
Book Section:
Son, S.A. orcid.org/0000-0002-3045-7939 and Schwak, J. (2022) Screening the Inter-Korean Conflict: The Politics of Crash Landing on You. In: Lim, S., (ed.) South Korean Popular Culture in the Global Context: Beyond the Fandom. Routledge , London , pp. 94-115. ISBN 9781032233710

https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003276944-7

CHAPTER 7

Screening the Inter-Korean Conflict: The Politics of *Crash Landing on You*[1]

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Son, S. A. & Schwak, J., (2022) "Screening the Inter-Korean Conflict" in *Popular Culture in the Global Context: Beyond the Fandom*, London: Routledge.

Abstract

This chapter explores the representation of the inter-Korean conflict in the 2019 hit South Korean television drama, *Crash Landing on You*. We draw upon a growing body of literature on popular culture and world politics to conduct a political analysis of both the drama's contents and its popular reception. The chapter first discusses the significance of popular culture in International Relations (IR), before looking at both South and North Korea's attempts to use popular culture productions in their image management strategies, shaped as these strategies are by the unending Korean War. We then review existing screen representations of North Korea, produced in South Korea. This is followed by a discussion of how the inter-Korean conflict is represented in *Crash Landing*, focusing on the division of the Peninsula, national security, regional geopolitics and reunification. We then present our observations on the international reception of *Crash Landing* visible in the international media, noting how the inter-Korean conflict is understood, while also commenting on the transformative potential of the drama in reshaping international perceptions of the political.

Introduction

South Korean popular culture has been a staple on TV screens in East Asia since at least the mid-2000s, and *hallyu* (the Korean Wave) has expanded globally since the 2010s. *Hallyu's* popularity has extended the consumption of Korean TV dramas (K-dramas), film and music into increasingly diverse audiences. Korea's cultural success culminated in the best film Oscar trophy going to Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* in 2020, which appealed to international audiences through its oecumenical sociological theme. This interest in Korean pop culture has also given rise to global interest in Korean language and culture: the Modern Language Association of America reported that between 2013 and 2016, enrolment in Korean language courses at U.S. universities increased by almost 14 percent, while overall enrolment in other language programmes decreased (Pickles, 2018). Korean media have also reported significant increases in enrolment at government-affiliated Sejong institutes, which offer Korean language training worldwide (Chung, 2019). Meanwhile, universities teaching Korean Studies across a range of academic disciplines globally have also experienced a marked rise in student enrolments over the past decade.

International exposure to Korean popular culture products has been made possible through YouTube and fan sites, and access has now expanded to the global online streaming platform,

Netflix. Viewership of Korean dramas in particular benefited from the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdowns in many countries over 2020-21. One K-drama that won legions of fans worldwide from this combination of factors was *Crash Landing on You,* a TV series with a tantalising, romantic comedy-themed storyline involving both North and South Korea. When it aired in South Korea in late 2019, *Crash Landing* obtained an average domestic viewership of 21.7 percent, only slightly behind that of another popular drama, *SKY Castle*, in 2018 (Sunio, 2020). It was also a success elsewhere in East Asia, finding popularity in Japan (Brasor, 2020), China (Global Times, 2020), Hong Kong, Taiwan (Ng, 2020), Singapore (Kiew and Low, 2020) and the Philippines (Malig, 2020), but also in India (Mathai, 2021) and the United States (US) (Koreaboo, 2020). *Crash Landing* follows the story of Yoon Se-ri, a *chaebol* (Korean conglomerate) heiress and successful businesswoman, who accidentally ends up on the North Korean side of the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea, after a paragliding accident. She is rescued by a North Korean army captain, Ri Jeong-hyeok, who decides not to report her but to help her get back to the South safely. In addition to the classic K-drama combination of love, suspense and humour, the show is notable because a significant part of it is set in North Korea, and it portrays a gallery of North Korean characters who contrast with common screen depictions of North Koreans. Many commentators, including North Korean escapees, have praised the relative accuracy of the drama's depiction of daily life in North Korea, likely resulting from the presence on the screenwriting staff of a North Korean defector (BBC News, 2020a). Crucially, although the story is fictional, *Crash Landing* presents scenes and characters that disrupt typical representations of North Korea as threatening, mad or bleak.

By the very nature of its border-crossing story, *Crash Landing* also presents an interpretation of the inter-Korean conflict and the division of the Peninsula. At the end of the Korean War (1950-1953), an armistice was signed to suspend open hostilities, but North and South Korea are still technically at war. This continuing 'cold' conflict has been the subject of numerous literary and cinematographic creations in South Korea. While *Crash Landing* is therefore not the first Korean popular culture production to narrate the conflict on screens, its unprecedented international reach presents the potential to influence how both South Korean and foreign audiences perceive and understand the geopolitical situation on the Korean peninsula. On-screen representations of geopolitical conflicts are not merely entertainment. Perceptions and worldviews both shape and are shaped by policy decisions and can therefore have real-world consequences. Hence, particularly since the Cold War, states have often sought to negotiate their images through screen productions, but also to control the way other actors represent them in popular culture. Indeed, the influence of fictional screen depictions on real-world perceptions is such that North Korean authorities have repeatedly called on South Korea to stop broadcasting content that presents North Korea in a negative light (BBC News, 2020b). Screen representations play a role in shaping how international publics conceive of both their own national identities and the identities of others, and characterisations of allies or enemies have been a key instrument of geopolitical competition since the mid-twentieth century.

The global dissemination of a cultural product that comments on North Korea therefore holds significant potential for shaping the views of global audiences towards the peninsula, particularly in the absence of a wide range of alternative media sources on North Korea. *Crash Landing*'s political impact has been evidenced by its use in university courses and its presence as a topic of discussion on political podcasts far beyond the usual K-culture fan site base. Academic articles commenting on *Crash Landing* have already been published and have generated attention beyond academic circles (Epstein and Green, 2020; Son, 2020). Building upon this commentary, this study takes as its focus the representation of the inter-Korean

conflict in *Crash Landing*, and critically assesses the international response to the drama through the international media commentary it received. First, the chapter discusses the significance of popular culture in International Relations (IR), before looking at both South and North Korea's attempts to use popular culture productions in their image management strategies, shaped as these strategies are by the unending Korean War. We then review existing screen representations of North Korea, produced in South Korea. This is followed by a discussion of how the inter-Korean conflict is represented in *Crash Landing*, focusing on the division of the Peninsula, national security, regional geopolitics and reunification. We then present our observations on the international reception of *Crash Landing* visible in the international media, noting how the inter-Korean conflict is understood, while also commenting on the transformative potential of the drama in reshaping international perceptions of the political.

Pop Culture and International Relations

IR scholars often look at popular culture products as primary sources that contain and manipulate representations of international actors. Following the aesthetic turn in IR (Bleiker, 2001) and the attention to the everyday in international politics (Davies and Niemann, 2002), IR scholars recognise that popular culture plays upon a register of images and emotions that are fundamental in shaping international relations. As Duncombe and Bleiker (2015) argue, popular culture is part of the fabric of the international because it produces constructions of 'us' and 'them' via characters and narratives that are the essence of the political. On this basis, IR scholars have integrated popular literature (Barratt, 2012; Nexon and Neumann, 2006), comics (Hansen, 2011), film (Behnke and de Carvalho, 2006; Carter and McCormack, 2006 & 2014; Heck, 2017; Schlag, 2019; Shapiro, 2015) and TV series (Grayson, 2017) into their scholarship.

States have long used culture to secure national interests, and popular culture productions have often been central to propaganda efforts. Popular culture is recognised as producing dominant or alternative worldviews and visions of enmity and friendship in world politics. For instance, Hollywood films have commonly depicted Russians (Lawless, 2014) and Arabs (Fries, 2005; Shaheen, 2012) through negative lenses according to the evolving geopolitical interests of the United States. Moreover, popular images themselves can become objects of international tension and insecurity, as in the case of the Danish cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (Hansen, 2011). The satirical film *Borat* generated much political anger in Kazakhstan (Saunders, 2008), while the comedy *The Interview* contributed to tensions between the United States and North Korea (Haggard and Lindsay, 2015). In these instances, popular culture products created a liability that states felt compelled to control, indicating a state concern with image management more broadly. Political scientists argue that the 'wrong' narrative has a destabilising effect on a state's sense of 'self' in the world, and states are therefore compelled to invest in promotional strategies to reduce national anxiety and insecurity (Giddens, 1984; Mitzen, 2006). Conversely, positive state images or 'nation brands' have been associated with welcome returns, such as wealth creation and enhanced diplomatic status (Lawler, 2005; Browning, 2015). The global ubiquity of social media creates even greater needs for states to control their narratives through public diplomacy (Leonard, 2009; Melissen, 2005) and promotional strategies (Schwak, 2018: 3) across multiple planes of human interaction. In a globalising world where state reputation matters significantly, the projection of "soft power" (Nye, 1990) towards both domestic and international audiences (Browning, 2015) has thus become a policy area occupying significant state attention.

In addition to being constitutive of state images, popular culture productions also reflect changing political contexts and dominant perceptions in domestic public opinions. Indeed, products become successful only if and when receiving societies are ready to appreciate the representations they contain (Duncombe and Bleiker, 2015). Oftentimes, popular culture is more effective in shaping perceptions than carefully orchestrated public diplomacy campaigns. Popular culture products create enabling and disabling environments for policymakers, as everyday perceptions and understandings determine the possibility and acceptability of policies. There is therefore "a popular culture/national security intertext" (Cho, 2009: 229) that connects official policies with popular culture and everyday experiences. In South Korea, there is a long-standing interplay between screen representations, everyday perceptions and foreign policies. Domestically, screen productions both express and shape political trends. As Cho writes, "in South Korea, the film can be regarded as the most effective medium through which to read the dynamics of its civil society [...] the political and the cultural are often conflated and power is always in play," (Cho, 2009: 228).

Screen Representations and State Image Management

Controlling the state narrative has always been crucial for South and North Korea, both of whom engage in highly organised image-management practices. The inter-Korean conflict creates a particular impetus for the two Koreas to manage the domestic and international discourse on their respective versions of historical events, on the legitimacy of each government, on the assigning of responsibility for the continuing conflict, and on possible solutions for bringing an end to that conflict. Both states are also driven by a need to project discourses that transcend the conflict, staking their respective claims to be responsible members of the international community, while showing a commitment to protecting their sovereign interests. Indeed, South Korea has worked hard over the last two decades to model exemplary 'middle power' behaviour and to display its full integration into the liberal international order (Ikenberry and Mo, 2013; Watson, 2011). This strategy has translated into a series of policies, such as the implementation of nation branding campaigns (Schwak, 2016), heavy promotion of K-culture products internationally (film, pop-music and TV dramas in particular), increasing its international development assistance, and vocally denouncing North Korea's human rights violations (Son, 2018b).

The North Korean government is also concerned about its international standing and its image in the eyes of its people (Cho, 2017). Although it has seemed determined to defy international condemnation of its nuclear weapons programme and to withstand the harsh sanctions regime imposed upon it, it has also sought to project an alternative image, portraying itself as a peace-loving state, acting only in self-defence as a victim of foreign aggression (Ballbach, 2016). It has responded to international outcry over the situation of human rights in the country with a vigorous counter narrative (Fahy, 2019), and has made unprecedented efforts to engage with United Nations human rights mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review in a show of commitment to international human rights norms (Son, 2018a). Domestically, the North Korean regime has attempted to adjust its internal information management strategy to mitigate against the unwanted impact of illegal foreign media (including South Korean pop culture) on North Korean citizens, who have increasing access to such media (Cathcart et al., 2014), as it is feared these products may undermine the regime's domestic legitimacy (Chung, 2019; Huat, 2020).

Evidence that North Korea is particularly concerned about the impact of foreign screen representations of both itself and the Korean conflict was visible in its cyber-attack on Sony Pictures in 2014 in response to the release of a satirical, US-made film about North Korea, called *The Interview*. In 2020, not long after the release of *Crash Landing* and another politically sensitive South Korean film, *Ashfall*, the North Korean leadership spoke through the voice of leader Kim Jong-un's sister, Kim Yo-jong, and state media to denounce the two productions as "unacceptable and atrocious provocation", "slandering our republic (and) causing outrage of our people" (sic) (The Straits Times, 2020b). For both South and North Korea then, image management is a crucial aspect of governance, and as a result, screen representations are an object of contention and careful control.

Representing North Korea

In Western media, North Korea has long been presented as either a basket case, or a threatening international pariah that could be either "mad" or "bad" or both (Dalton et al., 2016; Shim, 2014; Smith, 2000). In South Korean media, however, representations of North Korea are typically more cautious. For instance, Choi (2018) has found that while the ideological orientation of South Korean newspapers tends to influence their coverage of North Korea, most major South Korean newspapers were largely opposed to George W. Bush's 2002 depiction of North Korea as a member of the so-called "axis of evil", because such representation could threaten peaceful reunification (see also Shin and Burke, 2008). Exploiting its creative license, South Korean film has showcased more varied representations of North Korea than those in local mainstream media, particularly over the last two decades. *Crash Landing on You* follows other productions that have presented stories in which North and South Koreans forge relationships and practice collegial or even familial-style coexistence. Up until the 1990s, representations of North Korea were closely tied to geopolitical considerations and controlled by South Korean state censorship. The North was presented as unpredictable and menacing, while its people were little more than brainwashed agents of the state. However, in the 1990s, South Korea's democratisation, greater freedom of speech and less media censorship allowed screenwriters to explore a humane side to North Korea and the possibility of friendship between North and South Koreans.

More diverse representations were also fostered by the favourable policy context of Kim Dae-jung's presidency (1998-2003) and his Sunshine Policy of rapprochement with the North. In 2000 - the same year that Kim Dae-jung became the first South Korean president to meet a North Korean leader - the box office hit *Joint Security Area* reflected the mood of the time by narrating friendship between South Korean and North Korean border guards, moving towards humanised, rather than militarised, representations of the DMZ. Several more films released in the 2000s, such as *Shiri* and *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, contributed further to humanising North Koreans in the eyes of Southern audiences by emphasising the joint victimhood imposed by the division of the Peninsula at the hands of foreign powers, thereby fostering a sense of inter-Korean solidarity. These representations also responded to a broader geopolitical change: for South Korean leaders, the end of the Cold War had marked the victory of capitalist liberal democracy over Communist authoritarianism (Kim, 2004), reducing the sense of threat presented by North Korea (Epstein, 2009: 2). Evidence of this diminished threat appeared in the increasing representation of North Korea through humour on screen for the first time (Epstein, 2009: 1). A generational shift was also at play: younger generations in South Korea were more ready than their forbears to accept and consume images of North Korea less driven by anti-Communism, memories of the war and the subsequent division (Lee, 2006).

The phenomenal success of *Crash Landing* has undoubtedly arisen from similar contextual factors, two decades on from the Sunshine Policy era. It benefitted from a continuing curiosity among younger South Koreans towards the North as a somewhat mysterious foreign country, and to the context of a recent return to rapprochement between the two Koreas (2018-19) led by President Moon Jae-in. As a TV drama of sixteen episodes, rather than a two-hour film, *Crash Landing* also offers a more in-depth set of images and narratives about the North, its relationship with the South, and the inter-Korean conflict. It also contains well-developed details of everyday life in North Korea, satisfying perennial Southern and international curiosity about the so-called 'Hermit Kingdom'. Finally, it constructs North Korea's image through familiar, romanticised stereotypes, but also sometimes in grittier representations that challenge that romanticisation. In the section which follows, we explore how the inter-Korean conflict is portrayed in *Crash Landing*, before turning to examine the popular reception of the drama as evident in the international media coverage over the eighteen months since its initial release, focusing on how the inter-Korean conflict and the national division are acknowledged and understood.

The Inter-Korean Conflict in *Crash Landing on You*

In representing the inter-Korean conflict to both South Korean and international audiences, *Crash Landing* comments politically on a number of sub-themes tied to the conflict: the inter-Korean division, the national security implications of the continuing conflict, regional geopolitics and the lived experiences of the conflict at the interpersonal level.

The Division

The drama opens with a panoramic view of the DMZ. Signs warning of the presence of mines along the 38th parallel appear, along with North Korean soldiers and the North Korean flag. Scenes of their South Korean counterparts on guard follow, highlighting military tension from the outset. The first interaction between North Korean and South Korean characters is tense: in episode 1, viewers experience a classic DMZ stand-off between North and South Korean soldiers, due to some North Korean civilians crossing into the Southern zone of the DMZ illegally. This is an early introduction to the tension between the two countries, the continuing conflict, and the ever-present risk of violence. Throughout the episodes that follow, on first meeting, Southerners and Northerners invariably suspect one another of being spies, pointing to 'enemy' as the default assumption about citizens from the 'other' Korea. In the second episode, the female lead, Yoon Se-ri, and male lead, Ri Jeong-hyeok, attempt to find a solution to send Se-ri home after Jeong-hyeok has secretly hidden her in his house. Both characters mention that Se-ri's presence in the North could create a war between North and South Korea, involving "even the United Nations", signalling that a return to war could result from the smallest provocation.

While the border is portrayed as highly militarised, it is also presented as arbitrary or porous. In multiple scenes, viewers see birds flying easily across it, connecting the DMZ to Seoul. In the last episode, when the North Korean characters are poised to return to North Korea, a flock of birds again flies across the border overhead, suggesting the invisibility of the divide. In episode 3, when Jeong-hyeok attempts to send Se-ri back South on a boat, Se-ri acknowledges that she will never set foot again in North Korea, and describes a sense of powerlessness and frustration, noting how ironic it is that she can go to Africa or Antarctica, but not across the

inter-Korean border. In episode 9, the North Korean soldiers reflect on the fact that they can see Bukhansan mountain in Seoul from the DMZ but will never be able to meet Se-ri again after she returns to the South. At the end of episode 9, when Se-ri crosses the border back into South Korea at night, she walks over the military demarcation line, which is visible only as a thin piece of barbed wire. Jeong-hyeok tells her he "can't walk a single step over the line", suggesting the intense risk associated with transgressing the artificial demarcation. Yet, in a romantic twist, he follows, steps over the wire and kisses her, saying that "one more step should be ok", thereby suggesting that the act of crossing, once free of its political burden, is effortless. Indeed, in episode 11, Jeong-hyeok reaches the South through a long tunnel that debouches onto a Southern beach in order to pursue a personal mission in defiance of his country's interests, indicating again that the border is not entirely hermetic.

Despite the possibilities of crossing the division physically in certain places, the audience is also reminded constantly of its rigidity. Scenes in episode 16 when the North Korean soldiers and Jeong-Hyeok are being returned by the South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS) in a peaceful exchange with North Korean military officials, show a wide highway with a thick yellow line drawn across it, with the word *pyeonghwa* (peace) written in large letters. Both sides draw weapons during a hiccup in the handover, demonstrating the impossibility of transgressing that line without authorisation, and the violence that such transgression may be met with, despite the claim that it is a line of peace. At best, Se-ri and Jeong-hyeok's embrace across the border is a halt, during which hostility is suspended in time, but there is no larger realisation of peace. The drama is littered with subtle reminders of not just the impenetrability of the border, but also the consequences of violating it, and this is further evidenced in the frequent allusions to the national security threat posed by a neighbouring country with which each Korea is still at war.

National Security

The fact that the two Koreas are still technically at war comes as a surprise to many international observers, yet the conflict quickly becomes visible in the extent to which it is still felt in the form of national security controls in both Koreas today. In the South, a National Security Act first enacted in 1948 (subsequently amended but never withdrawn) effectively criminalises positive commentary on North Korea and the dissemination of North Korean propaganda. It has been cited by human rights organisations as allowing severe treatment of suspects by the South Korean NIS in criminal investigations initiated under the Act (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The existence of the law is partly responsible for the general lack of exposure to uncensored information on North Korea in South Korea. North Korean-owned websites, for example, are inaccessible in the South. While *Crash Landing* did not raise legal questions around violating the National Security Act, the drama did prompt an official complaint to the broadcaster from a minor right wing political party, which claimed that *Crash Landing* posed a risk to national security by weakening awareness of the threat presented by North Korea to the South through its presentation of North Korean soldiers as peaceful. The group also accused the show of acting as a propaganda instrument for Pyongyang (Dong, 2020).

Although national safety drills still take place on a regular basis in South Korea, which also plays host to a number of U.S. military bases, the continuing impact of the Korean War on national security is less pronounced there than in North Korea. North Korean citizens are kept on an almost constant war footing and many national endeavours are framed in military terms, as part of a national state-of-war mindset (although the 'enemy' in national discourse tends to be the United States, rather than its mere 'puppet', South Korea, see Cho, 2011: 327). *Crash*

Landing thus duly portrays the North as a highly militarised entity, while the South is presented as a civilian entity. North Koreans males are mostly soldiers, wearing military uniforms or military-style outfits, while South Korean males always dress as civilians. In the last episode, when the North Korean soldiers are returned to the North, the border exchange scene clearly signals this distinction. North Koreans, in military attire, face their South Korean counterparts, in dark suits. In addition, the ten years' military service required in North Korea is presented as a great sacrifice. In the first episode, a young North Korean conscript, Geum Eun-dong, reads a letter from his mother and expresses suffering due to separation from his family. However, the drama makes no mention of the military service that is also compulsory in South Korea, albeit for less than two years, and with recently introduced exceptions for conscientious objectors (Choi, 2020; Oh, 2021).

Crash Landing also presents contrasting views of national security apparatuses through the respective state security agencies. In North Korea, the Ministry of State Security (MSS) is highly visible in characters' daily life, while in South Korea the National Intelligence Service is largely unseen by ordinary citizens. In North Korea the MSS is depicted as sinister and dangerous: labour camps for political prisoners are repeatedly mentioned (episodes 2, 7 and 10) and Jung Man-bok, nicknamed the "Rat" due to his role as an intelligence officer, discusses quietly with his wife the cruelty of the North Korean state (episode 8). In another episode (10), Jung Man-bok is threatened by the North Korean villain, Cho Cheol-gang, and forced to act against his conscience to protect his family. The justice system in the North is presented as ruthless and capricious during Cho Cheol-gang's trial (episode 10). Throughout the drama, the North is depicted as corrupt (embodied in the character of Cho Cheol-gang) and criminal, a place where foreign outlaws can seek refuge (episode 1) and where officials engage in gangster-like behaviour, misusing state funds and trading illegally (episode 10; for a scholarly discussion of North Korea's criminal activities, see Crilley et al., 2020; Wang and Blancke, 2014).

By contrast, the South Korean national security apparatus is presented as kinder, fairer, transparent and technologically advanced. In episode 15, the North Korean soldiers are arrested by the NIS and find themselves in custody. They expect torture or death but the worst they face is a medical exam and a lie detector test. They are generously fed by the NIS, to the extent that Sergeant Pyo Chi-su expresses concern that this humane treatment is simply a strategy to break the soldiers' resolve. In episode 16, the NIS offers all soldiers the opportunity to settle in the South as *talbukja* (defectors), but after the soldiers refuse, they are not forced to remain in the country. Despite these deliberate contrasts, however, the national security structures and processes necessitated by the conflict on both sides are on show frequently and in notable detail, reminding the viewer of the conflict's continuing realities.

Geopolitics, Agency and Interpersonal Relations

While the inter-Korean conflict provides the drama with its very plot, regional and global geopolitics are largely unaddressed. It is silent on the role played by the United States and the Soviet Union in creating the division in 1948. At one point, Geum Eun-dong, the youngest North Korean soldier, is shown wearing a jacket embroidered with an American flag while he is on a mission in Seoul - a choice loaded with meaning for an informed viewer, considering the extent of the demonisation of the United States in North Korean propaganda. Throughout the drama, the current leaders of North and South are not mentioned. Former North Korean leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il are only seen in the state-mandated photographs displayed in North Korean homes, on badges worn by North Korean characters, and on posters during village exercises, while current leader Kim Jong-un is visibly absent throughout. Pyongyang's

nuclear weapons programme also goes unmentioned, unlike in South Korea's recent film *Ashfall*, which depicted the infiltration of North Korea's nuclear facilities by South Korean agents - a storyline which greatly angered the North Korean authorities. Instead, *Crash Landing* seeks to explore inter-Korean relations with greater attention to interpersonal relationships.

Crash Landing dismisses the idea that the conflict is manifested at the individual level. There are villains on both the Northern and the Southern side of the 38th parallel (Cho Cheol-gang in the North and Se-ri's brother, Se-hyeong, and his cruel wife in the South). Yet there are also generous, kind, and trustworthy characters on both sides, and it is these traits that bring them together, despite palpable differences in certain behaviours, which have evolved as a result of prolonged separation. Hence, even as Se-ri realises that both Southerners and Northerners have different table manners (episode 2), forms of humour (episode 2), terminology (some North Korean words are translated in subtitles for South Korean viewers), gender expectations (housewives in the North; powerful businesswomen in the South), and celebrations (episode 13), she also notes that they are all "of the same ethnicity" (episode 6). The visible socio-cultural divide does not prevent the two sides from fraternising, and even uniting in love.

In addition, *Crash Landing* also cultivates an image of independent agency among North Korean characters in ways not often seen on screen. Sergeant Pyo Chi-su warns Se-ri about "propagating South Korean beliefs", and yet it is clear this is motivated by a desire to tease her, rather than his ideological fervour. North Koreans appear to have a patchy knowledge of the South, resulting from anti-capitalist propaganda: in the second episode, the North Korean soldiers comment that amnesia is "a common illness in capitalist countries", and Geum Eun-dong asks if this is due to capitalists drinking too much Coca-Cola. Yet, despite their ideological background, North Koreans also appreciate South Korea's capitalist products, accessing them illegally via the private markets in town and villages. Soldier Kim Ju-meok watches South Korean dramas in the watch tower where he is posted at the DMZ (episode 1), the village's market sells prized South Korean cosmetics (episode 2), and families buy black-market home appliances from the South (episode 2). North Korean sergeant, Pyo Chi-su, instinctively sings the South Korean anthem that he knows by heart because he hears it every day on patrol in the DMZ (episode 10) and when on a covert mission in South Korea, the North Korean soldiers are in awe of Seoul's food, fashion, computer games and *jjimjilbang* (bath house) culture (episode 12). They even cheer for the South Korean football team while eating fried chicken in Seoul with other customers (episode 13) - a match during which the two Koreas reunite symbolically through their mutual animosity towards the opposing team, Japan. All this suggests that ideological decay - or at least intellectual agency - is possible in the North (Green, 2020) and that human relationships can flourish beyond the conflict.

Reunification

Despite this optimistic portrayal of interpersonal relationships between Southerners and Northerners, inter-Korean reunification proves a much more complex question which is never resolved in *Crash Landing*. While the drama goes beyond binary representations and presents both North and South as complex, varied and human, the plot never actually envisages the possibility of reunification. Indeed, the drama ends with Se-ri and Jeong-hyeok returning to their respective sides of the border, meeting once a year in Switzerland as the only means of continuing their relationship. Political reunification is never a narrative option in *Crash Landing*: the North Korean characters never seem to desire defection either (and actively decline it when offered the opportunity). In addition to this, frequent references to filial piety are used by Se-ri, Jeong-hyeok and other characters to justify their choice to stay on their

respective sides of the border. Human interaction guided by the five relationships set out in Confucian philosophy continues in both Koreas today, where hierarchical relations between family members are mirrored in the roles and responsibilities between the ruler and the ruled (Grayson, 2013). The duty to return to each other's rightful state is thus reinforced by the concurrent fulfilment of filial piety. The two lovers, therefore, can only meet in a neutral territory, and only ever temporarily. The choice of Switzerland is not insignificant. Switzerland is the mythical land of political neutrality (Fleury, 1999) and the country where North Korean elites, including leader Kim Jong-un and his sister, were sent to study as children. Although this choice of setting for the drama was considered "bizarre" by an American journalist (O'Keefe, 2021), it is not unlikely for a son of the North Korean elite like Jeong-hyeok to be educated in a German-speaking Swiss institution and to be allowed to travel to Switzerland as an acclaimed pianist.

In Switzerland, therefore, the lovers' nationalities do not matter, as the country is suitably removed from regional geopolitics. Of course, it is largely their elite socio-economic status that allows them to reunite, even if only briefly, every year. In episode 16, Se-ri's good-natured employees speculate that their boss is entertaining a long-distance relationship with a foreigner. This comment is both ironic and grim, as Jeong-hyeok is indeed a foreigner, but despite their geographical closeness, they must meet in Europe. In the same episode, after the lovers' separation, Se-ri tries to signal her movements to Jeong-hyeok through the media and her public activities, but his lack of response suggests he is unaware of her efforts, signalling the profound impenetrability of the divide even in the age of instant international communication.

Moreover, while South Korean authorities involved in the return of the North Koreans across the border in episode 16 include the South Korean Ministry of Unification, reunification tends only to be mentioned in *Crash Landing* in remote terms. It is an empty concept that Se-ri mentions several times in passing, but that no character expands upon. In episode 2, Se-ri promises an autograph of a famous South Korean drama actress to North Korean soldier Kim Ju-meok. He asks with great anticipation when Se-ri will deliver the gift. She answers, "after unification", and he is taken aback. To reassure him, she adds "it will happen someday", but provides no more discussion on the topic. Through *Crash Landing,* viewers are told that unification is a vague aspiration, with no clear roadmap or timeline.

Therefore, while *Crash Landing* seeks to create a story of meaningful relationships between North and South Koreans, it signals that neither side is actively pursuing reunification. Indeed, the last active attempt at reunifying the Peninsula was the very war that the two Koreas are still engaged in today, and a return to open hostilities is always possible. Yet *Crash Landing* also provides for the first time on screen the possibility of South and North Koreans continuing to encounter one another, finding a space (however idealised and class-bound) in which to coexist. While previous screen representations of cross-border friendship certainly went some way to humanising the North by bringing individuals together, *Crash Landing* suggests the emergence of a tentative, somewhat novel possibility of togetherness for the two Koreas.

Crash Landing **and the Inter-Korean Conflict in the International Media**

Crash Landing's popular international reception was quickly visible in the weeks after its release, principally on platforms dedicated to reporting on *hallyu* content for international fans. However, the coronavirus pandemic's imposition of global lockdowns resulted in new audiences consuming Korean dramas, particularly on Netflix. The result was media

commentary by journalists from sources historically less likely to cover K-drama, such as *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *the New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Asahi Shimbun*, *The Straits Times*, *The Hindu*, *The South China Morning Post, Newsweek Japan* and *La Repubblica*. The release of such coverage trickled out over the course of 2020 and 2021, following the pace of the drama's release on different regional Netflix versions. Due to the lack of familiarity of mainstream media audiences with K-drama or indeed the inter-Korean conflict, much of the coverage and commentary was brief: a summary synopsis and expressions of appreciation for the entertainment value of *Crash Landing*. There was also often a need to explain the geopolitical context, which was done with varying degrees of accuracy and detail. In what follows, we summarise themes emerging from a sample of this coverage gathered over 2020 and early 2021.

As is common in coverage of North Korea generally, some media observers leaned towards sensationalising *Crash Landing* and its portrayal of the situation in North Korea, which they claimed offered viewers a "rare insight into life in one of the world's most secretive nations" (Chaw, 2020; Kasulis, 2020). By contrast, a large number of (mostly Western) observers considered the show to be utterly unrealistic (BBC News, 2020a; Hazra, 2021; O'Keefe, 2021; Sharad, 2021; The Straits Times, 2020a; Walker, 2020). Others characterised the plot as "bizarre" (O'Keefe, 2020) and extended this characterisation to South Korean TV productions in general (Brasor, 2020; Walker, 2020). Therefore, while some international media sources noted the accuracy and credibility of the drama's depiction of North Korean life, such as the presence of homeless children or trains halting due to power shortages (BBC News, 2020a; Kamiya, 2020; The Straits Times, 2020a), they also speculated on the drama's euphemistic spin on reality, which "exaggerates the comfort of life in North Korea" and minimises the scale of starvation and human suffering caused by the North Korean regime (Sharad, 2021). Others described *Crash Landing* as glamorising North Korea (Kamiya, 2020; The Straits Times, 2020a), since the villagers regularly have plentiful meals (episodes 5, 14) while in reality the North Korean countryside is often affected by food shortages (BBC News, 2020a). Nevertheless, it was acknowledged that *Crash Landing* does portray the North as significantly poorer, more provincial, and less sophisticated compared to the South (The Straits Times, 2020a).

Some commentators added more nuance to their assessments by exploring the extent to which the drama romanticises or oversimplifies the complex consequences of the inter-Korean division, as it affects everyday life, by consulting with North Korean defectors (BBC News, 2020a; Cho, 2020; Kasulis, 2020; Kim, 2020; Kim and Denyer, 2020; Olivera, 2020). *France 24*, for instance, interviewed a North Korean defector who argued that the strong sense of village solidarity, or what Epstein and Green (2020) call the "maintenance of *jeong*", portrayed in the show has largely disappeared from the North, since "after the collapse of state-led economy, people have been left to provide for themselves to survive" (France 24, 2020). The same defector interviewee also considered that life in the North Korean army was portrayed much more positively than is true in reality.

Reference to the geopolitics of the region was sparse in the international media commentary beyond acknowledgement of the existence of the conflict. However, an Indian blog praised the drama for its relatability due to its "resonance" with aspects of Indian culture, but also for its role in providing hope that other divided countries – namely India and Pakistan - might also look to ways to overcome their differences (Devdiscourse, 2020). Another article quoted an American viewer who described the drama's impact as sparking a desire to "enhance his understanding of the complicated history between North and South Korea and the role that the

US has played in that history" (Kasulis, 2020). A popular blog aimed at university students pointed to the drama's contribution to blurring the lines between the "good" and the "bad" Korea, complicating the existing narrative most are familiar with on inter-Korean affairs (Sharad, 2021). Several articles from South Asian and South East Asian publications noted appreciation of *Crash Landing*'s ability to take the viewer on an emotional journey, presenting the heartbreak of the conflict and division viscerally, while also injecting romance and humour throughout (Chaw, 2020; Sharad, 2021). There was evidence in the commentary that in some parts of the world, *Crash Landing* has inspired curiosity in Korean peninsula affairs, and even prompted previously unconsidered life choices such as taking up studies of Korean language, culture and society (Devdiscourse, 2020). News of a university course in the Philippines centred on *Crash Landing* being inundated with students in early 2021 is perhaps unsurprising given the popularity of *hallyu* in that region (De Leon, 2020), but it also signals the ability of such screen content to generate academic interest and future expertise in inter-Korean affairs. In South Korea itself, viewers indicated that the show enabled them to learn about the North (Kim, 2020), particularly village life as depicted in the drama (The Straits Times, 2020a) with some interviewees expressing a desire to learn more about North Korea from defectors living in the South (BBC News, 2020a & 2020b; Kasulis, 2020; Kim and Denyer, 2020; Suliman and Kim, 2020).

There was only limited speculation on the potential impact the show might have on the North Korean regime's position, the Korean conflict and reunification. Several pieces noted North Korea's 2020 protest described earlier in this chapter over South Korean screen representations of the North (BBC News, 2020b; Kim, 2020; Schieber, 2021) and while some hoped that the drama could somehow reach North Korean viewers (Il Post, 2020), others acknowledged that the drama itself could heighten tensions between North and South (Sharad, 2021; Suliman and Kim, 2020). Indeed, Italian outlet *Il Post* (2020) reported that *Crash Landing's* screenwriters conducted a "meticulous and careful operation, taking great political risks", understanding what they could or could not risk showing on screen (for instance, showing portraits of Kim Jong-un).

Several media observers also evoked the question of inter-Korean reunification and a resolution to the conflict (Kamiya, 2020; Narrain, 2020), as reflected in the drama's ending, where the lovers are forced to live apart, except for a brief annual reunion in Switzerland. While some fans were reported to have found the drama's ending confusing (Olivera, 2020), musings on the contribution of the drama to transcending the Korean conflict appeared frequently in the media coverage. Appreciation of the "emphasis on shared humanity and a shared Koreanness, despite the divide" (Kasulis, 2020; Walker, 2020), and depictions of North Koreans that present them as "not that different after all" (BBC News, 2020a; Kim, 2020; Mhute, 2020), were expressed alongside observations drawn from South Korean audiences about *Crash Landing's* contribution to breaking down stereotypes of North Koreans common in the South and encouraging "empathy" and solidarity among South Koreans towards the North (Lau, 2021; Sharad, 2021). Aspesi reported for *La Repubblica* (2020) that foreign scholars and North Korean defectors have noted that the drama refrains from discussing human rights abuses and North Korean politics, choosing to emphasise similarities rather than differences. Nevertheless, it was also noted that reunification was mentioned rarely, and only ever in "weary", even tongue-in-cheek terms (Aspesi, 2020). Naivete or a lack of in-depth knowledge of Korean Peninsula affairs was perhaps visible in the absence of deeper questions around Korean reunification in the media coverage. Only one article detailed the drama producers' engagement with the South Korean Ministry of Unification, as part of an in-depth piece for *NK News*, an outlet which would be expected to have greater familiarity with the context (Kim, 2020). For

the most part however, the question of overcoming the Korean conflict was left unaddressed, with the actual prospects of an end to the war and a return to political unity unclear, just as it is in reality.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have discussed the political significance of the K-drama *Crash Landing on You* in representing inter-Korean relations, noting that screen representations of the political are of increasing interest to IR scholars due to their potential for real-world impact and relevance. Exemplifying the indissociable connection between screen images and geopolitical realities, after *Crash Landing* was broadcast, its screenwriter, Park Ji-eun, was awarded the Person of the Year award by the South Korean Ministry of Unification for contributing to "unification education" (Ministry of Unification, 2020). Globally, *Crash Landing* sparked attention in large part because of the mystery that typically surrounds North Korea in the international imagination. Yet beyond the curiosity generated by *Crash Landing* due to its portrayal of North Korea, the pre-existing concern in both North and South with state image-management, largely driven by the continuing Korean conflict, provided a useful lens for understanding the larger significance of the drama in terms of its narrative choices, as well as its international reception.

In our interpretation of *Crash Landing's* presentation of the Korean conflict, we explored a number of key sub-themes, first demonstrating variation in the portrayal of the inter-Korean border as both rigid and porous, but at all times highly militarised. We discussed the contrasts in the visibility of national security structures necessitated by the continuing war, which were softer, less militarised and more sophisticated in the South, but harsher and corrupted in the North. Moreover, the choice made by *Crash Landing's* creators not to engage deeply in the politics of the Korean conflict allowed them to explore inter-Korean relations at the level of the interpersonal. Enhanced by South Korean creative sensibilities, the North Korean characters fell into a binary of endearing "fellow Koreans", contrasted against a cold, dangerous villain representative of the criminality and corruptibility of the North Korean authorities. In this way, the drama achieved the humanisation of, and empathy for North Korean people, while also reminding viewers of the North's darker side. Last, our analysis explored the presentation of the reunification question, concluding that, as is the case in South Korean society at large, this national aspiration does persist but is largely rhetorical, such is the lack of specificity around when or how it might come to pass.

We then sought to contrast our discussion of the drama's content with *Crash Landing's* reception in the international media, which revealed a continuing shallowness in global understanding of the Korean conflict. However, the international attention received by the drama points to its significance in shaping and broadening this understanding. The media commentary raised questions about the historical context and geopolitical impact of the drama, it sought answers from North Korea watchers and defectors, but also noted the drama's tendency to romanticise life in the North. Finally, international media coverage also connected *Crash Landing's* success to a global growth in fans and observers of Korea more generally, evidenced by the uptake in opportunities to pursue study of Korean language, culture and society.

Crash Landing therefore belongs firmly to the modern history of screen representations of the inter-Korean conflict. However, its large and diverse viewership, both in South Korea and

abroad, the level of detail presented, and its broad availability makes it potentially more impactful than other South Korean productions depicting North-South relations. While it does add to the screen narratives of camaraderie that emerged in the context of the Sunshine Policy era, it also introduces ruptures, most notably because of its careful (and often optimistic) portrait of everyday realities in North Korea, but also because, despite the somewhat illusory horizon of reunification, the show's lovers find a space in which they not only co-exist, but also reunite.

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