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Article:

K-drama Narrates the National: Korean Identities in *Crash Landing on You*

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Abstract

This article considers how a very popular South Korean TV drama, *Crash Landing on You,* both interprets and produces Korean identity through its imagining of the 'national'. We draw on constructivist literature that explores the biographical parameters of national identity narratives and their significance in global politics to examine changing representations of North Korea on South Korean screens. We analyze *Crash Landing* as a set of representations that mirror South Korea's construction of Korean national identit(ies), with real-world, socio-political consequences. We argue that nostalgic depictions of North Korea on screen situate it as the receptacle of a Korean past characterized by ruralness and intimate community life. In contrast, capitalist (post-)modernity is South Korea's inescapable present, signifying its material victory over the North by virtue of its developmental successes. Finally, reunification is the future-oriented project that unites the divided biographical trajectories of both Koreas but remains materially elusive.

Keywords

North Korea, South Korea, popular culture, international relations, national identity, conflict, reunification

Introduction

Scholars of International Relations (IR) have demonstrated a growing interest in the ways popular culture conveys and produces representations of international actors and the international sphere itself (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009). Popular culture often reaches larger audiences than state-driven public diplomacy campaigns, and it has the potential to shape global perceptions of foreign states and societies, and their roles in the world. States have long used culture to promote and protect national interests, including in propaganda campaigns. Even when popular culture is not instrumentalized by states for strategic purposes, it still produces representations of international allies and enemies (Fries 2005), reflecting geopolitical worldviews. In response, states often seek to control and mitigate the effects of negative representations of themselves in foreign popular culture productions, which can fuel international tensions (Saunders 2008; Haggard and Lindsay 2015).

Films (Schlag 2019), novels (Barratt 2012), cartoons (Shim 2017) and TV dramas (Grayson 2017) are particularly impactful because they speak to human emotions, which play a significant role in international politics (Bleiker and Hutchison 2015). Popular culture engages sensory experiences instrumental to the production of international relations (Bleiker 2009, 2018), and articulates political constructions of 'us' and 'them' via relevant characters and narratives (Duncombe and Bleiker 2015) that define the international. While images represent and inform identity-making processes, critical IR scholars have also shown that images play a performative role (Callahan 2020, 2). They can incite responses among citizens and state actors, therefore exercising power as productive objects. Images are thus not only used strategically or for ideological purposes but can also mobilize affect (Callahan 2020, 19), contributing to the production of desired realities and excluding undesirable elements from

collective realities. Popular culture products are also produced at specific points in time, when societies are considered by producers as ready to accept narratives that may evolve away from existing paradigms. Narratives are likely to be supported if they correspond to everyday perceptions and experiences (Cho 2009, 229), while stories and images circulated in popular culture products may, in turn, shape political environments and the acceptability of official policies.

East Asian states are particularly attentive to the promotional asset that popular culture can represent. South Korea, for instance, has mobilized a private sector-led boom in Korean cultural productions, successfully exported to East Asia and beyond (Chung 2019). Its music, film and TV dramas have increasingly benefitted from global content-sharing platforms and streaming services like Netflix, garnering "K-culture" legions of fans worldwide and raising positive consciousness toward Korea among global audiences (The Straits Times 2020). In late 2019, a new Korean TV drama, *Crash Landing on You*, gained particular attention both locally and internationally, thanks to a storyline that transported audiences across the inter-Korean divide and presented a multi-dimensional interpretation of life inside North Korea. It achieved a viewership of over 20 percent in South Korea (Sunio 2020) – close to an all-time record for a TV drama on a cable network – and was also well received in East Asia and around the world, thanks partly to an increase in pandemic-driven television consumption (Aspesi 2020; Ng 2020).

The drama follows the story of a South Korean *chaebol* heiress and successful businesswoman, Yoon Se-ri, who accidentally finds herself in North Korea after a paragliding accident. She is rescued by a North Korean army captain, Ri Jeong-hyeok, who hides her from the authorities and attempts to send her back to the South safely. A romantic relationship

develops between them, but their union is ultimately constrained by the division of the peninsula. Their story is situated in a long history of screen representations of North Korea in the South. Until the 1990s, North Korea tended to be portrayed as a monolithic, threatening enemy by South Korean screenwriters. From the early 2000s, however, a turn toward more varied, humanising interpretations of North Korea on screen emerged, corresponding to diplomatic rapprochement on the peninsula, leading to screen scenarios centred around convivial interpersonal relationships between Southerners and Northerners. Most of these films, however, did not offer plausible scenarios for overcoming the conflict between the two countries. *Crash Landing* shares many features of what Lee and Kim (2017) call "division films," but it also adds new depth via detailed depictions of everyday life in North Korea that move beyond the securitising discourses common in media representations of the country. This depth is enabled by the 16-episode format, a slower presentation of commonalities and differences between the two countries, as well as the exploration of friendships and enmities developing both at and across the border. As a result, *Crash Landing* contains well-developed representations that are useful for exploring how South Korea imagines itself, North Korea and a unified Korean identity.

In addition, *Crash Landing* was produced as part of a strategy by the cable channel, tvN, to create "K-Content" aimed "toward the world," in partnership with Netflix (tvN 2021). Indeed, *Crash Landing* is one of dozens of tvN dramas made available globally on Netflix, which are gaining larger audience numbers year on year. The drama's content was thus designed with both a domestic and an international audience in mind, as part of the continuing, private sector-led, but strongly government-supported promotion of *Hallyu* [the Korean Wave], South Korea's core soft power resource (Chung 2019). The presentation of Korean identity in

Crash Landing must thus be considered in light of this political consciousness held by the creators and the production companies involved.

This article considers how *Crash Landing* both interprets and produces Korean identity through its imagining of the 'national'. This is an important question because of the 70 year-long "national" division and because the prospect of Korean reunification is highly dependent upon the imagined future of the two Koreas as a single community. Indeed, if the nation-state is the object of international relations, scholars must offer insights into what defines the nation-state as a community of interests driving its interactions with other states (Hall 1999, 11). Therefore, exploring the ways national communit(ies) are constructed, articulated and co-exist on the peninsula is a prerequisite to understanding the international politics of the two Koreas. We argue that *Crash Landing* presents politically significant visions of what Korea has been, what it is today and what it could be in the future, drawing on constructivist literature that discusses the biographical parameters of national identity narratives and their significance in global politics (Berenskoetter 2014). We explore how the drama envisions and reflects Korean identit(ies), while also glossing over political economic and geopolitical realities that threaten the narrative coherence of such identities. This occurs within a South Korean promotional agenda that projects both desirable and undesirable geopolitical realities between the two Koreas.

This research is based on analysis of primary data combined with secondary sources. Data from the drama was coded into categories relevant to the construction of national identity narratives in this context: the past (nostalgia), the present (capitalism, modernity), the future (imagining reunification), and the portrayal of the Korean conflict. Once coded, the data was analyzed through the lens of our theoretical framework.

We start by looking at changing representations of North Korea on South Korean screens. We then analyze *Crash Landing* as a set of representations that consolidate South Korea's construction of Korean national identit(ies). We use the plural here to emphasize that we see multiple identities in evidence, reflecting the complexities of 'nationhood' on the Korean peninsula, where the distinct national biographies of North and South run parallel to an imagined, pan-Korean identity grounded in the historical unity of the two Koreas and the prospect of future reunification. These biographies consist of chronological narratives that evolve from pre-modernity to post-modernity. We argue that nostalgic depictions of North Korea situate it as the receptacle of a Korean past characterized by ruralness and intimate community life. In contrast, capitalist (post-)modernity is South Korea's inescapable present, signifying its material victory over the North by virtue of its developmental successes. Finally, reunification is the future-oriented project that unites the divided biographical trajectories of both Koreas. However, *Crash Landing* offers an ending consistent with the geopolitical status quo on the peninsula, aligning with public opinion data showing that while South Koreans are emotionally attached to reunification, its practical realisation remains elusive and controversial. We conclude by suggesting that these biographies of the national provide a script that is consistent with South Korea's policy agenda *vis-à-vis* both North Korea and the world, by either permitting or excluding certain forms of geopolitical action, while at the same time advancing South Korea's international image.

North Korea on Screens

East Asia has been increasingly connected through popular culture flows since the 1970s, when national modernisation projects produced music, film and television industries, helping to make products available to eager new generations of media consumers. TV dramas in particular have formed a large part of the region's popular entertainment (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008, 1). While Japanese TV dramas initially dominated East Asian screens, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis enabled the emergence of cheaper South Korean popular culture products. Backed by industry-wide initiative, *Hallyu* [the Korean Wave] was rapidly embraced throughout the region by the mid-2000s (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008, 4–6) and in the 2010s, its popularity expanded globally. The success of South Korean pop culture has also benefitted from South Korea's ambitious nation branding efforts, launched in the late 2010s to improve its image as a leading world economy (Schwak 2018), while differentiating the South from its troublesome northern neighbor (Son 2018).

By contrast, North Korea is regularly portrayed by the international media as the very antithesis of global modernity (Shim and Nabers 2013), a threatening antagonist and a pathological anomaly in the liberal international order. In response to such depictions, the North Korean government has attempted to project a narrative of victimhood, pacifism and commitment to human rights, despite its decisive pursuit of nuclear weapons capability and its grave human rights record (Ballbach 2016; Fahy 2019). North Korea's responses to perceived threats to its international reputation have included attacks directed at the creators of the US film *The Interview*, the South Korean film *Ashfall* and the drama *Crash Landing on You* (The Straits Times 2020), each of which represented North Korea in ways it found offensive.

Throughout the Cold War, the painful legacy of the Korean War (1950-53) and fierce anti-Communism in the South meant the North was almost exclusively presented as a

dangerous enemy, its citizens brainwashed devotees to the socialist cause. In the 1990s, however, the consolidation of South Korea's newly acquired democracy and a relaxing of media censorship allowed greater freedom for screenwriters (Hwang 2016, 179). New films reimagining inter-Korean relations could therefore present stories that humanized North Koreans and explored the possibility of camaraderie between Northerners and Southerners, at least at the level of individual interaction. These on-screen representations coincided with the South's pro-engagement Sunshine Policy of the early 2000s, which facilitated rapprochement, dialogue and cooperation with the North. In a post-Cold War atmosphere of triumphant liberal democracy and market capitalism, North Korea was reframed as an estranged brother, including through the use of comedy, irony and farce to explore North-South relations in a cathartic manner (Epstein 2009, 1-2). The 2000 box office hit film *Joint Security Area* (JSA) introduced audiences to the idea that the Demilitarized Zone between North and South could be a space of friendship rather than constant tension by presenting a story of friendship between North and South Korean border guards that reframed the North Korean 'other' (Cho 2009, 229). Films like *Shiri* (1999) and *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2005) emphasized the joint history of both Koreas and their common experience of foreign interference, presenting the inter-Korean division as a shared tragedy and producing a sense of solidarity (Tilland 2020).

Crash Landing on You follows these earlier trends in representations of North Korea on South Korean screens, but with some differences. First, being a TV drama of 16 episodes made available internationally on Netflix, it reached a wide audience in South Korea and beyond, and dedicated considerable screen time to detailed depictions of North Korean everyday life. Second, *Crash Landing* was released at the end of 2019, shortly after the dramatic return to an atmosphere of rapprochement between North and South Korea and the United States, following a decade of hostility. Third, *Crash Landing* portrays neither a scenario

of inter-Korean unification, nor of heightened conflict, but rather one in which co-existence allows the tentative exploration of a positive relationship across the 38th parallel. Finally, unlike preceding visual scripts, it not only explores the security tensions between the two countries, but also contrasts their political economic systems, their uneven levels of economic and social development, and their staggered emergence into modernity. In doing so, it provides greater depth in its portrayal of Korean identit(ies), both united and divided. The drama prompted scholarly attention shortly after its release (Son 2020) and recent research has explored its popular reception both in South Korea, including among North Korean escapees, and internationally (Epstein and Green 2020). In this analysis, however, we focus on South Korean narratives of Korean nationhood portrayed in *Crash Landing*, through a temporal, biographical lens. We analyze how Korea is conceived in the South Korean national imagination today, and how this informs the peninsula's international relations.

National Biographies: Imagining Korean Identity in the Past, Present and Future

Crash Landing's exploration of relationships across the border provides meaningful insights into South Korean understandings of itself, of North Korea and of an imagined, pan-Korean nation. Constructivist IR scholarship is useful for understanding how South Korea narrates its own identity, both *vis-à-vis* North Korea and as part of an imagined, pan-Korean nation. Understanding these identities matters because they can shape the South's policy calculations regarding engagement with its neighbors and the world, due to the dynamic relationship between national identity and state policy described in constructivist scholarship (Bloom, 1990; Giddens 1991; Wendt 1999).

For Felix Berenskoetter (2014), the nation is,

… an entity constituted through a narrative designating an experienced space

(giving meaning to the past) intertwined with an envisioned space (giving

meaning to the future) and delineated through horizons of experience and of

possibility… (282)

This nation, then, is constituted by several spatio-temporal elements, which are articulated in a national biographical narrative. While pointing usefully to the importance of "private knowledge" (Wendt 1999) and "meaningful experience" (Bloom 1990) in articulating the parameters of a national biography, constructivist scholarship tends to be vague in describing what specifically constitutes this knowledge or experience (Berenskoetter 2014, 267). Berenskoetter thus makes a case for understanding the nation as a construct resulting from a narrative that (selectively) describes the past, present and future, which is also situated "somewhere" in a way that stimulates a feeling of being "home" (Berenskoetter 2014, 275). Korea is an illuminating case study to explore forms of knowledge and experience constitutive of national biographies, as it presents a situation where geopolitical borders do not constrain all aspects of mutually understood culture or meaning, and where private knowledge is shared at multiple levels, both within and between the two Koreas at different points in time and space. *Crash Landing* participates actively in narrating multiple Korean national biographies, and in doing so, it both mirrors and reinforces real-world national biographical parameters from the South Korean perspective.

In the 'real world', national biographies create a sense of security-giving community and help to define what Bloom (1990) calls the "national interest": a force which enables and constrains policy due to its influence on "collective agency" at the policy-making level (Berenskoetter 2014, 263). Berenskoetter (2014, 279) describes the central role of agents, both government and civic, in carrying and contesting the national biographical narrative, arguing

that doing so is a creative, "artful" process that, in liberal democracies, is as likely to occur in state policy discourse as it is in novels, television or social media debate. In Korea, this contestation is particularly acute because of the geopolitical division of what was once a single nation, resulting in the coexistence of multiple national biographies. Despite this, the outside world will often only be aware of a broader, "master narrative" (Berenskoetter 2014, 279) comprised of the less contentious aspects of a nation's identity, and this is the version of the narrative South Korea seeks to present in the K-content it so actively exports to the world.

This theoretical approach is useful because it is attentive to the temporal aspects of national imaginings that often result in incoherent interpretations of Korean national identity. While a more straightforward social constructivist approach highlighting practices of discursive 'othering' appears frequently in scholarly discussion of South Korean popular culture representations of North Korea (Cho 2009), this literature tends to overlook the nuances offered by an understanding of the biographical, spatio-temporal aspects of what constitutes a sense of national community. In the following section, we first look at how North Korea is portrayed through a nostalgic lens in *Crash Landing*, embodying elements of a shared past that exists in a space across the border. We then focus on capitalist modernity as the defining feature of South Korean self-understanding and experience in the present – the face it seeks to show to the world – and a feature that also creates a boundary against the North. Finally, we consider the imagined future of the Korean peninsula by critically assessing how Korean unification is narrated in *Crash Landing*, before concluding with some final reflections on how this pop culture artefact might inform our understanding of Korean international relations.

Nostalgia: Remembering Korea's Past

When Yoon Se-ri finds herself in North Korea in the opening episode of *Crash Landing*, she encounters a fictionalized version of South Korea's own, pre-developmental past (episode 1). The North Korean village she arrives in has only sporadic electric lighting, men pull carts with oxen, and women cook over coals, waking up before dawn to get started on a long day of work. Yet Se-ri soon realizes that the slower pace of North Korean life, which is closely in tune with the seasons, feels curiously pleasant in contrast to the fast-paced South. North Korean villagers are portrayed as affectionate, loyal and humorous. Se-ri's rescuer, Captain Ri Jeong-hyeok, prepares a homemade meal in a scene where the aesthetics of slowness and purity remind viewers of simplicity and tradition, tying North Korea's apparent 'backwardness' to postmodern trends in South Korea around organic food production (episode 2, see also Epstein and Green 2020). Life in the rural North Korean village is accompanied by gentle music (episode 2) that recalls references to Korea as the "land of morning calm," now a distant memory in the bustling South. The drama shows North Koreans eating simple, traditional Korean fare (episodes 4, 14, 16) while taking time to enjoy each other's company.

Communities in the North are presented as both intimate and insular, functioning as extended families where traditional social hierarchies are upheld. Indeed, while Se-ri is initially portrayed as a capricious and demanding CEO of a South Korean fashion and beauty company, she is softened by her time in the North. She learns to enjoy simple pleasures and becomes a more sociable, kinder manager to her employees (episode 12). In the final episodes, Jeong-hyeok impresses upon Se-ri attitudes that embody traditional behaviors around self-care (episode 14) as a responsibility toward oneself and one's family. Throughout the drama, he also makes frequent sacrifices for his family, demonstrating traditional values of filial piety, and encourages Se-ri to do the same for her own, troubled family (episode 14).

The drama's depiction of North Korea can thus be seen as marked by Southern nostalgia toward pre-modern ways of life, occurring in a space that resembles a rural "home" in a number of ways, from the style of the buildings to the natural surroundings. The presentation of North Korea as a country caught in another time (Kim 2013, 529–30) and a site of nostalgia for South Koreans is not entirely new in South Korean screen representations. However, the sheer volume of episode time contained in *Crash Landing* does allow for a more varied exposition of daily life. On-screen written notes provide clarification of words or phrases used in North Korea that may be unfamiliar to Southerners, while characters themselves also provide technical explanations about unfamiliar words or aspects of life in the North. However, many visual elements of the North in *Crash Landing* also recall South Korea's recent past. The drama pokes fun at the fashion choices of the village women in North Korea, with their conservative yet kitsch clothing, bright makeup and retro hairstyles. Yet the styles on show are not dissimilar to South Korean fashions of the 1980s and 90s. Loudspeaker announcements calling North Korean villagers to morning group exercise (episode 1) hark back to similar exercise routines practiced at school and within corporate offices in South Korea until the 1990s – a practice inherited from the Japanese colonial era (1910-45).

The presentation of certain things familiar but less accessible to South Koreans induces a sense of fondness, given their links with South Korea's past. Indeed, although seemingly banal aspects of the everyday, fashion trends, community activities and ways of cooking and eating do become an integral part of the national imagining when shared and practiced widely over time (Billig 1995), lasting in collective memory long after they are abandoned as routine. Yet images linked to past habits and behaviors may also prompt sadness when contrasted against the reality of life in the South today, given the lack of time and space for indulging in simple, slower pleasures, intimate social ties (see Epstein and Green 2020 on the maintenance

of *jeong* in North Korea), or travelling outside urban centers. Scholars have shown that nostalgia is a common experience and an "adaptive mechanism" in societies marked by accelerated social and political change (Davis 1979; Turner 1987). It is therefore not surprising that South Koreans, having lived through what Chang (2016) calls "compressed modernity," sometimes express a longing for the past to escape the disorienting effects of modernity. In *Crash Landing*, bittersweet depictions of North Korea's rural simplicity and intimate human relations perhaps express a "longing for what is lacking in a changed present… a yearning for what is now unattainable, simply because of the irreversibility of time" (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 920).

However, the nostalgic depiction of elements of South Korea's past and of a rural Korean identity portrayed through the lens of North Korean village life does not indicate a desire to revive the past in South Korea or to re-inhabit North Korea. In the drama, North Korea remains an intrusive totalitarian state where characters regularly face state oppression and corruption, and it is not exempt from class disparities. The romanticization of North Korean village life, which somewhat downplays the seriousness of material deprivation in the North, is tempered by reminders of the state's darker side. Indeed, despite narrative expectations, Se-ri does not choose to give up her life in the South to remain in this slow-paced, traditional version of Korea. Hence, the longing for the pre-modern past invoked by *Crash Landing* is tied to an acknowledgment that it is irretrievable, what Boym calls "reflective nostalgia" (in contrast to "restorative nostalgia," (Boym 2002)). If Se-ri appreciates the pleasures of the past, it is only because they contrast with her own hypermodern lifestyle in the South in ways which are momentarily enjoyable, but which would impede her sophisticated way of life in a liberal democracy.

Nostalgia is therefore a key aspect of the way 'Koreanness' is represented in *Crash Landing*. However, a national biographical narrative is "not a record of everything that ever happened... but highlights the experiences that matter" (Berenskoetter 2014, 269). Choices around what is remembered are guided by forces, most notably emotion and (perceived) morality, that are deemed useful for providing a national collective with a sense of security in who they are (Giddens 1991). When articulated in political discourses, scholarship, or popular culture, the nostalgic elements of a national narrative conjure an "idealized and stereotyped self-image" that collectively inspires pleasure, pride, or longing (Bryant 2008, 10). In *Crash Landing*, nostalgic representations of the pre-developmental past and affection between the characters reify elements of a unified Korean identity from a firmly South Korean standpoint. Nostalgia also highlights an irreversible discontinuity between past and present and reinforces contrasts between the two Koreas. Underlying these nostalgic representations is an exclusive, South Korean vision of Korean reunification that is conditional upon North Korea's ability to modernize and liberalize. Positive elements of the past remain common experiences that all Koreans can look back on with fondness, but they constitute a pan-Korean national narrative that lacks continuity with present-day realities.

Capitalist Modernity: Korean Identity in the Present

The contrast between the parameters of past and present in Korea's national biographies is made highly visible in *Crash Landing*. From the drama's introduction, the visually muted North, with its low-rise, run-down villages and traditional and military imagery, is contrasted with the technicolor South, its high-rise buildings, flashy boutiques and both Western and civilian attire. The South is firmly associated with capitalism (specifically consumption) and modernity. Se-ri's return to Seoul from the North is a return to familiarity (episode 10), an

acknowledgment of the ontological stability provided by modernity (Giddens 1991). *Crash Landing* participates in the stabilisation of the national 'Self' by presenting the South Korean present as a safe place and moment in which contemporary Korean identity is affirmed. The choice of capitalist modernity over communism highlights the weakness of North Korean ideology, which is easily surrendered by the North Korean characters when opportunities arise (episodes 10, 11, 12, 13). The present is characterized by division, but also by the triumph of the South through its success and appeal – a teleological narrative that portrays South Korea's present as the only kind of present imaginable.

South Korea's national experience is characterized by what Chang (2016, 33, 36) calls "compressed modernity": the coexistence in contemporary South Korean society of "traditional, modern, and postmodern values and cultures". The persistence of traditional values and culture alongside (post)modern culture forces citizens to "time travel" repeatedly in daily life (Chang 2016, 36). The resulting difficulty in selecting orienting values has led to the reification of selected features of both capitalist modernity and tradition, which are constantly rebalancing in response to local and external socio-cultural pressures. Despite these nuances, in *Crash Landing*, South Korea represents absolute modernity in the face of a North Korea that is economically and culturally pre-modern. The North is also internally weak: in episode 2, North Korean officers are seen eating relief goods from South Korea (Lim 2015). In several scenes North Korean characters are gently mocked for their fashion choices (episode 10, 11) and their naivete. In contrast, the first images of Seoul are of expensive cars and nightclubs, and the heroine is introduced as a savvy, high-flying CEO (episode 1).

Moreover, it is mostly capitalism that characterizes Korean modernity. The contrast North Korea creates with capitalist society is thrown into stark relief when the North Korean

soldiers are deployed to South Korea on a secret mission. When they reach Seoul, they are amazed by the sheer volume of cars, the diversity of food products available, the comforts of *jjimjilbang* [bath houses], and the ubiquity of hot water and electricity (episodes 11, 12). The character of Se-ri embodies the apex of Korean capitalism, but also its excesses. For her, the South is Gangnam, Seoul's wealthiest district, which she refers to as the "heart of capitalism". She is a rich *chaebol* heiress, coming from the "0.001 percent" in South Korea, or "high class" as she adds in English for emphasis (episode 2). The drama also alludes to the adoption in South Korea of the latest global trends in business management: managers heading large conglomerates, Corporate Social Responsibility programmes, and benevolent capitalism (episode 16). However, *Crash Landing* does not shy away from highlighting the corrupting consequences of capitalism: religion is portrayed as merely instrumental to prosperity in the South (episode 1), while the *chaebol* family fulfils a common stereotype by being presented as broken and corrupted (Choe 2018).

There is also a mythical element to South Korean capitalist modernity as portrayed in *Crash Landing*. The country's development appears ahistorical: nowhere in the drama is it signalled that South Korea's prosperity is the result of a contentious politico-economic process (Burkett and Hart-Landsberg 2010). In contrast to South Korea's experience of authoritarian developmentalism, the state appears absent in South Korean capitalism (while it is omnipresent in North Korea). In addition, Se-ri represents an upper-class lifestyle that is only accessible to few South Koreans. *Crash Landing* therefore paints an idealistic picture of the South as a place of ubiquitous wealth, while glossing over the country's growing inequalities as a result of its neoliberal transition (Pirie 2007). By excluding South Korean state institutions and socio-economic disparities from its portrayal of South Korean modernity, the drama precludes the

possibility of challenging the exclusive vision of South Korean capitalism as the only kind of present acceptable on the Korean peninsula.

Finally, *Crash Landing* presents a particular conceptualisation of class as it imagines the possibility of a reunion between the two Koreas via the main characters. The drama's lovers, separated by the inter-Korean division, nevertheless find a way to meet annually in Switzerland, thanks to their privileged socio-economic backgrounds, which are far from representative of either North or South Korean society more generally. Unlike the majority of their compatriots, Se-ri and Jeong-hyeok represent the 'ideal' man or woman envisioned in postmodern Korea and are thus endowed with beauty, connections, wealth and international mobility. Indeed, Se-ri and Jeong-hyeok embody the existence of a class hierarchy that seems to mirror one another and to unite both Koreas despite their different political economic systems. Yet while their embodiment of socio-economic success allows them to find a space to coexist in the peninsula's present, viewers are left wondering what their longer-term future might look like, and indeed what this suggests about the future of the peninsula itself.

Envisioning the Future Through Unresolved Reunification

The reunification of the Korean peninsula is a key component of the imagined future in the national biographies of North and South Korea. To be considered viable, national biographies tend to require a "creative vision" that maintains a form of continuity with the past and a sense of security for the national collective moving forward, while also legitimising the political choices of those in power (Berenskoetter 2014, 272). A future vision is an important source of national security, but it must be coherent with the past and the present in ways that ensure members of the national collective are willing and able to pursue that vision

(Berenskoetter 2014, 272). In addressing how the future is envisioned, Berenskoetter (2014, 272) notes that when the past is a site of trauma or suffering, the future tends to be constructed as a space free from such trauma. In Korea, this means imagining a future Self that is not colonized, at war, or divided. As a result, despite disputes over the modalities of its accomplishment, reunification has been the dominant national vision for the future of the two Koreas since their division. Declaring unification redundant or impossible remains politically taboo, because the idea of unification is coherent with the Koreas' shared past, and it represents a symbolic victory over the foreign meddling (Japanese colonisation and the Cold War) considered responsible for the division.

However, visions of the future in national biographies must also contain sufficient narrative vagueness to allow room for integrating new experiences and possibilities (Berenskoetter 2014, 273). Indeed, the "utopia" of a united Korea is invariably articulated at the policy level in unspecific terms, promising little other than "mutual benefit and common prosperity" for all Koreans (Suh 2009). In South Korea, the ideological divide between left and right has led to a continuous dispute over the methods and purposes of engagement with North Korea. Any discussion of a detailed roadmap for unification tends to lead to conflict, which may undermine the broad collective appeal of reunification as a shared vision for the future.

As a result, in *Crash Landing*, the future is envisioned in an uncontentious and somewhat distant manner: through the possibility of individual-level reunification off the peninsula and through the presentation of North Korea as a different kind of 'other', which can co-exist with the South. Throughout the drama, reunification is mentioned explicitly on several occasions, but without certainty or conviction about how or when it will take place. None of the characters decide to defect as eager viewers may have hoped they might. Instead, the two

lovers agree to reunite briefly in Switzerland each year (episode 16), signalling the untimeliness of reunification and the consequent choice to pursue a sporadic form of togetherness that temporarily alleviates the past and present trauma of the division.

Yet even if reunification is not envisioned concretely in the drama, the possibility of North Korea's convergence in socio-economic terms with the South is explored as a possibility. North Korea is portrayed as a familiar but exotic neighbor, a people whose social behaviors and cultural values are not dissimilar to that of the South, thanks in large part to creeping marketisation. This points to the possibility of reunification through a longer-term, organic form of socio-economic convergence. North Korea has private markets, where people can buy sought-after Southern products and enjoy a (limited) form of capitalist economy (Schwekendiek and Xu 2020). *Crash Landing's* portrayal suggests North Koreans might possess different forms of humor and table manners, but elites on both sides of the border display relative wealth, engage in entrepreneurial activities and hold cosmopolitan aspirations enabled by relative freedom of movement. Moreover, in both Koreas the characters are relatable, mirroring one another over the divide. The kindly villagers and the band of soldiers in the North share the community-oriented attitudes and concerns of Se-ri's employees in the South. Similarly, the villains on both sides of the border prove that neither Korea is free from corruption and criminality. The gap dividing the two countries appears more material than socio-cultural. *Crash Landing* thus suggests that that both peoples feel a sense of ethno-cultural proximity despite their different political economic systems and that North Korea is capable of reforms that would bring the two Koreas closer with time.

In addition, the division is portrayed as an arbitrary source of mutual suffering and injustice. This shared sense of victimhood between North and South Korea in relation to Cold

War politics allows solidarity to emerge (Choi 2010, 36). In *Crash Landing*, it is through mutual animosity toward Japan that the North Korean characters overcome their sense of inadequacy in Seoul and experience solidarity with South Koreans while watching a Korea-Japan football match in a restaurant (episode 13).

However, beyond tentative signals of shared experiences and future prospects, *Crash Landing* resorts to a form of irresolution of the conflict common in South Korean screen productions (Yi 2018, 120). Reunification is rhetorically present in characters' discussions but absent from the drama's visual script. This aligns with scholarly research describing the limits of imagining a united future for the peninsula or drawing a detailed roadmap toward political-economic unity (Bleiker 2005). *Crash Landing*'s representations of the North-South relationship therefore accurately reflect the centrality of reunification as a shared rhetorical future due to the continuing sense of familial affection toward North Korea, even though the sense of ethno-cultural proximity is gradually decreasing, particularly among younger generations of South Koreans (Kim, Kim and Kang 2018; Seoul National University 2019, 38). The drama concurrently reflects the difficulty of finding a consensual road to reunification and the doubts around actual reunification among the South Korean public. Indeed opinion polls show a growing preference for maintaining the status quo and pursuing the peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas, rather than stepping into a potentially destabilising and costly unification process (Seoul National University 2019; Lee 2020). *Crash Landing* thus handles with care South Korea's contentious vision for its own future, and the future of the Korean peninsula.

Conclusion

We have shown throughout this article that popular culture can shape or consolidate existing political representations as part of an agenda aimed at securing a coherent, positive image for the nation-state in the world. This effect has been particularly salient in East Asia where societies have been connected since the 1970s through pop culture flows. East Asian TV dramas have often attracted large audiences and impacted intra-regional perceptions of social and political affairs. On the Korean peninsula, where conflict persists and tensions are periodically high, identities and public perceptions play a key role in shaping the particular image both Koreas seek to present to the world, while also affecting the conditions for a move away from conflict toward rapprochement, peaceful co-existence or even a reunification process. South Korean screen productions have been a primary medium through which South Korean perceptions of itself and of the North are expressed and consolidated.

In late 2019, in the context of renewed inter-Korean rapprochement, *Crash Landing on You* received acclaim from South Korean and international viewers, attracting attention beyond the regular fan communities. While *Crash Landing* followed some of the typical trends in South Korean screen representations of the North, it provided a deeper exploration of the similarities and differences between the two societies. As we have shown, *Crash Landing* presents multiple visions of the 'national' that inform what constructivist scholars call 'national biographies'. The drama imagines South Korean, North Korean, and unified Korean identities, articulating biographical parameters via depictions of Korea's past, present and future. *Crash Landing* induces nostalgic emotions that, while a source of pleasure for the viewer, fail to provide a firm basis for a united future. It instead portrays a divided present, in which South Korea's capitalist modernity is undoubtedly victorious, and the future is characterized at best by peaceful coexistence. The lovers only reunite briefly in a neutral land far removed from the unresolved conflict. The unification ideal is not abandoned, in line with the continued (albeit eroding)

emotional resonance of unification evidenced in South Korea today. The ending of *Crash Landing* is therefore harmonious, simply postponing reunification and allowing for a temporary form of togetherness beyond the division. It signals a lack of readiness in South Korean society to accept more radical and immediate visions of a united future for the peninsula. The drama thus reflects South Korea's relationship with North Korea as an object of partial identification arising from common narrative elements, but also South Korea's desire to identify with the capitalist, liberal democratic world. *Crash Landing* therefore serves as a valuable text for examining South Korean national identity at its most conflicted: caught between a pan-Korean national imagining that sees the North as a repository of things shared in the past, and an exclusive, South Korean national imagining that reifies the South's relative power, modernity and sophistication in the present. Viewers of *Crash Landing* are not permitted a real glimpse into a reunified Korean future, which remains an elusive and uncertain vision.

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