

# On my way to meet who?

In introducing North Korean refugees, does a South Korean TV show portray them as irreconcilably foreign? | BY CHRIS GREEN / STEPHEN EPSTEIN

In 2011, *Channel-A*, a cable network run by the conglomerate that publishes the *Donga Ilbo*, launched a program called *Now on My Way to Meet You* (*Ije mannareo gammida*). Carved from a tried-and-true South Korean talk show format, the show brings together a rolling panel of young female *saeteomin* (North Korean refugees) every Sunday night at 10:50 to discuss life in the two Koreas with stalwart host Hui-seok Nam, a woman co-host or two, and a further set of four B-list male South Korean entertainers.

Each show opens in a light-hearted manner, with conversations about daily life in North Korea alongside mild flirtation between the Southern male and Northern female participants, who are routinely praised for their endearing attractiveness such as *minyeo* (beautiful women). To this extent, *Imangap*, as it has come to be known (for short) clearly mimics *Minyeodeulhui suda* (The chatter of beautiful women), or *Misuda*, a *KBS* network show that garnered a broad audience between 2006 and 2010 for its heady mix of personalities, including the same host, Hui-seok Nam, with a group of young foreign women discussing life in Korea, in Korean. In fact, one of the early hosts of *Imangap*, Bronwyn Mullen started out as a *Misuda-ista* herself.

But inevitably the women's Northern origins lend the program a serious undercurrent absent from the more resolutely-upbeat *Misuda*, whose immigrant panelists all arrived in Korea under much happier circumstances, and for whom the occasional indignity as foreigners in Korean society was more than balanced out by the special treatment afforded attractive young celebrities-in-the-making.

Throughout *Now on My Way to Meet You*, viewers hear narrative depictions of life in North Korea, many of which are extremely distressing, involving stories of the collapse of the state distribution network, the repression visited upon ordinary people by the North Korean government, defection, repatriation, family separa-



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tion, famine and death.

Indeed, for much of its brief history, one of the show's signature features has been its climax, the *talbuk seuteori* ("defection story") of a participant. The participant relates the story of how she defected, including in the narrative a description of a gift they bring with them and would like to give to someone they had to leave behind in another place (usually North Korea, but sometimes China or Mongolia).

While it is obvious that the producers are manipulating the feelings of viewers with the telling of these narratives, apparent from the swelling strings and the cutaway shots of weeping fellow panelists and shocked hosts, it would take a heartless viewer indeed not to be moved by the personal accounts of the horrific tribulations the defectors experienced.

However, the show has avoided relying solely on this riveting pathos. It also features singing, dancing and displays of athleticism, all accomplishments that the North Korean education system has instilled in its people, characteristic of the Eastern Bloc mold. Frequently, there are songs included related to some key tenet of socialist morality and/or the glory of General Jong-il Kim, the great *Janggunnim*.

As time has passed, the show's emotional content has become diversified. The producers of *Now on My Way to Meet You* have recognized that *saeteomin* society in South Korea is young, has shallow roots and that there are deep mutual suspicions between the new immigrants and established society in the South. Accordingly, they have introduced elements that elicit sympathy from South Korean and international viewers, and elements intended to foster solidarity and create a shared sense of resilience in *saeteomin* viewers, who make up another substantial proportion of the viewership.

Probably the most notable step in this direction has been the introduction of *talbuk seonggong* ("defector

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success") stories. In this segment of the broadcast, which has supplanted the harrowing *talbuk seuteori* on multiple occasions in recent months, either a panel member, or, more frequently, a third party, explains what they have achieved since arriving in South Korea, and how.

Such stories included a woman, now in her 40s, who taught mathematics in North Korea for eight years before escaping, unable to tolerate the non-meritocratic nature of her society. She then went on to establish a successful alternative school in the south for *saeteomin* children. A second woman, driven by the desire to give her young daughter a good start in life, told of how she worked night and day to build up a mini-empire of convenience stores.

Last autumn the show also welcomed Korea's traditional harvest holiday, *chuseok*, with an episode that celebrated the tradition of honoring ancestors during the holiday. It featured a group of South Korean entertainers old enough to have been born in what is now North Korea in the 1930s and 1940s, prior to the division of the peninsula. The elders played the role of kindly elder relatives, showing great warmth to the young women, while simultaneously providing proof, through their presence, that North and South really were a single country at some point in the living past and that *jeong* (affection) was a crucial value within it.

Yet despite its often-laudable aims, the show has been controversial, and faces criticism. In South Korea's polarized political climate, some have regarded *Now on My Way to Meet You* with suspicion because the broadcaster is *Donga*, a company that proudly announces itself as conservative. It is hard to say with confidence whether *Donga*, and its ideological

brethren, the newspapers *Chosun Ilbo* and *JoongAng Ilbo*, are drawn to *saeteomin* stories out of a sense of duty to a suffering group of people, or because the tales of suffering in North Korea buttress a reflexive anti-communism. In the absence of confirmation either way, doubts have arisen about the show among those whose politics lean to the left, and who would have supported the Sunshine Policy of former presidents Dae-jung Kim and Moo-hyun Roh.

Many *saeteomin* feel that the past, a time of even greater hardship in North Korea than the current era, should be left precisely where it is, and that the goal of integrating North Koreans into South Korean society can scarcely be aided by a show that reminds viewers that North Koreans have grown up in such radically different circumstances that total assimilation may not even be possible.

However, the controversy surrounds more than political questions of the show's broadcaster and on-screen elements of flirtation, manipulation and misrepresentation. Rather, despite its quality and popularity, the show conveys a sense of schizophrenia. This (as we argue in a paper to be presented at the University of London in May 2013), results from hunting for a harmonious *dongjilseong* (homogeneity) of the peoples of the two Koreas at the same time as creating a sense of *tajahwa* (sense of their "otherness" or foreignness) in an attempt to render the women's stories remarkable and attention-getting. This sense of "otherness" simultaneously draws together the community of *saeteomin* through their shared stories of experiences which are alien to the host society.

What else might one expect to result from episode 45's description of the North Korean state food dis-

tribution system and the ensuing dialogue about the foods eaten in the North? All the Northern women were familiar with *gangnaengibap*, a ubiquitous mix of corn and rice eaten as a rice substitute during hard times, while not one of the South Korean cast had tried it. Nam, humorously carrying himself like the presenter of another *Channel-A* TV show, *The Culinary X-Files* (*Meokgeori X-Pail*), points out, upon tasting the uninspiring blend, "It's all right now, but after a year, things would be a bit different." Elsewhere discussion of kimchi falters on the fact that in North Korea there is little other than salt with which to season it, leading Nam to utter one simple phrase upon tasting the Northern version, "*Jjammida*" ("It's salty.")

Of course, neither he, nor any other South Korean, will ever likely be required to eat the dusty porridge or its salty accompaniment. For this they should certainly be grateful, but that very fact does cause problems for a show whose varied goals, it appears, are doomed to irreconcilability. ●

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