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K-INVISIBLE: WHY TECHNOLOGY AND TIK-TOK BRING US NO CLOSER TO THE REALITY OF KOREA

AN UNLIKELY START

In the late 1980s, British student Michael Harrold had just finished a degree in English at Leeds University. Like most freshly-graduated young men, he began looking for a job. He never imagined, however, that his first job would be teaching English in Pyongyang, North Korea (also known as The Democratic People's Republic of Korea; DPRK). Unsure about what awaited him in the highly secretive Stalinist state, Harrold contacted the British Foreign Office for information about life and culture in North Korea. The answer he received was both illuminating and worrying. The British Foreign Office reported to Harrold that they unfortunately knew very little about life in Pyongyang and would be most grateful if he could tell them all about it when he returned. North Korea was a mystery to many, including Western governments. People simply knew nothing about the country, the culture, or the politics. This was, of course, exacerbated by Kim Il-sung's insistence on controlling the flow of information both in and out of its country as a way to maintain his rule over the population.¹ This meant that when discussing North Korea, most people were basing

¹ For more on North Korea as an 'information regime' see Jason Morgan (edited by), *In-*

their opinions on hearsay, intuition, and stereotypes.

The difference between reality and perceived reality, a core idea explored in this article through a largely autobiographical and qualitative methodological approach, was stark then just as it is today. The argument put forward here is that despite the dramatically changing social environment, particularly in terms of technological advancements (with a specific focus on the growth of social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube), continued globalization, and South Korea's rise as a cultural soft power, perceptions of Korea, both North and South, are often no closer to reality than they once were in the late 1980s. While social media and digital media communication has the ability to show us parts of the world that otherwise might remain hidden, it also encourages extreme and exaggerated views that present a distorted view of reality and we are left with (often damaging, and at best incomplete) generalizations. Moreover, using the concepts of generalizations, stereotypes, and gaslighting from sociological and psychological literature, the paper explores whether the continued popularity of exaggerated media representations of Korea can, in turn, affect the reality of the country. The concern is that the extreme hyper-real representation of the country, often created for social capital on media platforms, will ultimately become more influential than the lived experience of the tens of millions that inhabit the Korean Peninsula.

Harrold eventually made it to North Korea, becoming the first Briton to live and work north of the 38th Peninsula after the division on the land into two distinct political and cultural entities. Life for him there consisted of teaching English and translating various texts, including many of the speeches and proclamations of the leader. He lived a somewhat privileged yet nevertheless secluded life where many of the harrowing realities were kept from him. He wasn't given the freedom to travel around the country at will and was largely confined to certain places in Pyongyang, a long way from the poverty of the countryside and even further from the political prison camps of which many had heard rumors. Harrold eventually left North Korea in 1994, frustrated by the fact that he was unable to pursue a romantic connection because of the country's strict adherence to ethnonationalism. He was in love but there was simply no way Pyongyang would countenance an official relationship between a North Korean and a British citizen and risk, in their view, diluting the purity of the world's "cleanest race".² Nevertheless, Harrold's subsequent memoirs eventually brought to light some aspects of a country many knew little about. Most revealing about the situation, however, is not North Korea's focus on Stalinist social control, ethnonationalism, or the frustrated romantic adventures of a young man; instead, it was

formation Regimes During the Cold War in East Asia [2020], London, Routledge.

² For an understanding of North Korea's views on race see B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race* [2011], Brooklyn, Melville House.

the fact that Britain knew very little about North Korea and, in a world before social media and the internet, there was little in the way of books or information that could be accessed. Without feet on the ground, and with few allowed access to the country, North Korea remained, to paraphrase Churchill, a riddle wrapped inside a mystery.

THE FORGOTTEN KOREA

In a popular turn of phrase, the Korean War (1950-1953) has long been referred to as the “Forgotten War”.³ Coming only a few years after World War II and just before the Vietnam War, it received little attention in the West, particularly because it resulted in little domestic impact unlike the other two conflicts. Added to this was the lack of any meaningful resolution to the battle. After three years of brutal fighting, with somewhere between 2 to 3 million citizens losing their lives and countless more displaced, the man-made border between the two Koreas, drawn by two American military officials on a copy of a National Geographic magazine, remained pretty much exactly where it was at the start. In a sense we might say, despite the incredible loss of life, in the grand scheme of things, nothing happened. Borders didn’t change. Someone once said, «Nothing ever ends poetically. It ends and we turn it into poetry. All that blood was never once beautiful. It was just red».⁴ And this describes how many have looked back on that conflict and turned it into media. Rather than on the battlefield, the Korean War now exists in dramas, movies, and literature. The lack of resolution also means that, technically, the Korean Peninsula is still at war today. This is the sole reason why K-pop idols from G-dragon to Suga have to bring a stop to their global music careers and instead don a military uniform and spend nearly two years of their lives serving their nation.

Meanwhile, neighboring countries such as China and Japan have long dominated bookshelves, universities, and Western discussions. The communist revolutions, samurais, and artwork from Tokyo and Beijing were always far more readily available than what was happening in Seoul or Pyongyang. Korea was often little more than an afterthought, if even that. It might have been understood as a means to an end, providing geopolitical advantages in a world of great power politics. Yet for many it was never studied or held as a state possessing intrinsic value. Simply being Korea was not enough.

Consider the situation today when there is almost too much written about North Korea that it remains hard to keep up. We are forever inundated with stories and information. From the NK News Podcast, the countless peer-reviewed articles as well

3 For an account of the Korean War as the ‘forgotten war’, see Andrew Salmon, *To The Last Round: The Epic British Stand on the Imjin River, Korea 1951* [2010], London, Aurum Press Ltd.

4 This statement is sometimes attributed to Kait Rokowski, though it is difficult to find a definitive origin.

as journals like the North Korean Review solely dedicated to the subject, the Vice documentaries, the exposes, the think tanks, the Tik-Toks, the Reddit pages, and so much more. I have personally reviewed 12 contemporary books on North Korea for NK News in the last year alone and have still had to turn down many more opportunities. And yet we're only 30 years on from Michael Harrold being told by the British government they have nothing to share with him. The point being that we have gone from having very little information on North Korea to having almost too much information in an incredibly short period of time. Of course there is still much we do not know, and that is by design as Chairman Kim Jong Un (2011 -) maintains control over the country like his father and grandfather did by withholding information from his people as much as he does food or other freedoms.⁵ Yet were Michael Harrold to travel to North Korea today, he could feasibly take with him a vast knowledge of the *Songbun* system, the economy, the Munsu Waterpark, the fashion habits of Ri Sol-ju, and the rise of Kim Ju-ae (Kim Jong Un's young daughter). He could see the streets of Pyongyang on Instagram and then share his own travels and exploits in the country. With everything that is published and released on North Korea as our media platforms diversify and access to social media and internet platforms gives rise to a whole new avenue of voices, it is simply impossible to know everything. We've gone from too little information to too much information and this has had important effects on our understanding of Korea as well as the relationship between reality and representation.

Of course, not all of these new voices are reliable. Far from it, in fact. Conversely, many are intentionally malevolent. They carry falsehoods and untruths, designed to steer conversations and narratives in a certain direction, sometimes for ideological reasons and other times simply for attention.⁶ Seomin Seo frames this as the "tabloidization" of North Korea, particularly in a British media context.⁷ Meanwhile, hawks and doves appear simultaneously, declaring that Pyongyang is either the perpetrator of some of the modern world's most heinous human rights violations and crimes against humanity or a brave resistance fighter standing up against the almost impossible onslaught of American imperialism. Two incredibly divergent positions on a single country. At the same time, we now also have voices on North Korea we would likely never have heard before: Chinese tourists documenting their shopping

5 Peter Ward and Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, *Strategies of Political Control under Kim Jong Un: Understanding the Changing Mix of Containment, Repression, Co-optation, and Coercive Distribution*, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 63, No. 4 [2023], pp. 557-583.

6 Soomin Seo, *Why the media gets it wrong when it comes to North Korea: Cases of "dead" North Koreans in the Kim Jong-un era*, in *Journalism*, Vol. 24, No. 9 [2022], pp. 1899-1918.

7 Soomin Seo, Jungsik Choi, and Hayoung Choi, *The "Kim Jong-un Effect" and the mainstreaming of North Korea coverage in UK media*, in *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 38, No. 3 [2022], pp. 287-306.

in Pyongyang on YouTube and allowing us automated subtitles to understand what people are saying, public North Korean figures like Park Jihyun in London and Lee Seo-hyun in Washington shedding light on the reality they faced there,⁸ and other defectors taking to social media to let us know whether the latest K-drama portrayed life above the 38th parallel accurately or not.⁹ Last not but least, we also get North Korea's very own V-logs. These are made by government branches inside the country, particularly the Pyongyang-based company Sogwang Media Corporation, often feature young women or small girls, and seek to portray life inside the country in the best possible light. They discuss the Harry Potter book series, wear Charlie Brown t-shirts, and describe life inside the capital city as both pleasant and exciting. Both Google and YouTube have consistently removed these contents on the grounds that they violate the platforms terms and conditions which, in turn, frustrates both scholars of North Korea and "tankies" alike, but pleases those seeking a hardline and policy of sanctions against the country. These developments are important because while they remind us that we can now access numerous sources on North Korea, we cannot access North Korean sources on North Korea.¹⁰

Clifford Geertz once described culture as «the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves». With tech platforms such as Google and YouTube (both run by the same company) banning North Korean content on the grounds that it is propaganda, we lose the ability to listen to the stories North Korea wants to tell other people about who and what it is. We of course don't necessarily have to believe them, but by denying them a voice we might be said to be also denying them the opportunity to express their culture. Moreover, we increase the risk of Orientalizing those inside the country. Edward Said's 1978 work has often been mischaracterized as simply pointing to racist or unpleasant depictions of other people, particularly those from Asia and the Middle East. However, the broader point Said was making was about power.¹¹ His work was concerned with who controls the narrative and who writes the stories about certain groups of people. Much of what we know about North Korea is not told to us by North Koreans.

8 See Park Jihyun et al., *The Hard Road Out: One Woman's Escape from North Korea*, and Lee Seo-hyun's appearance on the Korea Deconstructed podcast.

9 Kyong Yoon, *North Korean Defectors' Self-representation as the Politics of Refusal*, in *South-North Cultural and Media Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3 [2021], pp. 69-83.

10 Shreyas Reddy, *YouTube terminates channels of prominent North Korean vloggers*, in *NK NEWS*, June 27, 2023: <https://www.nknews.org/2023/06/youtube-terminates-channels-of-prominent-north-korean-vloggers/>

11 Edward Said, *Orientalism* [1979], New York, Vintage Books.

AND THEN SEOUL

While many might be surprised to read about North Korean history in a piece seeking to shed light on contemporary South Korea (also, The Republic of Korea) amidst its recent impressive cultural rise, the same phenomena described above is also applicable to events in Seoul. We have gone from too little to too much in a compressed time frame leaving us with little understanding of reality amidst a tsunami of representations.

When Warwick Morris was told by the British Foreign Office in the mid-1970s that he was to learn Korean so as to better understand the dramatic economic changes that were taking place under President Park Chung-hee's (1961-1979) it seemed like a reasonable assignment. London and Seoul had diplomatic relations with each other and the two were ideologically aligned in the Cold War. However, following its creation in 1948, supported politically and economically by Washington, South Korea had got off to a very rocky start. The first President, Syngman Rhee, soon removed all limits on his power, political opponents were assassinated, and old age crept in. He was 84 when he was eventually chased from power by angry protestors in 1960. The country was mired in corruption and it had done little to lift itself out of poverty. South Korea was supported but it was never expected to do anything. Few imagined that the people there would make something of their nation. Certainly no-one imagined it would become one of the world's top-10 economies and win Oscars and Billboard awards in less than a century. This carried over into academia and broader discourse. Few were interested in South Korea. So the problem for Morris when he was given his assignment was that the only Korean Studies teacher in the UK at the time was Bill Skillend at SOAS. Moreover, Skillend's specialty was the *Sijo*, a traditional Korean poem form that emerged during the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392). How useful such knowledge would be in reading modern newspapers discussing stock prices and exports was highly debatable. Morris, therefore, faced much the same problem as Harrold: He wanted to know more about Korea, its people, its language, and its culture, but he couldn't. It wasn't that information was being restricted or prohibited in anyway, it simply didn't exist. By his own admission, Morris didn't even know where Korea was: «To be honest, we had to get out an atlas to see precisely where the Korean peninsula was, and reckoned that we had never knowingly met a Korean.»¹²

But it is not necessary to go back to the 20th century to find such stories of inaccessibility and a lack of knowledge. In the Foreword of his 2016 edition to *Korea: The Impossible Country*, the author Daniel Tudor lamented, «There are still far too few English language books on South Korea [...] When I started writing in 2010, you could have gone into a large bookshop in London or New York and would have been

¹² Warwick Morris, *BDOHP Biographical Details*, in *Churchill Archives Centre*, p.6: https://archives.chu.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/01/Morris_4odgTJb.pdf

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lucky to have found Mike Breen's *The Koreans* [...] For a country that punches far above its weight culturally and economically, there really ought to be more choice». ¹³ And Tudor is correct. For the longest time the country remained in the shadows of its larger neighbors Japan and China. People used to struggle to get information about Korea. Most people imagined either the outdated images of the M.A.S.H. television show or the Stalinist government in Pyongyang. The popular sociologist Sam Richards has won acclaim and fans alike for his explorations into culture and race and his lectures and media appearances feature regularly in South Korean news. He talks of first discovering Korea through a graduate student in the mid-1980s but despite that early introduction it wasn't until the late 2000s that Korea became a place of global importance and genuine exploration. Richards describes this transformation as being more like a tsunami than the Korean wave we hear about elsewhere: «Because you can't see a tsunami until it is upon you and we don't obviously and clearly see the influence that Korea is having in other parts of the world, including in the United States. But that influence exists nonetheless». ¹⁴

Few could have imagined what Seoul would become in the 21st century. It has changed incredibly quickly and this meant that any analysis of it has been difficult. The Korean scholar and sociologist Chang Kyung-sup describes the experience as a “compressed modernity”. ¹⁵ But we are still left with questions: Where had it come from? What had caused all of these changes? What did it all mean? As the Korean expression has it, one could lick the watermelon, but this would only be a surface level understanding of what was really going on. There was something deeper. The reality went down further than simple representations would allow for. Korea is, as it was then, complex and full of contradictions. Christianity sits alongside Buddhism, Shamanism, Confucianism and secularism in the spiritual sphere. Cutting-edge technology is seen in the hands of citizens in one of the world's most online countries while attitudes towards gender and LGBT groups remind one of the days of yesteryear. Moreover, successive governments have been incredibly adept at selling the world anything and everything Korean. With the economy focused on exports, Korean political leaders have encouraged, underwritten, and financed the export of intangible products such as music, make-up, food, and even Korean culture itself in the form of books and content about *han*, *nunchi*, and *jeong*. The country is changing so quickly and the causal factors so complex, so is it any wonder that generalizations became the

13 Daniel Tudor, *Korea: The Impossible Country* [2018], Singapore, Tuttle Publishing, p. 7.

14 Jeong Seung-ja, [Interview] «Just like me in my 20s, the world is fascinated by the charm of Korea», in *Cheon Ji Ilbo*, March 3, 2023: <https://www.newscj.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=3005965>

15 Chang Kyung-sup, *The Logic of Compressed Modernity* [2022], Cambridge, Polity Press.

easiest way to explain it all?

GENERALIZATIONS

Cognitive psychology suggests that in order to survive, humans are required to make generalizations.¹⁶ For example, we don't know the specific properties of every apple that exists in the world but we nevertheless create the category of 'apple' so that we can better navigate reality and, when necessary, find fruit when we need it. To have to judge every apple anew would be cognitively difficult and take up time and energy that would be useful elsewhere in our pursuit of survival. We do the same for many things, "dog", "chair", "school", "desk", and so on. We assign properties to each of these things and though each dog or chair may have their own specific qualities that do not always match the broader generalization, such mental frameworks help us survive in the world. Dogs generally behave in such a way and schools normally carry out particular activities. Statistical generalizations based on limited experience are essential for us because we are forever stepping into the unknown and encountering new things. This sounds like a reasonable way to navigate existence until we understand that we do the same thing about people based on sex, age, religion, profession, sexuality, and nationality. Instead of the words "dog", "chair", and "apple", we might do the same with "man", "European", or "Christian". Not all Christians think and act the same, clearly. But by using a generalization we can sometimes begin to narrow down certain things that might be applicable/not-applicable when interacting with a Christian, or member of any other group. It is, of course, morally wrong, to judge somebody based on their group membership. Cognitive psychology speaks of generalizations as the evolutionary tendency to respond in the same way to different but similar stimuli. We can trace these ideas all the way back to Plato's theory of forms in the West or the Confucian distinction between the abstract principle (*li*) and material reality (*qi*), known in Korea as the Four-Seven debate.¹⁷ More modern research says, «The adaptive application of past experience to new circumstances requires the recognition of similarities between those past experiences and the present. The similarities that are relevant to useful generalizations are often embedded within many task irrelevant similarities and differences. Thus, processes of abstraction – of finding the right similarities – are crucial to theories of generalization in a variety of cognitive domains, including vision, language, social behavior, and higher level reasoning».¹⁸

16 Josph L. Austerweil - Sophia Sanborn - Thomas L. Griffiths, *Learning how to Generalize*, in *Cognitive Science*, Vol. 43, No. 8 [2019].

17 Philip J. Ivanhoe, *The Historical Significance and Contemporary Relevance of the Four-Seven Debate*, in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 65, No. 2 [2015], pp. 401-429.

18 Ji Y. Son - Linda B. Smith - Robert L. Goldstone, *Simplicity and generalization: Short-cutting abstraction in children's object categorization*, in *Cognition*, Vol. 108 [2008], p. 626.

In their most constructive form, generalizations are purely observational, devoid of judgment. However, stereotypes, at their most detrimental, are reflexive and dismissive. The idea of the stereotype came to prominence in English in the 20th century and is thought of as being inherently negative, and morally inappropriate. That Korean people, for example, eat rice or use chopsticks is one example. Of course, not every Korean person necessarily eats or enjoys rice. Nevertheless, if you are going to visit Korea, the generalization that there will be a lot of rice and chopsticks in your future is useful information to have if you are to successfully navigate your time there. The stereotype that all Koreans eat rice will be inappropriate, however. «Stereotypes are false or misleading associations between a group and an attribute that are held by their subjects in a rigid manner, resistant to counterevidence».¹⁹ They deny individuality and mask difference. That might seem a rather trivial example, but such generalizations and stereotypes are not only limited to food. They also talk about culture, behavior, habits, and tendencies. Do Korean people like to sing? Certainly there are many who don't. But the country is filled with *noraebangs* (karaoke rooms) and there is a whole culture around the concept of *ddaechang* (singing together at concerts). How to navigate the difference between reality and representation? And what are the moral implications of this?

Generalizations and stereotypes do not only exist in the mind of those who hold them, however. The latter are seen as damaging not only because they are morally wrong but also because they have real-world effects. For example, being reminded of stereotypes about ourselves can fundamentally affect how we perform in the real world. Research has shown that «performance in a domain is hindered when individuals feel that a sociocultural group to which they belong is negatively stereotyped in that domain» yet at the same time «Asian-American women performed better on a mathematics test when their ethnic identity was activated».²⁰ In other words, when are we reminded of negative stereotypes about our group, we will perform worse. When we are reminded of positive stereotypes about our group, we will perform better. Nothing changes other than the image of ourselves that others present us with. If culture is the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, it's also important what stories other people say about us. Because, fundamentally, they are more than simply stories. Whereas an adage once rang true across the playgrounds of our youth that sticks and stones may break our bones but names will never hurt us, false consciousness is a Marxist concept that emerges as a product of capitalist society and refers to a condition where individuals within a particular social class or group adopt

19 Lawrence Blum, *Stereotypes And Stereotyping: A Moral Analysis*, in *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 33, No. 3 [2004], p. 288.

20 Margret Shih - Todd L. Pittinsky - Nalini Ambady, *Stereotype Susceptibility: Identity Salience and Shifts in Quantitative Performance*, in *Psychological Science*, Vol. 10, No. 1 [1999], pp. 80-83.

the perspectives, beliefs, or ideology of another group, often contrary to their own best interests.²¹ It suggests that individuals might unknowingly accept and internalize the dominant ideology or beliefs propagated by the ruling class or a more powerful group, even if these beliefs or ideologies do not serve their own benefit or may be oppressive to them.

Modern terminology talks of gaslighting, a form of psychological manipulation in which one person, typically with a goal of controlling or undermining another individual, seeks to make them doubt their own thoughts, feelings, perceptions, or reality. This is carried out often by subtly distorting the truth, or denying events or conversations that took place. The result is that the targeted person begins to question their sanity, memory, or judgment. Considered a form of emotional abuse and manipulation, gaslighting can be emotionally and psychologically damaging, as it erodes an individual's self-confidence and can lead to feelings of confusion and self-doubt. However, it can also extend beyond the individual psychological realm. Paige L. Sweet has argued that gaslighting is a sociological phenomenon.²² Then, can repeated stories about a country affect its performance? If we continually share certain stories about a specific group of people, will those people soon begin to adopt the behavior or characteristics from the narrative to which they are constantly subject?

SOCIAL MEDIA AND KOREA: REPRESENTATION BEYOND REALITY

That social media has fundamentally changed our lives is undebatable. One only needs to look around a lecture hall or subway car to see how utterly engrossed people have become in their own digital lives. Personally-curated algorithms provide individuals everything people want to see and nothing they don't. Moreover, despite all the promises that the internet would introduce us to other people, it has seemingly only pushed us further into ourselves and away from the 'other'. We no longer watch the movies our fathers like; we don't listen to our auntie's favorite music in the car; we don't suffer through the television series enjoyed by our younger brother. Instead, we now have our own private media center which gives us everything we like and nothing else. It is an expertly curated existence. But we often neglect to consider what we have lost by gaining everything that we like. The Korean-born philosopher Byung Chul Han channeled thinkers like Neil Postman and Aldous Huxley when he argued that by amusing ourselves to death, we have entered a crisis of love and lost sight of the "other".²³ For it is only in the other, that which is beyond ourselves, that we can

21 Martha Augoustinos, *Ideology, False Consciousness and Psychology*, in *Theoretical Psychology (ISTP)*, Vol. 9, No. 3 [1999], pp. 295-312.

22 Paige L. Sweet, *The Sociology of Gaslighting*, in *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 84, No. 5 [2019], pp. 851-875.

23 Byung Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros* [2017], Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT

experience true love and not simple narcissism. The internet was meant to free us from ourselves. We were meant to be experimental. Instead, we have found a whole new way in which to create generalizations about groups of people.

So what does social media tell us about Korea? And what does it create in terms of generalizations, particularly for those who live outside the country? Essentially, most people will only hear extreme stories about South Korea, either overly positive or extremely negative. More often than not, it is the latter. To demonstrate this, a simple empirical test can be performed. Type «Korea documentary» into the YouTube search bar. Then, see what images and ideas you are presented with about Korea. Doing so for me produced the following videos as I scrolled down: «Everyone will become poor», «Hell Joseon: The Price of Happiness», «The bullying crisis sweeping across South Korean schools», «29 years old and already \$200,000 in debt», «High costs of living in Seoul make Koreans grind themselves down to the soul», «Gender War in South Korea: Why the Backlash against Feminism?», «Inside South Korea's Most Notorious Serial Murder: Hwaseong Murders», «Why 20s, 30s in Korea die alone at home?», «South Korea's Obsession with Plastic Surgery», «Why Korea is Dying Out», and «The Dark Side of South Korea's Incredible Economic Success».

All of these videos have hundreds of thousands of views, some reaching into the millions. The most popular, «Why Korea is Dying Out» has achieved approximately 6 million views in two weeks at the time of writing. This rather simple test of reality demonstrates two things. First, that there is a great demand for content about South Korea these days. I only scrolled down the first couple of pages of results but there is an almost unfathomable amount of content being released. Korea is popular. People want to know about it. People want to talk about it. People want to watch content about it. Second, the vast majority of the content that one sees online about Korea is extreme in nature. The materials focus on death, depression, and conflict. It presents a view of Korea that is extremely negative. The country is seen as a dystopian technoscape: scientifically advanced but psychologically oppressive. It is worth noting that the initial search term («Korea documentary») did not specifically request anything either positive or negative but was instead neutral. The contents produced, however, were anything but. For someone that lives inside the country, we know that this representative content on Korea, like the dramas and the K-pop, is so incredibly different from the reality. But what of people whose first and only experience is this representation rather than the reality? What about the millions upon millions of people who, unlike Michael Harrold and Warwick Morris, now have countless books and videos to choose from despite not having been to Korea? And, most importantly, what about the effect on the people of Korea themselves?

This phenomenon is not limited to YouTube or video documentaries either. The

British newspaper *The Guardian* now regularly features stories on South Korea. In 2023, it has explored teacher abuse, feminist struggles, death from overwork, school bullying, and the country's suicide crisis. Where once people struggled to find Korea on a map, now newspaper readers in England are being inundated with stories about the country. But more than this, they will be presented with an incredibly negative view of the country. The old journalist adage reminds us that «If it bleeds, it leads». Other newspaper outlets take a similar approach. CNN's recent coverage of South Korea includes stories with the headlines «Why teachers in South Korea are scared of their pupils – and their parents» and then has other stories exploring ideas of gender discrimination, military parades, AI-created sexual images, and lonely deaths. Again, for those outside the country, there is a risk of generalizations descending into stereotypes about all Korean people and the country itself.

But it is not all doom and gloom in the realm of representation. There is also a highly glamorized view of South Korea available online. A recent popular TikTok meme and hashtag is called «Korea is really living in 2050». It has nearly 150 million views at the time of writing. Particularly popular with the young generation, these short videos generally include footage of robotic arms making coffee, people ordering food from kiosks, and clean public transport. The basic message of each video is that Korea is far more advanced than its western counterparts in terms of dining out, public safety, and technology. A video by Jenny Moon titled «Korean rest stops be living in 2050» has nearly 170,000 views in the last two months. In a vertical presented fashion, she spends less than 60 seconds explaining the various amenities at the popular Gapyong service station frequently visited by people traveling from Seoul to Gangwondo on the East Coast. Although I wasn't able to find the statistics, I would imagine it is one of the most-used service stations (rest stops) in the country and thus has been created to provide for a large number of visitors each day. Ms. Moon's video praises the presence of a cafeteria, food, restrooms, pharmacy, and cheap toys. Of course, there are two issues here. Why is it strange that such things are found at a major service station? Second, presenting one of the country's largest service stations as representative of everything in the country is similar to expecting every Korean woman to look like Chae-won from *Le Sserafim*. These, alongside various K-pop videos and v-logs of life in Seoul, present the country as a utopia. A place where everyone is beautiful and the future is being experienced.

I'm not suggesting that Ms. Moon's video is inappropriate nor that it was created with any malicious intent. It's a pleasant and largely joy-filled description of a place that I know rather well and have visited twice a week for the past decade or so. But the representation will likely create a warped version of reality in the minds of those who have not experienced the country first-hand. Yes, Gapyoung is real. But not every rest stop looks like that. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that the future is here, it's just not evenly distributed yet.

HELL JOSEON AND KOREABOO

These two extreme representations of Korean reality which have become ever-present across all manner of modern media, from print to award-winning dramas, can be separated into two distinct categories: “Hell Joseon” and “Koreaboo”. “Hell Joseon” describes the frustration, hopelessness, and dissatisfaction with the demanding and highly competitive nature of Korean society, particularly in relation to education and employment. The term is a play on “Joseon”, which refers to the Joseon Dynasty, a historical Korean dynasty that lasted for approximately five centuries (1392-1897). However, the term Joseon is still used in North Korea when referring to both the country and the language. The former, for example, can be translated into English as ‘The People’s Democratic Republic of Joseon’. Thus while the term is used to express a sense of disillusionment with the state of affairs in South Korea, particularly among the younger generation, it also points to Pyongyang. Illustrating that in the eyes of some South Koreans, their country is just as oppressive and backwards as their northern neighbor. It serves as a way for people to vent their frustration and convey their dissatisfaction with the various challenges they face in a highly competitive and demanding society. Essentially, the country is described as hell and the cause of physical, spiritual, psychological, and economic suffering.

In the “Hell Joseon” representation, Korea is described as having failed to protect its citizens and is portrayed as inferior to its Western counterparts. A tweet from a popular influencer captured the mood wonderfully: «Don’t believe everything you see in K-dramas! All the terrible things in them are actually true but most of the good stuff in them is made up». We can see this view creates a negative stereotype of Korean reality through the use of extreme representations. In doing so, the “Hell Joseon” representation compares Korea unfairly to Western standards. It fails to account for the vastly different historical trajectory Korea went through, including suffering through imperialism, colonization, civil war, and military dictatorships, only becoming a democracy in the late 1980s. The West’s development was largely smooth. Asia had to deal with post colonialism’s psychological and physical ruptures. It had to debate the use or rejection of foreign ideas. Its people quickly divided themselves into nationalists, revolutionaries, capitalists, socialists, and all other manner of groups. Something that even RM, the leader of BTS, was aware of when giving an interview to a Spanish newspaper in early 2023.²⁴ When faced with questions about the negative social aspects of his country, he turned the tables. He asked the reporter what the country was meant to do having been colonized and divided. Should it just rest and remain satisfied with its existence? Could it become democratic and modern without

²⁴ Haley Yang, *BTS’ RM praised for his defense of and honesty about K-pop industry*, in *JoongAng Daily*, March 15, 2020: <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/03/15/entertainment/kpop/el-pais-RM-RM-spanish/20230315175605118.html>

suffering? Of course not. Success does not come without sacrifice. Pleasure is never free from pain. Light comes with dark. The marvelously eastern paradox of dependent co-arising informs life. The Confucian icon of the *taeguk* (yin-yang) shines on the Korean flag, representing harmony and balance.

Some people online suggest that they are showing you the Korea that would otherwise remain hidden. That they are bravely speaking against the grain to introduce a perspective on Korea that would otherwise remain hidden. Such a claim, however, seems as fanciful as the right-winger grifters who bemoan that they are being silenced while embarking on book tours, appearing on national media, and earning millions. It is quite clear that the most visible narrative constructed online about Korea is a negative one. To focus on negative Korean social issues is to ignore the success and, more importantly, the reason why the country has had to work so hard to create a place for itself in the modern world.²⁵ It omits the external influences of colonialism and imperialism. Civil war and domestic military oppression and violence also had to be overcome. Focusing on problems is important. A critical view of history helps us learn from mistakes. To not repeat them. And, Korea is doing that. It has plenty of problems today. Problems that have arisen from the compressed modernity it traversed and the success it gained. However, these current problems are not insurmountable. And they shouldn't be seen as such. They should be understood in context and through the illuminating light of history. But, this is not the only representation of Korean reality that exists.

But what about the other side of the *taeguk*? A “Koreaboo” is a colloquial term used to describe someone, typically a non-Korean individual, who has a strong and often obsessive interest in Korean culture, particularly in its pop culture aspects, such as K-pop music, K-dramas, and Korean fashion. While many people are genuinely interested in and enjoy Korean culture, a “Koreaboo” is often characterized by their extreme and sometimes cringeworthy enthusiasm and behavior.²⁶ There is, at the fundamental level, a fetishization and essentialization of Korean culture that is highly inappropriate. The key characteristics of a “Koreaboo” often include an intense fascination with all things related to Korea. “Koreaboos” may idealize Korea and see it as a perfect or superior country in comparison to others. They may downplay or ignore negative aspects of Korean society. Essentially, Korea is seen as a fantasy: beautiful, sparkling, perfect, and unique. This view of Korea demonstrates little understanding of reality and veers towards a form of modern orientalism. While not exclusively, those who adopt the “Koreaboo” view of the country are often from less economically or technologically developed nations than Korea. Korea is thus seen as an aspiration

25 David Tizzard, *Post-Colonialism and BTS*, in *The Korea Times*, March 18, 2023: https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/10/715_347331.html

26 Se-Woong Koo, *Who Are Koreaboos?*, in *Korea Expose*, Feb 8, 2022: <https://koreaexpose.com/koreaboo-love-korean-culture-and-want-to-be-korean/>.

or a model of that which can be achieved.

A survey of more than 500,000 BTS fans in 2022 discovered that the while more than 96% of the group's ARMY were girls, and young, they primarily came from countries outside of Western Europe. Mexico, Peru, Indonesia, United States, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, Russia, India, and Philippines were the most represented in the research.²⁷ BTS' fandom is genuinely global. But Southeast Asia, Central America, and South America provide the majority of the fans. This does not affect the legitimacy of a cultural product but it does provide some food for thought as to why it resonates so well in one particular region and less in another. Other research has also shown that fans of groups such as Stray Kids and BLACKPINK also come from similar geographic backgrounds, the latter being particularly dominant in Southeast Asia. Again, this is not to seek to delegitimize the popularity of such groups. Far from it, in fact. Popularity in non-English speaking countries should be seen as equal to popularity in English-speaking countries. It does, however, look to challenge some of the more popular online narratives that K-pop has «broken the west» because such a perspective often ignores a large reason for a group's success: a reason found outside the west.

We might therefore suggest that the two extreme views of Korea that are commonly-found online are not so much a representation of the reality of Korean life but instead a reflection of the lives and socio-economic conditions of those that create and share them. People that come from advanced nations (in the political and economic sense) will find a sense of moral superiority in the “Hell Joseon” depictions while those from nations on the other end of the spectrum will instead see Korea and its culture as something fantastical and aspirational. The idols serving as role models, encouraging people to better themselves. Thus, someone's view of Korea will tell us as much, if not more, about them as a person than Korea itself. This is evidenced by the author's personal experience in lecture halls over the past decade or so. Students from Western Europe, countries such as Germany and Sweden, will tell me that Korea has much to improve in terms of attitudes towards sexuality and mental health. They will also lament the driving conditions of the country. Conversely, Muslim Indonesian women, often wearing hijabs, find Korea to be incredibly developed and progressive in terms of female representation in media and society. So whether Korea is seen as conservative or advanced in cultural terms (or other factors) is largely (but not exclusively) determined by one's own cultural and socio-economic conditions.

But while we contend with the difficult of explaining reality, leaving us questioning whether there is such thing as a true objective reality or merely a series of individual views and perspectives, we also need to consider how and why representations

²⁷ David Tizzard, *Who Likes BTS?*, in *The Korea Times*, July 16, 2022: https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/10/715_332835.html

of reality have changed over time. As Korea has modernized, its dramas and content have become much darker in terms of their themes and content. South Korea in the late 1990s and early 2000s was a country that still experienced poverty, sexual discrimination, racism, and *gapjil* (the physical and psychological abuse of power). Women were forbidden from smoking in public and, from the author's own experience, the streets were home to all sorts of shouting, spitting, and swearing. The country was still slowly civilizing its behavior. Yet despite the brutal reality of life in Seoul, the dramas and contents it produced were Disney-like fantasy stories. They presented Cinderella stories in which handsome men and virginal young women engaged in a pure and, largely platonic, relationship. One of the dramas that best represented this was *Winter Sonata*. This played a significant role in popularizing Korean dramas across Asia and beyond, especially in Japan, where it became a massive hit. The drama's success contributed to the globalization of the Korean entertainment industry. *Winter Sonata* is known for its melodramatic storytelling, emotional performances by the cast, and a memorable soundtrack. The drama's romantic and tragic elements resonated with audiences and made it a tearjerker. Essentially, when society was rough and difficult, the dramas created a sense of fantasy and escapism for people. However, as Korean society improved, as understandings of race, gender, and sexuality became more modern and people in society experienced less in terms of discrimination (while still obviously not being perfect), the dramas and content became much darker in nature. *Squid Game*, *Sweet Home*, *The Glory*, *All of Us are Dead*, *The D.P.*, and *Hellbound* all received international attention and were spoken about with great fanfare in Western media. These dramas all featured extreme content centered around death, depression, bullying, and suicide. For many outside the country, it was sometimes their first time hearing about or watching South Korean content. The violent nature of the shows was addictive but also capable of creating misinformed images of Korea in people's subconscious. Not everyone in Korea is depressed, bullied, or living a brutal existence with death a likely option at every turn. It does, however, make for compelling television.

Here specifically we see a negative correlation between reality and representation. When the reality was dark and difficult, the representation pointed to something bright and positive. It was a form of escapism: a cathartic release from the drudgery of real-life. This idea can be further reinforced by considering the representations of reality in countries like North Korea and, to a lesser extent, China and Russia. The people of North Korea watch television, movies, and dramas just like the rest of us.²⁸ However, they are not greeted with negative or critical depictions of their own lives and living conditions. Instead, despite the economic and political challenges they

28 Martyn Williams, *North Korea's Multi-Channel TV Age*, in *38 North*, December 16, 2020: <https://www.38north.org/2020/12/mwilliams121620/>.

might face, their representations present a fantasy. Challenging realities present and favor glamorized representations. If understood properly, this can be counter-intuitive for some people. Dark representations do not point to a necessarily dark reality. In fact, it is the opposite. They speak of a largely liberated, free and open society that is looking to address (or has addressed) certain issues. If we didn't see such dark content, we should be more worried.

THE BOOMERANG EFFECT

The depictions of Korea that have been popular abroad have not always resonated with people in the country. This is a phenomenon that goes all the way back to the previously mentioned drama *Winter Sonata*. Korean people at the time were surprised that what they considered a run-of-the-mill drama was wowing millions in Japan. This was the start of what can be described as a “boomerang effect”. The boomerang effect here is used to describe a situation in which a product first becomes popular outside of its country of production and then that external (or foreign) popularity increases its success in its country of origin. Such an explanation runs counter to the more traditional narrative and path to success. We generally believe that cultural products, such as movies, dramas, and music, will transcend their own country if and when they become successful enough domestically. A large amount of domestic success will naturally lead to international recognition. For Korean products, it is often different. The success and acclaim received abroad can influence local perceptions, sparking curiosity and a newfound appreciation at home. There are several different examples of the boomerang effect in play vis-à-vis Korean content and representations. In providing some of these, the point is to once more suggest that cultural representations that seem to (or at least are claimed to) best and most accurately depict Korean reality are, in fact, very far from what Korean people would consider a representative movie, drama, or music form.

When Melon, the local music streaming platform released its most streamed 100 songs of the last 10 years in 2020, it provided statistical evidence of what Koreans had been listening to as they go about their normal lives beyond media narratives, public relations, and other forms of hype. It pointed to a reality true to life in the country. The results were rather revealing (though not that surprising for those who live here). Busker Busker's *Cherry Blossom Ending* was the most played song, followed by IU's *Through the Night* and Park Hyo Shin's *Wildflower*. The solo artist IU had three songs in the top 10; BTS's *Spring Day* was the group's only track in the top 10, and that was probably because of its association with the terrible tragedy of the sinking of the Sewol ferry that took 304 lives. Other K-pop acts (or idol music if you prefer the term) did not feature in the top. Moreover, if you also consider that Ailee's *I Will Go to You Like the First Snow* was number six and Naul's *Memory of the Wind* was number 10, you begin to notice something beyond the absence of K-pop. Some Korean

people seem to like songs about the seasons, about nature. The songs are often soft: ballads and easy-listening numbers that reflect a sentiment of calm or tranquility in the incredibly competitive and fast-paced Korean society; a reminder of what life was, or at least could be, like. This is Korean music for Korean people. And while international depictions of Korea are full of highly-stylized and choreographed idol performances, life here often moves to the soundtrack of a melancholier or saccharine ballad. Whether this speaks to a local taste for the concept of *han* (a Korean concept that encompasses feelings of deep-seated sorrow, resentment, helplessness, and a sense of unresolved injustice or sorrow passed down through generations) or not is a matter of some debate. There are many who find value and truth in the idea of *han* being a unique and representative Korean emotion that they alone can feel and something that has driven the stories they tell about themselves, from the success of movies like *Seopyeonjae* to the tearful renditions of *Arirang*. Others such as Dr. Minsoo Kang believe such stories are not only a form of self-orientalism, they are oppressive to Korean people.²⁹ Nevertheless, what was missing at the top of the charts in the data released by Melon was the K-pop and hyper-polished idol music that dominates international stories about Korea. Reality and representation were once more at loggerheads and not in accordance with each other.

Parasite is probably Korea's most famous film. Released in 2019, it gained widespread attention and praise, eventually becoming the first non-English language film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2020. It received acclaim for its compelling narrative, well-crafted suspense, social commentary, and brilliant cinematography. The film's international success was a testament to its universal themes and storytelling, resonating with audiences across cultural boundaries. In Korea, however, while the film was certainly popular, it was nowhere near the country's number one movie. In the current list of highest-grossing movies in Korea, *Parasite* sits at number 21. It only just passed 10 million views, a threshold known locally as a «천만 영화». Above it was a whole host of comedies, historical dramas, and crime capers such as *Extreme Job*, *Ode to My Father*, *King and the Clown*, and *Veteran*. These films are clearly loved domestically but they received little to no attention abroad. Finally, you have the dramas. The biggest hit around the world was *Squid Game*. Released in 2021 on Netflix, the show quickly gained immense popularity and became a global sensation as a dystopian thriller that revolves around a deadly competition and children's games. However, following a brief stint as the top show on the Korean Netflix charts, it was surpassed by *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha*, a drama known for its heartwarming and lighthearted storyline, often focusing on the simplicity of life in a small community and the developing relationship between the main characters. The

²⁹ Minsoo Kang, *The problem with "han"*, in *Aeon*, March 18, 2022: <https://aeon.co/es-says/against-han-or-why-koreans-are-not-defined-by-sadness>

Economist ran with the headline, «South Koreans are bemused by the global success of “Squid Game”». ³⁰

So whether it's the fantasy-laden lives of K-pop idols or the depressing darkness of the movies and dramas, people outside of Korea often seen depictions of the country that neither speak to domestic interest and taste nor reflect the reality. It is necessary to try and understand why this phenomenon takes place.

ORIENTALIST COMFORT AND THE CAPITAL OF ANXIETY

There are many reasons why certain narratives and representations of Korea resonate so effectively, particularly abroad. Those that make and share negative depictions of the country feel a sense of superiority for believing themselves in having seen further than other people. They are the enlightened chosen few who truly understand that the emperor has no clothes. It's a compelling and incredibly popular drug. Academia, in particular, encourages such views. There is an unspoken understanding that to be smart you have to be cynical. The intelligentsia are those who reject, criticize, and deconstruct. Beyond the feelings of intellectual superiority, these negative dystopian projections of Korea are also incredibly popular on social media. They drive traffic. They generate data. This phenomenon is a form of “negativity bias” — the tendency to give more attention to negative details than positive ones. The tech giants know this. The algorithms they gave birth to know this. They advertisers that pay money for your eye time also know this. There's profit in pessimism, personal or otherwise. Social media platforms and journalists love a Korean horror story. In such stories, Seoul is a dystopian nightmare characterized by violence and terror. Sad Koreans, dead Koreans, and single Koreans are of particular interest. Nothing is more valued than a Korean slighted, assaulted, or sacrificed. This becomes the “capital of anxiety” – making money and profiting from other people's sense of anxiousness. Moreover, it is exacerbated to a large degree by the gamification of society. I once asked a popular blogger why they only shared horror stories about Korea and focused on all the negative aspects of society. In light of this research, particularly in terms of the tangible negative effects stereotypes and gaslighting can have at the sociological level, I continued, respectfully, by questioning whether they felt they were contributing to broader anxiety among the community in his frequent posts of woe, weirdness and extremity. Their response was as simple as it was revealing: the positive stories didn't get any engagement. Few were interested in them. What mattered was the little blue ticks, the red hearts, the likes and followers building up. The gamification of news and social media platforms playing on dopamine centers and controlling people. No

³⁰ *South Koreans are bemused by the global success of “Squid Game”*, in *The Economist*, October 9, 2021: <https://www.economist.com/asia/2021/10/09/south-koreans-are-bemused-by-the-global-success-of-squid-game>

matter what our best intentions might be, people generally want to succeed and be perceived favorably by others. Social media has created an ecosystem where, if you want to make a mark, you are looking for the most outrageous, the most offended, the most shocking story. As Marshall McLuhan observed many decades ago, long before the arrival of things such as Twitter or Facebook: the medium is the message. The medium determines the content and becomes the message itself. In a broader sense, the phrase highlights that the medium through which information is delivered influences how the content is perceived and understood by the audience. The choice of medium itself alters our relationship with the message, impacting our interpretation, emotional response, and the way we engage with the information. In such an understanding, a dialectical relationship between social media and negativity creates a whirlwind of destructive narratives.

It also feeds into unconscious biases and helps provide a sense of orientalist comfort. People are naturally drawn to content that aligns with their preexisting beliefs and opinions. Negative stories can reaffirm the biases and viewpoints of certain individuals, which leads to increased engagement from like-minded individuals. So when people around the world see these incredibly extreme stories of Korean death and despair, it speaks to something unconscious inside them that the people of Korea must be sad and not as individually in-tuned with their own personality and mental health. It also provides reassurance that despite Korea's three successful revolutions (economic, political, and cultural), there must still be something wrong underneath the veneer of all that progress. It reassures the west that even though parts of Asia might be moving far ahead in terms of public safety, transport, infrastructure, and health care, there is a psychological and existential price to pay for this success. Western attitudes might include views such as one suggesting that the Korean people might be educated and safe but they are depressed. The Korean economy might be doing well and the country navigating the Covid-19 pandemic far more successfully than its western counterparts but that's because the people are all so obedient. K-pop might be popular, but Korean people are not creative. Essentially, negative depictions of Korea make the west feel better about itself.

K-INVISIBLE: HARRY FRANKFURT AND BULLSHIT

In the middle of the last decade, the word “post-truth” emerged as a way of describing a situation in which people were now less concerned with objective facts and more influenced by appeals to emotion and personal belief.³¹ The lived experience reigned supreme and is touted loudly and widely as a refutation of anybody who professed expertise or rationality. The presence of evidence to the contrary of one's beliefs is

31 Sergio Sismondo, *Post-Truth?*, in *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 41, No. 1 [2017], pp. 3-6.

rationally dismissed as misinformation, and learning is hampered as a result. We are moved by vibes. Triggered by TikToks. And influenced by Insta.

The philosopher Harry Frankfurt has a brilliant way of describing this: “bullshit”.³² According to Frankfurt, the liar and the truth-teller both operate within the realm of truth but their relationship with it differs, with one intentionally manipulating it and the other valuing it. On the other hand, a bullshitter is indifferent to the truth altogether. They may not necessarily be concerned with the truth or falsity of their statements; their primary focus is on manipulating the listener or the situation. “Bullshit”, as Frankfurt sees it, is more about the intent to impress, persuade, or influence rather than a concern for the truth. Truth is irrelevant. The bullshitter’s aim is simply about promoting their agenda, image, or narrative rather than adhering to factual accuracy.

And so we see figures like Donald Trump. Sometimes he would tell the truth. Sometimes he would lie. It didn’t really matter. The idea of a cold and cynical Orwellian suppression of the truth was absent. This was all about image and representation. He’s not alone in this, of course. We are all occasionally guilty of bullshit. Sometimes we post things on social media that are true, perhaps a statement or a natural photo. Other times, we greatly exaggerate our position or reality, hiding the truth in favor of a filtered image or face-saving explanation. Online, our digital presence, is not always about truth or falsehood; it’s about creating the best possible impression on others so as to accrue likes, lovers, followers, and fans.

Essentially, Frankfurt took a phenomenon we all know well and gave it a name. He also explored why there is so much of it today. Social media has created a world in which people are now convinced that they must have opinions about more or less anything and everything, from international relations, global finance, culture, to morality and the existence of transcendental beings – so they speak quite extensively, confidently, and loudly about things they know virtually nothing about.

The Korea I experience is a place where you can take a clean modern subway, get cheap affordable healthcare, leave your phone and wallet on the coffee shop table, and have countless interactions with friendly and polite people. It’s certainly not perfect, but it’s a country that gets a lot right. A country that has achieved so much, despite the odds being stacked against it. A people that has reclaimed and written their history, shared their culture, and expressed their pride on the world’s biggest stages. Moreover, it’s a country that is getting better. Its citizens live longer than before, its women fare better than ever, its sexual minorities experience more representation, and those with mental or physical disabilities receive greater access and treatment than before. Even the animals have better lives than the past. Living conditions have improved and social values have progressed. Again, it can be better. But show me a society that couldn’t. I also believe that Korea will be better.

32 Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* [2005], New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

The trouble is, I rarely see this reality of Korea represented in media. I only see extremes. Yet the reality of Korea is that (often) nothing happens. Korea is certainly not perfect and it is a noble and important thing that journalists and citizens highlight injustices in the country so that oppressed people can lead better lives. Those who work towards more equal distribution are doing good work. But when I buy coffee, I don't have robots serving me every time. Normally, it's a young girl with her hair tied up in a bun and tattoos on the inside of her wrists. When I enter lecture halls and see hundreds of young Korean students each week, they are neither incredibly depressed and bullying each other nor beautiful K-pop stars. They are just normal people. They are the silent majority of this country.

The great marvel of South Korea is that, more often than not, nothing happens. Millions of people take the subway every morning and... nothing happens. Millions of people go to school, work, lunch, and then home. And, nothing happens. People get jobs, get married, have kids, stay single, rent a house, and... nothing happens. For the vast majority of people here, the largely invisible and silent majority, nothing happens. And that is a beautiful thing. There are countries around the world in which extreme things happen to people on regular occasions, from mass shootings to all sorts of other atrocities. Korea, of course, is not without its own tragedies: from Itaewon, the Sewol, the ROKS Cheonan, Sampoong department store, to the Seongsu Bridge. But, for the most part, Korea is a mundane miracle. The sublime and true nature of Korea is that you can go into a coffee shop and leave your laptop on a table without fear that it will be stolen. This is a behavior, alien and unthinkable to many other countries, I have called "Maeum Spacing".³³ You can walk the streets late at night and not fear that you will be mugged or attacked. You can sit in the park and not worry about needles and drugs. Essentially, in Korea, nothing happens. That is the reality of life for most people. However, we have yet to find a way to represent that reality to other people in a way that is either appealing or profitable. Instead, reality gives way to extreme representations. This, some might argue, is all harmless. But cognitive research and psychology show us that reinforcing or creating stereotypes about people is not just a moral or linguistic issue, it actually affects how people perform in real life. While death-filled dramas and beauty-laden music videos might earn money abroad, we should question whether they are not gaslighting Korean people, particularly the youth, into a negative state of mind just to earn a few more dollars and boost the country's brand. That is the problem we face when navigating reality and representations. The challenge is to see through the bullshit.

33 David Tizzard, *Maeum Spacing*, in *The Korea Times*, April 29, 2023: https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/12/715_350033.html.

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