

***The Realities of North Korean Resettlers: The Affective Politics of Citizenship
in Reality TV Programs Featuring North Korean Resettlers***

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Abstract

This study uncovers the dynamics of cultural politics in the recently emerging reality TV shows featuring North Korean resettlers (NKR2 show, hereafter) in South Korea, by postulating that more things are going on in these reality shows than the given role of media apparatus reproducing a dominant ideology for the resettlers as observed in many previous studies. The analysis showed the dynamics of the cultural politics of the recently shaped emotions involved in the distributional structure of emotions through specific devices and rituals operated in these programs. The present study paid closer attention to the fact that the emergence of the NKR2 program showed the border-crossing behaviors of the resettlers with a focus on the repressive feature of North Korean societal system. At the same time, the programs revealed the conservative ideologies of the resettlers by working through media rituals. Consequently, the programs reflected the distinctive features of civilization and cultural politics. Further interpretations and implications were also discussed.

Keyword: North Korean resettlers, Cultural politics of citizenship, Media rituals, Affective economy, Reality TV

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Introduction

In this paper, we focus on reality television programs in South Korea featuring North Korean resettlers¹ (NKR2s) as guests. These kinds of reality television programs are interesting in many respects. The history of media representations of North Koreans to South Korean audiences from the 1960s onwards shows that North Koreans have been represented primarily through news or TV documentary genres. In particular, North Korean resettlers are a media focus inasmuch as they are objects of the South Korean government's propaganda: With the exception of news and documentary programming, which are straightforward and highly ideological in terms of their messaging, North Koreans have rarely been represented in South Korean media until recently. However, it is only in reality shows that they are becoming more commonplace.

Ever since Korea divided, the system competition between the two countries has consistently provided a background in the many television programs covering the North Korean regime and North Koreans. In these media representations, North Koreans are an easy target of ideological propaganda, which supposedly proves that the North Korean socialist regime has lost the competition by failing to provide a high standard of living to its citizens.

The evident intention driving these programs is to show that North Koreans have suffered greatly because of the failure of the North Korean socialist regime. In the context of these programs, North Koreans are often represented as living proof of the inferiority of the North Korean socialist regime as compared to the South Korean regime. This is the main reason North Korean resettlers have attracted the attention of South Koreans to become an object in the media spectacle in South Korea.

In the present study, we focus on representations of North Korean resettlers in NKR2 shows. Unlike migrants from Southeast Asian countries, for instance, who enter South Korea as documented workers or marriage migrants, North Korean resettlers automatically obtain citizenship as they enter the country.

Yet, it is not uncommon for North Korean resettlers in South Korea not to be seen as full citizens of South Korea. According to one study (Seol & Skrentny, 2009), North Koreans in South Korean society are ranked very low in the South Korean ethnic hierarchy, which consists of many migrants from many foreign countries. North Koreans rank even lower than migrants from other Asian countries who are generally not held in high regard by native South Koreans.

We offer an examination of what happens in NKR2 shows and how this affects the representation of North Korean resettlers in South Korea more generally. In particular, by relying on Sara Ahmed's account of the distribution of emotion towards minorities and others and theories of the cultural politics of citizenship (Ahmed 2004), we

¹ Defector or refugee have been used when referring to the escapees from North Korea. However, in this study, we will use the term "resettler" as a neutral term without referring to the term "other".

explore how NKR2 shows interrupt the affective politics of North Korean resettlers as legal citizens and members of a minority group in South Korean society.

Our approach is distinct from those pursued in existing studies on NKR2 shows, which have recently emerged (Lee, 2014; Oh, 2011; Pang & Lee, 2016; Tae & Hwang, 2012). Based on an ideological analysis of the media texts of NKR2 shows, they commonly argue that the cultural politics and representations in NKR2 shows contribute to the perpetuation of images based on negative perceptions of North Korean resettlers as people who have suffered under North Korean dictatorship. In these studies, this image of North Koreans as victims of the oppressive socialist regime is presented as leading to a dichotomized and contradictory perception of North Korean resettlers: they are either viewed as people with the same blood as South Koreans or as objects of hate, as a threat, feelings originally directed at the North Korean regime as an enemy of South Korea.

However, the existing analyses of NKR2 shows have little to say about the reasons they are still seen as a minority group in South Korea: Why do these negative attitudes toward North Koreans persist? Why are they ranked lowest in the hierarchy of minority groups living in South Korea? What is happening in reality programs can be seen as a reproductive cultural politics that simply relies on and perpetuates a fixed image of North Koreans as our family and our enemy—an image that has existed for several decades and has served to prop up the anti-Communist, Red complex, Cold War ideological landscape in South Korean society? Or, is something else going on?

Focusing on two NKR2 shows, *Now on My Way to Meet You* on Channel A and *The Moran-bong Club* on TV Chosun, two reality shows representative of the genre casting North Korean resettlers, we analyze the representations of North Korean resettlers in these shows. Relying on Sara Ahmed's account of the political economy of emotions and theories on the cultural politics of minorities, we analyze how NKR2 shows interrupt the existing flow of emotion toward North Koreans in South Korean society. Focusing on specific media rituals and apparatus in NKR2 shows as a localized form of reality programs in South Korea, we consider how NKR2 shows are reshaping the image of North Korean resettlers.

Affective Economy and the Entertainment Industry

The neoliberal affective economy considered in this study produces specific effects in regard to intervening in the process of distributing emotions toward others, particularly minorities. As we will demonstrate, this economy produces and distributes prejudice against North Korean resettlers as the Other via an entertainment industry deeply implicated in the affective economy of the neoliberal era. We, therefore, refuse to recognize the entertainment industry as merely an ideological apparatus that simply reproduces or calls for given prejudices and ideologies. Instead, we suggest that at present, the entertainment industry is a crucial component of an affective economy that produces unique effects in relation to the flow of emotions such as prejudice against and hatred toward others.

According to Ahmed (2004, p. 45), in accord with her notion of “the political economy of emotion,” emotions such as prejudice against and hatred toward others are produced as a result of distribution and flow of emotions. This means that emotions such as prejudice and hatred do not actually exist in symbols that represent others, or specific things including persons, or programs in which producers have a particular intention (Ahmed, 2014). For Ahmed, to comprehend emotions in regard to others, it is necessary to observe emotional flow, i.e., the specific way in which emotions are distributed, because emotion is not a characteristic inherent in an object, nor is it inherent in any particular individual or group.

Ahmed’s account of the political economy of emotion is very useful in that it draws our attention to how emotions work, specifically how they arise through the processes of circulation, for example, interactions between people or mediation through the media. Given the ways in which today’s cultural politics of minorities operate in many regions, it is hard to deny the dominance of the media, including social media. We are increasingly watching others through such media rather than in face-to-face contexts. It is critical to consider the process of mediation and representation in the media of certain groups, the minorities in contemporary society.

In this sense, the circulation of emotion, i.e., the affective economy, can contribute greatly to generating, reproducing, amplifying, or reducing emotions. The approach that we draw from Ahmed’s political economy of emotion does not emphasize emotions toward the other in order to present a particular body or object. Instead, we use this approach to shed light on the complex process of creating boundaries that distinguish differences from the others by tying up certain others and their bodies into a category through unceasing movement and flow.

Further, this approach requires moving further from the perspective that the media—especially the entertainment industry here—simply conveys given emotions or reproduces the ideologies associated with them. That being said, we call for a more in-depth analysis of the role of the media beyond old-fashioned theories or the hypothesis of reproduction of ideologically overdetermined texts and symbols.

In the present paper, we focus on answering the following questions: What is the specific role of the media in the post-capitalist era, especially in which the voices, bodies, and behaviors of others are constantly held in the media gaze? In what specific ways does the media revitalize the entertainment industry and thereby affect the distribution of emotions such as prejudice and hatred? How do the logic and rituals of the media affect the dynamics of the affective economy and thereby influence the cultural politics surrounding the representation of others in our society?

In exploring the media representations of others, we call for an analysis not only of the existing ideology but also of the ways in which emotions are distributed by the media. We will analyze the ways in which the media, especially NKR2 shows, can reshape the distribution of emotions and the cultural politics of the affective economy in relation to emotions in regard to North Korean resettlers. Relying on Ahmed’s theoretical account of the political economy of emotions, we will analyze how the affective politics of North Korean resettlers as legal citizens and as a minority group

relate to post-socialist experiences and memories. Analyzing how North Koreans are represented in entertainment media, i.e., reality programs (talk shows), we consider how emotions, voices, and bodies are produced and distributed.

Localization of Reality Shows: Media Rituals and Apparatus of Reality Shows

In the present study, we analyze two reality talk shows starring North Korean resettlers on two major comprehensive programming channels in the South Korean cable network: Channel A and TV Chosun. We emphasize that one of the most distinctive features of the current media representations in South Korea is that the genre of such programs related to North Korean resettlers has shifted from fiction to nonfiction, from news programs to talk shows, and from documentaries to reality shows. *Now on My Way to Meet You* on Channel A and *The Moran-bong Club* on TV Chosun are two representative reality shows that include North Korean resettlers in the cast, which demonstrate contemporary trends in refugee-related reality shows.

In order to understand the distinctive ways in which the media interrupts the affective politics of citizenship in South Korean society today, NKR2 shows are an appropriate object of investigation. At present, North Korean resettlers are overwhelmingly represented in reality shows, one of the most popular kinds of entertainment television programs. The reality program in terms of format, media rituals, and apparatus in South Korea has transformed the South Korean media industry as it tries to survive competition from global media conglomerates by adapting to a fast-changing media environment.

First, the South Korean-style reality show, referred to as a “real variety show” in South Korea, is distinct from global reality shows in that the South Korean version has a larger portion of reality shows featuring celebrities rather than non-celebrity participants. This has led to a very specific impact on the rituals of South Korean-style reality shows, which tend to rely on the “de-celebrification” of celebrities rather than on the “celebrification” of general participants in creating the reality effect of the show (Lee, 2015).

In Western Europe and the United States where reality shows began and from which they are exported, the first reality shows cast non-celebrities. These shows followed specific forms including survival games, auditions, and makeovers. Many ordinary people participate in these programs, and the audiences identify with them.

In terms of genre, the reality show is located somewhere between non-fiction genres such as (soft) news, talk shows, and documentaries, and entertainment (often fictional) genres such as dramas. Given that the cast of any given reality show presents real actions and responses in an artificial setting, reality shows achieve a reality effect even though the reality of these shows is artificial. What is important here is that the shows represent only the plausible real, whereas the implausible real is simply disregarded. One of the easiest ways to achieve this specific effect is by making something unexpected. Many reality programs cast non-celebrities rather than celebrities, the latter of whom generally already have fixed characters in the eyes of the audience.

It is unusual, therefore, to include a lot of celebrities in a reality show because doing so makes it difficult for producers to make something truly unexpected unpredictable with all too familiar faces and characters like celebrities. However, it is not an impossible task. In South Korean–style reality shows, which tend to rely on celebrity crew, the celebrities to appear ordinary by acting very foolishly by using exaggerated gestures, expressing exaggerated emotions, or talking and behaving in unconventional (sometimes, aggressive and offensive) ways (Lee, 2015).

De-celebrification efforts (or conventions) produce a specific reality effect that many audiences of the South Korean reality show as a localized kind of reality program recognize and find to be entertaining. The exaggerated style as a way of creating a reality effect means audiences tend to have specific expectations of these programs in line with the intentions of the program creators. By creating a reciprocal relationship between the producers and the audience, these programs lead us to question what the real effect of reality in these shows is. As Oak and Park (2010) argue, the real found in these shows is closer to ‘the entertained real’ rather than ‘the documented real.’

Another characteristic of NKR2 shows as a localized South Korean–style reality program has to do with new relations between the global and the local in terms of the media industry. The emergence of the reality show is closely associated with accelerated deregulation and unlimited competition in the broadcasting industry, which is in line with globalization. The reality program genre, as a typical example, shows the effects of the simultaneous process of globalization and localization in that format imports and exports help many countries to produce local programs, even though the form of the reality show brings homogeneity in regard to aesthetic form via production methods, technologies, and program styles.

Most NKR2 shows in South Korea are broadcast through three recently founded cable TV networks: Channel A, TV Chosun, and MBN, which are owned by three conservative newspapers, Dong-A Ilbo, Chosun Ilbo, and Maeil Business Newspapers, respectively. With their unstable start as comprehensive programming cable TV broadcasters in 2011, the cable TV channels started seeking cheaper ways to produce programs including news programs, dramas, and entertainment programs. Talk show programming is a cheap solution for these cable TV channels that are criticized for not investing enough money in producing diverse programs and as a result, their programs are not general enough.

The characteristics as described of reality programs modified in the South Korean context provide an important clue to understanding the dynamics of mediated cultural politics of the Other, especially those who have experiences and memories in socialist society and are now living in South Korea. In this paper, we will offer a way to understand the contemporary cultural politics of North Korean resettlers in South Korean society by analyzing the media rituals of reality talk shows. More specifically, we examine the media rituals and apparatus of reality programs that include North Korean resettlers by focusing on three unique relationships: (1) between the celebrities in the cast and the show host, (2) between the celebrity crew and the North Korean resettlers cast in the program, and (3) among the television audience who are

not free from stereotypes of North Korean society.

For our analysis, we selected two representative reality shows, *Now on My Way to Meet You* on Channel A and *The Moran-bong Club* on TV Chosun. Specifically, the top five episodes of *Now on My Way to Meet You* during the second half of 2015 and the top five episodes of *The Moran-bong Club* during the first half of 2016 were selected on the basis of audience ratings. (Table. 1).

Table 1. Programs for Analysis

Channel	Program title	Episode	Air date	Audience rating
Channel A	<i>Now on My Way to Meet You</i>	206	Nov. 29, 2015	3.9%
		207	Dec. 7, 2015	4.3%
		208	Dec. 13, 2015	3.9%
		209	Dec. 20, 2015	4.8%
		210	Dec. 27, 2015	4.5%
TV Chosun	<i>The Moran-bong Club</i>	22	Feb. 13, 2016	2.9%
		25	Mar. 5, 2016	3.1%
		26	Mar. 12, 2016	3.3%
		27	Mar. 19, 2016	3.2%
		29	Apr. 2, 2016	2.8%

Analyzing the Cultural Politics of Citizenship in Two NKR2 Shows

(1) The Role of Celebrities in NKR2 Shows

Most of the casts in NKR2 shows such as *The Moran-bong Club* and *Now on My Way to Meet You* are mostly celebrity entertainers (mainly men). In both programs, most of the celebrities are middle-aged or older, whereas most of the resettlers are in their twenties or younger. The celebrities in the NKR2 shows do not want to appear as if they are celebrities. In order to achieve the specific entertaining effect, the NKR2 shows are likely to follow the conventions of South Korean-style reality shows marked by the use of exaggerated language and dramatic gestures (Lee, 2015). Given that facilitators and crew in NKR2 shows pursue “entertainment reality,” they hardly provide audiences with a contextual understanding through dialogue between the resettlers, the host, and crews. Therefore, audiences do not experience any distance from the process of producing preconceptions or stereotyped images of the Other due to a lack of contextual dialogue.

In addition, audiences tend to interpret the words, actions, and gestures of the North Koreans and other celebrities in these programs. What the North Koreans say about their experiences in North Korea is interpreted as a testimony on historical facts, which creates a documented reality effect like documentary films or news report. But this is not all that is happening in these shows. There is another reality effect, which we refer to as the entertainment reality effect. In particular, stories about what they have seen and experienced since arriving in South Korea tend to enter the specific interpretation process that reality programs create. In this context, what is real does

not lie in the extent to which their stories and experiences are based on historical fact. Instead, what is real depends on how authentic their behaviors and words look as a response to what is happening at the moment in the program.

The mixed reality effect is more prominent in NKR2 shows in which most of the North Korean cast members are young women. In the program, their appearance and voices tend to be seen as a sign of purity and innocence by the South Korean celebrities and hosts in the show. Stories about the harsh reality that the resettlers faced such as surveillance, poverty, and hunger under the oppressive regime and how they risked their lives escaping from North Korea have not prevented them from becoming scapegoats in South Korean society. Instead, their stories about the hardships they faced become perceived as difference and produce a paternalistic sympathy for them on the part of South Koreans.

(2) Interactions Between Celebrity and North Korean Refugee Cast Members

The interaction between the South Korean celebrities and the (female) resettlers is distinctively formed through the media rituals and devices of reality programs. In both shows, middle-aged male celebrities provide female resettlers with advice, just as other celebrities in many reality shows provide expert advice.

However, NKR2 shows use the confessions of North Korean female resettlers in their twenties about their personal experiences in South Korea. In this process, young female resettlers are represented as inexperienced people who need advice whether in regard to money, love, or shopping. At the same time, in the NKR2 shows, the middle-aged male celebrities play the role of well-informed advisers who are well-established citizens, which means that the North Korean female resettlers (especially those in their twenties) are depicted as innocent even “infantile citizens” (Berlant, 1997). This means that the female North Korean resettlers can gain a voice only in the private sphere rather than in the public sphere. This is closely associated with the conservative, sexist politics surrounding cultural citizenship in Korean society, where masculinity and good citizenship are often held to be the same.

(3) The Effect of Audience Expectations in NKR2 Shows

The main story of the North Korean female resettlers in the NKR2 shows is that they have endured extreme hardships that go beyond the life and death process of escaping and yet now have a new life in South Korea. The extreme situations and stories of their everyday lives are mixed together. The refugee stories create complex messages and emotional flows to the audience, as these stories are mixed with the audience’s general expectations of the reality show genre. When tracing the history of the media representation of North Korean resettlers, the story has been produced in documentaries and news as the object of media spectacle, not in entertainment talk shows.

However, the stories of their experiences in the reality program format are conveyed to audiences in a very different context from those of news programs or documentaries. Audiences sense that ordinary performers, e.g., the North Korean

female resettlers, in the reality shows are somewhat exaggerated, because they are trying to reach the rank of celebrities through excessive exposure, gestures, and inflated language.² Of course, not all the words and actions of the public performers in the reality programs are regarded as fake or inauthentic. Instead, it has a different reality effect from the testimony of existing news and documentaries. The reality effect of the resettlers' stories can be found not only in the content and truth of their speech, but even in situational factors such as the situations they are coping with in real time.

Nonetheless, it should be considered that the expectations of the audience of NKR2 shows are not the same as their expectations of other reality programs. Most of all, the audiences are not free from stereotypes of ordinary performers, i.e., the North Korean resettlers in the NKR2 shows. The general expectations of program audiences about ordinary performers in Western reality programs are somewhat unfamiliar to Korean audiences who are domesticated to media representation based on anti-Communist propaganda in regard to North Korea. Therefore, it can be seen that ordinary performers are considered active actors empowered in Western reality shows. However, it is hard to see such an active North Korean resettler cast in the NKR2 show. Instead, resettler performers are represented as relatively traditional and fixed roles or relationships, such as family relationships (e.g., in *Living Well*) or marital relationships (*South Guys and North Girls*).

Presenter (Kim Sung-ju): I would like to share with audiences the interesting story of some special North Korean resettlers, Mun jong Sook and Park Sung-hee, Mun's daughter. What motivated you to try to escape from North Korea?

[...]

North Korean refugee (Yun Seo-Yeon): In my case, my family came to Korea ahead of me. When North Korean brokers handed me over in North Korea, I did not say that my family was in Korea. I would be a political prisoner if I failed to escape from North Korea because I had already sent my family to South Korea. So, I hid everything and I said to the smugglers that I would go to China [.....] I resisted desperately, saying that I would die if I were sold. Then the guys seemed to be afraid, and they connected me to the phone. And, they called my mother and asked for a lot of money. (Huh) ... Mom said "I'll give you as much as you ask me, so please do not hurt my daughter. I will send a person." The next day they sold me to my mother, not to another person.

The Moran-bong Club, Episode 29, April 2nd, 2016

² In general, although there are some positive evaluations of public appearances on reality shows, celebrities and ordinary people are clearly distinguished from each other in reality programs. In other words, the entertainerization of the general public is very limited, which is not enough for democratic transformation or expansion of diversity. Even if this happens, they are the lowest among the media celebrities (Curnutt, 2011; Turner, 2010).

The NKR2 Show Media Apparatus

The place where the refugee reality program is produced and the voices of the resettlers are mediated are not natural in any way. It is an artificial space in which multiple devices, e.g., cameras, subtitles, and editing tools, are operating. Among the devices, it is necessary to pay closer attention to the role of subtitles and editing methods as distinctive devices of the NKR2 programs.

Contemporary media rely on technical devices that can capture visual and aural phenomena simultaneously. The NKR2 shows in the current media landscape frequently use a variety of editing methods and subtitles, which are far from straightforward scripts. They encourage a transformation of the resettlers' voices from "the voice as it is" to a "well-organized, but artificial voice with a narrative" (Lee, 2010, p. 66) erasing the ambiguous among what is said. In other words, the technological devices play a significant role in determining what is meaningful or meaningless in the resettlers' voices, and accordingly organize their voices in line with the narrative of the program.

Conclusion

In this study, we examined the distinctive features of NKR2 shows via an analysis of media rituals and the devices of reality TV shows. We paid particular attention to two representative reality TV shows, *Now on My Way to Meet You* and *The Moran-bong Club*, in the South Korean context. Also, based on our analysis of the media rituals and devices of these shows, we sought to identify unique relationships shaping and working between the inside and outside of the media, between the public, the celebrities, and expectations of the audiences. By doing so, we eventually revealed the dynamics of conservative citizenship and cultural politics as they pertain to the North Korean resettlers as a minority group in neo-capitalistic Korean society.

Analyzing media rituals enables a critical approach to NKR2 shows. An analysis of media rituals in TV programs is particularly useful for maintaining a critical perspective on the role and position of the media in contemporary society. Media rituals are based on the myth that media is a pathway to the center of the world or a society (Couldry, 2003). Therefore, media representation based on such a myth of media ritual can be regarded as a kind of mediated act through media. These mediated behaviors are rooted in the notion that media is the most important vehicle for approaching the center of society and are, therefore, deeply engaged in shaping the core categories and boundaries of media in order to justify and reinforce the value of media. Thus, the analysis of media rituals as evinced in NKR2 shows indicates that the specific cultural politics presented therein are linked to having a "desirable civic identity," of being a full citizen living in neoliberal South Korean society (Lee, 2010).

In shaping civic identity as an effect of NKR2 shows, cultural politics are complicated. The identity and role of the North Korean resettlers in these shows fit in relatively stable and traditional private categories such as family and marital relationships. As evidenced in the shows in regard to their daily lives in North Korea, the resettlers

have identities focused on their status as family members, i.e., as a mother, a father, a son, or a daughter. Also, the resettlers in the shows appear as infantile citizens who have not yet fully acclimatized to the highly capitalistic society that is South Korea. The NKR2 show emphasizes that as a unique minority in South Korea, North Korean resettlers must be continually educated.

Although the resettlers have South Korean citizenship, they are socially and culturally situated as a minority group. That is, they are located on the periphery alongside other minority groups (Campbell, 2015, 491). Given that the social and cultural environment surrounding the resettlers has been changing, the ways in which the resettlers are represented in the media have shifted from an emphasis on anti-Communist ideology to a representation arising from conservative cultural politics of citizenship.

To summarize, through an analysis of media rituals and devices, we showed that NKR2 programs represent a version of the roles and expectations of North Korean resettlers and that through these representations the cultural politics of citizenship are expressed and thus the requirements for full South Korean citizenship beyond any legal consideration. Further, we highlighted that the audiences of NKR2 shows are incorporated into the dynamics of a cultural politics that contributes to shaping a conservative citizenship. We thereby showed that these programs are distinctive inasmuch as they are located between entertainment reality and documentary reality.

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