong Club* (*Moranbong k’ülŏp*), and *Unification of Love: Southern Men, Northern Women* (*Aejŏngt’ongil nam-nam-buk-nyŏ*, hereafter *Southern Men, Northern Women*), are broadcast on well-known conservative channels, such as TV Chosun and Channel A. In analyzing the shows’ characteristics, I argue that these television representations establish the migrants as “national conservatives” (*minjokchŏk posujuŏi*) and present parallels between two forms of patriarchy: one centered on the nation (the big family) and the other on the small, domestic family in South Korean society. This article addresses questions of why South Korea needs to juxtapose itself with a failed socialist state and why the conservative framings derived from the Cold War have been in vogue in South Korea, and raises additional questions about South Korean conservatives’ alternative politics.

### **The Double-Paned Window of National Conservative Programs**

Television channels such as TV Chosun and Channel A have become influential producers of images of North Korean migrants (*SaengSaeng News* 2012).<sup>2</sup> These television channels have created stereotypical, gendered images of North Koreans living in South Korea and have subordinated North Korean migrants to South Korean citizens. Because North Korean migrants’ images are still somewhat rare and extraordinary to audiences, this kind of image is a selling point for media producers. For example, the 4.553 percent audience rating of the program *Now on My Way to Meet You* in December 2015 was notable because it represented the third highest television rating at the time (Lee Seulbi 2016).

The program *Now on My Way to Meet You*, which markets itself as an entertainment show, debuted on December 4, 2011 on Channel A. TV Chosun launched the first season of *Southern Men, Northern Women*, a reality television show, on July 4, 2014, and the season

concluded in June 2015; its second season ran from July 2015 to April 2017. TV Chosun launched the talk show *Moranbong Club* on September 12, 2015.

These shows can be characterized as “national conservative” (*minjokchŏk posujuŭi*), and their common topic is reunification. In order to understand this characteristic, it is necessary to understand what conservatism means in South Korea. According to political scientists Kang Jung In and Suh Hee Kyung, the political ideology of Korean conservatism is liberalism, capitalism, anticommunism, and cultural nationalism (Kang and Suh 2013, 105). Unlike the modernization of Western countries, where modernism has been pursued in a dialectical relationship with tradition, tradition as a value does not appear in the central ideology of the Korean conservatives (Kim 2011, 23, 26). Having experienced Syngman Rhee’s and Park Chung-hee’s regimes, Korean “conservatism identifies itself with anti-communism and anti-North Korea” (NM Lee 2011, 61). After a decade of Kim Dae-jung’s and Roh Moo-hyun’s liberal governments, the conservatives recognized a need to explain their ideology to the public.

With this mindset, a group of New Rightists (*nyurait’ŭ*) emerged in 2004. The New Right argues that ethnic nationalism (*minjokchuŭi*) is outdated and under the sway of globalization; therefore, New Rightists pursue patriotism (*aegukchuŭi*) rather than nationalism. Whereas the Old Right adopts anticommunism as its core ideology, the New Right embraces North Korean human rights and democracy as its main causes. However, political scientist Jae Ho Jeon points out that the New Right’s setting of “Koreans” (*han’gugin*) instead of “our nation” (*uri minjok*) as the subject of Korean history is another form of nationalism, since “there is no difference between nationalism and patriotism when the members of the nation-state imagine themselves as a part of the same nation [*minjok*]” (2014, 188). As a result, the implications of nationhood have not faded from the New Right’s mindset.

In this regard, the values of the so-called conservative television programs, which place North Korean migrants in the forefront, are similar to those of the New Right in that these programs trust the South Korean free-market economy and honor private wealth as a barometer of individual success. Like the New Rightists, the programs no longer criticize North Korea as a communist country but problematize its human rights and democracy. They do not embrace North Korea as part of the ethnic nation but accept North Koreans who follow South Korean ideas and are willing to become South Koreans. In this sense, these programs can be considered national conservative as long as “the nation” refers to “Koreans.” In addition, the necessity of

reunification seems beyond doubt for these programs, and unification means South Korea's acceptance of North Korea. With the official support of the Ministry of Unification (an executive branch of the South Korean government), programs such as *Now on My Way to Meet You* promise to air until the day of reunification.

At first glance, these programs seem to demonstrate what political theorist Hannah Arendt describes as the notion of a "voluntary prisoner" (1996, 115). Explaining how Jews became loyal Frenchmen after their exile to France, Arendt writes, "We were the first *prisonniers volontaires* history has ever seen. These Jews not only assimilated to adapt to a new country, they were also eager to prove themselves 'super-patriotic'" (1996, 115). In the same vein, the North Korean panelists on *Now on My Way to Meet You* demonstrate their gratitude, appreciation, and loyalty to South Korea since their arrival. However, throughout the episodes, this notion of the voluntary prisoner unexpectedly fails for the North Korean panelists when the panelists unwittingly reveal social contradictions such as the economic classism and snobbishness of South Korea.

In order to understand this interruption of the narrative of voluntary prisoners, it is necessary to recognize that these programs function like double-paned windows. In his essay "The Architectural Parallax," Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek borrows from Japanese philosopher Kojin Karatani's architectural concept of "parallax" to demonstrate how the outside world seen through a window is different from the outside itself (Žižek 2010, 259). The common definition of parallax is "the apparent displacement of an object, caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight" (Žižek 2010, 244). Thinking of his experience in a Peppermint Bay community center designed by Terroir Pty Ltd, Žižek explains what he calls the "inside-outside," indicating how an outside landscape seen from inside a building is different from the landscape itself. Seen through the window frame, "the outside is no longer simply the encompassing unity containing the inside, but is itself simultaneously enclosed by the inside (or, one might say, nature is enclosed by culture)" (2010, 244). According to Žižek, the meaning of "inside-outside" encompasses more than the subject's viewing frame. That is, if the landscape of Peppermint Bay has become well known after establishment of the community center's extraordinary window frame, the nature of the view before and after the subject learns of the existence of the window frame is no longer the same.

A similar conversion occurs for the viewing frame of South Korean television. The audience looks at and thinks of North Korea through a double-paned window: the program as conceived by the producers is the first pane, and the North Korean panelists create the second pane. The audience watches the programs through the North Korean panelists' testimonies, which are mediated by the show's producers. The television shows disseminate information through these double-paned windows to their audiences, which include South Koreans, North Korean migrants, North Korean refugees worldwide, and North Koreans residing in North Korea (Epstein and Green 2013).<sup>3</sup> The perspective of a double-paned window is significant because of the role played by the North Korean panelists in the second pane.

This second pane intentionally or unintentionally distorts the purpose of the first pane and causes disjuncture to the overall frame. For example, Yeonmi Park, one of the North Korean migrants who used to appear on *Now on My Way to Meet You* as a panelist, confessed later, in her autobiography, that her "interview was heavily edited" by the writers of the show and that she had to exaggerate some episodes for entertainment purposes (Park and Vollers 2015, 244). Park's confession demonstrates that the North Korean panelists are aware of the sensational preferences and thematic direction of the program. Even though the panelists follow the program provided by the producer and play the roles of model North Korean migrants, their narratives and expressions can distort the presentation of that first pane. The following analysis of selected episodes from the three programs featured in this article will provide glimpses of these moments of disjuncture, when the North Korean panelists go beyond the notion of the voluntary prisoner and become the subjects of their own narratives.

### **Gender Repositioning of North Korean Migrants: *Now on My Way to Meet You***

Since its 2011 debut, the weekly program *Now on My Way to Meet You* has broadcast 335 episodes (as of May 20, 2018). The show's format has not changed greatly since its inception, but there have been slight revisions. For example, its initial slogan was "A Touching Project for Divided Families" (*Isan kajok kamdong p'ũrojekt'ũ*); however, starting with episode 105 on December 16, 2013, the show adopted a modified slogan, "South-North Korean Communicative Variety" (*Nambuk'an sot'ong pǒraiǒt'i*). Whereas the former phrase focused the audience's attention on the stories of the North Korean "refugees" and their vivid experiences crossing borders, the latter devotes more time to entertaining aspects of the migrants themselves,

such as their dancing and singing abilities. All the while, the show has continued to promote ethnic homogeneity between North and South Koreans and aims to facilitate the North Korean migrants' adjustment to South Korean society. However, the emphasis of the show visibly changed after the slogan's revision. The amount of time devoted to the panelists' tear-jerking narratives has decreased, and the show has offered lighter entertainment overall.

The program's format highlights one of two new North Korean panelists in each episode. Sometimes these new panelists have just come from Hanawon,<sup>4</sup> the national institution for North Koreans' cultural education, and their nascent one- or two-month experience in South Korea becomes the center of fun on the show. The show host typically asks about the migrants' most confusing experiences upon arrival in South Korea, and their answers usually spark enthusiastic applause. For example, in episode 269 (Lee SY 2017), one female migrant said that the sight of an escalator amazed her when she visited a department store in Seoul. When she said that she was not at all interested in buying goods in the store but fascinated by riding on the escalator, everyone laughed. The caption that appeared after the laughter read, "Don't worry; escalators are not only in Seoul but everywhere in South Korea." After her "amazing" experience, most of the North Korean panelists added that they had been fascinated by South Korea's development, security, education, and liberty. The contrast with North Korea's desperate situation was the next topic. This conversation ended with the migrants, as well as South Korean hosts and panelists, concluding that they were all blessed to be in South Korea. Their successful resettlement stories generally included a happy ending: "However, they are happy after all, since they are here." According to the show, the happiness found in this capitalist society attests to South Korea's superiority over North Korea, which repeats the old rhetoric of the Cold War and reminds audiences that South Korea and North Korea remain counterparts.

Criticism of *Now on My Way to Meet You* has centered on the show's representation of the female North Korean panelists. As is well known, this show borrowed its format from the Korean Broadcasting System's *Global Talk Show—The Chatter of Beauties* (*Minyŏdŭrŭi suda*), a 2006–2010 program whose main panelists were beautiful young female foreigners (Epstein and Green 2013, 5; SM Lee 2014, 77). The female North Korean panelists in *Now on My Way to Meet You* are also called "Northern Beauties" (*t'albuk minyŏ*), and Eun-ha Shin, who sits at the center of the fourteen female panelists, is called the show's "official beauty [or number one beauty]" (SM Lee 2014, 77). In all of its 335 episodes, the show's focus on the female panelists'

beauty has not changed. Studies have criticized the show's mandate that female panelists wear "too revealing" clothing and perform a "sexy dance," which underlines their sexuality. The female panelists present their memories, but from the start, they are objectified by the male audience's gaze (Tae and Huang 2012, 117–118). Even though the show advertises itself as playing a significant role in promoting the country's reunification, it sells the beauty of the female panelists for the program's popularity. As Sun-min Lee notes, young women have relatively less authority in a male-dominated society, and statements they make are often perceived as private, light, and trivial. This analysis extends to the female migrants' statements and status on the show (SM Lee 2014, 95).

Whereas the female panelists are selected from young and beautiful female migrants who have enough entertainment value (in other words, external qualities serve as the main criteria for participation), the North Korean male panelists are selected from a group of higher-class specialists or elites from North Korea. Ever since male panelists began to appear on the show, the male migrants have validated the female migrants' statements. Without the North Korean male migrants' approval, the female migrants' statements are perceived as rumors lacking positive proof. In almost every episode, the host of the show asks a male panelist, perhaps a doctor or professor, to confirm whether the female migrant's statement has credibility. According to a 2017 interview, the producers prefer women to men and give priority to the North Korean female panelists who are good looking or good talkers, but the North Korean male panelists are cast based on their expertise rather than their appearance (Kang, Beak, and Nam 2017, 573). This difference in casting demonstrates how the program establishes different roles of North Korean women and men on the show; the roles are gendered, based on the traditional binary gender division and patriarchal order of South Korean society.

As a result of this gender division, four degrees of authority appear within the cast in the show: (1) the host, a South Korean male, shares his authority with (2) four male South Korean entertainers, who are usually invited to participate in separate sections of each episode. The host lends his authority to (3) the North Korean male, and (4) the show subsumes North Korean female panelists under the male panelists. The position of the South Korean hostess seems ambiguous. She situates herself somewhere between the South Korean male and the North Korean male. Although her role is important, because she is the only South Korean woman in the show, it seems merely supportive, as she performs the program's basic agenda, which places a

premium on the panelists' appearance. For example, the title of episode 252 is "New Generation of North Korean Defectors" (Lee SY 2016), and a new male panelist, Pyong Lee, appears on the show. Lee escaped North Korea with his family when he was eleven. In 2018, he is a twenty-three-year-old YouTube video creator who runs his own online channel. He became popular for his good looks; his tall, fair-skinned, big-eyed, and slim-jawed appearance directly opposed people's stereotypes about North Korean defectors. When introducing Lee, the hostess rises to welcome him and admires his appearance enthusiastically with applause. Her performance resembles the male host's admiration for the North Korean female panelists' beauty. Her attention to Lee's appearance, however, results in a contradictory effect, because Lee is introduced right after a male panelist in the South Korean section criticizes South Korea's obsession with people's appearance.

The critical panelist is Guillaume Patry, a Canadian who used to be a popular professional gamer and has worked as an entertainer for various South Korean television programs since 2000. When the host asks Patry the difference between South Korean and Canadian youth, he offers the criticism that South Korean teenagers pay too much attention to their appearance, whereas Canadian teens have learned that true beauty comes from inside. Many of the North Korean panelists agree by nodding and showing a positive reaction. Thus, when the hostess then stands up alone to applaud Pyong Lee's appearance, the camera captures Patry's surprised face. This episode unexpectedly reveals two points: (1) The hosts do not engage in self-reflection about the premium the program places on the panelists' appearance regardless of their gender. (2) The programs' format of casual entertainment is highly vulnerable to external criticisms, as in the case of Patry.

Since North Korean male migrants recently began to appear on the show, the relationship between the South Korean and North Korean men has been highlighted. The image of North Korean male migrants is divided into three categories: North Korean experts who used to be doctors or elite members of North Korean society, soldiers who are described as ignorant and rough, and the new generation of good-looking men. Min-woo Jung, who used to be a company commander in the People's Army of North Korea, has become the representative male North Korean figure on this show. His tanned skin and strong northern accent depart from the ideal image of men in South Korea, and he has become a target of mockery to boost the show's entertainment value. Actually, however, the panelists' laughter directed at Jung reflects the

show's discrimination against North Koreans. Whenever Jung speaks, the host and other South Korean male guests ask someone to “translate” and he is characterized as a North Korean Don Juan. The show is thus cementing a negative stereotype of profligate North Korean men.

However, when Hyung-seok Lee, a North Korean between the categories of North Korean experts and the new generation, visits the show as a special guest, the hierarchy in which South Korean men are placed above the rest of the participants falls apart. Lee, a street beggar (*kkotchebi*) in North Korea for four years, defected to China with the help of his father, who had defected before him. When the episode premiered, Lee was living in Canada and working as a North Korean human rights activist.<sup>5</sup> In episode 190, his appearance surprises the South Korean male guests, because his looks contrast with that of Jung (see figure 1).



Figure 1. “Northern Men as Black and White.” In episode 190 of *Now on My Way to Meet You*, Min-woo Jung on the left is referred to as “black,” and Hyung-seok Lee on the right is “white.” The black-and-white comparison of Jung and Lee creates negative and positive value judgments of their looks, respectively. *Source*: Screenshot from Lee SY (2015).

One of the South Korean male guests says, “I was very confused when I entered the studio. I was wondering why that person was sitting there among the North Korean panelists even though he is *not* a North Korean.” Hyung-seok Lee wears a white jacket and glasses and has lighter skin than Min-woo Jung. Moreover, Lee does not have a northern accent, and his fluency in English enhances his image as an “unusual North Korean man.” This comparison intentionally denigrates Jung by promoting Lee as a representative of a new chapter of North Korean male migrants. It is interesting that Lee’s presence not only threatens Jung but also

makes the South Korean male guests insecure. The urbane South Korean male guests initially positioned themselves above the North Korean migrants. However, the appearance of Lee, who “looks exactly *like* South Koreans,” confuses them, attesting to the fact that, previously, the North Korean panelists had been perceived within a certain stereotype that did not apply to Hyung-seok Lee. The new generation of North Korean migrants, such as Pyong Lee, the YouTube creator, also does not fit the established stereotype of rustic North Korean men.

The treatment of these good-looking North Korean migrants is similar to that of the “Northern Beauties,” twisting the original gender format of the program. The previous notion of the North Korean male migrant, typified by the unsophisticated presence of Min-woo Jung, was relatively safe, because “former enemies” like him had to be submissive when they arrived in South Korea. In this simple binary frame, South Korean males were able to identify their own status with that of the nation of South Korea itself. Viewing the male migrants as ignorant and maladjusted characters satisfied the South Korean males’ desire to be superior. However, the recent arrival of the new generation of North Korean migrants, whose appearances and way of speaking are not radically different from those of South Korean men, has produced changes in the hierarchy of the two groups. Although the new generation of North Korean migrants does not shake the South Korean heteronormative patriarchal system, the migrants showcase the future of South Korean society in which 2,517 North Korean teenagers were residing as of 2016 (Korean Educational Development Institute 2016).

### **North Korean “Caste System”: *Moranbong Club*<sup>6</sup>**

With its relatively recent debut in 2015, TV Chosun’s *Moranbong Club* selects popular North Korean female migrants who had previously appeared on several television shows. This device boosts the program’s popularity. *Moranbong Club* promotes “Northern Beauties.” However, this talk show’s emphasis on the North Korean migrants’ backgrounds, such as their native regions and their class in North Korea, reflects the materialism and snobbishness of South Korea and shows how elite status in North Korea fits into South Korean power hierarchies. The show often uses expressions such as “the top one percent,” “special class,” and “gold spoon” (*kūmsujō*) as topics and headlines.<sup>7</sup> Even though the North Korean and South Korean panelists criticize the hereditary fortune and power of the family of Kim Il-sung, they nonetheless admire the migrants who come from the top one percent of North Korean society. This show transforms

North Korea's classism into South Korean economic classism without any contradiction, since the privileges that the top one percent of North Koreans have enjoyed reflect those of the upper echelons of South Korean society.

For instance, the early episodes divide the female panelists according to their home regions in North Korea and require them to compete against each other by arguing that their own region is better than the others. Episode 17 (Im and Chung 2016a) highlights North Korean migrants who used to be in the upper one percent of North Korean society in terms of education. It is well known that in order to enter the three popular universities in North Korea—Kim Il-sung University, Kim Chaek University of Technology, and Pyongyang University of Music and Dance—high grades and an elite family background are required. Without a prominent family background, students with high grades do not receive the opportunity to take entrance exams to those universities.

Furthermore, according to episode 47, there are roughly five classes in North Korean society. The privileged special group (*t'ŭkpyŏl gunjung*) includes the bereaved family members of revolutionary patriots; the core people (*haeksim gunjung*) include the families of those who died in the war and honored soldiers; the average people (*kibon' gunjung*) include the proletariat, farmers, soldiers, and intellectuals; the complicated people (*pokchaphan' gunjung*) include North Korean defectors and draft dodgers; and, finally, the hostile people (*chŏktae gyegŭp*) include landowners, pro-Japanese collaborators, spies, religious men, and defectors. People with disabilities are not included in this class hierarchy. They are segregated in a remote region and, according to the panelists, are rarely seen. People from poor family backgrounds have been evicted from the capital Pyongyang, which has turned it into an elite region.

South Korean guests are surprised by the North Korean class system and discrimination, but at the same time they admire North Koreans who come from the top one percent. Guests who used to be students at those elite universities proudly explain the privileges they enjoyed, and the South Korean hosts and other North Korean migrants on the show listen to their narratives with admiration. Lacking any criticism of North Korean class divisions or self-examination (such as a discourse on divisions in South Korean society), the show continually focuses on the migrants' privileges in the same way that other programs showcase celebrities' luxurious lifestyles. There is thus a lasting division between the North Korean migrants who used to be in the upper one

percent and the rest of the migrants from North Korean rural areas, even after they have migrated to South Korea.

Episodes 46 and 47 (Im and Chung 2016b, 2016c) intensify the expressions of *Moranbong Club*'s snobbishness and its obsession with the migrants' socioeconomic strata in North Korea. One North Korean male guest who identifies himself as a "Pyongyang native" proudly says that he had lived in Pyongyang for twenty-eight years (1968–1996) before his defection. The host then asks the other migrants whether this guest is included in the privileged group. One of the panelists says he is "a person with an excellent family background and is very *clean*." This idea of "clean" or "pure" bloodline is understood by all participants. However, when another North Korean male migrant who also came from the upper one percent in of North Korean society says that he had never had a chance to mingle with members of the lower classes like the other migrants on the show, one female migrant runs out of patience and almost yells at him, "You said that you did not even know that we, the lower class, existed, but it was same to us. We did not know you existed." Their minor quarrel is mediated by another male migrant, Kim, who ends the situation by saying, "This is why I like South Korea. South Korea does not have a class system." Criticism and admiration—over these ambivalent and contradictory ideas of bloodline and economic class—continue throughout the show without offering participants a chance to reflect on them. However, this moment of disjuncture, the minor quarrel between the North Korean migrants, creates an uneven perspective in the program and leads to two unintended accomplishments: it reveals that some North Korean panelists are unhappy with the class-centered topic of the show, and it inadvertently raises questions, as a North Korean panelist mentioned, about how success would be measured in South Korea without social classes.

Episode 52 (Im and Chung 2016d), with the subtitle "Nothing Is More Important Than Money," invites three South Korean women and three North Korean women who are known as the "wives of important people" (*samonim*) to be panelists. On the South Korean side, the women are introduced as the wives of a doctor and two higher officials; on the North Korean side, the women are the wives of two former successful businessmen and a former higher official of the North Korean political party. These upper-class North Koreans defected to South Korea because they experienced limited access to luxuries due to the surveillance and control of North Korea's socialist system. Their stories focus on the regions in which they lived, such as Gangnam in Seoul and the center of Pyongyang, recognized as the richest areas in South Korea

and North Korea, respectively. The women compare how rich and luxurious their lives are (were) and how powerful and successful their husbands are (were). In the end, the North Korean women quarrel with each other over whether money or class is more important in North Korea. This episode succinctly conveys how North Korean people from the upper class fit into the South Korean elitism and materialism that the program actively promotes.<sup>8</sup>

In the atmosphere of *Moranbong Club*, where members of the highest class of North Koreans are warmly welcomed, the migrants who do not belong to this class feel isolated. This is a key limitation of these conservative television programs, which promote elitism and materialism to their targeted audiences and lack a reflective or critical view of the class system in South Korean society. Reflection is impossible unless the programs obtain a more introspective or self-critical view of their own society, in which privileged people are praised and wealth is considered exceptional. Without such reflection, only a superficial level of criticism of North Korea is possible. Within their limitations, these programs unintentionally emphasize the commonalities between upper-class South Koreans and upper-class North Koreans, thus revealing that the materialism and snobbishness of the societies are not so different from one another.

### **Matchmakers: *Southern Men, Northern Women***

*Unification of Love: Southern Men, Northern Women* adapts its title from the old Korean saying, “Among the men, Southern men are good, and among the women, the Northern women are good.”<sup>9</sup> This program is a reality show in which two couples consisting of South Korean male entertainers and North Korean female migrants enter virtual marriages. Season 1 began on July 4, 2014 and ended on June 19, 2015 after fifty-one episodes. Season 2 began on July 17, 2015 and ended on April 7, 2017. The show depicts the typical patriarchal married lives of South Korean men and North Korean women, including the indoctrination of the women who have entered into South Korean marriage. The program clearly aims to unify South Korean men and North Korean women by encouraging real-life mixed Korean marriages as a precursor to the reunification of the country. The show focuses on how South Korean men teach their North Korean wives to become members of the South Korean marriage system, which consolidates the heteronormative patriarchy of Korean society. Whereas *Now on My Way to Meet You* and *Moranbong Club* demonstrate how North Korean migrants can become members of a big family

(that is, the nation), *Southern Men, Northern Women* shows how North Korean women can become members of a small family in South Korea.

Many virtual couples have participated over the show's two seasons, but the gendered framework has remained constant. The South Korean men perform their role as the saviors of the newcomers, and they teach the women how to be good wives in their society. In this frame, the North Korean migrants are considered potential wives who do not threaten the patriarchal system but instead fortify it. For example, episode 11 (Si 2014a) shows how the two couples spend Chuseok, the Korean harvest moon festival (*ch'usŏk*). A South Korean man, Soo-hong Park, tells his actual mother over the phone that he will bring Soo-ae Park, a North Korean woman, home for Chuseok. Without asking Soo-ae's opinion, Soo-hong tells his mother that Soo-ae will prepare all the food because she is now her daughter-in-law (even though it is a virtual marriage). He says, "You don't have to do the hard work, Mom, you have a daughter-in-law now." To prepare the food, Soo-hong calls a South Korean female friend, Min-hee, and introduces her to Soo-ae as a (virtual) sister-in-law. Min-hee teaches Soo-ae how to serve her parents-in-law: "A daughter-in-law is supposed to be nervous during holidays [*myŏngjŏl*]." Min-hee teaches Soo-ae four rules for being a lovable daughter-in-law:

1. Behave obediently and do not irritate your mother-in-law.
2. Do not get too close to your father-in-law. Your mother-in-law is also a woman who can get jealous.
3. Do not take your mother-in-law's words literally. For example, if she says to take a rest while she prepares the meal, she does not mean that you can actually rest. Follow her all around and ask her, "How can I help you, Mother?"
4. If your husband takes any action to help you in the kitchen, reject his help and tell him, "I will do it. You take a rest."

These four rules, captioned "The Strategy to Survive in the Parents-in-Law's Place/World [*shiwŏltŭ*]," center on deciphering the mother-in-law's language. When Soo-ae visits Soo-hong's actual parents, their virtual marriage gets into the "real" family zone, which confuses the line between virtual and real life.<sup>10</sup> When Soo-ae visits Soo-hong's parents in their apartment, the program edits Soo-ae's actions based on the four rules and shows how well she follows them. In this episode, Soo-hong's parents play the role of the stereotypical South Korean in-laws, even though the producers did not particularly order them how to behave. Soo-hong's parents treat Soo-ae, their virtual daughter-in-law, as a *potential* daughter-in-law and evaluate her

performance, including her attitude toward their son and her way of eating at the table. This Chuseok episode succinctly reveals the woman's role in Korean marriage by focusing on her relationship with her husband's family. As an old Korean saying goes, "When a woman is married, she should become deaf and mute at least for three years in her husband's family." In keeping with tradition, the episode showcases female North Korean migrants as marriage material, in particular, Soo-ae's experience in learning to be a daughter-in-law who obeys her husband and is docile toward her in-laws.

In an interview with the producer, Soo-ae confesses that she was uncomfortable while eating and could not even use the restroom in Soo-hong's parent's apartment. However, because she is still new to South Korean society, she does not question the role of the daughter-in-law and just accepts the rules as mandates that every woman must follow. Actually, the role of the daughter-in-law in North Korea does not differ significantly from that in South Korea, because the two Koreas are based on a heteronormative patriarchal order. The show promotes North Korean women as model Korean wives and the idea that such virtual marriages can be a microcosm of a future unified Korea. However, this idea demonstrates the gendered, subordinate relationship between South Korea and North Korea in which North Korea is represented as the docile wife in the patriarchal marriage.

A North Korean woman becoming part of a small family in South Korea is shown particularly well in episode 53 (Si 2014b), in which a chorus concert is held on January 26. For this concert, four North Korean female migrants form a singing group named Moranbong Sidae (in Korean, *Moranbong sidae* means "Moranbong generation" or "era of Moranbong"). North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un directly selects the members of Moranbong Band, a very popular North Korean group that sings for Kim and the nation (see figure 2). In the episode's concert, the South Korean counterpart is Moranbong Sidae (see figure 3). This band wears the same uniforms as the North Korean band and sings Moranbong Band's most popular song, "With Pride" ("Porandŭsi"). Whereas Moranbong Band sings for and about their nation ("My only country in the world, let's keep it great, make others jealous"), Moranbong Sidae sings for and about their husbands with slightly revised lyrics ("My only husband in the world, let's keep our home great, make others jealous"). This revision, which does not contain mockery or satire, sincerely promotes the equation between the nation and the husbands that these women are expected to serve. Furthermore, the North Korean regime and the South Korean reality show portray the

North Korean women as “proud” of their men, nation, and leader in ways that surprisingly resemble each other. The North Korean women and their images, which are used to maintain the patriarchal society of North Korea, now serve the same role in South Korean society. In this way, South Korean society and North Korean society mirror each other.



Figure 2. The North Korean popular band, Moranbong Band. *Source*: Choi (2015).



Figure 3. Moranbong Sidae, the South Korean version of Moranbong Band. Screenshot from *Southern Men, Northern Women*, episode 53.

This “ideal relationship” paradigm of South Korean men and North Korean women has also been actualized through matchmaking companies in South Korea. In 2013, there were about five matchmaking companies that brokered marriages between North Korean female migrants and South Korean men. According to the Foundation for Supporting North Korean Refugees, three out of four North Korean migrants are married to either North Korean male migrants or Korean Chinese men (Pyo 2013). However, unions of South Korean men and North Korean women are also on the rise. In fact, Young-hee Choi, who runs a matchmaking company called “Southern Men, Northern Women,” migrated to South Korea in 2002 and established her company in 2005 (Im 2010). In the five years since the company’s foundation, Choi has matched approximately four hundred couples. According to Choi, 90 percent of South Korean men seeking her matchmaking services are urban men in their early thirties to early forties (Huh 2011).<sup>11</sup> Choi thinks that whereas South Korean women are selective about men’s annual salaries and jobs, North Korean women do not consider those elements significant. Furthermore, she adds that South Korean men are kind and sophisticated, whereas North Korean men are blunt and patriarchal. Choi cites these reasons to explain why South Korean men and North Korean women seek each other. She adds that couples composed of North Korean men and South Korean women are rare, because there are few North Korean male migrants on the lists of the matchmaking companies, and South Korean women are not aware of them (Huh 2011; Im 2010).

Is it coincidental that South Korean women and North Korean male migrants are notably absent in this “ideal” marriage frame? What makes them unappealing in this frame? In contemporary South Korean society, misogynistic discourse has been prevalent, and acute tension between men and women has been a part of serious social discourse. In this environment in which talking about misogyny itself has become antagonistic, it is problematic that the image of the obedient and devoted North Korean woman is presented as an ideal type on these conservative television programs.

### **The Real Politics of North Korean Migration**

These televised entertainment shows portray a slightly different image of North Koreans than those involved in real-life politics. Instead of scenes with beautiful North Koreans, the news media show North Korean protesters participating in ultraconservative demonstrations. The gap between these two images of North Korean migrants seems confusing, but in reality, the

difference showcases the way conservative Korean groups connect with North Korean migrants. Whereas television programs reach out to a few North Koreans who are qualified for entertainment shows, the conservative groups recruit an unspecified number of North Korean migrants to serve their own political purposes.

In 2016, *The Hankyoreh*, one of South Korea's daily newspapers, reported that the Federation of Korean Industries (*Chönguk kyöngjein yönhaphoe*, hereafter FKI),<sup>12</sup> “hired” the Parent Federation<sup>13</sup> to organize demonstrations against anticonservative government protests (*The Hankyoreh* 2016b). More surprisingly, the Parent Federation also mobilized North Korean migrants' groups (*t'albukcha danch'e*) and paid for their participation (*The Hankyoreh* 2016a; *JTBC* 2016).<sup>14</sup> These two united groups—the Parent Federation and the North Korean migrants—had served the Park Geun-hye government with FKI's financial support. North Korean migrants who participated in the demonstrations shouted the Parent Federation's frequently used slogan “Pro-North Out, or Pro-Red Out” at the so-called antigovernment protesters.

It is well known that the Parent Federation and North Korean migrants' groups served in the conservative governments of Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2017); however, it is not fair to generalize them as government-controlled groups or as scapegoats mobilized by the conservative government. Instead, the question arises about why members of these groups participated in these government-led demonstrations. Of note, most of these elderly and North Korean migrants are economically and culturally marginalized in Korean society. For them, it is important to achieve recognition from society and especially from the authorities that can reward them for their social “performance.” North Korean migrants deem indispensable the chance to conduct pro-government activities because they need to avoid the government's constant monitoring and allay suspicions that they are North Korean spies. Thus, they feel the need to criticize not only North Korea but also the groups designated as pro-North. In this sense, they are also victims of the bipolar frame of “pro-North or anti-North” in South Korean society.

Established during the Cold War, South Korean conservatism has, in essence, been ideologically anticommunist and anti-North Korean. This is why the question “Is there really conservatism in South Korea?” has lingered; paradoxically, South Korean conservatism has needed North Korea as a counterpart. Even though the North Korean socialist system has failed, South Korea apparently still needs to juxtapose itself against its neighbor for political reasons.

Although the South-North ceasefire and confrontation has maintained the power of vested interests, it is a serious obstacle to political maturity through democracy. The so-called conservative television programs rely on an old framework derived from the Cold War, wherein the two Koreas still compete against one other in terms of their economic strength and political legitimacy. However, as mentioned, the programs also reveal unexpected commonalities between these two societies regarding elitism, materialism, and patriarchal order.

President Moon Jae-in of South Korea and the North Korean leader Kim Jung-un held a summit on April 27, 2018. According to the presidential secretary Yoon Young-chan, Kim Jung-un mentioned that many people in South Korea—including divided families, North Korean defectors, and the residents of Yōnp'yōngdo Island, who are living in fear of a possible attack from North Korea—were anticipating that the 2018 summit would bring some changes (Noh 2018). A surprising development was Kim Jung-un's official mention of North Korean defectors and their fear of living in South Korea as traitors. A week after the summit, on May 8, in episode 138 of *Moranbong Club*, the North Korean panelists discussed the summit and Kim Jung-un's pronouncement. The panelists also expect to meet their families and friends in North Korea once the relationship between the South Korea and North Korea improves.

In a statement to the public on May 27, 2018, after a second summit with Kim Jung-un, President Moon mentioned that the possibility of war breaking out in the Korean peninsula had caused a regression in South Korean democracy and politics. When South Korea and North Korea declare peace in the peninsula and the United States, as South Korea's strongest military ally, guarantees to the end of the armistice, South Korean national politics will find it necessary to establish a new core ideology to justify its existence.

## Conclusion

This article has analyzed three South Korean television programs—*Now on My Way to Meet You*, *Moranbong Club*, and *Southern Men, Northern Women*—that produce a new notion of “North Korean-ness” focusing on North Korean panelists' gendered and class-oriented images. South Korean television programs have promoted the image of North Korean migrants as national conservatives by showing how they become members of a big family (the nation) and the small family (heteronormative patriarchal marriage). Although these entertainment programs make it easier for South Korean audiences to see North Korean migrants, they are also

responsible for reinforcing specific images and stereotypes of them. These programs select North Korean migrants who are safely settled in South Korea economically and professionally, or sometimes those who have exceptional beauty. However, these entertainment programs are not interested in exposing discriminatory practices against North Korean migrants. On the one hand, North Korean audiences watching these shows may believe that they will soon be recognized as “complete” citizens of South Korea. In this sense, North Korean migrants are always in the process of “becoming” South Koreans. On the other hand, they are also becoming the image of “North Koreans” that the programs create. Yet, the double-paned window frame of the programs creates moments of disjuncture. The discordance between the producer’s pane and the pane of the North Korean panelists’ testimonies and reactions enables viewers to see these North Koreans in a stage of becoming. They do not just embody the “voluntary prisoners” described by Arendt; instead, through this crack of discord, they establish themselves as subjects of their own stories. With the flow of the peace discourse, North Korean migrants in South Korea are expected to play a significant role in bridging the gap between people in the two countries.

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## Notes

- 1 I differentiate refugees from migrants. Even though the current border crossers differ from the defectors during the Cold War era for multiple reasons, the term “refugee” helps to emphasize North Korea’s geopolitical isolation. I use “refugee” to refer to border crossers who have not yet achieved permanent legal status or whose own will to achieve citizenship is in a state of suspension. In this regard, the undocumented North Koreans who reside in China are refugees, since they can never achieve legal status in China. Due to China’s repatriation policy, North Koreans are exposed to the danger of enforced return regardless of their will. I use the word “migrant” to refer to North Koreans who reside in South Korea and other countries and have achieved legal status (as citizens or having been granted a visa for a temporary stay) (Cho 2017, 9).
- 2 This influence extends to not only these channels’ audiences but also their supporters. For example, on November 14, 2012, the Ministry of Unification bestowed awards upon *Now on My Way to Meet You* for its contributions to unification efforts and South Korean and North Korean relations. The show received the program award, and three North Korean migrants who participated in this program from the beginning as “Northern Beauties” won special awards. The Ministry of Unification used the expression “Northern Beauties” on its official website to explain this award (*SaengSaeng News* 2012).

- 3 It is widely known that a South Korean cultural wave (*hallyu*) is prevailing in North Korea. It is illegal to access and watch foreign programs in North Korea, but North Korean people watch South Korean dramas and entertainment shows after obtaining recorded tapes through underground sellers. It was rare to find any North Korean panelists who had not watched South Korean television before they crossed the border. Indeed, according to Stephen Epstein and Christopher Green, “The *Dong-A Ilbo* has recently reported that a young elite North Korean woman studying in Beijing defected as a result of watching *Imangap* [short name of *Now on My Way to Meet You*]” (2013, 4). They added that this story was told by Yong-hwa Kim, a defection broker, on September 15, 2013, but “it has not been independently confirmed.” However, many of the panelists said on the show that they decided to come to South Korea after they watched South Korean television, including *Now on My Way to Meet You*.
- 4 A center of the Ministry of Unification, Hanawon operates to help North Korean defectors adapt to South Korean society. The chief of this institution is a senior-level official, and in 2012, the first woman chief was named to this position. Originally named the “North Korean Defector Settlement Assistance Office,” Hanawon opened in 1999 to educate the increasing number of North Korean migrants in South Korea. Currently, the two Hanawon offices are located in Gyeonggi and Gangwon Provinces. Upon the arrival of North Koreans in South Korea, the South Korean government intensely investigates them for a period of seven days to one month to confirm their motivation for escaping, verify their identification, and determine whether they are spies. After this period, the migrants are sent to Hanawon to receive social adjustment training for three months.
- 5 Hyung-seok Lee later changed his name to Sungju Lee and published his autobiography, *Every Falling Star: The True Story of How I Survived and Escaped North Korea* (S. Lee 2016). He recently finished his master’s degree at the University of Warwick in Britain.
- 6 Moranbong is a small hill located in Northern Pyongyang in North Korea. It is believed that this hill resembles the shape of a peony blossom (in Korean, *moran* means “peony” and *bong* means “hill”). North Korea’s most famous female band’s name is Moranbong Band (*Moranbong aktan*), and it seems that this television program was similarly named due to the band’s popularity.
- 7 For example, the title of episode 13 (December 5, 2015) is “The Best Region of North Korea,” episode 17 (January 2, 2016) is “Top 1% Elites from Three Major Universities in North Korea,” and episode 21 (February 6, 2016) is “Alumni Association for the North Korean Major Universities.” Even if other episodes do not have such titles, the show consists mainly of people who belong to elite classes in North Korea and those who held positions close to the Kim family.
- 8 A study (Kang, Beak, and Nam 2017) argues that, in contrast to *Now on My Way to Meet You*, *Moranbong Club* reveals the panelists’ criticisms of and disappointments in South Korea, as well as their skepticism about capitalism. However, in *Now on My Way to Meet You*, the panelists also offer critiques of and show disappointment in South Korean society. After an examination of every episode, it is difficult to conclude that *Moranbong Club* fosters greater criticism of South Korean society than does *Now on My Way to Meet You*.
- 9 This saying has generally been used to refer to South Korean men and North Korean women, but according to *Spring Anecdote* (*Ch’unmyŏng ilsa*) in *Imha Notes* (*Imha p’ilgi*),

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- North and South here refer to the northern and southern region of Hamgyeong Province (now located in northeastern North Korea) during the Chosŏn dynasty.
- 10 Later, in episode 18, Soo-ae questions Soo-hong, “To what extent are our feelings ‘real?’” Soo-hong is a television entertainer with twenty-seven years of experience, but Soo-ae has newly arrived in South Korea as a North Korean migrant. Throughout the episodes, it becomes evident that Soo-ae confuses her feelings toward Soo-hong with this virtual marriage, whereas Soo-hong understands the line between the two relatively well.
- 11 The registration fee for the matchmaking companies is about 1.7 million won (approximately U.S. \$1,500) in 2011, and when couples decide to marry, they pay additional costs ranging from 5 million won (U.S. \$4,413) to 10 million won (U.S. \$8,827). There were five reports of matchmaking scams in 2009. By 2010, the cases of fraud increased to twenty-four (Huh 2011).
- 12 Established in 1961, FKI (Chŏngyŏngnyŏn) is designated as a representative of a close alliance between business and politics. South Korea’s representative conglomerates—including Samsung, SK, LG, and GS—are FKI’s members. FKI declared that it defends the rights of the business sector, but it has been accused of collaborating against anticonglomerate movements. FKI is designated as a representative of a close alliance between business and politics. In 2017, President Park Geun-hye was impeached for her involvement in the mergers and amnesty of large corporations such as Samsung and SK in exchange for collecting illegal funds through FKI. Lee Jae-yong, the head of the Samsung group, promised to withdraw from FKI, and LG and KT officially withdrew in January 2017. It turns out that FKI deposited more than 500 million won (approximately U.S. \$5 million) in the borrowed-name account of the Secretary General of the Parent Federation. Although evidence proves that FKI, the Parent Federation, and North Korean migrants’ groups are associated, many media and newspapers have been reluctant to discuss the issue due to the power of FKI. FKI businesses were not only the advertisers but also the sponsors of those media.
- 13 The Parent Federation (*Ŏbŏiy ōnhap*) was established on May 8, 2006 (May 8 is Parents’ Day in South Korea), and today it is called the Union of Korean Neoliberal Extremists. The group is known for being ultraconservative and strongly anticommunist. It has held rallies such as the one urging the Democratic Party’s demolition (August 10, 2013), as well as rallies against the National Teachers’ Labor Union (September 23, 2013), the Korean Railway Workers’ Union strike (December 27, 2013), Seoul city’s free lunch policy (December 20, 2010), Hanjin heavy industry strikes (July 30, 2011), and the reconstruction of truth about the Sewol Ferry Disaster (February 5, 2016). The public and media have criticized the Parent Federation for its mobilization regarding government services.
- 14 It turns out that the North Korean migrants’ groups were mobilized at the request of the Parent Federation, and every individual received 20,000 won (approximately U.S. \$20) per demonstration (*The Hankyoreh* 2016a; *JTBC* 2016).

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