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Green, C.K.; Epstein, S.J.; Kim, Y.

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## 11 Revealing voices?

### North Korean males and the South Korean mediascape

*Stephen J. Epstein and Christopher K. Green*

Visitors to the YouTube channel of BJ (“broadcast jockey”) Ipyeong will find highlighted a ten-second clip in which the channel owner makes a bid for an audience;<sup>1</sup> Ipyeong looks sternly at the camera, his eyebrow piercings accentuating an imposing demeanor, and commands the viewer to subscribe (*ni gudokhaera*). However, the young man then breaks into an ironic pose of over-the-top cuteness as he moves his hands to his face, revealing a heavily tattooed forearm with figures that include a rabbit and some skulls, and squeals “gyuuuu,” as an effect lends blush to his cheeks. Visible behind him are accoutrements of trendy South Korean youth, such as multiple baseball caps and sports shoes.

BJ Ipyeong’s display of tough masculinity softened by a performance of *aegyo* (affective cuteness) would not be especially remarkable but for one important feature; Ipyeong is a *talbukja*, a border-crossing migrant from North Korea, who made his way out of the country at age 11 and now airs his own videos online, engaging with the audience in a live format on AfreecaTV, a South Korean digital platform that allows self-broadcast.<sup>2</sup> Ipyeong then also archives these shows on a YouTube channel that has more than 40,000 subscribers. In his broadcasts Ipyeong offers reflections about his own experiences, North Korea and the *talbukja* community. He thus adds a personal, insider perspective to media voices on North Korea within South Korea that complements and, at times, challenges more mainstream outlets. Through his very presence, Ipyeong helps construct an alternate version of North Korean males and masculinity, one that defies common portrayals of the Kim dynasty and its men as elite minions or goose-stepping soldiers.

In this chapter, we extend previous work on the representation and involvement of North Korean migrants in the South Korean media. The topic not only reflects ongoing developments in South Korean understandings of neighbors from the North but also provides an engaging venue for exploring recent changes in the South Korean media landscape. In an earlier article, we considered in detail the cable television show *Now on My Way to Meet You (Ije mannareo gamnida)*, focusing on how evolution in broadcasting law and screen culture intertwined with gendered portrayals of North Koreans (Epstein and Green 2013). As we argued at the time, the show had garnered a substantial audience by successfully bringing North Korean women into the popular *yeneung* (variety entertainment) show format, but its desire to emphasize shared ethnic and cultural elements

between the North and the South while providing information on North Korea in a way that commanded viewer attention led to a dilemma; although viewers are encouraged to recognize traits held in common with the new arrivals from the North, the show's material often represented Northerners as Others.

The appearance of several more media texts featuring defectors since that article was published urges further investigation of the phenomenon. These offerings include such programs as *Good Life (Jal sarabose)* on Channel-A, the conservative broadcaster of *Now on My Way to Meet You*, and *Love Reunification: Southern Man, Northern Woman (Aejeong tongil – namnam bungnyeo)*, which is shown on a second, equally conservative cable channel, TV Chosun. In keeping with *Now on My Way to Meet You*, both programs make romantic flirtation and tension between South Korean males and North Korean females a key attraction, as highlighted in the title of the latter, and draw heavily on the *namnam bungnyeo* motif. This trope, which highlights the desirability of matches between men from the South and women from the North, continues to exert appeal for South Korean audiences while, in the process, reinforcing gendered hierarchies of power on the Korean peninsula.

The demographics of the resettled North Korean community encourage this propensity to focus on defector females. Although in the early days of inter-Korean migration, men composed a majority of those who defected, their proportion has declined markedly over time; of the 1,127 North Koreans who entered South Korea in 2017, just 188 were male, and they now make up only 30% or so of the entire community of over 30,000.<sup>3</sup> This long-standing shift has led research on representations of *talbukja* to concentrate on women, often critiquing the way in which they are subjugated to the patriarchal gaze of the South Korean media (Tae and Whang 2012; Lee 2014). A corollary of such attention to women has been a gap in research on *talbukja* men.

In this chapter, therefore, we examine evolving South Korean media representations of North Korean migrants with particular attention to the portrayal of men. Ongoing developments in the South Korean media landscape are allowing the repertoire of such images to expand considerably. The proliferation of talk shows involving North Koreans opens possibilities for more nuanced representations of these recent arrivals, and members of the community are also availing themselves of self-broadcast as a means of empowerment. Furthermore, greater knowledge on the part of South Korean media consumers about North Korean society means that recourse to stereotypes of the past carries less and less weight in such formats. Audiences often seek answers to specific and comparatively well-informed questions, albeit not necessarily the ones to which the migrants would prefer to respond.

Our exploration of these developing modes of discourse focuses on three case studies. First, we consider TV Chosun's *Moranbong Club*, which pursues the framework staked out by *Now on My Way to Meet You* but with the addition of male panelists and greater emphasis on life after resettlement, as an example of how conservative broadcasters continue to mine this topic and attempt to shape public discourse, while increasingly bringing in North Korean male voices. Second, we address the supportive portrayals of young North Korean men in *Best*

*Friends* (*Ddak joeun chingudeul*), an EBS show sponsored by the Institute of Unification Education, a sub-division of the South Korean Ministry of Unification. Finally, we return to look in further detail at the rise to low-level prominence of BJ Ipyeong as an example of how self-broadcast is fostering a more direct channel for North Korean migrants to reach South Korean audiences. What images of men with North Korean origins do such recent productions from cable networks and user-created content put forth? How do these texts contribute to knowledge of North Korea for a South Korean audience, and what do these developments reveal about South Korean society itself?

### ***Moranbong: joining the country club***

Broadcast on TV Chosun, *Moranbong Club* is advertised as a vehicle for discovery of how “beautiful defector men and women” (*talbuk minam minyeodeul*) live in South Korea today. As such, the show nods to *Now on My Way to Meet You* in focusing on the attractiveness of its guests. Divergence with its forerunner has come in consideration paid to male panelists and to the personal background of panelists as interesting individuals rather than simply informants about North Korean life. Initially, the show admitted only North Korean defectors with less common histories into its “club” and referred to them as “members.”<sup>4</sup>

In spotlighting male participation in a club whose members have national origins outside mainstream South Korean society, the show also draws inspiration from the recent *Non-Summit* (*Bijeongsang hoedam*), a cable television program that has attained an unusual degree of popularity. Launched in mid-2014, *Non-Summit* features foreign males fluent in Korean discussing their lives and integration into South Korean society, with special attention to their experiences in the labor force. While humor is certainly present, the show takes the views of these foreign members of society seriously; discussion takes place around a conference table, in contrast to most variety shows. The setting lends authority to the ensuing conversations and establishes an insider group of males standing in implicit opposition to others who are unable to converse similarly in Korean. Likewise, *Moranbong Club*, first broadcast in September 2015, began with a conference table format to validate the voices of its panelists as they explained their lives and their views of both North and South Korea, and related information about North Korea that the audience would otherwise struggle to access. This hierarchical privileging of certain members of the community, though potentially problematic, conveyed the desire to respect the voices of at least some North Koreans and not simply treat them as fodder for consumption.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, *Moranbong Club* also displays continuity in less encouraging representations of North Koreans. The show’s discussions of North Korean society can be accompanied by playful but derogatory treatments, such as the pithy description in episode 95 of the late Kim Jong-Il’s palace lifestyle by one of his former guards, which features cartoonish interpretations of the deceased dictator that occasion great laughter from those assembled.<sup>6</sup> Not infrequently, these treatments tip over into reminders of North Korea’s poverty, as with discussion of the low salary level of a male DPRK Foreign Ministry official in comparison with a Vietnamese

cleaner in episode 63, which is treated as a source of embarrassment and highlights North Korea's failure to meet international norms.<sup>7</sup>

Anecdotes can, however, regard favorably North Korea's maintenance of traditional character traits that older South Koreans at times complain have been lost in the younger generation locally, a theme largely absent from the female-oriented *Now on My Way to Meet You*. Episode 70 treats Hwang Taek-Hyeon, a former member of North Korea's elite special forces, as worthy of unusual admiration for his manly fortitude.<sup>8</sup> Though hardly imposing looking, Hwang, in a modest tone, claims to be able to face off against seven or eight men simultaneously. The assertion, regardless of its veracity, is a clear performative statement of tough masculinity, and his professed indifference to the dangers of defection clashes with the emphasis on the perils of the process in female and child defection stories. Understated stoicism here evokes astonishment from his interlocutors, while also suggesting the resoluteness of North Korean manhood in the role of adversary.

At the same time, examples of North Korean males' lack of empathy for women are foregrounded; in the show's first episode, conversation turns to differences between North and South Korean men. Female *talbukja* panelists become authoritative sources for the comparison; unlike their North Korean counterparts, South Korean men are described as usually remembering a couple's special days and celebrating those days with gifts; they are also characterized as more detail-oriented than North Korean males as a rule, paying careful attention to their clothes so that their outfits are well coordinated.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, North Korean male attitudes are made to clash with those of contemporary South Korean males, represented here by the show's first co-hosts Ji Sang-Ryeol and Kim Seong-Ju, who affect an urbane, trendy appearance alongside a compassionate demeanor.

The show further reveals that, although as subject to the stresses of contemporary South Korean life as anyone else, its "members," male and female, can integrate into society without jettisoning a North Korean identity. The point of view of *Moranbong Club* therefore expands upon that adopted in latter episodes of *Now on My Way to Meet You*, in which positive examples of resettlement replaced harrowing narratives of defection (Epstein and Green 2013). The North Korean regime is to be rejected, but not all aspects of North Korean upbringing have to be downplayed or diminished. This focus on integration jibes with a South Korean media preference for shows that present the successful assimilation of foreigners into Korean society, such as the long-running *Love in Asia*, which strives to bring before the public happy international marriages, and the aforementioned *Non-Summit*. As they reveal the inner workings of the North Korean state, the North Korean males on *Moranbong Club* thus implicitly challenge dismissive portrayals of migrants as part of a developing underclass and the dystopian visions of unification associated with Lee Eung-Joon's novel *Private Life of the Nation* (*Gukka-eui sasaenghwal*) and Chang Kang-Myoung's *Our Aspiration Is War* (*Uri sowoneun jeonjaeng*).

Most strikingly, in episode 68, *Moranbong Club* brought forth Thae Yong-Ho, a former senior official in the North Korean embassy in London. Likely the most well-known male *talbukja* in Korea, Thae assumes prominence on *Moranbong Club* as an exemplar of how North Korean men may be accommodated within a

reconstituted Korean fabric as sophisticated and respected members of society. His smooth and affable cosmopolitanism has enabled him to fit within frameworks of South Korean self-understanding. Indeed, one South Korean official has remarked that Thae is not even a Korean per se so much as a citizen of the world.<sup>10</sup> Thae's rejection of North Korea, of course, is therefore treated as "proving" the superiority of South Korea's system, and concern for his family's wellbeing as a motivation for defection encourages sympathy on the part of the audience and a view of Thae as a loving father.<sup>11</sup> Through the appearance of Thae, other special guests, and its more regular panelists, *Moranbong Club* reassures the public that reunification is desirable, necessary and, moreover, possible. In doing so, it offers an example of how shifts in the media landscape with the proliferation of cable channels can work to further political agendas and effect social change.

### ***Best Friends: best of intentions***

Sponsored by the Institute of Unification Education for EBS (Education Broadcasting System), South Korea's public broadcasting network, *Best Friends* wears its pedagogic intent on its sleeve. The program concerns itself with bringing together young panelists born on each side of the 38th parallel and exhibiting the close friendships between them. Rather than confront prejudices against *talbukja* directly, the show's force comes from its understated but insistent position that North Korean migrants are likeable fellow citizens who can (and do) fit into the larger societal framework. The program pursues serious discussion of issues without the inherent othering and hierarchical assumptions of South Korean superiority seen in shows from conservative broadcasters. In other words, *Best Friends* recognizes heterogeneity but takes as a philosophical starting point an acceptance that North Koreans and South Koreans are equal but different. This attitude stems in no small part from drawing on and targeting youth in its attempt at open-minded education.

The first episode's opening sounds the keynote; Seo Gyeong-Seok, the middle-aged host of *Best Friends*, appears facing the camera, seated behind a table around which four pairs of chairs are placed. He then introduces himself together with a glossed account of the show's title, "Best Friends, a South and North Korean teenagers' reunification project" (*nambuk shipddaedeurui tongil peurojekteu, ddak joeun chingudeul*). His words provide a framework for interpreting what follows, as he explains that *ddak joeun chingudeul* stands for *ddakchingu*, a term that he expects his listeners from South Korea to find unfamiliar inasmuch as it is a Northern equivalent of *danjjak chingu* ("best friends"). Seo's explanation introduces another usage that becomes regular throughout the program he relates, that the term originates in the *witdongnae*, "upper village/neighborhood," a counterpart to the phrase *araet dongnae* ("lower neighborhood"), which is in common usage in North Korea as a way to describe South Korea without attracting negative attention. The use of *witdongnae* stands in relief to the much more common *bukhan*, which strips North Korea of its preferred name for itself (*joseon*) and treats the country as a wayward polar opposite to South Korea (*hanguk*). *Best Friends* thus also indicates a desire to avoid insofar as possible the associations

that “north” (*buk*) and “south” (*nam*) have accrued over decades; this simple but significant strategy innovates and moves towards the North on its own terms.

In the show’s first 30 seconds, Seo emphasizes a generational gap in speaking of the close friendships established among the young people whom the viewer will encounter, friendships that adults brought up in a different era cannot even imagine. The audience then meets in turn four young North Korean migrants, three of them male, who become the show’s protagonists as half of pairs composed of a teenager born in South Korea and a teenager born in North Korea. The formula for the presentation of these young arrivals from North Korea deserves notice. Along with name and age, the caption accompanying their introduction relays current school, home town, and year of entry into South Korea. In other words, the most salient aspects of their identity are that they are students with a local affiliation, but they have also crossed the border from a specific origin point in the North; their year of entry to the South is treated as a key marker in their lives. These individual introductions of the North Koreans mark them as special and the primary focus of attention. Here it is the Southern counterparts who will be brought in and defined in relation to their migrant friends; the fact that they are otherwise unexceptional normalizes friendship with North Korean peers as not requiring unusual openness or compassion.

The reversal of the demographics of the *talbukja* community deserves attention; the show appears to wish to offer support for young North Korean male migrants, who are at times seen as at risk within South Korean society. Once all four have been introduced, they are brought together in a still shot, divided into quadrants, beneath which a caption reads “friends with abundant charm” (*maeryeok neomchineun chingudeul*). The editorializing frame encourages viewers to respond positively to these participants, who no doubt were chosen in large part because they do evince ready charm in their interactions and often display winning smiles. Seo as the host also treats his guests as appealing and endearing, as they reveal details about themselves, and frequently speaks of the participants in complimentary terms to reinforce a positive view.

The first episode then provides separate portraits of the friendship pairs. The first portrait, which can be taken as paradigmatic, involves *talbukja* Gun-Seong, who grew up near Mt. Baekdu in the North; Juni, his best friend and dorm roommate comes from Jeju Island in the South. The show follows Gun-Seong as he goes to visit Juni’s home. The introduction to this segment emphasizes the distance that Gun-Seong has travelled, and the use of this pairing to lead off the show appears deliberate, as Gun-Seong’s journey to Jeju Island recalls a phrase that emphasizes the unity of the Korean nation – “from Mt. Baekdu to Mt. Halla” (*baekdusaneseo hallasankkaji*), the two tallest peaks north and south of the 38th parallel. The literal instantiation of this well-known phrase marks desire for reunification.

A central feature of this segment is discussion of Gun-Seong’s dilemma of how to reveal his Northern origins to Juni, previously undisclosed at his school. Gun-Seong determines that it is best to take the initiative and divulge this information, and the secret (*bimil*) strengthens the bond between them. Juni is asked if he felt any different about Gun-Seong after the development of their friendship upon learning that Gun-Seong is a *talbukja*, and is adamant, despite prodding, that



nothing whatsoever changed. Although the story depends on a tacit understanding that concealing Northern origins might be natural, Juni's attitude further normalizes acceptance.

Numerous clips of footage taken from beyond the studio allow viewers to see the panelists interact with high school classmates more fully. These clips make evident the esteem in which they are held by their peers, and the Northerners' congeniality and adaptability is emphasized. Insertion into a South Korean educational framework in which they perform admirably encourages empathy from the audience. Crucially, the panelists are depicted as eager participants in South Korean society who adhere to normative rules of working hard and achieving good grades.

In other segments, the audience can compare divergences in Southern and Northern manhood. The South Korean youth may appear stronger, and at times filming angles make height differentials between the two groups readily apparent. Nonetheless, despite slighter stature resulting from childhood diets lacking in the protein of their peers, the Northerners demonstrate more virility and vigor than their counterparts. Viewers witness how the young migrants possess skills from Korea's agrarian past that are in danger of being lost by South Korean youth and evince an alternate vision of Korean masculinity that intertwines with notions of indigenous authenticity, undiluted by urban modernity.

For example, during one episode, the pairs of friends go on an overnight outing to Paju's reunification village (*tongilchon*).<sup>12</sup> There they are divided into teams, and have contests set before them as *Best Friends* reproduces a typical convention of South Korean variety entertainment (*yeneung*) shows. These events include a firewood splitting contest in which the young men from the North prove themselves far more adept and powerful than their counterparts. The vignette offers opportunity for humor at the clumsy attempts of the Southern boys to wield axes. A caption reads "splitting firewood is not easy for the friends from the lower village who have no experience." In a post-match discussion, one of the Southern youth remarks that their Northern friends have "know-how and skill." As in the *Moranbong Club*, the audience observes that, among Northern males, unassuming appearance and impressive prowess can go hand in hand.

Overall, deliberate editing strategies (at times verging into the heavy-handed) and wise choice in the show's participants help *Best Friends* put forth a complimentary vision of young North Korean men – friendly, charming, diligent and handsome. These positive portrayals thus reassure viewers that these new arrivals can readily become productive members of South Korean society. The show combats stereotypes of Northern defectors as lazy and feckless, raised within a system that encourages them to expect handouts from the state, a characterization more commonly associated with defector males than females, given the latter's repositioning as dynamic participants in the North Korean market economy. Although the approach taken by *Best Friends* is hardly radical, the contrast to sensational, sentimental and sexualizing treatments elsewhere in the South Korean media towards *talbukja* makes it noteworthy. Ultimately, however, *Best Friends* remains a niche educational product with little chance of major impact upon older frames of understanding the North and its migrants.



## Engaging the ROK the BJ way

Perhaps one of the most significant recent developments in South Korea's media landscape has been the rise of self-broadcast, especially through the interactive platform of AfreecaTV, which permits broadcasters to engage in real-time with their audience. Launched in 2005, AfreecaTV derives its name from the phrase "Any FREE broadcasting." Individuals who assume the role of a "broadcast jockey" (BJ) on this platform exercise greater control over their own image and the subject matter of their productions than in the traditional media and have consequently brought about further transformations in practices of media production and consumption. More significant is the platform's affordance of enhanced opportunities for affective bonds of solidarity to arise between broadcast jockeys as producers and their audience with little additional mediation.

In light of distortions introduced, by accident or design, in transferring defector voices to other broadcast media, the availability of platforms that empower them to reach the public directly furnishes multiple advantages. Most famous among the resettled North Koreans who self-broadcast on AfreecaTV is BJ Bom Hyang, a young woman whose archived defection story had been viewed over five million times on YouTube by early 2018.<sup>13</sup> Other female *talbukja* have followed suit, including Lee So-Yul and, more recently, Han Songi, who also started a YouTube page in 2018 that acquired 1000 subscribers within a month.<sup>14</sup>

Equally noteworthy is their AfreecaTV male counterpart, BJ Ipyeong, who broadcasts live six days a week beginning at 10 pm on the service. Born in 1994 in Chongjin, he travelled as a boy via China and Mongolia to South Korea, where he now lives with his parents. As a 1.5 generation immigrant, Ipyeong has experienced many of his formative years within South Korea. He admits needing to research aspects of North Korea before his broadcasts, but like 1.5 generation immigrants elsewhere, socialization into two worlds allows him to interpret between them.<sup>15</sup> As such, he can perhaps permit himself the privilege of transgression with less fear of backlash than other *talbukja* might experience.

Ipyeong adopts the trappings of trendy youthful South Korean masculinity, and freely exhibits the artistic tattoos that cover his arm, in contrast to the reluctance of older North Korean defector males to draw attention to their own, many featuring pro-regime slogans that cause their owners distress when revealed (*Huffington Post* 2015; JTBC News 2015). An on-screen bullet point list that appears in several of Ipyeong's broadcasts directly addresses issues of authenticity, liminality, and multiple belongings – "NO plastic surgery; military service exemption for defector citizens; my nationality is Republic of Korean" (*NO seonghyeong; talbukmineun gunmyeonje; gukjeokeun daehanminguk imnida*).

In one of his most-watched clips, Ipyeong addresses questions that he receives especially frequently from his audience, including his decision to self-broadcast.<sup>16</sup> He responds that he has found that in South Korea prevailing understandings of North Korea differ substantially from his own. Because these

views are frequently projected onto *talbukja*, Ipyeong hopes to change preconceptions even if his contribution is but a small one. Elsewhere he states that he realizes that there is much that his peers do not know and that he can convey information more readily because of his closeness to them.<sup>17</sup> His account of why he engages in self-broadcast may not tell the whole story of his motivations for doing so, of course; activism on behalf of community, the desire to achieve an unedited form of self-expression, and monetary incentives are not mutually exclusive.

Virtually every broadcast affords Ipyeong the opportunity to dispense information about the nation he left, either via memory, discussion with his family and the larger community, or research from a more informed starting point than many. When the occasion arises for him to talk with nostalgic affection of his favorite animated program from North Korea, “The Boy General” (*Sonyeon jangsu*), he quickly searches clips on YouTube as he speaks and then shares his screen with his audience so that they receive an immediate experience of the show that turns his interaction into a multiple media experience. His most popular clip is his defection story, a 28-minute account of how he arrived in South Korea. The clip’s force derives in part from his skill as a storyteller, and the narrative is gripping. His account is largely unembellished beyond him speaking directly to the camera and, by extension, his audience with a sense of immediacy, but he shows himself schooled enough in South Korean media tropes to seek the addition of sentimental piano music once he begins his story in earnest.

Ipyeong’s broadcasts thus encourage the frisson of cognitive and emotional pleasure that come from engaging with a North Korean, given the lingering mystery that still attaches to the country. Certainly, though, Ipyeong’s professed motivations for self-broadcast do not overlap completely with the expressed interests of all his fans; when Ipyeong appears on *Now on My Way to Meet You* he occasions a reaction close to swooning. The young man is well aware that he has another crucial asset in twenty-first century South Korea and plays to it; local standards of attractiveness treat him as unusually handsome. His interactions with his followers therefore also draw on flirtatious modes and provide a substantial helping of “fan service.” Ipyeong complies with requests for actions that heighten his appeal, which can range from displays of cute affect (*aegyo*) to stripping off his shirt to expose his bare chest and his “chocolate abs,” a favored convention of K-pop stars. Editing effects underscore the moment; the screen displays the English “Wow!” together with an emoji of a smiley face with eyes bugging out as hearts and the Korean phrase “*eomeona sesange*,” perhaps best rendered here as “OMG!”<sup>18</sup>

In one clip Ipyeong takes on a challenge from his audience to make a “reaction video,” and follow along with clips suggested by his viewers. The requests seem designed to mildly discomfit Ipyeong and inspire behavior that will elicit cuteness. For example, Ipyeong mimes to the choreography of the music video of “Mr. Chu” from K-pop girl group A-Pink, before moving on to a North Korean children’s song.<sup>19</sup> In the clip Ipyeong addresses himself to “older sisters” (*nunadeul*), a greeting that acknowledges a primary viewership of female admirers. Likewise,

the avatars that scroll down the screen during AfreecaTV broadcasts as his fans comment are almost exclusively gendered as female, and during broadcasts they engage with one another as well as with Ipyeong.<sup>20</sup> The two top comments on the clip express admiration for Ipyeong's good looks, and further point to fandom among South Korean women. Commenters' use of the language of affect, either via local emoticons (ㄸㄸ, to suggest tears) or stylized speech (-*yong* for -*yo*, a nasalized affectation of cuteness), further hint at emotional investment in an imagined community of fellow admirers of Ipyeong.

Ipyeong's active self-commodification creates a marketable product for South Korea's competitive neoliberal environment, and intertwines with use of the platform for expression of an autonomous identity. Positive and negative aspects present themselves in this phenomenon; on the one hand, Ipyeong as an individual has taken advantage of the South Korean media market as he finds it, and has succeeded in developing an identity beyond that of "North Korean migrant." He also accepts the representative's role and seems to relish the opportunity to associate young male North Koreans with appealing masculinity. His success results from combining styles favored by South Korean youth as an insider, with the uniqueness of a North Korean birth. But the impact of his approach on representations of refugees as a whole, to say nothing of general societal awareness of North Korea as a distinctive social construct, may also be set back by the capacity for integration and self-promotion shown by Ipyeong and others like him. Although this approach may be the way of the future for refugee representation, and resonate with the young of both the North and the South, for others it may necessitate a radical and perhaps disorienting deconstruction of once coherent North Korean identities for South Korean audiences. Such a deconstruction is unlikely to serve the interests of the community as a whole, or indeed the cause of greater understanding between the two Koreas.

## Conclusion

North Korean migrants occupy a special place in the South Korean imagination as new members of society who fit into longstanding, if contested, visions of the national fabric. Despite opinion surveys that show decreased interest in reunification among young South Koreans, the popular imagination often longs to engage with the North and assimilate suitable Northerners – male and female – into local understandings of acceptable behavior and identity. As we have highlighted, several cable television programs make *talbukja* their subjects. Although many shows such as the aforementioned *Non-Summit* and *Love in Asia* treat foreigners as collective new members of society worthy of attention, no other national community can claim a range of television series dedicated to the issues that face them in South Korean society. The arrival of self-broadcast further accentuates distinctions between North Korean defector-migrants and other foreigners. Not least, they spotlight the importance of native-level literacy for thoroughgoing engagement. Unless educated in Korean, very few foreigners or diaspora Koreans, even if fluent, have the linguistic skills to control the fast pace of commenting found in AfreecaTV's freewheeling bombardment.

Despite discussions of alienation experienced by North Koreans in South Korea, the proliferation of programming involving *talbukja* helps offer resettled male North Koreans opportunities to push into the mainstream. Even if the majority of resulting shows make little attempt to challenge established stereotypes and hierarchies, several do. This situation reflects changes in South Korean society's fissure points. The approach taken to North Korea and North Koreans in these media texts points up not only the split between conservatives and progressives that so regularly surfaces in South Korean society, but an increasingly salient generational gap that has more to do with demography than the gendering practices of "Southern Man, Northern Woman" (*namnam bungnyeo*). *Best Friends* and *BJ Ipyeong* target youth, whereas the home of *Moranbong Club*, TV Chosun and Channel-A address older audiences. As noted, Ipyeong's ability to assimilate is distinctive in that his brand of homogeneity targets Koreans of the younger generations. When he appears on *Now on My Way to Meet You*, his tattoos disappear behind a long-sleeved collared shirt, which he pairs with conventional slacks and shoes that render him more acceptable to older viewers who might feel alienated by the image he cultivates online. Indeed, an older South Korean male panelist expresses surprise to learn of the self-broadcast affordances provided by AfreecaTV. During Ipyeong's appearance the show has him convene a session so that viewers can see how self-broadcast works. This destabilization of media structures corresponds to the arrival of both the North Korean "new generation" (*shinsedae*) and South Korea's own *shinsedae*, whose values diverge from those of prior generations infused with an ethnic conception of the nation (Campbell 2015; Lee and Denney 2017).

Ultimately, then, how are the case studies that we have analyzed to be understood within a broader framework of media use and North Koreans? The soft power of media institutions can play a crucial role not only in encouraging Northerners to move southward but also in enabling more successful settlement. North Korean migrants who seek input into how they are represented in South Korean popular culture must contend with factors impeding their attempts to provide first-person counterpoints to top-down portrayals foisted upon them. As the South Korean media landscape evolves in the second decade of the twenty-first century, North Korean migrants continue to contend with these challenges. Some will embrace the multiplicity of cable television broadcasting, while others will dismiss the traditional broadcast media as a lost cause. A few will avail themselves of new platforms and rely upon talent and initiative to engage with audiences on their own terms.

## Notes

- 1 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFIR6UFw8k4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFIR6UFw8k4)
- 2 In this chapter, we use the term *talbukja* in preference to *saeteomin* ("new settlers") for the sake of consistency rather than to make a political statement about terminology that

is often fraught. Although *talbukja* is no longer the officially sanctioned designation, it is the term most frequently used in everyday discourse. Conversely, for the sake of variation in English and to suit context, we have been less strict in switching between “refugee,” “defector,” and “migrant.”

- 3 The Ministry of Unification maintains basic up-to-date statistics on the composition of the defector community at its website: [www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/statistics/](http://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/statistics/)
- 4 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=y60k-2z3A-8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y60k-2z3A-8)
- 5 See e.g. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=y60k-2z3A-8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y60k-2z3A-8)
- 6 From 1:20 of [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LruyflksaU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LruyflksaU)
- 7 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0rC6dEETDA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0rC6dEETDA)
- 8 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=aD5d8hB\\_Jq0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aD5d8hB_Jq0)
- 9 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2Fa9nNL7MA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2Fa9nNL7MA)
- 10 Comment made to one of the co-authors in a private conversation with staff of the Korean Institute for National Unification about North Korean human rights on November 1, 2017.
- 11 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZxXcaJt8-8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZxXcaJt8-8)
- 12 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mBFc0D1sV8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mBFc0D1sV8)
- 13 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZPfjRSk9SI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZPfjRSk9SI)
- 14 BJ Lee So-yul’s YouTube channel: [www.youtube.com/channel/UC9jMdW7ZEnPBYhQ-sIksoDw](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9jMdW7ZEnPBYhQ-sIksoDw). Han Songi YouTube channel: [www.youtube.com/channel/UCG2KKCanr2bEsE8Xr8tR5bw](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCG2KKCanr2bEsE8Xr8tR5bw).
- 15 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6Qxg5tngo4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6Qxg5tngo4)
- 16 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KARR1W6QPfU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KARR1W6QPfU)
- 17 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkYKYeFx\\_QY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkYKYeFx_QY)
- 18 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppEEHSJ5UtU&t=10s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppEEHSJ5UtU&t=10s)
- 19 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6Qxg5tngo4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6Qxg5tngo4)
- 20 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFj77QxFohk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFj77QxFohk)

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