

Banal Koreanness: National Imagery in Multicultural-Themed Television Shows

Felicia Istad,

Korea University, South Korea

ORCID: 0000-0001-9438-0101

Claire Min Jung Kim,

1021 Creative, South Korea

ORCID: 0000-0003-1010-6741

Nathaniel Ming Curran,

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, China

ORCID: 0000-0002-6477-8730

Abstract. This article analyses how three South Korean multicultural-themed reality television programmes discursively produce Koreanness. We ground our study in scholarship on ‘othering’ and the notion of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995) and conduct a thematic analysis of the shows. Our findings show that the programmes adopt a Korea-foreign dichotomy that becomes a lens through which viewers can vicariously experience the existence of a unified South Korean culture. We argue that the juxtaposition of a Korean ‘us’ against a foreign ‘them’ precludes imagining a more pluralistic South Korea—even as the shows ostensibly celebrate South Korea’s increasing diversity.

Keywords: South Korea, Migration, National Imagery, Reality Television

Within the global industry of reality television, South Korea (hereinafter Korea) has emerged as an important player, exporting popular show formats such as *Masked Singer* (*Misūt’ōri ūmaksyo pongmyōn’gawang*, 2015-) and *Return of Superman* (*Syup’ōmaeni torawatta*, 2013-) to among others China, Italy and the United States (Ju, 2020: 107). At the same time that cultural exports enjoy steady growth, Korea is experiencing increased cultural diversity at home as a result of immigration. Public awareness of the country’s rising diversity is reflected in a domestic media industry in which multicultural-themed reality shows have emerged as a regular television format (Oh, 2020: 15). Shows in this new genre have proven popular. In 2014, the talk show *Non-Summit* (*Pijōngsanghoedam*, 2014-2017) achieved the highest viewer ratings among private

broadcasters (The JoongAng, 2014). Meanwhile, the long-running docudrama *Love in Asia* (*Rōbū in ashia*, 2005-2015) was able to retain a consistent rating of 13 percent—making it the most-watched television in its time slot (Cha, Lee and Park, 2016: 1470). Having showcased female marriage migrants in Korea, the show was also highly lauded for its portrayal of minorities and received multiple awards, including the Cultural Diversity Program Award (Ahn, 2018: 134).

In contrast to other countries—where the depiction of non-celebrities (for example in *Big Brother*, 1999-, and *The Bachelor*, 2002-) has until recently been a key characteristic of the reality genre (see Grindstaff, 2011)—the casting of celebrities has long been a defining feature of Korean reality television (Jung, 2020: 193). Multicultural-themed television shows are the exception, and they cast predominantly ordinary citizens. The casting of migrants in prime-time television is, in the Korean context, quite noteworthy and speaks to the Korean media and audiences' intense interest in the increasingly multicultural character of contemporary Korea.

Although not the result of direct government intervention, the rise of multicultural-themed television shows has coincided with expanding efforts by the Korean government to manage cultural diversification. Such government-led efforts have included the integration of permanent residents (Chung, 2010) and the introduction of multicultural education in Korean schools and the public sector (Moon, 2013). Crucially, the government has also taken action in the area of cultural policy, issuing guidelines about television content featuring ethnic minorities (see Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2018). At the intersection of public and commercial interests emerges an ongoing negotiation of the boundaries of Koreanness that is articulated, at least in part, via multicultural-themed shows.

In this article, we draw on theories of identity and nationalism in popular culture to examine how Korean national identity is defined and (re)produced through the evolving genre of multicultural-themed shows. Specifically, we examine how Koreanness is discursively constructed via these shows, focusing in particular on the role that representations of cultural and racial 'others' play in this process. We use banal nationalism (Billig, 1995) and the literature on othering as our analytical framework and carry out a thematic analysis of three shows from different genres. We find that the shows reinforce images of a unified Korean culture through the lens of the foreign 'other.' Whether encountered alternately as a historical oppressor or favoured guest, the constructed figure of the foreign other serves the important role of reifying what is

portrayed as a historically-continuous and ostensibly immutable ‘Koreanness.’ The findings demonstrate how shows that are premised on the demographic diversification of Korea effectively forego opportunities for imagining a culturally diverse society by instead juxtaposing ‘them’ amongst ‘us.’

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: we first review the literature on banal nationalism and othering and then discuss these issues in the context of reality television. Next, we position our research within the specific context of Korea and articulate our research question. This is followed by a discussion of our methods and an overview of the three shows. Then, we present and discuss our findings. We conclude by considering the implications of our study and outlining areas for future research.

Banal Nationalism and Othering

One of the most enduring and well-cited concepts in studies of national identity is that of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995). Broadly speaking, banal nationalism refers to the unconscious (re)production of national identity through everyday discourses, practices and symbols. Billig (1995) argues that national identity ‘is remembered because it is embedded in routines of life,’ such as national flags, which serve to “mindlessly” remind us of nationhood, even when they hang ‘limply’ and ‘unnoticed.’ A similar function, Billig (1995: 43) argues, is performed by the ‘routine phrases of the mass media,’ which serve to unconsciously remind people of national identity.

Although adopted widely by scholars in a variety of disciplines, Billig’s (1995) notion of banal nationalism has also been the subject of considerable critique. For example, drawing on a number of studies engaging with Billig’s (1995) work, Skey (2009: 337) suggests that Billig (1995) assumes too much homogeneity of the ‘audience’ for various messages of banal nationalism and that he also fails to address how ‘different constituencies might respond to the particular media texts or political speeches’ that Billig uses as examples in his explication of banal nationalism. We acknowledge that Billig’s (1995) thesis about the nature of national identity is difficult to empirically verify (or falsify) and that audiences—even superficially homogeneous ones—display variation in their response to any message. Nonetheless, we find many aspects of Billig’s (1995) work on national identity (including the notion of ‘deixis,’ discussed below) useful in our analysis of Korean multicultural-themed television.

Billig's (1995: 81-83) conceptualisation of national identity is predicated on 'our' nation being one in a world of nations—which naturally delineates a distinction between 'us' and 'them.' National identities are 'evoked by embracing a complex set of themes about "us", "our homeland", "nations" ("ours" and "theirs"), "the world", as well as the morality of national duty and honor.' Because of this concern with in-groups and out-groups, Billig's conceptualisation of national identity bears much in common with the concept of 'othering.' Othering refers to when an individual or group 'defines and secures [its] own identity by distancing and stigmatizing an(other), thereby reinforcing [its] own "normality" and setting up the difference of others as a point of deviance' (Narthey and Ladegaard, 2021: 4). One important contemporary way that assumptions and stereotypes are discursively constructed and disseminated is reality television.

Reality Television

A well-established scholarly tradition highlights the centrality of media to the emergence and maintenance of both nationality identity and nationalism. This thesis was famously articulated in Anderson's (1983) analysis of print capitalism's role in the formation of national consciousness (for a summary, see Szulc, 2017), and Billig (1995) used the example of the mass media in his formulation of banal nationalism. Reality television in particular has been highlighted as an important platform for communicating and constructing national identity (Darling-Wolf, 2011; Deery, 2012: 67-90). As a quotidian part of life for many people around the world, reality television contributes to banal nationalism. Aslama and Pantti (2007) cite the concept of banal nationalism in their analysis of the Finnish reality show *Extreme Escapades* (*Suuri seikkailu*, 2001-2005), analysing how Finnishness is 'flagged' through the show's images of rural landscapes, myths, narratives of technological connectedness and everyday leisure activities.

However, while the relationship between media and nationalism is well documented, research also questions a straightforward correspondence between nationalism in the media and the discursive production of national identity (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2014). In the realm of reality television, previous studies have identified reality shows as sites of both cultural conservatism (Hambleton, 2011) and liberal multiculturalism (Jiang, 2019; Pearson and Kothari, 2007). Therefore, rather than considering reality television as a reflection of national identity in the general public—if such a thing as a singular general public can even be said to exist (see Morley, 2004: 424-425)—this study approaches reality television not as a mirror but as a platform

through which elites transmit their worldviews (Lavie-Dinur and Karniel, 2013). In this view, when dominant discourses are transmitted via the media, elite ideology is disseminated and normalised (see Croteau, Hoynes and Milan, 2012). Thus, while we acknowledge that all media texts are open to contested readings (Hall, 1973 [1980]) we concur with Elias, Jamal and Soker (2009: 375), who, writing in the context of Israeli reality television shows, argue that ‘the ostensibly pluralistic nature of reality shows is limited a priori by the hegemonic forces.’ They conclude that the superficial pluralism of Israeli reality shows masks their ‘othering’ of minorities.

Critics argue that although reality television can provide the opportunity for mainstream audiences to encounter minorities, the guests themselves often have little agency in shaping what the television audience sees (see Cha et al., 2016; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). Further, research shows that the representation of traditionally marginalised groups (such as LGBTQI, women and ethnic minorities) in reality television oftentimes is accompanied by stereotyped and normative images (Drew, 2011; Gamson, 2014; Stephens, 2004). Thus, even when it increases the visibility of minorities, reality television’s representations often contribute to processes of othering (Yang and Oh, 2008). For example, studies examine how reality shows construct national identities through stereotyped images of ethnic minorities (Volcic and Erjavec, 2012) who are deliberately constructed as foreign others (Hambleton, 2011).

Korean Context

In Korea, mainstream entertainment shows play a particularly important role in disseminating and normalising elite discourses due to their central, rather than peripheral, position in the nation’s cultural industries (Kim, 2011). Supporting the notion that it is dominant discourses that are (re)produced through multicultural-themed television shows, research highlights that migrants themselves remain underrepresented in the production of Korean multicultural-themed shows (Han and Hong, 2013: 220). Thus, while they have become increasingly visible on screen, migrants and foreigners remain underrepresented behind the camera and are ‘othered’ when they appear on camera.

Korea has a relatively recent history of immigration, starting in earnest with labour-intensive work migration in the 1990s, followed by the immigration of foreign spouses, skilled workers, refugees and international students in the 2000s (Hwang, 2017: 22-31). The Korean

government responded to this development with a variety of policies aimed at integrating marriage migrants, controlling the flow of work immigration and promoting social cohesion (Kim, 2015: 90-107). Today, the Korean-Chinese diaspora is by far the largest cultural minority in Korea, followed by other Asian minorities from neighbouring countries, such as Thailand and Vietnam (Ministry of Justice, 2020: 45). Although ethnic return migrants remain a significant majority among migrants in Korea, the country has experienced a rapid diversification of cultures, nationalities and races over the past decades, and the country's 2.5 million migrants made up close to 5 percent of the total population in 2019 (Ministry of Justice, 2020: 38).

The popularity of multicultural-themed shows highlights an apparent incongruence in Korean society today. On the one hand, Korea claims a monoethnic past (see Lie, 2014), premised on the notion of *tanil minjok* (one ethnic people). On the other hand, there is widespread public awareness in Korea of neologisms such as 'globalisation' (Lee, 2016) and 'multiculturalism' (Hundt, Walton and Lee, 2019). It is within this social milieu that multicultural-themed reality shows have exploded in popularity. The very emergence of multicultural-themed television can in and of itself be interpreted as an implication of change and diversification in Korean society. For example, Ahn (2018) examines television shows featuring biracial children and argues that while the programmes evade serious discussion of race, they simultaneously emphasise that 'the children—and the nation itself—is coming of age into a multicultural future' (187). By depicting biracial individuals, the shows seem to be implicitly raising the question of the degree to which bloodline - long celebrated as *tanil injong* (one race) - can or should constitute an integral aspect of modern Korean identity (Kang, 2018: 61).

In this study, we are interested in the ways that foreigners are used simultaneously to symbolically reflect the increasing multi-ethnic nature of contemporary Korea and also to highlight the ostensible uniqueness of Korea and Korean culture vis-à-vis the other—whether countries, cultures or races. Although previous research investigates how the themes of multicultural shows interact with elements of Korean identity, including food (Song, 2019), economic development and a past of racial homogeneity and economic development (Ahn, 2018), more research is needed that systematically examines how Korea's evolving national identity is alternately articulated in and across multicultural-themed shows. Based on the literature reviewed above, we put forth the following research question: How is Koreanness discursively constructed in multicultural-themed television shows?

Method

To answer our research question, we conducted a thematic analysis of three popular multicultural-themed shows. We decided to use thematic analysis because of its inherent flexibility (Terry et al., 2017: 17) and because we were interested in how enduring themes in the shows subtly contribute to discursively constructing Koreanness both within and across the shows. At the start of the analysis, our unit of analysis was the individual episode, but through an iterative process, we also ended up examining smaller units of analysis, down to the level of individual scenes. The various ‘activities’ that the participants engaged in also emerged as useful units of analysis (see Table 1, discussed below). In analysing the shows, we paid close attention to how they make use of what Billig referred to as ‘national deixis’ (1995: 116). Deixis refers to the linguistic flagging of a nationally unified ‘us’ in contrast with a national other— ‘them’ (1995: 106-107). Such deixis can be subtle. For example, Billig discusses how deixis is accomplished via the use of the definite article ‘the’ rather than ‘a’ in an article about ‘*the* prime minister’ of the UK. By using the definite article, the UK automatically serves as a point of reference for both audience and writer—‘indicating Britain as the centre of reader's and writer's ('our') shared universe’ (Billig, 1995: 108). Following Billig, we examined how the three Korean reality shows discursively demarcate boundaries of belonging and exclusion. However, in addition to examining the linguistic terminology—the primary subject of Billig’s analysis—we also consider how audiovisual elements and editing decisions, such as the use of post-production techniques, contribute to delineating the limits of Koreanness.

In analysing each show, we focused initially on identifying scenes where either Koreanness or foreignness was explicitly foregrounded, such as scenes in which words like ‘foreigner’ were used, or when Korea was compared to other countries. However, our iterative coding approach gradually resulted in the identification of latent themes as well. In many cases, these latent themes were not discernible from the dialogue of the participants and hosts alone but required also examining the use of on-screen captioning, musical scoring and the decisions to air (or not air) particular scenes.

Our multi-scalar and recursive coding procedure identified several salient themes from the episodes we watched. In identifying themes, we followed Clarke and Bruan’s (2014) argument that the purpose of thematic analysis is to identify those themes relevant to answering

specific research questions rather than simply identifying themes that appear most frequently in the data.

Sample

We started our sampling procedure by categorising multicultural-themed television. To ensure that our analysis of the discursive construction of Koreanness was not skewed by the national origin of the guests, we purposefully chose multicultural-themed television shows that feature three or more different cultures across episodes. After having established our sample criteria, we identified potential shows through a review of the literature on multicultural television and a search of a Korean news media database (Big Kinds). We find that the shows are divided into two phases (see Figure 1). The first phase started in 2005 and was characterised by a focus on primarily Asian marriage migrants, who were featured in docudramas and talk shows. The second phase started in 2013 and is marked by the appearance of multiple shows featuring non-Asian, primarily Caucasian foreigners. This period also features a wider variety of sub-genres in the reality genre, including game shows and travel shows. According to our observations, the year 2017 marks the point when multicultural television can be considered a fixture of Korean television, with five or more shows airing each year thereafter.

We selected three shows airing after 2017, each of which represents a different sub-genre of multicultural-themed shows and is produced by different broadcasters: the docudrama *My Neighbour Charles* (*Iutchip ch'alsŭ*, 2015-); the game show *South Korean Foreigners* (*Taehanoegugin*, 2018-); and the travel show *Yo! Welcome to Korea!* (*Ŏsŏwa han'gukŭn ch'ŏmiji*, 2017-). This diverse sample helps ensure that our findings are representative of the genre more broadly rather than being indicative of any particular show format or broadcaster. The authors watched the first twelve available episodes from each of the three shows' 2019 season. The average duration of episodes across all three shows ranged from 47 to 105 minutes. The 36 episodes in our final sample comprise approximately 47 hours of screen time.

[insert Figure 1 approximately here]

Three Multicultural-Themed Shows

My Neighbour Charles (from now on MNC), also known as *Iutchip ch'alsŭ*, is a docudrama from KBS. Each episode features a new guest, all of whom are foreign-born residents in Korea. A

production team follows their daily lives as they go to work, do house chores, interact with family members and go travelling. Afterward, the guests are invited to a television studio, in which they watch the recordings together with show host Choi Won-jung, a group of two or three regular panels (referred to as ‘seniors’) and one special guest (referred to as ‘junior’).

South Korean Foreigners (from now on SKF), or *Taehanoegugin*, is a game show on MBC plus. The show is hosted by comedian Kim Yong-man, who is a seasoned entertainer. In front of him is a large circle, with seats reserved for the Korean team on the left side and another set of seats for foreign-born guests on the right side. The game is organised so that the Korean team of five people takes turns in taking on a contender among the foreign team of ten people. The foreign team is seated in a pyramid-like structure of four levels. In addition to the regular cast, each episode features local celebrities as well as migrants who speak Korean.

Yo! Welcome To Korea! (from now on WTK), or *Ösöwa han'gukün ch'öümiji*, is a travel show on MBC every1. Each episode features a migrant in Korea who invites friends or family from their hometown to visit Korea. Upon arrival, the visitors follow the host on a guided tour across the country, with each episode featuring new attractions and activities. The cast includes one special guest, three accompanying visitors and four regular programme hosts seated in a studio.

We began our study by categorising the national origin of the three shows’ guests. In doing so, we were aided by the fact that all of the ‘multicultural’ cast members are verbally introduced as ‘foreigners’ and represented with small symbols of the national flag of their country of origin on screen. In other words, the participants are literally ‘flagged’ as foreign. Based on the use of the national flags, we identified that the sample’s 52 characters (33 men and 19 women) were from Europe (40 percent), Asia (35 percent), North America (10 percent), South America (6 percent), Africa (6 percent), and Oceania (4 percent) (percentages rounded).

We also visited the official website for each show and collected the show descriptions in Korean. We observe in the show descriptions a deixis of ‘foreigners’ and ‘Koreans.’ Viewers are promised ‘foreigners who are more Korean than Koreans’ (SKF), and whose perspective on ‘the real Korea’ (WTK) offers insight into ‘a different side of *our society*’ (MNC). Although the three shows describe significantly different casts, ranging from permanent residents to visitors who stay for less than a week, the differing formal statuses and self-ascribed identities of participants are flattened via the repeated use of the word ‘foreigner’ to describe long-term

residents, including naturalised Koreans, alongside tourists. In effect, the descriptions of the shows discursively produce a homogenised ‘other’ juxtaposed against a homogenised ‘us.’ Below, we discuss the themes identified from our thematic analysis: *Global Prowess, Food, and History*.

Global Prowess

Despite the ostensible focus on foreigners, all three shows depict guests in ways that allow the hosts—and by extension, the audience—to reflect on the prowess of *Korea* and in particular its global industries. In WTK, travellers are seen praising the convenience of public transportation (ep. 1) and marvelling at Seoul’s towering skyscrapers (ep. 10). In SKF, the participants are quizzed about urban redevelopment projects like Nodaeul Island (ep. 2) and Korea’s advanced technological innovations, such as a planned drone delivery service in 2025 (ep. 2).

In an episode of MNC (ep. 11), the camera crew is shown following a Russian guest on his daily commute to work. When asked about his choice of transportation, he responds: “Seoul buses are faster than cars and public transportation itself is much more convenient!” He goes on to add that he makes use of the city’s public bicycles on sunny days. This scene and ones like it use the guests’ commentary to highlight Korea’s high level of development, especially in comparison with the guests’ home countries.

Although the experiences of foreigners are ostensibly in focus, it is often not their opinions that are showcased but instead the opinions and reactions of the Korean hosts sitting in the studio, who watch and comment on the scenes together with an in-studio audience. On WTK (ep. 9), when three Thai guests land in Korea, a scene shows them pressing the airport elevator button and then staring at the transparent glass elevator coming down; the hosts in the studio smugly remark that the sight ‘can be fascinating,’ a comment seemingly implying that the Thai visitors have never seen such a modern elevator before. Crucially, the Thai trio does not make any comments on the elevator, merely waiting for it to come down. Nonetheless, captions appear on the screen and describe the Thai participants’ ‘eyes widening,’ highlighting their ostensible admiration for Korea’s technological advancement.

In addition to showcasing Korea’s urban and technological developments, the shows also focus on the emergence of new export industries, such as Korean cosmetic products. Scenes of guests’ visits to the shopping area Myeong-dong feature lengthy shots of travellers from

Thailand (ep. 9) and Poland in beauty shops (ep. 8). Crucially, these scenes are accompanied by voice-overs from the studio in which the hosts comment gleefully on the travellers' excitement: "They are hooked!" (ep. 8). Via cutting, captioning and post-production tools, the three shows situate the foreign experience as a storyline to which the Korean hosts are invited to react and the Korean audience to then proudly consume. The foreign other becomes a prop that sets the stage for the majority's reflection on the achievements of Korea.

Through the perspective of foreigners, the three multicultural-themed shows present Korean cultural products as universally consumed products in a global market. The shows' portrayal of guests' experiences paints an image of Korea as a highly developed country that is not only economically successful but also culturally influential. When WTK (ep. 9) introduces three visitors from Thailand, the scene opens with iconic images of their hometown, Bangkok, which a caption on screen triumphantly declares is 'abundant with traces of Korean culture.' In its introduction of Bangkok, the show highlights street shops that sell Hallyu merchandise, including close-up images of posters with the faces of Korean actors and singers. In another scene (ep. 10), we see one of the Thai guests expounding his love towards Korean television and singing the soundtrack of a historical drama called *Jewel in the Palace* (*Taejanggŭm*, 2003-2004). Once they are in Seoul, the guests from Thailand are seen visiting the drama theme park of major broadcaster MBC, where they dress up in traditional kings' costumes and talk about the Korean dramas they have watched back home. The delight of the shows' hosts is palpable as the scenes highlight the popularity—and ostensibly ubiquity—of Korean culture and, with it, the country's global prowess.

In the quiz show SKF (ep. 8) the two competing teams are asked to identify a gesture that has become 'a staple of K-culture as K-pop grew popular all over the world.' When the Korean team accurately guesses that the gesture in question is a miniature heart shape by crossing the thumb with the index finger, the host excitedly elaborates that this gesture is so popular that 'even Hollywood stars are doing this!' His comment is accompanied by a photo on the screen showing Tom Cruise and other Hollywood actors mimicking the gesture along with the caption: 'Hollywood actors' most beloved K-heart.' Scenes like this one highlight Korea's global cultural appeal by demonstrating (with great pride) that Korea's influence extends around the world, and even reaches Hollywood. In the shows, Korea's global prowess is portrayed as lying not merely in the fame of Korean popular culture but is further confirmed to the audience via foreign others'

engagement with and consumption of ‘K-culture’. By explicitly emphasising other countries’ interest in Korean national culture the shows also become a platform through which Korea situates itself as a nation in a world of nations. That is, the shows reinforce multicultural television shows’ grounding in banal nationalism by explicitly depicting numerous other countries’ engagement with a unified and distinct Korean culture.

Food

Food is a quotidian yet crucial way in which national identity (and nationalism) are articulated across the three shows. That food is used to discursively represent national identity is unsurprising: ‘food culture [is] arguably the most banal version of culture’ (Ichijo, 2017: 265; also see Jeong, 2020b). In all three multicultural-themed television shows, food is a crucial site through which the Korean nation is articulated—often vis-a-vis foreignness or the foreigner (see Song, 2019).

In general, the guests’ ability and willingness to consume Korean foods are praised by Korean participants and treated as an important milestone in meeting the threshold of Koreanness: ‘He is all Korean now!’ (WTK, ep. 3). Through such scenes, food functions as a metonym for Koreanness more broadly. By focusing only on traditional food and ignoring the diversification of cuisine in contemporary Korean society, the shows construct the image of a Korea that, while increasingly ethnically diverse, is culturally homogenous.

In the docudrama MNC, Korean cuisine is depicted as a staple of everyday life in the homes of multicultural families. Kimchi appears frequently, which is unsurprising given that it has often been adopted as a symbol of Koreanness; the side dish has been widely promoted internationally by the Korean government, starting with the 1988 Summer Olympics in Korea (Cho, 2006: 215-216) and continued afterward through multiple global campaigns, including the 2008 ‘Year of Korean Food Globalization’ (Jeong, 2020a: 154) and the 2016 ‘World Hansik Festival’ (Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 2016).

In an episode of MNC (ep. 1), a man from Tanzania who has already lived in Korea for seven years is shown eating Kimchi at home and at dinner with his soccer club members, all of whom appear Korean. Scenes show the guest constantly telling the people around him that he is ‘fully Korean,’ a claim that the studio hosts acknowledge as they praise him for his kimchi consumption. One Korean friend tells the Tanzanian with surprise, ‘even Koreans don’t eat

[Kimchi] *this* often.’ In the scene, kimchi functions as the means through which the Tanzanian is able to claim his right to belong in Korea. On the one hand, Korean food is thus depicted as a point of entry for foreigners to claim membership in the ostensibly expanding boundaries of Koreanness. On the other hand, by drawing a one-to-one correspondence between traditional Korean food and Korean identity, the boundaries of Koreanness are simultaneously narrowed in scope.

Food is also a recurring theme in the domestic travel show WTK. By coding all of the discrete activities featured in the sample episodes, we find that the guests are shown eating 31 times and doing other activities 35 times (see Table 1). That is, the cast eats almost as much as it engages in all other activities combined. As shown in Table 2, almost all of the meals are Korean, ranging from traditional dishes like steamed beef rib (ep. 10) to contemporary favourites like roasted chicken soup (ep. 5). Not only are food scenes frequent, they are also lengthy and celebratory. Close-ups of the foreign visitors are used to depict them enthusiastically devouring the food. However, in many cases, the meals are consumed in silence by the travellers and narrated to viewers through voice-overs from the studio and captions on the screen. The praise for the food emerges often not from the guests, but from the studio hosts. For example, the hosts clap their hands and vigorously applaud when the Polish visitors sit down for a meal of boiled pork and pork feet (ep. 5). In contrast, they speak pityingly about a group of Finnish guests, who, the hosts point out, have not had the opportunity to eat Korean food in a year: ‘Imagine how much they must have missed the taste of kimchi and makgeolli during the past year!’ (ep. 1) Some dishes are recognised as rare culinary opportunities even for locals, including Korean blood sausage (ep. 3) and live octopus (ep. 2). The host comments: ‘Even *we* don’t get to eat that food very often.’ Ironically, the foreign visitors are seen eating Korean food in places that are popular with young Koreans precisely for their selection of *global* cuisines. For example, visitors from Thailand eat one of Korea’s old-fashioned stews in Garosu Street (ep. 10), a trendy part of Seoul popular with the younger generation. The scenes consistently depict the foreign cast disproportionately eating Korean cuisine in an urban landscape that is in reality infused with global cuisines. Instead of acknowledging the culinary diversity of Korea, foreign others are employed to reinforce the notion of cultural/culinary homogeneity.

[insert Table 1 approximately here]

[insert Table 2 approximately here]

Even the quiz show SFK, which precludes opportunities for visiting Korean restaurants due to its location in-studio, still features food prominently. For example, in one episode (ep. 6) the correct answer is king crab and foreign participants are shown guessing a wide variety of traditional Korean dishes, such as red bean soup and raw crab marinated in soy sauce, much to the delight of the hosts.

In addition to showcasing Korean cuisine, many of the food scenes carry nostalgic connotations to a Korea of the past, both in terms of menu and serving. In WTK (e.g. ep. 1, 2, 3), the travellers are repeatedly seen consuming their meals inside traditional buildings (*hanok*) and served by elderly staff dressed up in national costumes (*hanbok*). Traditional meals (*hansik*) are served in countless ceramic bowls and consumed on a wooden floor table. The traditional food is contrasted with the foreignness of those consuming it. The existence of a shared (and unchanging) Korean culture is reinforced via not only the food but also its consumption by those who are flagged as foreign. The creation of a binary distinction between a foreign ‘other’ and a national ‘us’ contributes to the portrayal of a fixed and homogenous Korean culture in which traditional Korean food is automatically preferred by anyone who is—or aspires to be—Korean.

History

In each of the shows, history is mobilised to both celebrate a shared past and to construct a shared historical memory that reinforces the dichotomy between an ‘us’ and a ‘them.’ The primary ‘other’ in discussions of history is Japan, which brutally colonised Korea, occupying the country between 1910 and 1945. Within the otherwise lighthearted shows, the Japanese occupation is a recurring element, and multiple historical events are discussed; the Korean Independence Movement, the Japanese occupation of Korea between 1910 and 1945 and the subsequent bilateral conflict concerning the issue of public apologies for the sexual slavery endured by Korean women during the occupational period and territorial disputes surrounding Dokdo Island. In the quiz show SKF (ep. 6), participants are asked about the Provisional Government for the Republic of Korea and Boshingak, a landmark that came to symbolise the independence movement. The questions are alternately accompanied by traditional Korean music in the background and the show’s Korean participants singing an old song that celebrates Korea’s capital, Seoul (ep. 6). In this way, history is linked to other elements of banal nationalism, and national sentiment is amplified. Crucially, painful and polarising domestic

events, such as the democratisation process of the 1980s, the dictatorship and economic growth of the 60s and 70s and the Korean War in the 50s, do not surface.

In the docudrama MNC (ep. 12), the audience is introduced to a fifth-generation Korean-Russian who is living in Korea with his wife and daughter. The show joins him in his search for traces of his family's history, detailing the story of his great-great-grandfather, who was an independence fighter in the early 1900s when the Japanese occupation of Korea began. After hearing his history of resistance, imprisonment and flight from Korea, the leading host becomes emotional, covers her face with her palms and exclaims: 'Just thinking about it makes me tear up.' She adds, 'This is why we need to know *our* history!' and is supported by her colleague: 'we must never forget that *our* happiness is achieved through the sacrifices of many people.' In this scene, a member of the Korean diaspora, whose position as Korean is otherwise ambiguous, is conscripted as a member of the 'us' to bring attention to the suffering inflicted by the Japanese 'them.' Not only is the Japanese government an enemy of the past, the history of colonisation also carries into bilateral conflicts in the present, such as ongoing demand for public apologies for colonisation atrocities. In WTK, travellers visit museums and other historical sites that focus on the Japanese colonisation. During a visit to Seodaemun Prison History Hall (ep. 6), which is a historical landmark of the Korean Independence Movement, full-screen news footage shows modern-day protest marches by the aging victims of sexual slavery with the caption: 'The painful Japanese Military Sexual Slavery is not an issue of the past but still ongoing.' Even in the case of museums that are not centred around the occupational period, such as Seoul Museum of History (ep. 1), fragments of the story between Korea and Japan are brought into focus and further constructed through discussions in the television studios, where the hosts condemn the actions of Japan and complain that its government has not properly apologised: 'We still haven't received a formal apology.' The political commentary is particularly noteworthy in the context of shows that are otherwise devoid of political topics, even that of immigration.

Discussion & Conclusion

In each of the three themes explicated above, foreigners are situated as a lens through which multicultural-themed television shows (re)produce a monolithic Korean national identity. Under the pretence of inviting foreigners to tour Korea, compete in quizzes about Korea or share their lives in Korea, the three shows bring into focus the characteristics of a seemingly immutable

Koreanness that is discursively reified as it is presented to, and engaged with, by the foreign other. Centred around scenes that display ‘their’ consumption of ‘our’ food or test ‘their’ knowledge of ‘our’ culture, the premise of these shows is the existence of a differentiated—yet ultimately one-dimensional—foreign other who encounters a strictly homogenous Korean ‘us.’ Ironically, an in-group Korean identity is discursively strengthened even while it is Korea’s increasing demographic diversity that is ostensibly being highlighted.

In the shows, Koreans are constantly compared to foreigners and the term ‘foreigner’ itself is used to denote anyone outside the narrowly defined in-group of Koreans. Thus, a ‘foreigner’ is both a visitor from Poland who comes to Korea for a week of travel, his friend who is a resident in Korea (WTK) as well as a naturalised migrant from India who has lived in the country for 41 years (SKF). By bundling together anyone who was born elsewhere into the singular category ‘foreigner’—regardless of their purpose, status or identification as visitors, residents or citizens of Korea—an easily distinguishable outgroup of ‘them’ is created, against which an impenetrable boundary of a Korean ‘us’ can be established. Crucially, this not only occludes differences in cultures, but also erases the fact that many of the guests are permanent residents of Korea who have lived and worked in the country for many years. By juxtaposing ‘them’ with ostensibly timeless elements of Koreanness, even long-term residents are rendered forever foreigners.

Although the shows construct the foreign other as a largely homogenous group—whose only shared characteristic is that they are not *born* in Korea—the shows do not attempt to erase their presence in Korea. Instead, the genre’s focus on foreign others constitutes a paradox in which the foreign other is excluded from the definition of a Korean ‘us’ at the same time that the construction of ‘us’ hinges on the presence of ‘them.’ This is similar to what Billig (1995) observes of banal nationalism flagging the nation as ‘a nation within a world of nations’ but with a notable difference: Korea is not constructed as a *territorial* nation within a world of nations, but rather as a *people* within a world of increasingly blurred boundaries of nation-states (that is increased mobility and ever-expanding forms of citizenship). By redirecting the flagging of Korea away from the territorial and towards group-oriented boundaries, the shows effectively circumvent the irreversible changes that a multicultural society represents to Korea as a nation and instead reiterate a culturally homogenous image of Koreans as a people.

Despite the continued expansion and diversification of production in ethnically diverse programmes, we find that mutual dialogue on cultural plurality in Korea remains remarkably absent in the multicultural-themed shows that we examined. Instead, by positioning foreigners as an out-group that interacts with and reacts to ‘our’ culture, the shows effectively ‘other’ cultural and racial minorities in Korea. The erasure of cultural plurality on shows that are centred on the presence of foreigners foregoes a rare opportunity to raise awareness on the topic of immigration and to promote a full embrace of Korea’s foreign-born residents. The homogenisation of Korean culture further diminishes opportunities for conversations on national identity in a society that is undergoing rapid demographic changes and an increase in first and second-generation migrants (Ministry of Justice, 2020).

As forms of popular entertainment, multicultural-themed shows are inevitably produced under the constraints of show-business, such as budgeting, viewer ratings and tight schedules. Within these constraints, there are limits to what the shows can do in terms of offering a more pluralistic and accepting vision of Korean society—and a more nuanced portrayal of the many different types of ‘foreigners’ in Korea. However, changes are necessary. By identifying the mechanisms through which discourses of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are (re)produced on Korean television, we hope to contribute to ongoing debates about Korea’s multicultural present and future. However, we recognise that our study has several limitations. For example, we sampled only shows in which three or more cultures were featured. As a result, the themes we identify may differ from those of country-specific shows within the multicultural genre, such as those featuring North Korean defectors on *Now on My Way to Meet You* (*Ije mannarō kamnida*, 2011-) and *Great Friends* (*Ttang choŭn ch'in'gudŭl*, 2015-2016). These shows’ focus on a single guest from a single foreign country may allow for a more in-depth and multidimensional portrayal of those guests. Nonetheless, we hope that our study will contribute to future scholarship on Korean multicultural-themed television’s role in shaping understandings of Korean identity in contemporary Korea. Future studies could examine the techniques ‘foreign’ participants on these shows use to challenge portrayals of a homogeneous Korean culture. Also useful would be studies that assess the degree to which audiences engage in contested readings of shows in this genre and studies using methods specifically amenable to the analysis of moving images, such as multimodal discourse analysis, would be particularly helpful. Going forward there is also a need

for comparative studies that can examine how representations of Koreanness and foreignness have shifted, or evolved, over time.

While our study has drawn attention to how static notions of Koreanness are reproduced via contemporary multicultural-themed television, we do not believe that such limited portrayals of Koreanness will necessarily endure. And as witnesses to the growing ethnic and linguistic diversity of contemporary Korean society, we remain optimistic that more nuanced portrayals are not only possible but can offer opportunities for new and more tolerant configurations of identity to emerge.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors declare that this publication received no funding.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the anonymous reviewers and Dr. Elke Weissmann.

References

Ahn JH (2018) *Mixed-Race Politics and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in South Korean Media*. Cham: Springer.

Anderson B (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Aslama M and Pantti M (2007) Flagging Finnishness: Reproducing National Identity in Reality Television. *Television & New Media* 8(1): 49–67.

Big Brother (2000-) Veronica.

Billig M (1995) *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.

- Cha NY, Lee CSH and Park JH (2016) Construction of Obedient Foreign Brides as Exotic Others: How Production Practices Construct the Images of Marriage Migrant Women on Korean Television. *International Journal of Communication* 10: 1470–1488.
- Cho HS (2006) Food and Nationalism: Kimchi and Korean National Identity. *Korean Journal of International Relations* 46(5): 207–229.
- Chung EA (2010) Korea and Japan’s Multicultural Models for Immigrant Incorporation. *Korea Observer* 41(4): 649–76.
- Clarke V and Braun V (2014) Thematic Analysis. In: Teo T (ed.) *Encyclopaedia of Critical Psychology*. New York: Springer, pp. 1947–1952.
- Croteau D, Hoynes W and Milan S (2012) *Media/Society: Industries, Images, and Audiences*. 4th Ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Darling-Wolf F (2011) World citizens "à la française": Star Academy and the negotiation of French identities. In: Kraidy MM and Sender K (eds) *The Politics of Reality Television: Global Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, pp. 127–139.
- Deery J (2012) *Consuming Reality: The Commercialization of Factual Entertainment*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Drew EM (2011) Pretending to Be “Postracial”: The Spectacularization of Race in Reality TV’s Survivor. *Television & New Media* 12(4): 326–346.
- Elias N, Jamal A and Soker O (2009) Illusive Pluralism and Hegemonic Identity in Popular Reality Shows in Israel. *Television & New Media* 10(5): 375–391.
- Extreme Escapades (Suuri seikkailu, 2001-2005)* MTV3.
- Gamson J (2014) “It’s Been a While Since I’ve Seen, Like, Straight People” Queer Visibility in the Age of Postnetwork Reality Television. In: Ouellette L (ed.) *A Companion to Reality Television*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 227–246.
- Great Friends (Ttang choŭn ch’in’gudŭl, 2015-2016)* EBS.

- Grindstaff L (2011) Just be yourself - only more so: ordinary celebrity in the era of self-service television. In: Kraidy MM and Sender K (eds) *The Politics of Reality Television: Global Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, pp. 44–57.
- Hall S (1973) *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. Retrieved from: [http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/2962/1/Hall%2C 1973%2C Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse.pdf](http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/2962/1/Hall%2C%201973%2C%20Encoding%20and%20Decoding%20in%20the%20Television%20Discourse.pdf).
- Hall S (1980) Encoding/Decoding. In: Hall S, Hobson D, Lowe A, et al. (eds) *Culture, Media and Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. London: Routledge, pp. 128–138.
- Hambleton A (2011) Reinforcing Identities? Non-Japanese Residents, Television and Cultural Nationalism in Japan. *Contemporary Japan* 23(1): 27–47.
- Han JM and Hong SK (2013) Practical Direction of Multicultural Society’s Broadcasting Standard: Focusing on Fairness Discussion and Multicultural Family Interview. *Korean Journal of Broadcasting and Telecommunication Studies* 27(6): 186–225. [in Korean]
- Hundt D, Walton J and Lee SJE (2019) The Politics of Conditional Citizenship in South Korea: An Analysis of the Print Media. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 49(3): 434–451.
- Hwang MH (2017) *Immigration Policy for Majors in Multicultural Studies*. Gyeonggi Province: Korean Studies Information. [in Korean]
- Ichijo A (2017) Banal nationalism and UNESCO’s intangible cultural heritage list: cases of washoku and the gastronomic meal of the French. In: Skey M and Antonisch M (eds) *Everyday Nationhood: Theorising Culture, Identity and Belonging after Banal Nationalism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 259–284.
- Jeong JH (2020a) *Korean Food Television and the Korean Nation*. London: Lexington Books.
- Jeong JH (2020b) Taste of Korea: Governmental Discourse on National Cuisine and Its Articulation of Nation-ness. *Ewha Journal of Social Sciences* 35(1): 153–186.

Jewel in the Palace (Taejanggŭm, 2003-2004) MBC.

Jiang X (2019) Parenting Practices and Gender Roles in the Modern Chinese Family: Interculturalism in *Where Are We Going, Dad?* *Television & New Media* 20(5): 460–475.

Ju HJ (2020) *Transnational Korean Television: Cultural Storytelling and Digital Audiences*. London: Lexington Books.

Jung G (2020) Aspirational paternity and the female gaze on Korean reality-variety TV. *Media, Culture & Society* 42(2): 191–206.

Kang KL (2018) Talking Hospitality and Televising Ethno-national Boundaries in Contemporary Korea: Considering Korean TV Shows Featuring Foreigners. *Television & New Media* 19(1): 59–74.

Kim EY (2011) *Entertainment is Powerful*. Paju: Esse. [in Korean]

Kim TH (2015) *Interpretation of Multiculture Society & Korean Immigration Policy*. Seoul: Chipsajae. [in Korean]

Lavie-Dinur A and Karniel Y (2013) National Identity and the Representation of Palestinian Arab Women's 'Otherness' in Reality Shows on Israeli Commercial Television. *Critical Studies in Television* 8(1): 52–72.

Lee JS (2016) "Everywhere You Go, You See English!": Elderly Women's Perspectives on Globalization and English. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 13(4): 319–350.

Lie J (2014) Introduction: Multiethnic Korea. In: Lie J (ed.) *Multiethnic Korea? Multiculturalism, Migration, and Peoplehood in Contemporary South Korea*. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, pp. 1–27.

Livingstone S and Lunt P (1994) *Talk on Television: Audience Participation and Public Debate*. London: Routledge.

Love in Asia (Röbŭ in ashia, 2005-2015) KBS.

- Masked Singer (Misŭt'ŏri ŭmaksyo pongmyŏn 'gawang, 2015-)* MBC.
- Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (2016) *2016 World Hansik Festival*. [in Korean]
- Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (2018) *Guidelines for Enhancing the Receptiveness of Multiculturalism in Television Contents*. [in Korean]
- Ministry of Justice (2019) *Korea Immigration Service Monthly Statistics January 2019*. [in Korean]
- Moon R (2013) Globalisation and citizenship education: diversity in South Korean civics textbooks. *Comparative Education* 49(4): 424–39.
- Morley D (2004) Broadcasting and the Construction of the National Family. In: Allen RC and Hill A (eds) *The Television Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp. 418–441.
- My Neighbour Charles (Iutchip ch'alsŭ, 2015-)* KBS.
- Nartey M and Ladegaard HJ (2021) Constructing Undesirables: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Othering of Fulani Nomads in the Ghanaian News Media. *Discourse & Communication* 15(2): 184–199.
- Non-Summit (Pijŏngsanghoedam, 2014-2017)* JTBC.
- Now on My Way to Meet You (Ije mannarŏ kamnida, 2011-)* Channel A.
- Oh MH (2020) *The Legends of Entertainment*. Paju: Dapge. [in Korean]
- Pearson S and Kothari S (2007) Menus for a Multicultural New Zealand. *Continuum* 21(1): 45–58.
- Return of Superman (Syup'ŏmaeni torawatta, 2013-)* KBS.
- Skey M (2009) The National in Everyday Life: A Critical Engagement with Michael Billig's Thesis of Banal Nationalism. *The Sociological Review* 57(2): 331–346.

- Slavtcheva-Petkova V (2014) Rethinking Banal Nationalism: Banal Americanism, Europeanism, and the Missing Link between Media Representations and Identities. *International Journal of Communication* 8: 43–61.
- Song M-S (2019) Cooking love in Asia: Food, belonging and the making of a multicultural family on Korean film and television. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 15(2): 197–211.
- South Korean Foreigners (Taehanoegugin, 2018-)* MBC Plus.
- Stephens RL (2004) Socially Soothing Stories? Gender, Race and Class in TLC's A Wedding Story and A Baby Story. In: Holmes S and Jermyn D (eds) *Understanding Reality Television*. London: Routledge, pp. 191–210.
- Szulc L (2017) Banal nationalism in the Internet age: Rethinking the relationship Between nations, nationalisms and the media. In: Skey M and Antonisch M (eds) *Everyday Nationhood: Theorising Culture, Identity and Belonging after Banal Nationalism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 53–74.
- Terry G, Hayfield N, Clarke V, et al. (2017) Thematic analysis. In: Willig C and Rogers WS (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage, pp. 17–37.
- The Bachelor (2002-)* ABC.
- The JoongAng (2014) JTBC Records its Highest Viewer Rating and Ranks No. 1 Among Private Broadcasters. Retrieved from: <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/15510099> [in Korean]
- Volcic Z and Erjavec K (2012) Commercial and Sexualized Nationalism on Serbian Reality TV. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16(6): 597–614.
- Yang JH and Oh CW (2008) Representation of the Other: How Television Portray Interracially Married Asian Women to Korean Men. *Korean Journal of Social Science* 27(1): 345–371. [in Korean]

Yo! Welcome to Korea! (Ŏsŏwa han 'gukŏn ch 'ŏŭmiji, 2017-) MBC every1.

Author biographies

Felicia Istad is a PhD Candidate in Public Policy at Korea University. She has a Master of Science in Management and Human Resources from LSE and a Bachelor of Arts in Korean from SOAS, University of London.

Claire Min Jung Kim is a Content Strategist at 1021 Creative. She holds a dual Masters degree in Global Media & Communications from LSE and Global Communication from the University of Southern California.

Nathaniel Ming Curran is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Communication at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). At PolyU he is affiliated with the Research Centre for Professional Communication in English.