

# OF CASINOS AND MANGOES

## Korean Drama Representations of the Philippine Islands

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**ABSTRACT:** A noticeable trope in South Korean dramas is using actual specific islands as settings. The Philippine islands have been mentioned and portrayed in almost all types of Korean TV drama genres, such as romance, suspense, drama, comedy, action, crime and fantasy. In the first part of the article, these fictional island representations are examined to uncover two types of depictions of cultures of ‘islandness’ or constructions of island identity, the first of which is tropical and paradisiacal, where everything is exotically beautiful, blissful, and bountiful; and the second, dark, dangerous, and chaotic, where criminals and outcasts exercise corruption and power. The second part examines ‘cultural-imperial’ or ‘re-oriental’ suggestions and assumptions in these K-dramas.

**KEYWORDS:** Korean TV Drama, representation, Philippines, Islands, *Hallyu*

### Introduction

In 2021, South Korean dramas (K-dramas) were Southeast Asia’s largest online video category, consumed even more than Western content. As a part of *Hallyu* (the so-called ‘Korean Wave’), K-dramas are popular with millions of devoted viewers. Their storylines, themes, and characters contribute to the relatability and success of these dubbed or subtitled shows. The popularity of these TV series is usually attributed to their supposed “sincerity,” showcasing “idealistic human relationships” and related ideological messages (Biana, 2023; S. Lee, 2012, pp. 455–456). With the online streaming giant Netflix’s investment in K-drama originals and their purchase of global rights to some famous series, its audience and international appeal have broadened further (Kang, 2023). Such transnational popularity has led to various interpretations, perceptions, and significations of K-dramas’ cultural, textual, and contextual constructed meanings and identities (Ju, 2020, p. 4). Across interdisciplinary studies, the identity constructions of work, gender, class, nationality, race and the self have been explored (Ainslie, 2016; Baldacchino & Park, 2020; Herlambang, 2023; Irene Yang, 2008; Ju, 2020; M. Kim & Strauss, 2018; Lat & Tacla, 2018).

The use of specific islands as settings for various storylines is a noticeable trope in these fiction-based K-dramas. Moving away from the bustling city of Seoul, some have featured local islands, including the Jeju and Nami Islands, and abroad, Cuba, Hawai’i, Singapore and the Philippine islands. Such dramas span many genres, from romantic comedies to fantastical thrillers, as they portray varied cultures of ‘islandness’ and constructions of island identities. Despite these themes, K-dramas are not yet a hot topic in Island Studies. Aside from a study on the symbols in the K-drama entitled *Island* (Sabriana et al., 2023), most delve into “screen-tourism” or the effect of the island settings on tourism (Chan, 2007; Kim et al.,

2009, 2009; Kim et al., 2007; Kim & Wang, 2012; Lee, 2020; Noh, 2010). These studies show that because of their consumption of K-dramas, foreigners express a desire to visit South Korea and its scenic Jeju and Nami islands for a holiday or a honeymoon (Chan, 2007).

Given the considerable influence and role of television series in building or strengthening the image and brand of these places, it is not surprising that local authorities have consciously encouraged the use of their islands to promote “South Korea’s desirable image around the world” (Kang, 2023, p. 175). As evidence of the ‘soft power’ of South Korean pop culture (Kim, 2021), K-dramas increase the “pull factor” of such beautiful, natural scenery just by featuring the glamourised and sanitised South Korean islands (Chan, 2007; Kang, 2023). As a result, K-dramas, in part, increase South Korea’s “overall attractiveness” in various “commercial, capitalistic, unpredictable and even paradoxical ways” (Kim, 2021, p. 3).

The supposed effects and influence of featuring islands in K-dramas necessitate investigating how island identities manifest. After all, islands and their constructions are critical for comprehending “relational sensitivities and entanglements” (Foley et al., 2023). With the dramas’ “digital spreadability and symbolic potency,” their impact extends to local economic interests, national image-making and the global stage (Y. Kim, 2021, p. 4). Given that K-dramas represent not only local but also faraway islands, these island constructions may have consequences for them as well. For instance, the Philippine islands have been featured in many K-drama genres ranging from romance, suspense, drama, comedy, action, crime and fantasy. While the effects have not been measured yet, certain islands and their images may experience polarised ramifications through the suggestions and assumptions of K-dramas.

The soft power of K-dramas plays a role in the “shifting discourses of islandness,” and the islands they represent may become subjects of cultural (or even natural) “breaching and incursion” (Edmond & Smith, 2020, p. 5). These discourses have their own biases and border politics, which affect the “ideal fantasies” and “extreme realities” of the islands (Edmond & Smith, 2020, p. 6). A variety of crucial work on the scrutiny of postcolonial and imperial narratives and their “ideological contamination” of islandness has been undertaken (Edmond & Smith, 2020; Mellon, 1994; Papoutsaki & Strickland, 2008), however, inter-Asia island representations and identity constructions in South Korean television have yet to be tackled. With the perception of *Hallyu* and K-pop as another mode of the “cultural imperialism and re-orientalism” of their Asian neighbours such as the Philippines, could K-dramas be perpetuating the usual European and North American narratives of exoticism (Ainslie et al., 2018, p. 75)? In this case, the otherness, smallness and darkness of non-South Korean islands.

With the power and influence of K-dramas, the potential effects of their representations on perceptions and constructions of islandness must be navigated and examined. Throughout the spread of South Korean cultural products, there has been an inadvertent (or maybe unconscious) 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” (Ainslie et al., 2018, p. 68). Beginning with how these dramas represent local and other international islands, this article compares these narratives with those of the Philippine islands. Exploring the Philippines’ portrayal in K-dramas may explain how these dramas express islandness as a sociocultural phenomenon. What are these fictional island representations, and how are the Philippine islands depicted in their cultures of islandness and constructions of island identity? Are there “cultural-imperial” or “re-oriental” aspects and assumptions in these dramas? Furthermore, what could these representations’ implications be?

## K-Dramas and Islands

K-drama settings and storylines have featured various South Korean islands. This should not be surprising since South Korea has approximately 3,400 islands. According to the travel website *EnVols* (2023), some South Korean “island gems” include Jeju, Marado, Ulleungdo, the Island of Goeje, the islands of the Tongyeong Archipelago, and Namhae. Jeju is known as the ‘crown of the East’; Marado (a part of Jeju), the ‘pearl of the sea’; Ulleungdo, has a nature sanctuary; and Goeje, Tongyeong and Namhae are islands with picturesque scenery. Busan also has islands that boast of memorable views. The Goeje and Tongyeong islands have been featured in several K-dramas<sup>1</sup> but Jeju Island and the river island Nami are the favoured destinations for TV productions. These islands are typically represented as places of respite where people can relax away from their busy urban lives or move to work. Portrayals of the islands affirm the “Blue Mind Theory,” wherein “therapeutic landscapes” and coastlines contribute to and enhance people’s well-being (Foley et al., 2023). Bodies of water are always highlighted to show both the renewal and rootedness of the main characters, as such settings are energising, invigorating, soothing, and meditative (Foley et al., 2023).

Aside from being serene and breathtaking, these islands are also shown as perfect venues for falling in love. Jeju Island, the largest island in South Korea (at more than 36,000 square kilometres), lodges the protagonists of *Hospital Playlist 2* (2021) and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (2022), who are respectively taking a break from their medical and legal professions while navigating the intricacies of their romantic relationships. While they could have remained in the sophisticated city of Seoul, the main characters travelled to Jeju to heal themselves and reveal their innermost feelings. A forthcoming K-drama, *You Have Done Well* (2024), is a period series featuring protagonists who fall in love with each other that also uses Jeju as a backdrop.



Figure 1 - In *King the Land* (2023), the main characters are stranded overnight on an island and get closer to each other as they travel around it.

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<sup>1</sup> Goeje island is the second largest island, after Jeju. Some K-dramas that feature Goeje include *Carousel Merry-Go-Round* (2003), *Garden of Eve* (2003) and *Hospital Ship* (2017). Tongyeong is featured in *Padam Padam* (2011) and *The Innocent Man* (2012).

Jeju also features love-work-related arcs. In *Forecasting Love and Weather* (2022) and *Yumi's Cells* (2021-2022), characters are assigned to reside in Jeju for work. Both series show characters falling in and out of love. In *The Interest of Love* (2023), characters had to visit Jeju for work-related emergencies. In *King the Land* (2023), a picturesque promotional shoot was undertaken with the hotelier and concierge characters in a hotel in Jeju, where they slowly fall in love with each other. The romantic comedy-drama *Warm and Cozy* (2015) features Jeju as a place where a struggling employee from Seoul starts a new life and falls in love with a restaurateur. *Something in the Rain* (2018), a melodramatic love story, had its romantic climax shot on the Jeju coast. These portrayals confirm David Lowenthal's (2007, p. 202) pronouncement that "islands are for lovers" with their "balmy seas." Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher (2017, p. 90) explain how "countless heroes and heroines have found their "one true love" on an island;" as islands are sites of "shared experiences," emblems of intimacy, enablers of courtship.

*Our Blues* (2022) presents slices of life in Jeju. In an omnibus format, Jeju is shown as a place of opportunity and struggle for both old and young natives and mainlanders. The island is showcased as a vibrant place rich in natural resources such as fish, abalone, and sea urchins. A recent K-drama, *Welcome to Samdal-ri* (2023), likewise revolves around life in Jeju in relation to the city of Seoul. Work and community support in Jeju is contrasted with the 'dog-eat-dog' culture of Seoul. In both dramas, we see various islander tasks such as fishing, diving, harvesting molluscs and sea urchins, fish vending, selling in the wet market, managing aquariums, saving dolphins, and even assisting tourists. We also see other specialised careers that thrive in Jeju, such as professional women divers (*Haenyo*) and Cho Yong-Pil's weather forecasting.<sup>2</sup> Cho Sam-dal, on the other hand, another main character in *Welcome to Samdal-ri*, is shown leaving Jeju's small economy for in pursuit of a better career in Seoul.



Figure 2 - In *Welcome to Samdal-ri*, Cho Sam-dal gathers seaweed with other locals on Jeju island's coastlines.

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<sup>2</sup> In *Forecasting Love and Weather*, Lee Shi-woo is assigned to Jeju Island Typhoon Centre.

Along with other Jeju natives who strive to make it in the city, Cho Sam-dal eventually returns to Jeju when she fails to succeed. From these representations, we can derive two opposing narratives, what Pete Hay (2006, p. 30) refers to as a less common “homecoming trope” that “affirms sociality and island collectivities” and the familiar tale of leaving islands to “affirm the radical individuality” brought about by “market-centered worldviews” and global capitalism. As Cho Sam-dal navigates life back in Jeju, the homecoming trope is highlighted, and island life is presented as rewarding despite its many challenges. Both *Our Blues* and *Welcome to Samdal-ri* also end in redemption arcs, where they positivise Jeju’s “smallness,” “sea-boundedness,” and “comparative remoteness” (Foley et al., 2023). They show that despite leaving Jeju, the characters are pulled back into the island as they search for themselves.

*Winter Sonata* (2002), another famous K-drama set in Jeju and the Nami islands, tells the story of two characters “strolling across the snow-covered metasequoia path on Nami Island” (Kang, 2023, p. 175). Aiding tourism promotion, K-dramas depict South Korean society and its country and islands as attractive and ideal. This, according to Jennifer Kang (2023, p. 175), is in line with promoting “Korea’s desirable image around the world.”<sup>3</sup> Aside from attracting tourists from the mainland, the islands are also promoted to attract “continental sojourners” to “shut out the oppressive present” (Lowenthal, 2007, p. 210). Lowenthal explains that islands evoke “remembered or imagined bygone ways” and let people “escape, for a time, the insistent drumbeat of modern progress” (2007, p. 210). In real life, Jeju is the dream destination for South Korean retirees (Cho, 2017, p. 254). Because of its serenity, Jeju is also shown as a place where the affluent have resthouses, such as that of a grandmother corporate magnate in *Itaewon Class* (2020). After all, in contrast to life in Seoul, living in the countryside promises quiet surroundings, clean air, and abundant nature-based activities. These activities include golf, horse riding, hunting, fishing, and mountain climbing (Park & Njite, 2010). Long-stay tourists even revisit Jeju Island, where they can “escape from a mundane environment” and relax (T. Kim et al., 2022, p. 856). In a study on the Middle Eastern fandom of K-dramas, a fan wanted to spend days on Jeju island to be “like a bird... flying so high and forget about everything” (Noh, 2010, p. 348).

Jeju Island is also one of the most preferred honeymoon destinations for domestic tourists. As Lowenthal (2007, p. 17) states, islands are “elegiac retreat(s)” for honeymooners. Domestic honeymooners see Jeju as a perfect destination, given its value for money. Jeju Island has also been called the “The Hawaii of Korea” (Manente, n.d.). Thus, it would not be surprising that Hawai’i is frequently mentioned in K-dramas as a dream wedding destination for local couples. In *Yumi’s Cells*, the protagonist, Yumi, has always dreamt of having a small wedding in Hawai’i to the point that she spreads lies about her impending wedding on the island with her ex.<sup>4</sup> Hawai’i remains the “dream” international destination most popular for South Korean honeymooners as well (Jun, 2020). Another non-Korean island exhibited in K-dramas is Cuba. *Encounter* (2018) features a wealthy hotelier who mixes business with pleasure. She looks for a Cuban hotel to purchase and makeover and eventually falls in love with a younger hotel executive. They travel from Cuba to Seoul and back but primarily have the most breathtaking scenes in Havana.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Later productions of K-drama content that are regulated by Korea Communications Standards Commission, however, have begun departing from traditional, wholesome content (Kang, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, many K-drama stars have had small private wedding ceremonies or their honeymoon in Hawai’i (Choi, 2022; Yan, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> In one scene, however, the hotelier’s purse was stolen by locals.

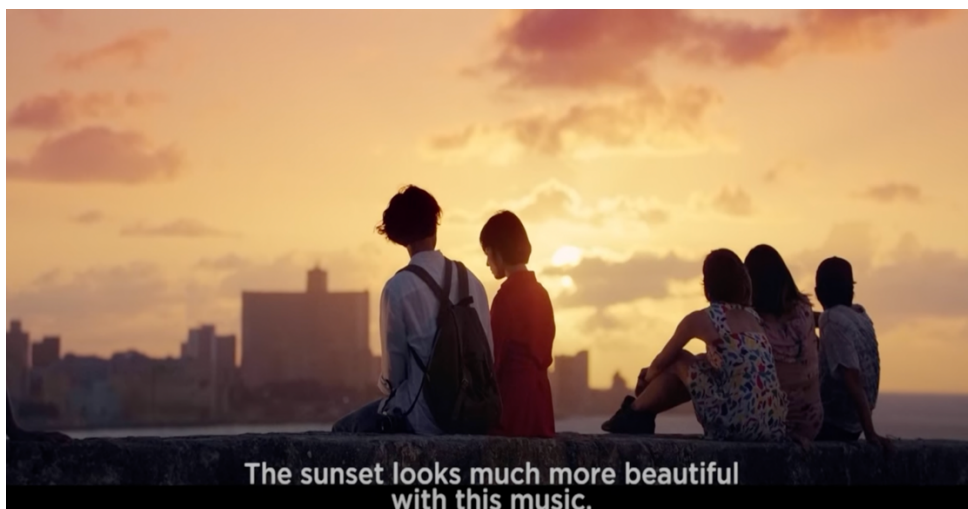


Figure 3 - In *Encounter*, the two main characters fall in love with each other against the backdrop of Havana's Malecon Beach.

Business travellers also prefer Jeju for conventions, meetings, and conferences because of perceived opportunities for relaxation and sightseeing (Park & Njite, 2010, p. 17). In contrast, the island of Singapore is featured in the suspense K-drama *Little Women* (2022) as a place where serious business dealings are portrayed. We see the main character, Oh In-joo, attending an Orchid Festival in the Fullerton Hotel, walking against the Marina Bay Sands Hotel backdrop, saying goodbye at Changi airport, and dreaming of someday owning a place on the island "as a rich person." While Singapore's islandness is not represented like Jeju or other South Korean islands, it is shown as a haven for business and leisure and an urban space that is serene, beautiful, and sophisticated.

However, not all South Korean islands are portrayed as paradisiacal, especially with fantasy and horror themes. In *Tale of the Nine-Tailed* (2020-2023), Geoje Island is shown as a dark and scary place with many mysterious deaths. *Island* (2022), a fantasy-action series, spotlights various occult elements such as ghosts, demons, and spirits and shows how demons are trapped in Jeju as it becomes the warzone for the demon hunter. Both series feature these South Korean islands as places where mysteries unfold and where good fights against evil. Such portrayals reflect the trope of the "darker history of islands and islanders" (Foley et al., 2023) and how islands are one of the most "mysterious" of places of the modern mind (Gillis, 2020, p. 30). Using Crane and Fletcher's (2017) taxonomy, we could even refer to these fictional representations as "thriller" and "fantasy" islands.



Figure 4 - In *Crash*, two investigators explore a cliffside and find a pair of shoes that belong to a missing schoolgirl.

Despite not being a fantasy or horror K-drama, the police drama *Crash* (2024) features the “darkness” and peculiarity of Hwapyeong island as a crime island. In its concluding episodes, a traffic crime investigation team uncovers the mystery of a missing schoolgirl. While the plot unfolds, we first see the simplicity and serenity of the island, but later on, we find out that the island is not what it seems, and the islanders are sinister, greedy, conniving, and capable of crime. This is what Crane and Fletcher (2017, p. 6) refer to as “the potential of the island as a crime scene,” wherein the “island signals the agency of place as a remote, bounded space, which is again invested with agency.” Viewers may already anticipate the story of the investigation and the story of crime wherein the island has a “peculiar culpability” (Crane & Fletcher, 2017, p. 6). When one of the main protagonists, Cha Yeon-Ho, is assigned to an island after solving traffic crimes in Seoul, it is already presupposed that Hwapyeong will be another venue for traffic crime. The only difference is that there is a veil of mystery about the islanders.

### K-Dramas and the Philippine Islands

The Philippine islands have been mentioned and portrayed in almost all types of K-drama genres, such as romance, suspense, drama, comedy, action, crime and fantasy. However, if we use Crane and Fletcher’s classifications of representation, K-dramas primarily show the Philippines as “crime islands.” While “islands are everywhere in the atlas of crime fiction (Crane & Fletcher, 2017, p. 3),” such representation of the Philippine islands seems more apparent in K-dramas. Recently, *Big Bet* (2022), set in the Philippines, tells the story of a casino kingpin accused of murder. As the plot of *Big Bet* unfolds, it describes how South Korean nationals can get away with murder, theft, money laundering, prostitution and bribery on the islands. The Philippines was also shown as a playground for guns, drugs and illegal gambling. In the introduction of *Big Bet*, we see clips of Philippine island scenery, such as shores and sugarcane plantations. Still, these images are interspersed with news clips that say, “2 Koreans found dead,” crime scenes, police vehicles, criminals in handcuffs, guns,

smuggled goods in suitcases, wads of cash, casino games, brown *mariposa* butterflies<sup>6</sup> and country folk cheering for a boxing match (presumably featuring Manny Pacquiao, aka ‘Pacman’). These suggest that, like fictional crime islands, the Philippine archipelago is “dark and forbidding, spatially ripe for crime” (Crane & Fletcher, 2017, p. 49). Throughout the series, South Korean characters are constantly reminded that they “are no longer in Korea” and that the Philippines has different rules. These verbal exchanges illustrate that the “islands are not simply exotic locations” (Crane & Fletcher, 2017, p. 52) but rather “places where the rules of society no longer operate. They represent a confined territory in which, or over which, two rivals (nations, agencies, individuals) compete, like boxers in a ring, repeatedly coming out of and retreating into their respective corners” (Crane & Fletcher, 2017, p. 52).



Figure 5 - *Big Bet* features the corrupt dealings of South Korean nationals with the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group (CIDG) in the Philippines.

*Big Bet* also shows how suspicious Korean nationals hide in the Philippines after committing crimes in South Korea. This scenario can also be seen in *Partners in Justice* (2018), where a murder suspect pretends to flee to the country. In *Good Detective* (2020), a murder suspect is shipped overseas in an intermodal container to lie low on one of the Philippine beaches. *Black* (2017) likewise features Steven Woo, a Korean resident in the Philippines with a suspicious family background. In *Vincenzo* (2021), Jung Do-hee initially considered hiding in Taiwan but chose the Visayan island of Cebu instead. The main character of *A Killer Paradox* (2024), Lee Tang, is a fugitive residing in the coastal city of Navotas and neighbouring Manila. Navotas is presented as a fish port amidst a slum area. The films *Project Wolf Hunting* (2022) and *Confidential Assignment* (2022) also use the familiar trope of South Koreans fleeing to the Philippines. *Project Wolf Hunting*, in particular, commences with a cargo ship full of criminals being transported from the Philippines.

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<sup>6</sup> Brown butterflies are said to symbolise incoming money and wealth.





Figure 6 - In *A Killer Paradox*, a South Korean fugitive walks the slum areas of Manila.

Many fictional criminal organisations are also said to hide their operations in Manila and nearby provinces. Regarding technology, some IP addresses are routed to the Philippines to prevent police tracking in *Celebrity* (2023).<sup>7</sup> In *Red Swan* (2024), the Philippines becomes a stopover for the 8-Star gang for casino activities, gambling, and hiding away slush funds. Numerous fiction works portray “island hideouts” as impregnable, hostile, and contained (Crane & Fletcher, 2017). While South Korea has an extradition treaty with the Philippines, it appears safe from South Korean power and authority. It is raw, scruffy, and chaotic, in contrast to South Korea’s advancement, cleanliness, and order. To hammer the nail in the coffin, *Red Swan* shows Manila as a venue for a “terror attack,” assault and unlawful killing, and *Big Bet* shows a cold-blooded murder, in broad daylight. In these images, violence is equated with hiding on the islands.



Figure 7 - In *Red Swan*, Seo Do-yeon protects Oh Wan-soo from a shootout and an alleged “terror attack” in Manila.

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<sup>7</sup> The film *The Golden Holiday* (2020) also features Manila as the dwelling place of an illegal conglomerate.

There are also many Philippine prostitutes, drug pushers, loan sharks, gambling lords and casinos in K-dramas. As a result, South Korean characters acquire massive debts from gambling or earn from smuggling drugs from the country. For instance, Netflix's *Squid Game* (2021) features Player 101, Jang Deok-su's character, joining the deadly game because he has massive gambling debts acquired in the Philippines. A Filipino gang also chases and threatens to harm him to collect his debts. When *Squid Game* director Hwang Dong Hyuk was interviewed about this scene, he claimed that his experience with casinos in the country inspired it (Cabral, 2022). *Big Bet* likewise shows business magnates falling into debt as they get addicted to gambling. Local cops and government officials on the payroll of South Koreans to protect them from being arrested also exist in the plot. Local cops also plant drugs to squeeze money from foreigners. In one scene with a backdrop of a supposed red-light district filled with Filipino sex workers, the main character, Cha Moo-sik, is also shown threatening a prostitute for information. A legal drama, *Bad Prosecutor* (2022), also mentions the flourishing trade of illegal drugs in the country. While K-dramas always have disclaimers that the series is a work of fiction (except for those based on historical or real-life persons), they may influence promoting the Philippines as not only a hideout for criminals and a playground for drug traders but also a sex tourism destination.



Figure 8 - Numerous Philippine casinos are featured in *Big Bet*.

Positive representations of the Philippine islands, however, can be seen in the following K-dramas: *Crash Course into Romance* (2023), *The Glory* (2022-2023), *Little Women* (2022), *Yumi's Cells*, *Dear My Friends* (2016), *Undercover* (2021), *The Uncanny Counter* (2020), *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* (2018), and *Strongest Delivery Man* (2017). One particularly striking aspect is the representation of mangoes. In *The Glory*, Lee Seok-Jae dreams of saving enough money to visit the Philippines to eat mangoes, while Oh In \Joo's mother in *Little Women*, leaves her daughters to harvest mangoes with her husband in the Philippines.

Daniel Graziadei et al. (2017, p. 243) identify that bountiful harvests of fruits, in this case, the mango, “play an important role in conceptions of islandness” and they explain this “literary evocation” in terms of “tasting islands,” which reflects the Pacific “islands’ perceived bountifulness and abundance of food.” Using the example of the *Bounty* chocolate covered

coconut bar – with its evocations of the mutiny on the *Bounty*, Tahiti and Pacific hedonism<sup>8</sup> – they argue its appeal may be likened to the encounters of “(pre)-colonial Europeans and island cultures” wherein “the sensory experience of the perceived bountifulness of the Pacific region has been to great effect” in representing tropical islands (Graziadei et al., 2017, p. 243). In the case of K-dramas, the Philippine mango fulfils a similar function to the confectionery bar and the concept of “tasting islands” has been particularly maximised by Guimaras Island in its bid for agritourism. As one of the top Philippine regions for mango export, Guimaras offers tours in the National Mango Research and Development Center and other activities such as picking and tasting mangoes (Ganzon & Fillone, 2013). The manner in which K-dramas have picked up on “tasting island” mangoes could have been an effect of their increased consumption of mangoes and Philippine tourism efforts.

Business opportunities are also a prominent factor. In *Yumi's Cells*, the Philippines is identified as an ideal place for business expansion. *The Uncanny Counter* even mentions how Do Ha-na has already conducted business in the Philippines.<sup>9</sup> In *Dear My Friends*, the main character, Jo Hee-Ja, briefly lives in the Philippines with her very successful son, who has a fancy house and helpers in his employ. Detective Goo of *Undercover* talks of the dream of an affluent future when he has a vast fortune and moves to the Philippines, where he can play golf and his children can study English. *Forest* (2020) features South Korean entrepreneurs attending the fictional “51st Asia-Pacific Academic Consortium for Public Health in Philippines (sic).” In *Strongest Delivery Man*, Oh Jin Kyu’s father has a resort business where he is threatened with being sent to the Philippines to do manual labour as a construction worker. Some K-dramas also use the Philippines for alibis. In *Crash Course in Romance*, Jo Do-yeon pretends to have a spouse teaching Taekwondo in the country to protect a niece she has been caring for since childhood. Similarly, Kang Mi-rae of *My ID is Gangnam Beauty* also lies about going to the Philippines to study English (when she just had plastic surgery). On a positive note, in K-dramas, Philippine islandness presents prospects for advancement and expansion: a strategic tropical location for *agribusiness* (such as mango production and harvesting), business mobility and movement, like Singapore or Hong Kong, and the nearest convenient hubs for English education. Choosing the Philippines to learn English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reflects the Philippine islands’ American colonial past and its Western influence.

### Cultural Imperialism and the Re-Orientalism of the Islands?

K-dramas portray two types of islandness in the Philippines: first, like Jeju island, Hawai’i, and Cuba, the country is a tropical, exotic paradise where everything – such as fish and tropical fruits – is abundant and bountiful. It is also ripe for relaxation and recreational activities such as golf. These stylised representations combine “nature, romanticism, authenticity, and nostalgia” (Scott & Staines, 2021, p. 6). As such, this first type of islandness may attract South Koreans to visit the islands. The Department of Tourism (DOT) claims that “South Korean tourists are (still) the Philippines’ top visitors” and that “1 in every 4 foreign tourists” in the country are South Koreans (Pazzibugan, 2024). This may be traced to the DOT’s 2005 campaign in South Korea, which promised, with its slogan, “More than the

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<sup>8</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s *Bounty* bars were advertised on US and British TV in adverts showing glamorous young people on tropical beaches and swimming under water accompanied by variations on the slogan “The taste of paradise.” See, for instance, the 1988 ad online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8S7B8lnOL4>

<sup>9</sup> The business referred to here, however, is the business of hunting evil spirits.

usual warmth, feel the Philippines,” as an escape not only during the cold winter but all year round (Mena, 2011, p. 98). Interestingly, the same campaign marketed the islands as perfect for sightseeing and beach holidays, as a romantic honeymoon destination, for relaxation and recreation by playing golf and for learning English in a foreign place. All these marketing strategies seem evident in the positive island representations of K-dramas (Mena, 2011, p. 98).

The second type of islandness is the Philippines’ darkness and chaos, where outcasts hide, and tools of power exist for corruption and entrapment (Schmitz, 2018). Islands, after all, play roles in punishment and “penal imagination,” and where asylum seekers are sent (Scott & Staines, 2021, p. 7). Countering the paradisiacal islandness, such imagination elicits a “dark tourism” to the Philippines. Rather than touring its dark past, though, foreigners may thrive in its dark present through illicit business or even sex tourism. Pack (2020, p. 168) claims that “Korean men are drawn to the Philippines because of easy access to a virtually unlimited supply of young, attractive, and eager women.” At one point in time, South Korean nationals have even operated a large-scale sex tourism syndicate on the island of Cebu, which offered a “19-hole” tour package that not only includes golf but “nightlife” in the itinerary (Pack 2020, p. 168). This type of tourism promotion may have played a part in the influx of South Koreans into the Philippines in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The travel and migration of Koreans has led to “more than one Korea Town” in the country (Kim, 2018). Such, however, has also led to an increase in the “incidence of crime by and against Koreans in the Philippines,” to the point where a Korean Desk was set up by the Philippine and South Korean police force (Kim, 2018). This “desk” was also shown in *Big Bet*, as a South Korean officer investigates crimes committed in Korea Town, Angeles City. In one instance, Koreans are said to be “deliberately targeted as victims of crime,” and the *Wall Street Journal* even identified the Philippines as “the most dangerous place to be a Korean” (Pack 2020, p. 163).

The stark contrast between Philippine and South Korean island representations affirms Crane and Fletcher’s classifications of various fictional islands: romance, thriller, fantasy, and crime islands. John Scott and Zoe Staines (2021, p. 1) argue that there is “a popular mythology” of “islands as idyllic paradises” given the existence of counter-narratives that islands are also places of crime. While Scott and Staines (2021, p. 2) consider islands in criminological “backwaters” and cultural peripheries, they highlight the role of island ecologies in crime. However, they also assert that the social construction of islands should not solely “mythologize islands as places of either *idyllization* or horror” or “backwardness” (Scott & Staines, 2021, p. 3). One wonders, though, if there is a bias toward evoking the Philippines primarily as a crime island. Suffice it to say, K-dramas may give the impression that the Philippine islands are mainly full of “bad neighbourhoods, slums, ghettos, shanty towns and crime hot spots” (Scott & Staines, 2021, p. 4).

*Hallyu* has been accused of “face inflation,” or the “tendency to construct an idealised image of perfection that eclipses all others” (Tudor, 2018, p. 75). In this case, looking at island identity constructions, are Jeju and Nami representations more perfect or ideal than those of the Philippine islands, for instance? This face inflation has been criticised as an exercise that sets Korea apart and distinguishes itself from other (Southeast Asian) nations. Ainslie et al. (2018, p. 75) refer to this phenomenon as cultural imperialism and “re-Orientalism,” which likewise perpetuates previously interrogated “European discourses of exoticism and inequality.” Are K-dramas reviving “unscrupulous neo-colonial manipulation” where the

Philippine islands are “social backwaters,” “distant outposts of mercantile civilization,” with its backwardness and irrelevance (Hay, 2006, pp. 21, 27)? Some would argue that K-dramas’ “heavy promotion” of the Korean islands’ superiority and perfection is indeed a form of cultural imperialism (Ainslie et al., 2018, p. 76). Pack (2020, p. 161) elaborates (that aside from the promotion of its islands) South Koreans also internalise a “racial hierarchy whereby they perceive their darker-skinned Asian counterparts as ranking lower on the pigmentocracy scale.” The ‘Korean invasion’ has somehow led to the refrain “Fucking Koreans” as a response of Filipinos to “being treated as second-class citizens” (Pack, 2020, p. 161).<sup>10</sup>

In Espiritu’s study on the reception of K-dramas by Philippine audiences, however, it has been found that they “expressed cultural affinity with the culture, storylines, values, and environment in Korean and other Asian television dramas that have invaded the Philippines” to the extent where “American cultural imperialism” is “undermined, challenged, and to some extent subverted” (2011, p. 255). The problem with this, however, is that such American cultural imperialism may be merely being replaced by a newer form of imperialism, a South Korean one. Through *Hallyu’s* “indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of slick commercial and media products” it could very well be battering “authentic, traditional, and local (Philippine) culture” (Espiritu, 2011, p. 356). For instance, Philippine audiences tend to prefer K-dramas and storylines since they present different outlooks to the predictable Pinoy dramas (P-dramas) or *teleserye(s)* (Philippine television series), complete with “oppression and crying” and “traditional meek type of Filipino heroines” (Espiritu, 2011, p. 363). In a study analysing Philippine social media posts and reactions (on Facebook and Twitter) to K-dramas, it has been concluded that Filipino viewers prefer K-dramas because of the diversity and unpredictability of their storylines and finer overall production design (including cinematography, accuracy, and original soundtrack) (Beruin, n.d.; Conda III et al., 2022). Tweets and comments criticise and antagonise P-drama plots and themes as uncreative, recycled, irrelevant, and predictable. By being exposed to K-dramas, Philippine audiences develop frustration with their country. Similarly, Conda et al. (2022, p. 6) claim that the appreciation for South Korean culture frustrates Philippine culture because “Korean dramas’ production level tends to be superior to that of Filipino dramas, inclusive of the unorthodox plots, brilliant screenwriting, talented casts, picturesque setting, and admirable cinematography.” Aside from storyline and character content, Philippine viewers agree that K-dramas have more appealing settings and cinematographies than *teleserye(s)* (Canes & Agapito Jr, 2020, p. 3). This is partly because they showcase their beautiful tourist attractions and exhibit South Korean culture (Canes & Agapito Jr, 2020, p. 3).

Following the alleged “colonial mentality” of Philippine viewers (Conda III et al., 2022), K-dramas’ island representations may be evaluated as the usurping of Philippine culture and “the construction of Southeast Asia as a poorer Asian ‘Other’ next to superior Korea (Ainslie et al., 2018, p. 76). While conceptions of islandness have long tried to move away from Western hegemony, K-dramas appear to be centralising cultural flows in South Korea and reproducing unequal perceptions of the islands. Like reinforcing dominant Western external perspectives on islands, K-dramas may impose ‘re-orientalising’ or cultural-imperial representations of the Philippine islands. To borrow Nimführ and Meloni’s concept of decolonial perspectives in Island Studies (2021, p. 7), K-drama productions on islandness may reflect a *Koreacentric* mode of thinking or a *Korean gaze* that welds the South Korean positionality in the oriental matrix of power. Espiritu (2011) claims that the turn to East Asian

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<sup>10</sup> The refrain also refers to the secondary meaning of the sexual relationships between Koreans and Filipinos (Pack 2020, p. 161) and South Koreans’ engagement in sex tourism and prostitution in the country, which has led to many “Kopino” children. See Hyun-kyung (2013).

popular culture merely replaced American cultural imperialism in the Philippines. Such accusations, however, may be exaggerated. The paradisaical takes of the islands neutralise K-drama representations of the Philippines as crime islands. K-dramas would have the same island constructions as the Philippine and South Korean islands. Furthermore, K-dramas perpetuate both South Korean and Philippine islands as paradisaical and dark, depending on the plot, theme, and storyline. The difference, however, is that crime themes are most set in South Korean cities rather than specific islands. While *Big Bet* strongly emphasizes drug trafficking, corruption, and crime in the Philippines, we see the same in South Korea with other K-drama productions, such as *The Worst of Evil* (2023), *Vigilante* (2023), *Vagabond* (2020) and other whodunit mysteries, action flicks, and thrillers. Of course, who could forget *Parasite* (2020), the Oscar-winning film that showcases extreme violence and poverty in South Korea? More recently, *Crash* has also exposed the darkness of a South Korean island and its islanders.

### De-Orientalising K-dramas

Claims concerning the re-orientalism or cultural imperialism of representations of the Philippine islands may be unfair against K-dramas. Rather than the intent of K-dramas to imperialise Southeast Asian nations, it may even be evidence of the poor state of P-dramas and their Philippine island representations. The criticism of K-drama 'dumping' may indicate the scarcity of high-quality Philippine productions. For instance, while many Philippine movies feature the beauty and serenity of the islands, their storylines and plots do not give justice to the scenery. Even Senator Jinggoy Estrada, who mulled banning K-dramas in the country, "admitted that Filipinos have a lot to learn" from K-dramas (Purnell, 2022). While many Filipinos admire K-drama productions, they can be benchmarks for bringing about unique Philippine culture and identities of their local island productions.

This does not mean, however, that island identities or the constructions of the islandness of the Philippine islands must not be examined or questioned. As the influence of K-dramas looms over the globe, it can shift island discourses through its partialities and machinations. Their representations may motivate viewers' fantasies and realities of the islands, which may be good or bad for island cultures and economics. For instance, K-drama productions are motivated to feature more desirable images of South Korean islands to illicit tourism. The features of the Philippine islands, however, may have two other motivations: to capture Philippine and Southeast Asian viewership or to exploit the islandness of the country. Capturing viewership may be seen as a move toward cultural imperialism and re-orientalism. As Southeast Asian and Philippine viewers struggle to define their identities apart from other developed nations, the 'Asian invasion,' 'Korean invasion,' or the positioned Korean cultural products risk contaminating Philippine distinct values and morals (Ainslie et al., 2018, p. 71). Senator Estrada likewise sees K-drama's dominant viewership as a threat that steals jobs from Philippine production staff and actors. For the second motivation, in a similar token, we witness the remoteness, darkness and mystery of the Philippines as a group of islands perfect for crime and terror in *Big Bet* and *Red Swan*, for instance. Such representation may be said to be exploitative of Philippine island identity, which is not entirely and purely accurate of the islands. Whichever motivation is genuine, there remains a challenge to interrogate and investigate these representations.

A continued investigation must be conducted on K-drama representations. K-dramas may re-promote orientalised island narratives, which may significantly increase negative

perceptions and conceptions of South Korea's 'poorer' neighbouring islands. These may be cemented as fixed images without challenging conceptions and may be inaccurate or rigid as portrayals and as inter-Asia island representations. More rigorous studies may be undertaken to de-orientalise K-drama island representations. After all, more than its offer of tropical fruits and golf resorts, the Philippines has also been a haven for South Korean migrants and students in the last decades, and they have treated it like home. Furthermore, like Jeju, the Philippine islands are among the topmost tropical destinations for Korean nationals. With more than 100 dramas made each year, there are many opportunities for South Korean audio-visual productions to present more balanced images or even employ Philippine consultants to ensure that portrayals are more accurate and neutral.

Another angle that can be explored is that perhaps K-dramas are merely echoing some cultural elements and values of global capitalism and the American way of life, which would counter the concept of re-orientalism and reinforce another form of Western hegemony or cultural influence through a South Korean medium. For example, *Hallyu* is already considered the new mainstream for Southeast Asia audiences and, thus, is now a part of the status quo. How K-dramas are readily embraced by other Asian audiences may merely reflect the same affinity toward Hollywood-based content. Thus, a proposal for de-orientalising or re-orientalism may remain a pipedream propagated by inter-Asian critical studies. What is essential, however, is that, like other cultural productions featuring islands, South Korean and Philippine island representations will remain biased without re-orienting viewers and critics with more critical perspectives. The continued call is to ensure that in K-dramas, the Philippine islands will not only be remembered for its dark, crime-ridden casinos but also for its vibrant culture, variety of world heritage sites and, of course, its heavenly mangoes.

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