

Beautiful Defectors: An Exploration of South Korea’s “Now on My Way to Meet You”

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What does it mean to be beautiful in North Korea, to escape, and then end up as a minor celebrity in South Korea? A new variety talk show in Seoul features North Korean women—*mi-nyeo*, or beauties—who share stories of their respective experiences in the DPRK, as refugees in the Chinese borderlands and beyond, and describe the challenges of their present lives in South Korea. “Now on My Way to Meet You” (*I-jae manara kamnida*; 이제 만나러 갑니다), broadcast on “Channel A” since December 2011, features a panel of female North Koreans who have settled in Seoul, along with three hosts.¹ Based on a careful reading of the show along with interviews with two of the women who participated, we argue that rather than merely objectifying the women as part of a masculine or South Korean gaze, it reframes how defectors are included in media—not as victims or objects being discussed, but as feminine participants with agency.

According to the [program's website](#), the show aims to show South Koreans how these defector “beauties” have “turned the corner past their tribulations to settle in ROK.” Throughout the episodes, we see [stories of struggle](#) in adapting to life in Seoul as well as a variety of performances spanning from more [traditional](#) to [pop](#). In whatever medium, the program also aims to show how the women are misunderstood in South Korean society as well as to reveal the prejudices they face. The program ultimately tasks itself with the lofty goal of being “a communication variety show that seeks harmony between the North and South.”²

Socialization in the South | At first glance, it might be tempting to conclude that “Now on My Way to Meet You” is part of the feminization and ethnic-ization of North Korean settlers in ROK, focusing primarily on *differences*, even as it heightens South Korean awareness and sympathy. Thus it might be asked: are the women on display for a male gaze or a South Korean audience, or is their participation somehow more meaningful?

The tendency in the South Korean media portrays North Korean women in two distinct ways: as impoverished, homely victims or beautiful trained women constructed by a totalitarian state. In the case of North Korea, [nearly 70 percent](#) of refugees in China are

¹ The hosts are Nam Hee-seok, no stranger to attempt to [incorporate](#) outsiders into Korean society; film actress Kang Seong-yeon; and South African Bronwyn Mullen, a former “[chatting beauty](#)” herself.

² This isn’t the only broadcast related to beautiful, feminine defectors. In May, Channel A broadcast a multi-part documentary “[Defector Beauties’ Story](#)” (“Tal-buk i-nyeo-deul-i i-ya-gi”) that tackled similar themes.

women and often find themselves in horrendous situations of physical or sexual abuse with few options for survival. This is a problem considered elsewhere, as several experts have examined [the foundations and policy implications](#) of the feminization of refugees worldwide.

On the other hand, it's sometimes said that North Korean women are some of the most beautiful in the world. Rumor has it might even be a constructed beauty: women on the show discuss the apparently high rate of plastic surgery among young women in Pyongyang. On a related note, there is, surely, the superficial problem of presenting the women as "beauties," as *mi-nyeo*.

What does it mean when Northern settlers are represented primarily in the South as female? It is worth examining not how the women are presented as objects, but rather as subjects. Specifically, through this television program, are the women prey to a system that assigns them particular roles (beauty, victim, etc.), or are they able to actively use the medium as a way to reframe how each woman, as an individual agent, is able to create her identity—to be a subject? Based on our reading of the show along with interviews we conducted with some of the show's panelists we argue that the women are now active agents in their experience.

Subjects, Not Objects, on the Show | Overall, many of the women on "Now on My Way to Meet You" view themselves as subjects and believe the show has practical value in several respects. Primarily, the show helps the predominantly South Korean audience see North Koreans as individuals with unique talents. One of the women on the show explained to us:

"The North Koreans living in the South are often seen merely as the poor and downtrodden, and we are pitied more than we are respected. Some people view us as a burden on society due to the financial assistance we receive from the South Korean government, so they fail to recognize that we do have unique talents and can make valuable contributions to society."³

Comedy as Humanizing Force | Indeed, despite some of the "lighter" moments on the show that have been criticized as superficial and unnecessary, like when the panelists demonstrate comical dance moves or voice impersonations, there have also been plenty of moments that these women demonstrate genuine artistic, vocal, linguistic and musical skills.

Some of their performances on the show also offer the viewers unique insights into different aspects of North Korean life. One woman replicated the performance she sang in front of Kim Jong-il. These sorts of experiences are novel to the South Korean audience, but other vignettes on the show were more familiar. Another panelist performed the morning song and dance routine that she taught her kindergarten class in North Korea. Through its endearing simplicity and similarity to songs taught to Korean

³ The two women on the show interviewed by SinoNK have requested anonymity.

children south of the DMZ, the routine acts as a powerful reminder that despite being a world apart the North and South retain some common ground past the politics.

The notion that the “human side” of North Koreans that many in the South may not have observed is reflected in the remarks of another show participant:

“This show can help change some of the South Koreans’ views of North Koreans living here because the views have not been changing—or at least not fast enough. Some of the South Koreans, especially the older generations, still view us suspiciously as if we were spies or aliens. Obviously, that needs to change.”

Thus, even some of the goofiness on the show can have a certain humanizing effect that further connects the North Koreans to the South Korean people, many of whom avidly view a plethora of South Korean TV shows that endorse onstage silliness.

In an interview with [Dong-A Ilbo](#), comedian and show MC Nam Hee-seok emphasizes the pitiable quality of the women appearing on the show:

Our panelists are very young and pure. There’s the sense of having a childlike innocence, to the point where when you hold their hand you think you have to marry them. They are extremely enthusiastic, passionate, and sincere in risking their lives for a new life.⁴

That “new life” is frequently dramatically different. Han Seo-hee, once a member of Kim Jong-il’s private musical performance troupe, now plays for a public audience broadcasted in South Korea. In a sense, she is now the artist and the agent in her performances. Whereas before she was trained to reproduce the regime and bring joy for the Great Leader, in a sense now she is an [entertainer in her own right](#) and can be seen as an individual with talent. Han now has subjectivity; the program allows her to be seen as an individual within her new society that focuses on individual talents rather than reproducing the collective.

Conclusion | Whether the women’s beauty aids or impedes their message and status as settlers in the South is certainly a contentious issue. It seems that glamorizing the mysterious women locked north of the border [won’t end anytime soon](#). But another issue does seem to be addressed in a positive way for the women: this represents a marked change in how South Koreans can meet DPRK defectors in mainstream media. Following the shift in popular discourse as represented by films such as *JSA* and *Shiri* in the early

⁴“우리 출연자들을 보면 참 순수해요. 때 묻지 않은 느낌이죠. 손을 잡으면 결혼해야 한다고 생각할 정도예요. 목숨을 걸어본 사람들이라 삶을 대하는 태도만큼은 굉장히 열정적이고 성실해요.”

2000s, this may signal the next great shift in how we see defectors in Korean media—as having the ability to portray themselves.