Korean Nationalism in Descendants of The Sun

i. Introduction

Nationalism refers to the feeling of being devoted to one’s country and having a sense of a collective national conscious. “Nationalism is associated with the pride derived from the make-up of a nation state: its history, culture, economy, politics, set of values and international influence” (Han 2005:5). Today, South Korea continues to be one of the most homogenous countries in the world. Korean identity and nationalistic feelings toward Korea continues to be dominant, despite today’s globalized world. I argue that South Korea continues to preserve its nationalism through the globalized success of their culture’s creation. Exemplified by the drama series Descendants of the Sun (KBS, Eunbok Lee and Sanghoon Baek, 2016), it is clear that the South Korea’s legacy continues to preserve nationalism through themes of the drama’s setting, historical government policies, consumer nationalism, pride in Hallyu and overall national identity.

ii. Drama setting

Nationalism in Descendants of the Sun is inevitable when looking at the setting of the drama and the occupations of the characters involved. This 16-episode Korean drama aired in 2016, mainly following the relationship between a doctor and a soldier who were romantically interested in one another, but were restricted on many occasions.

Song Joong Ki plays Lee Shi Jin (hereafter Shi Jin), a military captain in the special forces unit for South Korea. His team often gets deployed to dangerous armed zones to protect and dispute issues. Song Hye Kyo plays the female lead Kang Mo Yeon (hereafter Mo Yeon), a cardiothoracic doctor at the Haesung Hospital in Seoul. After their initial breakup, Mo Yeon and Shi Jin reunite in a fictional and war torn country called Urk, where Shi Jin was stationed for peace keeping, and for overlooking the visiting hospital volunteer team from Seoul which Mo Yeon was part of. The second lead characters are in the army; Seo Dae-Young and Yoon Myeong-Joo, who are also romantically involved with one another, but struggle to find approval from Myeong-Joo’s father, the Lieutenant General, because Dae-Young’s military ranking was not as prestigious as his and his daughter’s.

The integrity and roles of these occupations sets a level of nationalism within the drama from the very beginning. For Shi Jin and his alpha team, their occupation of working in life-threatening situations embodies ideals and ethics that are nationalistic. In episode 2, Shi Jin and Mo Yeon discuss their different ideologies of their jobs and how they view life and death differently. Shi Jin states: “The reason I, and they, do this job is because it is something that someone must do, for my family and I, Doctor Kang and your family, and important people to those family members. I believe that my job is keeping the freedom and peace of the land for those people.” Shi Jin’s occupation is admirable to most, because soldiers must risk their lives to try to preserve peace for South Korea. Soldiers are also required to kill or shoot on command, in which Mo Yeon disagrees with. The medical team in the drama represents a different type of

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1 “Descendants of the Sun.” Episode 2, KBS (33:15-34:08).
nationalism. For Mo Yeon and the other team of doctors and nurses, nationalism is represented through their ability to save and preserve lives. In the same scene, Mo Yeon states: “I am a doctor. Life has dignity. I don’t think there is any higher value nor ideology than that.” Soldiers and doctors both try to improve the wellbeing and security of their peoples, which evidently embodies nationalistic feelings. Overall, Descendants of the Sun romanticized nationalism through the heroic actions of the characters, who strive to be protectors of life.

iii. History of Government Policies

Historically, Neo-Confucian philosophy has guided the Korean leadership for five centuries. Korea’s economic activity has been controlled by only a small handful of people. “Korea has had a long struggle for cultural continuity, confronted by a series of threats of foreign cultural domination”(Shim 2008:27). Hardships amongst the general public were exacerbated by the Japanese colonial authority over Korean economic interests during their long occupation which was followed by civil war and ultimately the constant presence of the US. South Koreans have long since looked to move away from the benevolent “older brother” of the US and look towards developing their influences in the international economic community.

From 1910 to 1945, average Koreans experienced continuous economic exploitation and cultural oppression by the Japanese. Families were pushed from their farms into packed cities and dangerous mines as their traditional ways of life were labelled obsolete. Western goods were

2 “Descendants of the Sun,” Episode 2, KBS (34:08-34:28).

incredibly scarce and usually required black market purchasing. Products were produced within South Korea for subsistence or imported from Japan as a strategy to profit on their occupied populations. For many people, nationalism is evident through shared hardship and experiences. “The memory of the harsh Japanese rule over Koreans, the severe lack of natural resources and the real threat from communist North Korea were a few immediate obstacles Koreans faced and which influenced the lives of Koreans every day” (Han 2015:4). It would not be until Park Chung-Hee’s dramatic entrance into office in 1961 that the economy would be drastically re-modeled and re-oriented to rapidly increase South Korean exports. Park designed export strategies for the national economy: light industrial development in the 1960s, heavy and chemical industry in the 1970s, and (after Park’s death), electronics and consumer goods in the 1980s” (Nelson 2000:33). “Nationalism was a fuel for South Korean industrialization”(Nelson 2000:42), and the political implementations of rapid industrialization in South Korea resulted in high success and achievement. The development of Korean nationalism is formed through historical events, such as suppression and domination from other countries, or pride from rapid economic prosperity. It is important to understand that the circumstances of South Korea’s past, and their ability to overcome adversities are prideful to most South Koreans, and are key indicators of their national identity.

iv. National Identity

South Korea has a very strong sense of collective identity. Koreans take pride in their ethnic culture, which is more “blood based rather than naturalization, place of birth or acculturation” (Han 2015:3). This is because South Korea is still one of the most homogenous societies in the world. National identity, therefore, originates from “the pride derived from the make-up of a nation state: its history, culture, economy, politics, set of values and international influence”(Han 2015:5). In addition, Korea’s “long struggle for cultural continuity, confronted by a series of threats of foreign cultural domination” (Shim 2008: 30) increased the national pride.

Korean dramas are a way to recreate Korean ideologies. In almost all Korean dramas, many distinctive aspects of Korean culture are conveyed in each drama and these symbolisms continue to increase nationalism. The most obvious indicator is that all Korean dramas have a shared language— Korean! For example, in Descendants of the Sun, Chi Hoon often talked to the sick orphan child whom he called “Blackie” in the Korean language, despite that fact that this was in Urk, a fictional place where most people would not encounter the Korean language. Shared rituals are also an important indicator of Korean identity. An example of this is the mandatory military enlistment for all Korean men. Since it is a requirement to serve, it creates a right of passage for Korean men. In episode 1, when Mo Yeon asked for identification from Shi Jin to return Dae Young’s stolen cellphone, Shi Jin pulled out his dog tag and said “Every male of the Republic of Korea has this, so you won’t believe me.”

People in the military are regarded with higher credibility in most societies, but because mandatory enlistment is a social fact and is enforced by law, Shi Jin says this quite casually as he knows that being a soldier is normal. This exemplifies mandatory enlistment as a way for the government to standardize nationalism through its knowledge and training. Moreover, although Descendants of the Sun did not focus on enlistment but rather military as a profession, the heroic and selflessness of Shi Jin and the Alpha team increased the morality of a soldier’s work. This shared ritual of citizenship is a right of

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4 “Descendants of the Sun.” Episode 1, KBS (34:53-35:00).
passage amongst South Korean males, and a way for the government to increase their national pride.

Flags are also a symbol for self and national identity. In *Descendants of the Sun*, the South Korean flag was shown all throughout the drama. The flag made a clear distinction in military scenes, where there were joint operations or opposing members of their country. The Korean flag was also featured on the base camp in Urk. In episode 3, there was a scene where Shi Jin immediately saluted as the South Korean flag was being lowered to half-staff, while Mo Yeon put her hand on her heart to show respect for her country. The emphasis on the South Korean flag shows the strong patriotic feelings. This scene was also quite lengthy and played in slow motion, further indicating the underlying nationalistic messages embedded in the drama.

The international setting of the drama further emphasizes nationalism and pride of South Korea, as its characteristics are carried through the characters regardless of their location. In episode 5, Mo Yeon and Shi Jin discussed the meaning of patriotism. Mo Yeon states: “What is patriotism? You love the country, and are loyal to the country and the people.” Shi Jin responds: “Why would you have to be a soldier to do so? I’m not sure what you think patriotism

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is… It is the patriotism in my mind.” Although Shi Jin’s job forces him to travel to different places, he emphasizes that his love and devotion to South Korea is a mindset that he takes with him on missions. The values that South Koreans uphold is something that is part of a self identity which is mobilized through day to day life.

Lastly, the morals and behaviour acted out in most Korean dramas show the underlying morals influenced from Confucianism. Many of its influences are embedded in Korean culture and are unspoken social rules, such as bowing, the use of honourifics in language, and focus on respect and politeness towards one another. Confucianism played a large role in moulding “the values that shape the moral fabric of Korea” (Tu 1996:12). An important value in Confucianism is called filial piety, which refers to the obligations that one should make their families proud and to “live an honourable and creditable life” (Dawson 1915:157). Piety is derived from “pietas,” meaning to devote oneself to parents with unflagging service. Generally, filial piety gives people a general guide line of their obligations. The family’s legacy is an important part of filial piety, making marriage and reproduction of children the right of way for people to pass down the family’s values and fulfill their parent’s dreams. An example in Descendants of the Sun is the ongoing internal conflict Dae Young feels when dating Myung Joo. Dae Young has continuously pushed Myung Joo away because he failed to get the her father’s permission to date. Power, military ranking and pride is extremely important to the General, who does not think Dae Young is successful enough to be suited as his son-in-law. As a result, General Lieutenant makes a strong effort to separate the lovers, and even threatened Dae Young’s employment in the military to do so. Dae Young is constantly conflicted between what his heart is telling him to do, and what he should be doing to respect the Lieutenant General’s wishes. Korean dramas are distinct in this way, as an elder’s opinions are very influential in how people socialize. The reason why Korean dramas are so popular in other parts of Asia may be because “Korean television dramas touch the right chord of Asian sentiments, such as family values and respect for elders” (Shim 2008:27). In general, Korean dramas seem to be a way to exemplify the national identity of traditional Confucian ideals as a way to keep the order in Korean society.

v. Consumer Nationalism

“Consumerism is the creation and reproduction of social identity through the consumption of mass produced, branded, and advertised things” (Gerth 2011:2). Therefore, Consumer nationalism refers to the buying and using as a political statement through the non consumption of foreign countries (ibid). According to Nelson, the national economy in 1960 was ranked amongst the world’s poorest country, at an average annual per capita income of less than $125 (2000:27). The 1991, the average urban household head earned $1700 per month (ibid). Within this time, the rapid industrialization implemented policies that promoted consumer nationalism within South Korea. As a result, people are financially able to consume more products. Consumer nationalism is still very prominent in contemporary South Korean society. Not only this, some of South Korea’s biggest companies, such as Samsung and Hyundai, are highly successful and well known globally. The majority of Koreans take pride in the products that their country has produced and will often will support these companies by purchasing domestic products. Therefore, consumer nationalism is very evident within its pop culture. Korean dramas often incorporate Korean branded items as a source of marketing but also to create more exposure to their products. This may be a direct result of the export oriented

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industrialization which was implemented by President Park between the 1960-1980s. 99% of Korean households were equipped with domestic products, such as appliances, services, furniture and apartments (Nelson 2000:44). Product placement in Korean dramas are a strategic way of advertising. For example, after the utilization of makeup products by Mo Yeon in the
"Descendants of the Sun", the Korean cosmetics brand Laneige stated that “The number of the so-called Song Hye-kyo lipstick searched on the Internet surged 11 times after the drama started to air.” Another example is the Hyundai Tucsan, a crossover SUV which was featured as Shi Jin’s car in Urk rose 10% in the local market following the drama’s success. Other notable examples include the Lotte Choco Pie, a Twosome Place (coffee shop), and Cheong Kwan Jang Red Ginseng Everytime extract.

Food consumption within the drama also embodies a collectiveness in consumer nationalism. Many Korean foods consumed act as emblems to modern South Korean cuisine. Soju is an alcoholic spirit that is heavily consumed by South Koreans. According to a survey done by Euromonitor, South Koreans drink on average 13.7 shots of liquor per week, and are

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9 ibid.

amongst the highest consumers of alcohol in the world.\textsuperscript{11} Soju accounts for 97\% of the country’s spirits market,\textsuperscript{12} and is a major part in accommodating the social gatherings in South Korea. In \textit{Descendants of the Sun}, soldiers are prohibited from consuming alcohol when they are working. Therefore, Shi Jin and Dae Young created their own tradition of drinking for 72 hours straight every time they returned to South Korea. Picture below, Shi Jin, Dae Young, and the rest of the alpha team are consuming countless amounts of soju inside a Korean barbecue restaurant\textsuperscript{13}. The scene also shows that the owners of the restaurant don’t seem to care, showing that their behaviours are not particularly absurd because drinking culture in South Korea is strong and very normalized.

\textbf{vi. National Pride Through Hallyu}

Hallyu, also known as the Korean Wave, is a worldwide phenomenon in which Korean cultural products are being consumed by people outside of Korea. Because of this, South Koreans take pride in knowing that their culture and its products are being commodified in other countries (Joo 2011:500). As a result, Hallyu tourism became an integral part of national interest, because it transcends Korean cultural awareness across Asia and beyond. Korea finds national

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\textsuperscript{12} ibid.
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\textsuperscript{13} Korean barbecue is another indicator for consumer nationalism. It is one of the main forms of Korean cuisine and is usually accompanied with the consumption of Korean alcoholic beverages.
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pride in the asymmetrical exchange and reception of popular cultures with other Asian countries (Joo 2011:500).

Hallyu is a successful international economic venture. For the first time in 2013, Korea’s exports exceeded their imports, exporting $1.25 billion won worth of Korean cultural content (Connolly et al. 2016:529). Many cultural ideologies are incorporated into Korean pop culture, so the idea that non-Koreans are also consuming these cultural products are a source of national pride. The success of *Descendants of the Sun* is undeniable. The drama brought in 3 trillion won, surpassing the record set in 2013 by the drama *My Love from Another Star*. Ratings and statistics also showed that the drama had a domestic viewership of 30.09% on average, making it the number one drama to date in 2016. *Descendants of the Sun* was also extremely popular around the world, particularly in China and Japan. iQiyi, a Chinese online platform paid broadcasting fees of $250,000 for each episode, which had been viewed over 440 million times.

Hallyu is helping enhance images of Korea as refined and sophisticated, spreading awareness of Korean culture abroad (Joo 2011:496). The Korean government actively promotes and implements measures to reap economic benefits from. Hallyu tourism is the attraction of “filming location, studio sets and broadcasting stations, as well as other TV drama themed festivals, tourist participation in the filming process and organized tours with celebrities” (Kim and Nam 2016:531). According to Kim and Nam, 64.6% of international tourists stated that Hallyu influenced their decision to visit Korea, and 44% of Asian tourists say that Hallyu was a key factor behind the decision to travel to Korea (2016:529). It is estimated that 20 million international tourists will visit Korea each year by 2020 (ibid).

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17 Ibid.

Since Descendants of the Sun became the top viewed Korean drama in 2016, many fans flocked to the filming locations to relive the drama. Although most of the series is notably filmed in Greece, there are still quite a few areas in which fans can go revisit in Korea. Song Joong Ki was also named the “honorary ambassador and promotional model to get travellers from around the world to visit the country” for Korean tourism in 2016, after the popularity of his drama. The Taebaek set is a popular destination for Descendants of the Sun fans. Taebaek is a town in the Gangwon Province of South Korea, which received inquiries from travelling agencies to visit the location. This was the filming site for the military base in Urk, the medicube, and also the power plant building that collapsed during episode 5-8. Another example would be a Camp Greaves in Paju city, just 2 kilometres away from the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea. Here, activities inspired by Descendants of the Sun, such as dog-tag making and uniform fitting are common for tourists to participate in.

As a result of the overwhelming success of Descendants of the Sun, the popularity of the actors in the series have drastically increased. Male lead Song Joong Ki had a busy year endorsing dozens of companies in 2016. Notable endorsements include his collaboration with Hite Beer, Baskin Robbins ice cream, flights on Jeju Air, Domino's Pizza, Cuchen rice cookers,

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19 The filming locations in Greece are another major Hallyu-tourist site since the release of Descendants of the Sun.

20 Korean Wave stars are often portrayed as “true patriots” or “national treasures.”


Forencos cosmetics, and LG Household & Healthcare toothpaste. This may be a result of the South Korean government designating cultural technology (pop culture) as one of the 6 technologies that will drive the Korean economy in the 21st century (Shim 2008:31). In addition, Song Joong Ki also held a Asia fan meeting tour after the success of the drama in Asia, and helped boost the awareness of his drama (and Korean popular culture in general) in major advertisements all throughout Asia.

vii. Conclusion
Most contemporary Korean dramas encompasses many facets of social, economic and political life in Korea. In this paper, I analyzed nationalism within the context of Korean creations. Through Descendants of the Sun, the drama setting, national identity, history of government policies, consumer nationalism and national pride through Hallyu are discussed in relation to how this drama exemplifies nationalistic discourses. Evidently, creating a drama revolving nationalistic and esteemed occupations: doctors and soldiers, creates an honest sentiment to nationalism in a contemporary setting. The influence of Korean dramas not only reinforces the collectiveness between Korean peoples, but also exposed non-Korean viewers to its culture. This method of transcribing nationalistic messages in Korean pop culture is subtle, strong yet effective, and will continue into the future.

Bibliography


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