

# THE KOREAN GAZE: K-DRAMAS AND RE-ORIENTALIST REPRESENTATIONS

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**Abstract:** This article examines shifting modes of “looking” in contemporary Asian media by extending the theoretical discourse on the gaze beyond its Western-centered origins. As Korean dramas shape and perform popular imaginaries across Asia, they offer alternative narratives that contest Western hegemony while simultaneously introducing new hierarchies. Their polished aesthetics, storytelling, and staging of South Korea as an ideal contribute to their appeal; however, these same representational strategies may also reproduce unequal perceptions of other Asian cultures. Drawing from the concept of re-orientalism, this article interrogates whether a “Korean gaze” emerges, one that positions South Korea as the center of Asian modernity while framing neighboring nations as otherwise. As K-dramas also expose contrasting portrayals of South Korean and other Asian cultures and settings, this article offers insights about inter-Asian representation, cultural imperialism, and the construction of regional identities.

**Keywords:** K-dramas, Korean gaze, re-orientalism, representations, oppositional gaze

## Introduction: The Gaze

In film theory, a way to analyze pop culture representations is through Laura Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze,” which holds that women are objectified in cinema and portrayed in ways that reinforce dominant patriarchal ideologies.<sup>1</sup> This concept has been expanded to other forms of media and used to raise critical awareness on the glorification of masculinity and overly sexualized and objectified portrayals of women. Essentially, Mulvey examines the spectator’s way of “looking” and how it is configured to view men as active and women as passive.

<sup>1</sup> Roberta Sassatelli, “Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 5 (2011): 123-43.

Such a gaze is oppressive to women, in that it forms fixed gender roles and identities. To counter the male gaze, the idea of “the female gaze” is offered as a way to represent women in media through more critical portrayals and incorporating female perspectives in filmmaking and production.<sup>2</sup> Expanding its application to intersectional issues, bell hooks proposes the need for an “oppositional gaze.”<sup>3</sup> A gaze that is not solely focused on sexist representations, but rather racist or classist ones as well. The oppositional gaze invites a re-examination of power dynamics and demands more truthful and authentic narratives and images in the media.

“The gaze” concept thus transcends the critique of sex and gender portrayals per se and also explores intersectional ones. It includes the analysis of representations of race and other markers of diversity, and how they reinforce dominant images. Many studies introduce and tackle “the White gaze,”<sup>4</sup> the violence it has caused to Black individuals, and how it should be resisted in art, education, and media. Kesha James exposes the “sadistic fetishism” of the White gaze, and proposes strategies by which its hegemony may be repurposed. She instructs viewers to question, challenge, and reverse looking practices of texts, to “awaken social consciousness and heal the centuries-long racial wounds of the past.”<sup>5</sup>

By the same token, “the orientalist gaze” is also discussed by Miriam Ahn in a critique of gendered and racialized performances in Southeast Asia, which enforce violent forms of spectatorship.<sup>6</sup> Ahn elaborates on the justification for the Global North’s exploitative gaze on Global South performances. Jonas Larsen and John Urry, on the other hand, discuss the similarity of gazing and performing through the “tourist gaze” or “the enjoyment of gazing or visually consuming

<sup>2</sup> Lisa French, “The ‘Female Gaze,’” in *The Female Gaze in Documentary Film: An International Perspective*, ed. Lisa French (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 3.

<sup>3</sup> bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 288-302.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Kim Sions and Courtnie N. Wolfgang, “Looking Back, Looking Forward: Resisting the White Gaze in Historical Narratives and Future Possibilities of Art Education,” *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* 41, no. 1 (2021): 82-104; Ahmed Ilmi, “The White Gaze vs. the Black Soul,” *Race, Gender & Class* 18, no. 3/4 (2011): 217-29; James Wright, “The White Gaze: Epistemological Imposition and Paradoxical Logic in Educational Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 18 August 2023: 1-14.

<sup>5</sup> Kesha James, “‘This Is America’: Repurposing the White Gaze through Imitation,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 110, no. 1 (2024): 7-26.

<sup>6</sup> Miriam Ahn, “Imperial Subjection and the Orientalist Gaze: Turning Asian Women’s Bodies into Entertainment,” MA thesis, University of San Francisco, 2020, <https://repository.usfca.edu/thes/1299>.

places that are out of the ordinary in some way or other.”<sup>7</sup> The “objects” of the tourist gaze may also be people and things, but are, however, no longer just visually consumed. Through this multisensuous or “embodied gazing,” critics invite the rethinking of representations by examining their performativity as well.<sup>8</sup>

Using these various “gazes,” or approaches to “gazing,” therefore, spectators are encouraged to “learn to look” critically at cultural texts, to go beyond the common indicators of commodification and objectification, and recognize their “problematic potential.”<sup>9</sup> Without it, Ahn claims that there will be continued stigmatization and exploitation of vulnerable groups, particularly those who are being looked at or gazed at.

Within the “gaze” framework, versions of “the Western (male) gaze” have been the focus of many studies. This may perhaps be attributed to the former accessibility, distribution, and popularity of Hollywood productions and other similar outfits. With the emergence of multiple streaming platforms, however, Western productions no longer dominate the media landscape. Asian movies and television have successfully penetrated global markets, with some even winning (U.S.) Academy Awards. The rise of the East Asian Wave, or the Korean Wave, has also proved to be undeniable, as “a new player in regional media flows [...] and a way to counter the threat of the Western-dominated media market.”<sup>10</sup> In a sense, Asian productions offer an alternative, critical approach to presenting more truthful portrayals and narratives of people and objects in the region, away from the Western or White gaze. Such shifts in cultural and global media and pop culture consumption, therefore, demand new critical ways of examining the gaze or ways of looking.

## The Korean Wave

As *Hallyu*, or the Korean Wave, has become accessible worldwide, Korean dramas, or K-dramas, and Korean variety shows have dominated viewership in many regions and nations. In Southeast Asia, K-dramas alone have captured 35% of total Netflix viewing hours in the second quarter of 2025.<sup>11</sup> Their popularity can be

<sup>7</sup> Jonas Larsen and John Urry, “Gazing and Performing,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 6 (2011): 1110.

<sup>8</sup> Larsen and Urry, “Gazing and Performing,” 1113.

<sup>9</sup> Courtney M. Cox, “Developing an Oppositional Gaze: Learning to Look with bell hooks,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 45, no. 4 (2022): 446-49.

<sup>10</sup> Youna Kim, “The Rising East Asian ‘Wave’: Korean Media Go Global,” in *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contra-flow*, ed. Daya Kishan Thussu (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 121-22.

<sup>11</sup> Naman Ramachandran, “Korean Dramas Drive Southeast Asia Streaming Boom as Netflix Holds Lead with 12.8 Million Subscribers, Report Finds,” *Variety*, 30 July 2025,

attributed to their entertainment value, sincerity, and their portrayal of ideal human relationships and related ideological messages.<sup>12</sup>

As if banking on the concept of the tourist gaze, K-dramas depict South Korean society, objects, and places as attractive and perfect. They consciously “perform” to evoke more than mere viewing, and they also appeal to multisensory experiences. Furthermore, they embody rich Asian culture and values, which represent a “structure of feeling” somewhat quite different from the usual North American productions.<sup>13</sup> Thus, alongside the consumption of K-dramas, spectators are eager to consume other Korean cultural products, such as pop music, technological devices, fashion, cosmetics, and food.<sup>14</sup> With the fascination for these products and performances, so to speak, many global travelers flock to South Korea to witness firsthand its “desirable image.”<sup>15</sup> K-dramas, which are a key aspect of the Korean Wave, with their “emotionally powerful content” and “unique sensibility,” have become so popular that they have become a “counterweight to Western cultural influence.”<sup>16</sup>

With such acclaim, controversies naturally emerge around these productions, particularly over the “rigging” and hyper-idealized or glamorized depictions of everything in South Korea. As representations are socially constructed in K-dramas, they challenge the “hegemony of dominant ideas, values, and ways of life”<sup>17</sup> (apparently that of Western media). However, they may also perpetuate hegemonic ideas about other societies and cultures as they uplift South Korea’s status, image and its products. Since the Korean Wave is a state-led “soft power strategy” to achieve actual political and commercial goals, there has been some

<https://variety.com/2025/tv/news/korean-dramas-southeast-asia-streaming-netflix-lead-1236475194/>.

<sup>12</sup> Hazel T. Biana, “See You in 100+ Years Or So: Immortality and the Afterlife in K-Dramas,” in *Philosophies of Appropriated Religions*, ed. Soraj Hongladarom, Jeremiah Joven Joaquin, and Frank J. Hoffman (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023), 25-39.

<sup>13</sup> Kim, “The Rising East Asian ‘Wave,’” 132.

<sup>14</sup> Kim, “The Rising East Asian ‘Wave,’” 121.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Seongseop Kim et al., “Effects of Korean Television Dramas on the Flow of Japanese Tourists,” *Tourism Management* 28, no. 5 (2007): 1340-53; Jennifer M. Kang, “A New Style of K-Drama in Netflix Originals: Generic and Stylistic Experiments in Korean ‘Genre Dramas,’” in *Streaming Video: Storytelling Across Borders*, ed. Amanda D. Lotz and Ramon Lobato (New York: NYU Press, 2023), 175.

<sup>16</sup> Kim, “The Rising East Asian ‘Wave,’” 131.

<sup>17</sup> Youna Kim, “Introduction: Popular Culture and Soft Power in the Social Media Age,” in *The Soft Power of the Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS and Drama*, ed. Youna Kim (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 4.

competition<sup>18</sup> and cultural frictions arising within Asia.<sup>19</sup> These rising tensions, therefore, require attention and interrogation.

Using the concept of the Western, White, or male gaze to analyze these cultural texts and phenomena, however, may not be an effective strategy. While the oppositional gaze is general, in that it invites a re-examination of the authenticity of narratives, it does not explicitly address Asian dynamics, complexities, and cultures. In fact, the likes of hooks have been criticized for focusing solely on Black representations, while ignoring and downplaying Third World ones.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Ahn's concept of the orientalist gaze is technically a critique of the Western or continental gaze, in that it challenges how the Global North views productions and performances from the Global South. Inter-Asian critiques and frameworks are somewhat limited, which calls for further analysis and exploration of how hegemonic narratives and images may also be present in Korean cultural texts.

When Mary Jane Ainslie et al. conducted a study in Southeast Asia, they found that the Korean Wave is perceived as exhibiting "colonial-esque attitudes and cultural imperialism."<sup>21</sup> For instance, throughout the spread of South Korean cultural products, there has been an inadvertent positioning of Southeast Asia "as an ultimately inferior version of Asian culture that aspires to the sophistication and modernity represented by the more affluent and globally dominant East Asian nations."<sup>22</sup> Such positioning may be termed a kind of cultural imperialism, of South Korea over its 'poorer' Southeast Asian neighbors. Such approaches to representation may be evidence of a different type of gazing, or of the "Korean Gaze." Since K-dramas manifest "face inflation," or the "tendency to construct an idealized image of perfection that overshadows all others,"<sup>23</sup> their performativity sets Korea apart from other (Asian or Southeast Asian) nations. Consequently, it reshapes European representational modes that construct the 'exotic' and uphold structural inequality, though in a different form.

<sup>18</sup> Hwa Kyung Kim et al., "Catching up to Hallyu? The Japanese and Chinese Response to South Korean Soft Power," *Korea Observer* 47, no. 3 (2016): 527.

<sup>19</sup> Cristiane Vanessa Alves de Oliveira, "The Hallyu Wave as a Strategic Soft Power Tool: South Korea's Cultural Diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," preprint, SciELO Preprints, 24 July 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1590/SciELOPreprints.12388>.

<sup>20</sup> Hazel T. Biana, "Extending bell hooks' Feminist Theory," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 21, no. 1 (2020): 20.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Jane Ainslie et al., "Understanding the Potential for a Hallyu 'Backlash' in Southeast Asia: A Case Study of Consumers in Thailand, Malaysia and Philippines," *Kritika Kultura* 28 (2017): 63, Archium Ateneo, <https://archium.ateneo.edu/korean-stud-faculty-pubs/3/>.

<sup>22</sup> Ainslie et al., "Understanding the Potential for a Hallyu 'Backlash,'" 68.

<sup>23</sup> Ainslie et al., "Understanding the Potential for a Hallyu 'Backlash,'" 75.

## Re-Orientalist Representations

K-dramas contribute to shifting discussions about Asia and Asianness, with their varied representations. Accused of becoming sites of cultural tension and exchange, some studies have examined the postcolonial and imperial narratives and the ways that they distort knowledge.<sup>24</sup> Inter-Asian representations and identity formations in South Korean dramas, however, remain largely unaddressed. The question of how to define these underlying biases and border politics in Asia, and how to examine these cultural texts, therefore, is a curious task. Without relying on the typical modes of looking or gazing, how can the fantasies and exaggerated realities be interrogated in Korean productions? Perhaps the lens of cultural imperialism may be used. A Western-framed idea, however, cannot simply explain the intricacies, nature, and orientation of Asian histories and geographies. Sylvia Ang et al. explain a new type of racism that goes beyond color, and that is not limited to Western societies.<sup>25</sup> They also emphasize that instances of racialization and racism occur both by Asians and within Asian communities, which should be addressed in conversations about race and intersectionality. Furthermore, Sam Pack asserts that South Koreans also follow a social hierarchy wherein they view Asians with darker skin tones as positioned lower on the pigmentocracy spectrum.<sup>26</sup>

The widespread popularity and influence of K-dramas, their possible misrepresentations of other Asian cultures and identities, or even the reinforcement of racial hierarchies within Asia, are not due solely to the colonial gaze or colonial relationships. Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendez use the term “re-orientalism” to define these dynamics and the social order of cultural producers in the East.<sup>27</sup> Re-orientalism is related to Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, which is the simplified, stereotyped, and often negative depiction of

<sup>24</sup> Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith, “Editors’ Introduction,” in *Islands in History and Representation*, ed. Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith (London: Routledge, 2003), 1-18; James Mellon, “Representations of Micronesia on Film, Video, and Television,” *EastWest Film Journal* 8, no. 1 (1994): 86; Evangelia Papoutsaki and Naomi Strickland, “Pacific Islands Diaspora Media: Conceptual and Methodological Considerations for a Pilot Study,” *Fijian Studies: A Journal of Contemporary Fiji* 6, no. 1/2 (2008): 166-84.

<sup>25</sup> Sylvia Ang, Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, eds., *Asian Migration and New Racism: Beyond Colour and the ‘West’* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> Sam Pack, “‘Fucking Koreans!’: Sexual Relations and Immigration in the Philippines,” *Slovenský národopis* 68, no. 2 (2020): 161-74.

<sup>27</sup> Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes, “Introducing Re-Orientalism: A New Manifestation of Orientalism,” in *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other Within*, ed. Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 3-16.

“oriental” cultures that results in their othering by the West, or the “Occident.” As a European imperialist tactic that presents the West as superior by casting the East as its opposite, strange, exotic, sometimes dangerous, and always different, Orientalism continuously shapes both popular representations and institutional cultures and identities. In contrast, re-orientalism not only maintains such Orientalism or the divide between East and West but also involves the internalization and reproduction of stereotypes about the East’s self and countries within its region. Re-orientalism, on the other hand, is the way “cultural producers with Eastern affiliations come to terms with an orientalized East.”<sup>28</sup>

Re-orientalism theory reveals both the influence and the fluidity of Orientalist discourse, offering the ways to challenge the persistence of Orientalist practices in the present.<sup>29</sup> As a tool for critiquing culture, re-orientalism theory analyzes the consequences of emphasizing only select aspects of the Orient, often at the expense of a more comprehensive representation. It examines how individuals from the East, particularly those in positions of power or influence, perceive themselves and others from their region, mirroring traditional Western perspectives. Whether intentionally or not, the East becomes subject to external views of difference and actively reinforces them.

In the case of Hallyu, its superior and aesthetic performatives of Korea and Korean society, in contrast to the representation of “other Asians,” have been accused of being re-orientalist. K-dramas have been criticized for their face inflation as they constantly present idealized images of perfection. This phenomenon revives “unscrupulous neo-colonial manipulation,”<sup>30</sup> wherein other Asians or Asian nations are portrayed as backward, underdeveloped, and irrelevant. Some claim that these idealized representations, which are “heavy promotion” of Korean culture and society in dramas, are a way to establish its perfection and superiority in Asia.<sup>31</sup>

Dumping “large quantities of slick commercial and media products,” K-dramas could very well be battering “authentic, traditional, and other local cultures.”<sup>32</sup> Given their adherence to the strategic state-recommended positioning, they intentionally showcase beautiful tourist attractions and the unique aspects of

<sup>28</sup> Lau and Mendes, “Introducing Re-Orientalism,” 3.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Lau and Mendes, “Introducing Re-Orientalism,” 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ainslie et al., “Understanding the Potential for a Hallyu ‘Backlash,’” 75.

<sup>31</sup> Ainslie et al., “Understanding the Potential for a Hallyu ‘Backlash,’” 76.

<sup>32</sup> Belinda Flores Espiritu, “Transnational Audience Reception as a Theater of Struggle: Young Filipino Women’s Reception of Korean Television Dramas,” *Asian Journal of Communication* 21, no. 4 (2011): 356.

South Korean culture.<sup>33</sup> Due to the bombardment by these texts, other Asian or Southeast Asian audiences prefer K-dramas over their own.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, spectators perceive South Korea as superior and become frustrated with their own country. This appreciation or idolization may be a result of K-drama performatives, “inclusive of the unorthodox plots, brilliant screenwriting, talented casts, picturesque setting, and admirable cinematography.”<sup>35</sup>

## The Korean Gaze

Using re-orientalism as a way of looking at K-dramas, therefore, the question arises whether they do indeed motivate unequal perceptions of other Asian cultures. Is there a “Korean gaze” that emerges, and if there is, how do these cultural productions position South Korea vis-à-vis its other neighboring Asian nations? The Korean gaze is a Koreacentric mode of thinking that positions South Korea at the top of the oriental power matrix.<sup>36</sup> Similar to how the media utilizes the male gaze and White gaze as a way of looking (in connection to maleness or Whiteness), the Korean gaze glorifies its own South Koreanness and eclipses all others. Consequently, adding on the layer of re-orientalism, the Korean gaze reinforces structural inequalities between South Korean and other Asian cultures.

Jennifer Kang explains this position as an effort to promote “Korea’s desirable image around the world.”<sup>37</sup> K-dramas are a vehicle for attracting “continental sojourners” to the country,<sup>38</sup> thereby making them suitable for political and

<sup>33</sup> Daryll E. Canes and Benigno B. Agapito Jr, “A Study on The Elements That Affect Filipino Viewers’ Preference Towards Korean Drama,” ResearchGate, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343444545\\_A\\_Study\\_on\\_The\\_Elements\\_that\\_Affect\\_Filipino\\_Viewers%27\\_Preference\\_Towards\\_Korean\\_Drama](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343444545_A_Study_on_The_Elements_that_Affect_Filipino_Viewers%27_Preference_Towards_Korean_Drama).

<sup>34</sup> Laurence Beruín, “Contextualizing the Meanings behind Filipinos’ Consumption of Korean Dramas: A Legitimated Social Action Theory Approach,” Academia, [https://www.academia.edu/45351415/Contextualizing\\_the\\_Meanings\\_behind\\_Filipinos\\_consumption\\_of\\_Korean\\_Dramas\\_A\\_Legitimated\\_Social\\_Action\\_Theory\\_Approach](https://www.academia.edu/45351415/Contextualizing_the_Meanings_behind_Filipinos_consumption_of_Korean_Dramas_A_Legitimated_Social_Action_Theory_Approach).

<sup>35</sup> Carlos A. Conda III et al., “‘What’s Wrong with One More Episode?: A Qualitative Study on Why Korean Dramas Are a Hit in the Philippines,” DLSU Senior High School Research Congress “Beyond the New Normal: Realizing Innovations for a Sustainable and Crisis-Proactive Society,” 12-13 May 2022, Animo Repository, 6, [https://animorepository.dlsu.edu.ph/conf\\_shsrescon/2022/paper\\_mps/13/](https://animorepository.dlsu.edu.ph/conf_shsrescon/2022/paper_mps/13/).

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Nimführ and Greca N. Meloni, “Decolonial Thinking: A Critical Perspective on Positionality and Representations in Island Studies,” *Island Studies Journal* 16, no. 2 (2021): 7.

<sup>37</sup> Kang, “A New Style of K-Drama in Netflix Originals,” 175.

<sup>38</sup> David Lowenthal, “Islands, Lovers, and Others,” *Geographical Review* 97, no. 2 (2007): 276.

economic goals. They enthrall consumers and tourists by highlighting South Korea's supposedly ideal and superior culture, place, and products. Since promotion is at the cusp of its motivation, it follows that they are framed in a Koreacentric way. Unfortunately, a byproduct of such Korean gaze is a possible re-orientalized performativity that merely replaces the U.S. American cultural imperialism. This means that while conceptions of Asia have long sought to move away from Western hegemony, K-dramas contribute to the reproduction of unequal perceptions, manipulate its cultural flows, usurp other local cultures, and construct Southeast Asia, for instance, "as a poorer Asian 'Other' next to superior Korea."<sup>39</sup> Reinforcing dominant Western external perspectives, K-dramas re-orientalize their representations. The Korean gaze, therefore, depicts Asia in a manner reminiscent of Western Orientalism or of the White gaze. They feature Asia as the object of an exoticizing gaze, exposing a unique variation of Orientalism.

A famous K-drama that induces consumerism and tourism of South Korean places and products is *Winter Sonata* (2002). Aired in 2002 and set in Jeju and Nami islands, it shows two characters "strolling across the snow-covered metasequoia path on Nami Island."<sup>40</sup> These images and performances shape the audience's behaviours and attitudes towards South Korea. As a result, many Asian tourists visited Korea after its airing in East Asia (Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, and Japan) and subsequently in Southeast Asia (the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand).

Apart from *Winter Sonata*, many other K-dramas feature South Korea's picturesque islands and landscapes, set against romantic, feel-good storylines that elevate the country's image and prestige. Rural culture in South Korea is also presented like a warm hug, inviting and peaceful, with lovable country folk. Some examples include *Hometown Cha Cha Cha* (2021), *When the Weather is Fine* (2020), *The Good Bad Mother* (2023), and *Welcome to Samdal-ri* (2023). The conflicts between characters in these dramas are usually resolved, leaving audiences yearning for the beauty of such life and location.

Apart from rural or island life, some of the most famous K-dramas also illustrate this idealized Korean image through portrayals of cosmopolitan Seoul's vibrant, corporate culture. Some examples include *Our Unwritten Seoul* (2025), *Love Scout* (2025), *Something in the Rain* (2018), *King the Land* (2023), and *Business Proposal* (2022). Iconic places in Seoul are most often also 'sold' in dramas as eye candy, further underscoring Seoul's distinctiveness and its central role in South Korean culture and geography. Some of these tourist attractions include Lotte

<sup>39</sup> Ainslie et al., "Understanding the Potential for a Hallyu 'Backlash,'" 76.

<sup>40</sup> Kang, "A New Style of K-Drama in Netflix Originals," 175.

World, Namsan Tower, Itaewon, Cheonggyecheon stream, Deoksugung Palace stone wall walkway, Han River, and Gyeongbok Palace.<sup>41</sup> Gangnam, the famous affluent district in Seoul, is also a common feature. In a VisitSeoul TV clip, it shows many “things that only happen in Seoul” (as shown in K-drama clichés), particularly meeting the love of one’s life fatedly, the giddy and *kilig* first date, falling in love, “drunken” confessions, proposal against the Seoul skyline or sunset, and the happy ending.<sup>42</sup> All these scenes are shown in slow motion, highlighting (or even exaggerating) eye contact, hand movements, lovers running toward each other, and beautiful background settings. In suspense or action dramas, productions always find ways to showcase Seoul’s beauty despite the dark plot. Some examples of this include *Red Swan* (2024) and *Tempest* (2025). These show how South Korea is the perfect place to fall in love and find your life partner (despite the insurmountable odds).

Incidentally, the Korean man is also “marketed” as “Mr. Perfect.” Min Joo Lee observes that K-dramas depict romance and masculinity, which cut across cultural backgrounds.<sup>43</sup> She claims that spectators “seek intimacy with Korean men in their real life,” as a result of these dramas’ evocation of “racialized and erotic desires for Korean men.”<sup>44</sup> Because of the K-dramas’ reconfiguration of Korean masculinity, some even “traveled to Korea to find real-life Korean boyfriends.”<sup>45</sup> This is based on the belief that they will find gentlemanly, “romantic, emotionally attuned” ideal Korean boyfriends and relationships (similar to the ones portrayed in K-dramas).<sup>46</sup> One study found that K-dramas also demonstrate the “deglamorization” of male protagonists, or their willingness to adapt to women’s personalities, thereby making them ideal, simple, and attainable. As if using the gaze to its advantage, K-dramas appeal to cultural assumptions, essentialist notions, and social constructions to idealize South Korean men and masculinity.

<sup>41</sup> Klook Travel, “K-Drama Fan’s Guide to Seoul: 15 Iconic Filming Locations to Visit in Real Life – Klook Travel Blog,” Klook Travel, <https://www.klook.com/en-AU/blog/best-kdrama-filming-locations-seoul-korea/>.

<sup>42</sup> *Things That Only Happen in Seoul I K-Drama City Seoul*, produced by VisitSeoul TV, 2025, 03:19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Pkt1GZOnRE>.

<sup>43</sup> Min Joo Lee, *Finding Mr. Perfect: K-Drama, Pop Culture, Romance, and Race* (Newark, DE: Rutgers University Press, 2025), 10.

<sup>44</sup> Lee, *Finding Mr. Perfect*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Finding Mr. Perfect*, 14.

<sup>46</sup> *Finding Mr. Perfect*, 14; Min Joo Lee, “Intimacy Beyond Sex: Korean Television Dramas, Nonsexual Masculinities, and Transnational Erotic Desires,” *Feminist Formations* 32, no. 3 (2020): 100-20.

Some spectators have even fallen prey to “oppa scams,” because they confuse the fictional, ideal Korean man in K-dramas and actual reality.<sup>47</sup>

## Other Asias

K-dramas skilfully integrate local people, food, music, lifestyles, education, and many other aspects of Korean culture, thereby shaping multisensory experiences of Korea in an ideal manner. The question is whether such integration contrasts with how other Asian counterparts are portrayed in these shows. How are “other Asias,” such as other East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, represented in these dramas? The Koreacentric gaze would, apart from portraying South Korea’s superiority, also do the opposite with its Asian counterparts.

In a study examining the representations of islands in K-dramas, the Philippines is primarily depicted as a crime-ridden island.<sup>48</sup> Far from “perfect” South Korea, K-dramas narrate of casinos, murder, theft, money laundering, prostitution, bribery, murder, guns, drugs, and illegal gambling in the country. In *Big Bet* (2022), for instance, the audience is reminded that they “are no longer in Korea” and that the Philippines has different rules. Other K-dramas also show the Philippines in a bad light. Some of these include *Killer Paradox* (2024), which showcases extreme poverty, and *Red Swan*, which highlights terrorism. Many others, such as *Partners in Justice* (2018), *Good Detective* (2020), and *Vincenzo* (2021), talk about how criminals can “hide” or flee to the country. David Oh claims that even if the two countries, South Korea and the Philippines, cinematically co-produce, there remains an “unequal soft power” between the two media “producing visible dialectical tensions,” thereby concretizing regional hierarchies.<sup>49</sup>

Other Southeast Asian countries have also fallen into the same trope. In *Typhoon Family* (2025), Thailand’s alleged flaws in its legal system regarding bribery were highlighted. Indonesian audiences boycotted *Racket Boys* (2021) for its negative portrayals of badminton players and event organizers. The K-drama was even branded as “racist,” “insulting,” and a mockery of their national

<sup>47</sup> Ligia Prezia Lemos and Mariana Marques de Lima Pinheiro, “‘Oppa Scam’ and Romantic Relationships in K-Dramas: Idolatry and Fan Activism in Brazil,” *Brazilian Creative Industries Journal* 4, no. 2 (2024): 256-76.

<sup>48</sup> Hazel T. Biana, “Of Casinos and Mangoes: Korean Drama Representations of the Philippine Islands,” *Shima* 18, no. 2 (2024): 69-86.

<sup>49</sup> David C. Oh, “Dialectics of Cinematic Co-production: Ambivalent Korean Fantasy Romance in Ultimate Oppa,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 41, no. 5 (2024): 437-49.

badminton team.<sup>50</sup> Despite the producers issuing an apology in Bahasa Indonesia language to appease the audience, the drama received a rating of 1/10 on IMDB. South Asian viewers, however, have sparked backlash over the teaser of *To the Moon* (2025), expressing disappointment and accusing the drama of cultural appropriation and “recycling harmful stereotypes for entertainment.”<sup>51</sup> *Genie, Make a Wish* (2025), by the same token, was bashed for its racist and stereotypical portrayals of South Asians, Africans, and Middle Easterners.<sup>52</sup>

When it comes to East Asia, though, K-dramas tend to portray the Chinese as villains and the country as a place that harbors criminals. This is evident in the historical K-drama *Bon Appetit Your Majesty* (2025), in which Chinese officials exploit Korean (Joseon) people and their resources, while their chefs do whatever it takes to win the cooking competition. *My Dearest* (2023), likewise shows the brutality of Chinese invaders enslaving the Joseon people. In *Curtain Call* (2022), one character is a smuggler and violent criminal in China, and in *Crash Landing on You* (2019), the grey-market operators are supposedly Chinese thugs. Given Korea’s history with Japan’s colonization, the Japanese are often portrayed as inhuman, especially within the historical genre. This can be seen in many dramas set in the Joseon dynasty, including *Tomorrow* (2022) and *The Murky Stream* (2025). In the twentieth-century settings, however, *Pachinko* (2022) shows how oppressive and discriminatory the Japanese were.

Representations of North Korea, however, are a different story entirely. South Korea is always portrayed as the “better,” more modern Korea. The most famous K-drama that North Korea claimed to be insulting and degrading would probably be *Crash Landing on You* (2019). North Korea has lambasted the South for “showing the North in a bad light and engaging in ‘atrocious provocation.’”<sup>53</sup> *Crash Landing*

<sup>50</sup> “SBS Apologises to Indonesians as K-Drama Racket Boys Draws Flak,” Yahoo News, 23 June 2021, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/sbs-apologises-indonesians-k-drama-racket-boys-flak-negative-depiction-101327310.html>.

<sup>51</sup> lewishooper1, “Are Koreans Racist? MBC Drama Teaser Vanishes after Backlash over Offensive Middle Eastern Stereotypes,” Dojeon Media, 4 September 2025, <https://www.dojeonmedia.com/post/are-koreans-racist-mbc-drama-teaser-vanishes-after-backlash-over-offensive-middle-eastern-stereotyp>.

<sup>52</sup> Nillohit Bagchi, “Genie: Make a Wish Faces Intense Backlash as Netflix Show Accused of Romanticising Iblis, Becomes 2025’s Lowest-Rated Korean Drama,” *India Times*. PopRant, 7 October 2025, <https://poprant.indiatimes.com/trending/genie-make-a-wish-faces-intense-backlash-as-netflix-show-accused-of-romanticising-iblis-becomes-2025s-lowest-rated-korean-drama-672782.html>.

<sup>53</sup> “North Korea Blasts South’s ‘insulting’ Dramas and Films,” *BBC News from Elsewhere...*, 4 March 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-51740826>.

on *You* was criticized for exhibiting the North as an “underdeveloped country where people live with frequent power cuts,” where the elite are corrupt and privileged.<sup>54</sup> Other K-dramas depict the problematic lives of defectors from the North, such as *Curtain Call* (2022) and *Dr. Stranger* (2014).

Looking at these representations, therefore, the crucial question of the existence of the Korean Gaze thus reemerges. Do these K-dramas position South Korea as the center of Asian modernity, and, if so, how do they frame the other Asias? Is there a neo-colonial manipulation through South Korean superior positioning? Theories of gazing and ways of looking would affirm these as motivated representations. bell hooks, in particular, would likely observe a conscious shaping of perception<sup>55</sup> and the reinforcement of a (South Korean type of) system of domination that is carefully crafted. From a re-orientalist perspective, however, the depictions are explicit, and the other Asias are indeed put in a bad light. South Koreans are portrayed as heroes and main characters performing in their narratives at the expense of the other Asias as an inconvenient backdrop. Ainslie et al. would attest to these as neo-colonial and cultural imperialist representations and approaches.<sup>56</sup> It also reflects the racial and placial dynamics in Asia, positioning South Korea (and other East Asian countries) at the top of the regional hierarchy. For instance, the emphasis on the decay and corruption of other Asias, and the perceived lack of sophistication among other locals, elevate the status of South Korea and its citizens. Incidentally, the vocal reactions of non-South Korean audiences are evidence of these unfair and inauthentic portrayals. Since the dramas are presented through the Korean Gaze, the gazer remains largely unaware of their own perspective, which often provokes strong or even violent reactions from those being portrayed.

It is also a curious question whether non-Asias are portrayed similarly. For instance, what about the case of Europe or the Americas? Are they equally put in a negative light? This would debunk the re-orientalist theory and simply affirm the Korean gaze as superior to all nations, whether in Asia or not. Nonetheless, this confirms the existence of the Korean gaze and its role in perpetuating hierarchies worldwide.

## Final Thoughts

Upon examining these representations, one can easily conclude that the Korean gaze has indeed emerged in K-dramas through the projection and performance of

<sup>54</sup> “North Korea Blasts South’s ‘insulting’ Dramas and Films.”

<sup>55</sup> hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze,” 288-302.

<sup>56</sup> Ainslie et al., “Understanding the Potential for a Hallyu ‘Backlash’ in Southeast Asia,” 63.

an ideal South Korea and the other Asias. It is, however, essential to reflect on how K-dramas portray the darkness and conflicts in South Korea. For instance, K-dramas portray both South Korea and other parts of Asia as both beautiful and dark, in positive and negative lights, depending on the plot, theme, and storyline.

One can see the same darker, non-idealized South Korea in numerous K-dramas, such as *The Worst of Evil* (2023), *Vigilante* (2023), *Vagabond* (2020), *The Manipulated* (2025), and other whodunits, action series, and thrillers, where crime, corruption, and social precarity are foregrounded. In historical Joseon-set dramas, it is not all roses as well. Corporate Seoul is not that ideal either, with its cutthroat business tycoons, crypto scams, and slush funds. The frequent portrayals of suicide in K-dramas highlight the loneliness and despair experienced by many Korean citizens, young and old alike, revealing deep-seated frustrations with economic instability, social expectations, and the pressures of attaining markers of success. And, of course, *Parasite* (2020), the Oscar-winning film, exposes the country's entrenched violence and social inequality. Conversely, K-dramas have also portrayed other Asian nations in more flattering lights; Thailand and Indonesia, for instance, appear as strikingly exceptional settings in *King the Land* and *Something Happened in Bali* (2004), respectively. The Philippines is also portrayed as a paradise in some dramas with many beautiful locations.

The strong claim of the existence of a Korean gaze, therefore, may be unfair to K-dramas, as they reflect social constructions similar to those found in other Asian nations that are likewise navigating the complexities of defining their socio-cultural identities. In fact, K-dramas may even be seen as self-reflective and interrogative of their own society, raising questions about their own superiority and modernity. They could be gazing very well at their own deficiencies or at aspirational ideals. Accusations of a Korean re-orientalism in portrayals of non-Korean nations, therefore, require more nuanced consideration. While it is true that there is a conscious motivation to idealize South Korea, rather than concluding that K-dramas intentionally seek to dominate or imperialize other Asian contexts, one can view K-drama 'dumping' from a different perspective. It may instead signal the perfection of the craft of dramas and the need for stronger, higher-quality cultural productions within other nations. In this sense, K-dramas can function as benchmarks that encourage the development of distinctive local narratives and identities in an increasingly interconnected media landscape. Clearly defining the region and its diverse cultural expressions can further strengthen a shared regional identity. However, continued investigation into K-dramas is warranted. Negative perceptions of South Korea's 'poorer' neighboring nations risk becoming fixed images if left unchallenged by an oppositional gaze, alternative perspectives, or diverse inter-Asian representations. With more than

100 dramas produced each year, South Korean audiovisual media could present more balanced depictions or even employ international consultants to broaden their regional insights.

Another angle to consider is that K-dramas may echo cultural elements and values associated with global capitalism and the U.S. American way of life. This would complicate arguments about the Korean gaze, suggesting instead that K-dramas function as conduits for a rebranded form of Western hegemonic perspectives through a South Korean medium. Hallyu, now firmly established as mainstream among Asian audiences, may thus mirror the region's affinity for Hollywood content. What remains essential, however, is the ongoing interrogation of K-dramas, and the construction of more ways of looking, especially those accused of the Koreacentric gaze and re-orientalist tendencies, to ensure that representations evolve alongside the shifting cultural dynamics of the Asian region.

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