



Conceptions of Foreignness and Koreanness in *Itaewon Class*

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Abstract

The popular 2020 Korean Drama Itaewon Class features the Guinean-Korean character Kim Toni. It is the first major international K-Drama series to include among its main characters a member of what Hyein Amber Kim describes as the “Collective Dark”; that is, a person on the bottom level of Kim’s three-tiered description of Korean racial hierarchy. Through an examination of Toni and of the presentation of foreigners in Itaewon Class, this article explores how the drama presents notions of Koreanness and foreignness. The show attempts to promote a more open definition of Koreanness by suggesting that people who are not racially Korean should be accepted as Korean provided they have Korean heritage. However, while it endorses a wider understanding of Koreanness, it nonetheless presents an insular attitude towards foreigners and foreignness, demonstrating little understanding of cultural difference outside of Korea and essentializing all foreigners as basically the same and culturally American. Even the foreign aspects of Toni, despite his ostensible identity as a Guinean-Korean, are conceived of as American. Fundamentally, Itaewon Class is a Korea-centric drama which displays little understanding or acceptance of outsiders.

Keywords: *Itaewon Class*, Koreanness, foreignness, K-Drama

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Introduction

Modern representations of Koreanness in South Korea are heavily mediated by tacit understandings of who is “inside” and “outside” society: the word “foreigner” itself (*oegugin*) means “outside country person.”¹ Contrary to the common assumption that modern racism in Korea exists as a product of the country’s colonial experience, both Vladimir Tikhonov (2012) and Jae Kyun Kim show that, in Kim’s words, “anti-blackness (or racism) is possible without a collective racial encounter” (J. Kim 2015, 214). They demonstrate that racialised hierarchies existed prior to Japanese colonisation; however, as Tikhonov notes, Western frameworks of race and racism did enter into and shape Korean discourse in the early 20th century. Some Korean nationalists even advocated for an alliance between the “Yellow” peoples of China, Japan and Korea to oppose the external “White threat” (Tikhonov 2012, 39). Tikhonov argues that “Korean blood became the unchangeable essence of ‘Korean-ness’” as a distinct rejection of “Yellow race unity” (51) following Japan’s colonisation of the peninsula. Since then, Koreans have often depicted themselves as homogenous, which Kun Jong Lee suggests may be a response to the experience of colonisation, “an expression of their yearning to maintain their integrity, honor, and self-respect especially in times of national crisis” (Lee 2015, 13).

Attitudes in Korea towards non-Koreans are complex and varied, but the historically insular country still displays very little tendency to accept outsiders. A popular vehicle that both reflects and forms public attitudes is, of course, Korean Drama. The vast majority of these dramas exist in an imagined Korea that exclusively contains Koreans; those foreigners who do exist usually represent either a threat to the central protagonists or an object of pity for the hero to rescue or redeem. While it is clear that what Marion Schulze (2013) calls K-Dramaland is not a realist depiction of life in Korea, it does reflect many values which are commonly accepted. This article explores notions of Koreanness and foreignness as expressed in a recent

1. Throughout this essay I use the term “Korea” to refer to South Korea unless otherwise stated.

K-Drama, *Itaewon Class*. I first discuss the question of what constitutes a Korean, and by extension a foreigner, expanding Hyein Amber Kim's framework (2020) to argue that in order to be universally and fully accepted as a Korean, a person must fulfill the five categories of blood, language, culture, race, and citizenship. I then perform a close reading of *Itaewon Class*, looking at how the drama conceptualises Koreanness and foreignness by focusing first on the show's depiction of a single character, Kim Toni, and then more broadly on its presentation of foreigners in general. I argue that the show tries to move away from an understanding of Koreanness based only on race, but at the same time struggles to express the complexity that arises when a person embodies more than one cultural heritage. Furthermore, *Itaewon Class* demonstrates a fundamental inability to conceive of foreignness as anything other than being American. Drawing on the neighbourhood's associations with exotic—and erotic—foreignness, the drama depicts Itaewon (a famously multicultural district of Seoul) as a sexualised semi-foreign site where characters are free to act in ways that they do not when in the show's *fully* Korean locations. While the series attempts to demonstrate an outward-looking perspective, and is at points obviously prescriptive about political attitudes, *Itaewon Class* shows at best a patchy understanding of what it is to be foreign in South Korea. Despite its clear attempts to contribute to conversations about race and nationality, it is at heart an inward-looking drama.

Conceptions of Koreanness

Underlying this study is the fundamental question of how to define Koreanness. The question could be resolved in the most basic, legal sense by defining as Korean anyone who possesses Korean citizenship. This classification alone, however, is clearly insufficient. Thousands of people across the world who do not hold Korean citizenship may consider themselves—or may be considered by others—to be Korean. Similarly, there are people who legally have Korean citizenship, but whose Koreanness is subject to some measure of doubt. For instance, several athletes, such as

Aileen Frisch, Timofey Lapshin, and Alexander Gamelin, have received Korean citizenship for the purpose of competing for the country in the Olympics. Although they are legally Korean, many people in Korea and elsewhere may challenge their claims to Koreanness. A more robust definition is obviously required.

In her article “Understanding ‘Koreanness,’” Hyein Amber Kim summarises notions of Koreanness by stating that “literature on Korean identity and culture” indicates that “there are at least three elements of a Korean identity: having Korean blood, knowing and using the Korean language, and understanding Korean culture and customs” (H. Kim 2020, 77).² To these three, Kim adds one further aspect that plays a vital role in conceptions of Koreanness: race. Kim defines racial Koreanness as “belonging to or having Korean skin color. Korean skin color can be described as a yellow to red tone” (79). Obviously this is an incomplete definition, as she acknowledges. It would be possible to add more detail to Kim’s definition, discussing for example hair texture and colour or eye shape and colour, but while a precise definition of “racial Koreanness” remains elusive, Kim provides a base from which to work. Despite the remaining difficulties surrounding a precise definition, it is clear that a fourth aspect of Koreanness is, as Kim argues, race.

However, this still can be insufficient for a person to be considered *truly* Korean. The element missing from Kim’s definition is that, in South Korea at least, a Korean must hold South Korean citizenship. The furor in Korea over the 2022 Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony, in which a Chinese-Korean woman wore a hanbok, is one instance among many that demonstrates how strongly some South Koreans resent claims of Koreanness from abroad, even if those claims are apparently backed by strong justifications. It is telling that South Koreans have distinct words not just for South and North Koreans, but also for numerous other groups too: the word *Joseonjok* is

2. As with all culture, Korean culture is mutable and highly dependent on geographical and temporal context. For an exploration of the constitution of Korean culture, see K. Han (2003). The notion of Korean blood is, of course, a circular one: to be a Korean is to have Korean blood, and Korean blood is the blood that Koreans have. Nonetheless, the notion that Koreanness is an exclusively hereditary trait is widespread.

used for Chinese-Koreans; *Hwagyo* for people of Chinese descent whose families may have lived in Korea for generations, meaning that they have adapted to Korean culture; *Koryoin* for Koreans in or from the former USSR; *Jaemi gyopo* for Korean Americans; and the catch-all term *Gyopo* used for people of Korean descent living or having grown up in other countries.³ The very closeness of these groups to Koreanness, the fact that some may see them as truly Korean, can mean that they pose more of a threat to notions of homogenous Koreanness. As Oh-Jung Kwon points out, “both the *Hwagyo* and *Joseonjok* had high cultural proximity to Koreans, which made them even more vulnerable to perceived discrimination”; he also notes that a 2013 survey indicated that “the *Hwagyo* and *Joseonjok* had a stronger sense of perceived discrimination, compared to other foreigners” (Kwon 2021, 468).

The example of Korean Americans also demonstrates South Korean insularity. Adrienne Lo and Jenna Chi Kim, in their article “Linguistic Competency and Citizenship,” discuss media portrayals of Korean Americans as linguistically competent English-language users, the envy of and contrast to so-called “Korean Koreans” (Lo and Kim 2012, 256). They contrast older concepts of the “worldly U.S.-oriented *gyopo* ‘overseas Korean’ whose proficiency in English became an icon of their modernity and cosmopolitanism” (257) with other complex images of Koreans abroad. Of particular note is the image of the “inauthentic Korean American whose Korean is laughably bad” (257). Lo and Kim argue that this linguistic inability of some Korean Americans locates them on the margins of Korean society:

The inauthentic Korean American...is presented as someone who unintentionally marks his low-class, non-modern, non-cosmopolitan persona and his marginality within the Korean nation through his pathetic Korean. (Lo and Kim 2012, 257)

3. For a consideration of what it means to be Korean in Kazakhstan during the 1990s, see Shin, et al. (2008).

Crucially, Lo and Kim’s use of the verb “marks” indicates that the Korean American’s language is not the cause but the symptom of the Korean American’s marginality within Korea. Obviously, culture and language can be closely linked to citizenship, but it is possible to distinguish them as separate issues. To be universally accepted as completely Korean, it is necessary to possess Korean citizenship.

With this inclusion of citizenship, it is possible to arrive at a fuller definition: to be fully accepted as Korean, a person must 1. have “Korean blood”; 2. speak Korean; 3. participate in Korean culture; 4. be “racially Korean”; and 5. have Korean citizenship. However, while Koreanness is sometimes portrayed as a polar binary, where someone either is or is not Korean, it would be more accurate to see claims of Koreanness as a series of concentric circles (Fig. 1), where people in the different circles are more or less likely to be accepted by others. At the centre of Koreanness is a core of people—made up of millions and millions—whose claim to this identity is impervious to challenge. They fulfill all five categories of blood, language, culture, race, and citizenship and thus have solid, indisputable claims to

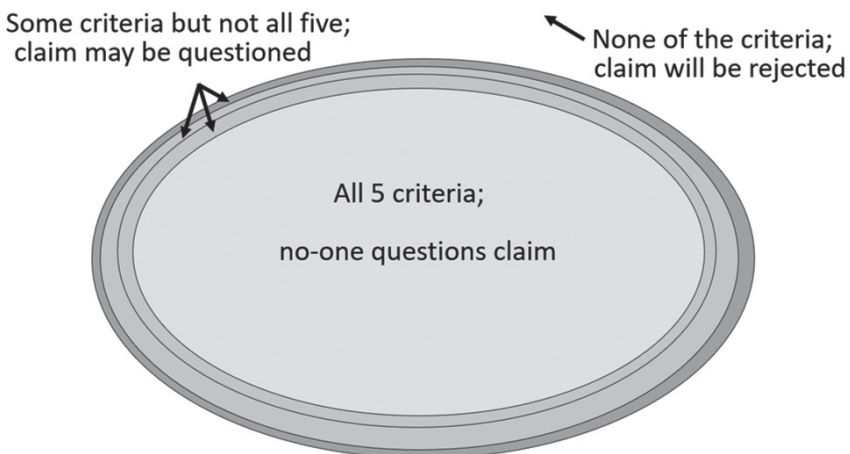


Figure 1. Circles of “Koreanness”

Source: Author.

their identity as Koreans, such that no one would ever challenge their claim to Koreanness. The vast majority of Korea's population falls within this category. On the edges of this circle are groups of people whose claims to Koreanness become seen as progressively more dubious the further from the centre they are. These people fulfill some of the five categories, but not all of them. People in one of these outer circles may or may not consider themselves to be Korean, just as they may find others reject their claims to Koreanness. That is not to say that all people will have the same response. People on the peripheries may find that some people accept their claims to Koreanness while others reject them. Indeed, they themselves may make no claim to Koreanness at all, or may provide nuanced responses to questions about their identity. For those who meet all five criteria, no one will reject their claim to Koreanness. By contrast, those outside the circle who fulfill none of the five criteria would face universal rejection in the unlikely case that they made such a claim. The former are firmly Korean, just as the latter are undoubtedly foreign; it is the people in the liminal spaces between these two groups who find their identities subject to contestation. Yet, as much research attests (Ahn 2014, 2015, 2018; B. Kim 2019; H. Kim 2020; Kwon 2021, etc.) anyone outside the innermost circle faces at least the possibility of discrimination in Korea.

Koreanness in *Itaewon Class*

While of course *Itaewon Class* does not explicitly articulate a concept of Koreanness such as the one expressed above, the series does explore the question of what it means to be Korean. Based on the webtoon of the same name, *Itaewon Class* first aired in 2020 on the Korean network JTBC and is now streaming on Netflix. The drama has won several awards, including the Best Drama Series from the Asian TV Awards, and the final episode achieved 1,261,000 viewers in Korea alone,⁴ a figure that does not even

4. Nielsen Korea Top 10 List for TV Programs, accessed October 10, 2022, https://www.nielsenkorea.co.kr/tv_terrestrial_day.asp?menu=Tit_1&sub_menu=2_1&area=00&begin_

account for the viewership on Netflix. Aside from its popularity, *Itaewon Class* is significant in that, along with *Squid Game* of the following year, it is the most prominent K-Drama to foreground a member of Kim's "Collective Dark"—that is, the bottom level of Korea's three-tiered racial hierarchy which places Koreans at the top.⁵ The drama's name, *Itaewon Class*, features both English and Korean, simultaneously signaling an appeal to the international viewer and a firm grounding in Korea. It also hints at a large part of the drama's purpose: while the word "class" in Korean conveys connotations of high culture and sophistication, its pedagogical implications also unwittingly indicate the show's attempts to promote a specific liberal political agenda. *Itaewon Class* uses its plot and characters to present a series of statements about social issues in Korea. The story of redemption and revenge revolves around protagonist Park Saero-yi as he runs Danbam, a bar-restaurant, and competes with his nemesis Jang Dae-hee, whose son killed Saero-yi's father in a traffic accident subsequently covered up by Dae-hee. The supporting cast of characters who work for Saero-yi in Danbam are a group of misfits within Korean society: the manager and love interest Jo Yi-seo, a highly intelligent young woman who rejects common Korean social conventions (by using the lower politeness register to speak to people much older than her, for example); Choi Seung-kwon, a reformed prisoner; Ma Hyeon-yi, the transgender head chef; and Kim Toni, a Guinean-Korean character searching for his family (significantly, Toni was not present in the original *Itaewon Class* webtoon). Across the drama, each of these characters experiences reformation, with the transformations working together as a signal of the drama's political statements about Korean society. In this way *Itaewon Class* demonstrates its politics very clearly. The show acts as a polemical drama attempting to shape Korean society, using its protagonists as mouthpieces to discuss social issues. I therefore read the series itself as a unit, a kind of argumentative text that maintains positions on Korean social issues.

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5. For an exploration of the portrayal of blackness in Korean cinema and literature, see for example C. Kim (2014) and Lee (2015).

Benjamin M. Han's recent article (2022) examines the way *Itaewon Class* presents Toni's blackness. He argues that the show employs melodrama to produce "a catharsis of social expression" (10) as it addresses social issues in Korea. However, as Han notes, the show ignores Toni's "cultural specificity rooted in Guinean history and culture" (11). Han argues that the decision to give Toni a Guinean background was a "strategic" one which "obliterates his Blackness as attached to the racialized history of U.S. occupation and militarization" and constructs "his Guinean Blackness as unfamiliar, exotic, and less threatening to Koreans" (11). While Han focuses primarily on the representation of blackness, I examine questions about Koreanness and foreignness in *Itaewon Class* more generally. In the following section I employ the concepts of Koreanness explored above to perform a close reading on the presentation of Toni. I argue that the drama seeks to present Toni not as foreign but as Korean; but, to the extent that the show does present Toni's foreignness, it conceives of it not as Guinean but as American. Following this, I examine the series' wider presentation of foreignness, arguing that *Itaewon Class* sexualises and essentialises foreigners, again demonstrating a failure to conceive of foreignness as anything other than American.

Toni's Foreignness

A clear example of the way *Itaewon Class* presents conceptions of Koreanness comes in Episode 6 with the first appearance of Toni. He enters Danbam in order to apply for a job. When he comes in, most of the workers panic at the sight of this black man—how will they speak to him if they don't speak English?—but Yi-seo stands up and greets him in English. Toni replies in Korean, to which the whole crew react with great surprise. Comic music starts playing. Toni tells Saeroyi and Yi-seo in Korean that he's been living in Korea for a year, to which Yi-seo replies that his Korean is very good. Significantly, Toni replies: "I'm Korean. My dad is a Korean." In the background, Hyeon-yi says "I never thought of hiring a foreigner as a part-timer." The camera cuts back to Yi-seo, who says that it would be good to have a foreigner working with them because they need another person who

speaks English. Toni counters by repeating that he is Korean but says nothing about his English ability. Yi-seo nods and laughs doubtfully at Toni's claim, and Saeroyi agrees to give him a job.

There are a number of different understandings of Koreanness and assumptions about foreignness on display in this scene. When Toni asserts his Koreanness first by saying that he is Korean and then by stating that his father is Korean, he switches between the five criteria for Koreanness outlined above. Toni's assertion about his father implies that his father fulfills all five categories: blood, language, culture, race and citizenship. Episode 8 later demonstrates that this is indeed correct. On the other hand, when Toni first claims that he himself is Korean, he is making an appeal based primarily on the criterion of blood, but also partly on his familiarity with Korean culture and language—though his American accent undermines the latter. Moreover, Toni does not fulfill the criteria of race or citizenship (Episode 8 clarifies that he does not yet have Korean citizenship and requires a visa to stay in the country). Toni exists on the periphery of Koreanness: he clearly has a claim, but may not find it accepted by everyone. Indeed, the hearers in Danbam all reject it: in the background, Hyeon-yi immediately calls him a foreigner, just as Yi-seo does so in the foreground. Toni's assertions of his own Koreanness are met with nothing more than a patronizing smile. Even as the hearers in the pub universally accept Toni's statement about his father, they reject his own claim.

The scene sets up all the wrong ways to view Toni: the staff of Danbam all assume he speaks English and reject his claim to Koreanness. The show wastes little time providing models for correcting these ways of thinking. In the next episode a white couple—visibly outsiders—come in to Danbam and ask for a table in English with American accents.⁶ The staff collectively panic, as they had done when Toni first entered. This time Yi-seo is absent, so everyone looks to Toni to speak to the guests. Toni, however, is just as confused as everyone else. He tells them that he does not understand, that

6. Here and below, CedarBough T. Saeji's definition of "foreign" as "visually identifiable as not being of primarily East Asian descent" (Saeji 2015, 257–258) is a useful way of conceiving of these brief glances of foreignness on screen.

he does not speak English. Saeroyi, confused, asks “Then who does?” The scene cuts to a meeting. Seung-kwon asks “Why? Why, even though you look like you can speak only English, why can you not speak it at all?”⁷ Toni’s response is “Because I’m Korean.” Saeroyi points out that Toni has only lived in Korea for a year, and asks where he lived before that. Toni replies “Guinea. So I speak French very well.”

By setting up an incorrect assumption that the characters—and presumably many viewers—all make about Toni’s language ability, *Itaewon Class* here makes its first attempt to teach a lesson about foreignness: not all people who look foreign can speak English. However, the show fails to sustain this notion, and ultimately hints that it is unacceptable for a foreigner not to speak English. Hyeon-yi says Yi-seo will “flip out” if she finds out, and Seung-kwon says that Yi-seo will fire Toni “for sure.” Even if this could be dismissed as the words of supporting characters rather than the series itself, Saeroyi also tells Toni that he must learn English. As the drama’s protagonist, Saeroyi usually acts as a mouthpiece for the messages that *Itaewon Class* attempts to convey, which at this point seems to be that people who look different do actually need to speak English after all. Despite Toni’s ability to speak Korean and his own claim that he speaks French “very well,” he must learn English if he is to retain his job.

Relatively soon after this, in Episode 9, Saeroyi calls a meeting where he decides that the company should be called Itaewon Class, or IC for short. All the other staff members pronounce the company with Korean accents so that it sounds like “I she” (playing on the similarity of this sound with Korean slang), but Toni inexplicably pronounces the abbreviation IC with a perfect American accent—and Seung-kwon even comments approvingly on Toni’s use of English. No more mention of the issue of Toni speaking English is made until Episode 16, the final episode, which takes place four years after Toni’s arrival in Korea. Again, a visibly, racially foreign couple enter the pub, again all the workers panic, and again the foreign man speaks with an American accent. However, this time Toni stands up, confidently walks over to the pair, and speaks to them in perfect American English. Hyeon-yi

7. Author’s translation.

reveals that over the past few years, Toni has learnt English because it was a task assigned by Saeroyi.

The show starts by suggesting that people who look foreign do not necessarily speak English, but then undermines its own proposition. The characters, including Saeroyi, all treat Toni as if it is his fault that they assumed he speaks English; he made no such claim—but despite this, his job is threatened and he is told that he must learn a third language if he is to keep his place at Danbam. Indeed, the show ends by presenting the thing it had earlier suggested was unnecessary. While Episodes 6 and 7 make it clear that not all non-Koreans speak English, Episode 16 displays the very thing it sought to deny before: the Guinean-Korean, who could not speak English at all when he first appeared, now speaks perfect American English. Moreover, Toni inexplicably demonstrates a flawless American accent almost immediately after being told he must learn to speak English. People who look foreign do, after all, speak English.

In fact, despite the insistence in *Itaewon Class* that Toni is Guinean Korean, it cannot stop thinking of his foreignness as American.⁸ This is evident in several aspects of his character. Most obviously, the show casts African-American actor Chris Lyon to play Toni. He therefore inescapably speaks Korean with an American accent and, as mentioned above, speaks English with a perfect American accent, even before he is supposed to have learnt the language. By contrast, he never speaks French, despite his claim that he does so “very well,” and there is never a hint of a Guinean or Francophone accent in his speech. In fact, the show’s implication that he only speaks French and Korean reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the linguistic makeup of Guinea. While French is indeed the Guinea’s official national language, the people of Guinea speak it almost exclusively as a second or third language; the majority of the population are at least bilingual, with over 20 different first languages prevalent in the different

8. The definition of Americanness is at least as fraught as that of Koreanness. For the sake of this article, I use the term broadly to refer to distinct cultural and linguistic features commonly seen as deriving from the United States.

regions of the country (Diallo 2004; Institut National de la Statistique 2017).⁹ The series demonstrates no indication of this fact, almost as if the show's writers were unaware of it.

Indeed, Toni's very name demonstrates the show's inability to understand what it would mean for a foreigner to be anything other than American. While Toni is not a Korean name, nor is it Guinean. Deriving as it does from Latin roots, the name Toni suggests a European or North American background, not a Guinean one; and given Korea's close historical links with America, the first country that the name "Toni" brings to mind is the USA, not Guinea. After all, Guinea is approximately 85 percent Muslim, and naming traditions in many parts of the country reflect this, but *Itaewon Class* provides no recognition of this fact—the show does not have the confidence or capacity to deal with the questions of difference that would be raised by creating a Muslim character of Guinean-Korean heritage. Of course, not all Guineans are Muslim; but in any case, just as Toni's name has nothing to do with his supposed Guinean heritage, so too does he display no sign of his Guinean culture or heritage in the rest of the show. Even in the scene where he reveals that he lived in Guinea, he very specifically does not claim to be Guinean; he merely says that he lived there. Indeed, he never once claims to be Guinean, though he explicitly states that he is Korean numerous times. Throughout the series, the complexities of a Guinean-Korean identity are consistently dismissed, obscured by a vague notion of blackness rooted primarily in notions of American culture.

Furthermore, even before Toni's face is visible, the show employs non-verbal signals to depict him as American. Toni's entrance to Danbam discussed at the beginning of this section is actually preceded by an extended introduction through the sight of his body strolling through the street towards the pub, an image interspersed with shots of Saeroyi having a discussion with his staff. Hip hop music plays as Toni walks down an Itaewon street and the camera focuses first on his trendy chequered black-and-white trainers and socks, and then on his torso: his face remains absent from the frame as the shot continues to highlight his clothing. His jacket is

9. With thanks to Florent Gaudiller for his help with the French.

adorned with skull and alien badges, under which he wears a luminous green hooded jumper. He has a single-strapped bag slung in front of him with wireless headphones hung over the strap, and on his back he carries a guitar in its case. His hands are in his pockets; he pulls them out to put on his headphones, revealing for the first time his skin, but still his face is obscured. It is not until Toni arrives in Danbam, almost 14 seconds of screen-time after his shoes first appear, that viewers finally see his face. The entrance works on one level to set Toni apart from the other characters on the street, but the hip-hop music and trendy urban clothing—especially his hooded jumper—also carry clear resonances of African-American culture. Indeed, Toni wears a hoodie in every scene of the series until Episode 11 when he realises that Kim Soon-rye is his grandmother: that is, until the moment that he is fully confirmed as Korean, as I argue below. After this revelation he wears a hooded top only once more in the whole series, a clear visual sign of the shift in his identity. Even before Toni's face appears, *Itaewon Class* uses sartorial and musical cues to declare him to be (African) American.

In light of this, Seung-kwon's question "Why? Why, even though you look like you can speak only English, can you not speak any?" reveals the show's real understanding of foreignness: what he means is that Toni looks like an African American. It is a showcase of *Itaewon Class*'s inability to conceive of a black African as distinct from a black African American. The show may insist that Toni is Guinean-Korean, but it cannot conceive of what that means. Guinea ceases to be a real country with a culture and history, and simply becomes the essence of a *oeguk*, a foreign land, a non-America. Han rightly defines Toni's character as "plastic," in that he is malleable and "yet inorganic and lacking depth" (B. Han 2022, 13). This plasticity is also apparent as Toni retains aspects of (African-)American culture—clothes, language, music—which are more popular in Korea, while at the same time his supposed Guinean heritage allows *Itaewon Class* to sidestep the fraught questions of Korea's painful relationship with the USA, and especially with African-American soldiers and their children. In casting, name, language, accent, clothing, use of background music, and in the way the others respond to him, the foreignness of Toni is conceived fundamentally as

American or African American, but certainly not as Guinean.

Toni's Koreanness

However, the show does ultimately insist that Toni should be seen not as foreign but as Korean. Across the presentation of Toni's character and in the denouement to the search for his family in Korea, *Itaewon Class* suggests that the fourth category, race, should not be seen as a requirement of Koreanness and that Toni should be accepted as Korean. The show depicts a scene of explicit racism directed against Toni in Episode 8 when the main characters all decide to go to a club. Given its importance in the show, it is worth providing a transcript of the relevant parts of the scene:

Security guard: [in English] Hey stop, stop, stop. Where are you from?
Toni: [in Korean] Sorry? I'm—
Yi-seo: Why are you asking him that?
Security guard: People from Africa and the Middle East can't enter.
Hyeon-yi: Come on. This is Itaewon. Don't be like that. You're embarrassing us. [literally, "You're embarrassing *the country*."] *the country*.
Security guard: I'm just following the rules. [To Toni:] Where are you from?
Toni: [smiling] I'm Korean.
Security guard: Show me your passport.
Toni: But I'm Korean. My dad is Korean.
Security guard: Hey we have a bugger. Send someone to the entrance.
[...]
Yi-seo: Forget it. They don't accept Africans. Let's go somewhere else.
Toni: But I told you that my dad is Korean.
Yi-seo: Let's go already. [pulls Toni away]
Toni: I'm also Korean, okay?
Yi-seo: How are you Korean? You have dark skin.
Seung-kwon: Hey.
Toni: You... You're so mean! [runs off]

Many viewers interpret this scene as a condemnation of racism, and indeed

it plays a pioneering role exploring the issue in Korean Drama. However, a close look at the dialogue indicates that the key question throughout the scene is actually whether to accept Toni's claim to be Korean. He continually repeats his claim, stating three times that he is Korean and twice that his father is. He is appealing to his Korean blood, but the others cannot get past his race. The only reason the security guard stops Toni, after all, is his skin colour; and Yi-seo, clearly frustrated by Toni's constant claims to be Korean, specifically points out his skin colour when she challenges his claim to Koreanness.

The focus on whether or not to accept Toni's claim to Koreanness means that the wider questions surrounding racism examined in this scene are sidestepped, at least temporarily. What the security guard did wrong, the show implies, was to refuse entry to a Korean. He should have accepted Toni's claims based not on his race but on his blood and perhaps, to a lesser extent, his proficiency in Korean language and culture. The scene presents simultaneously a wider and yet nonetheless insular view of Koreanness; completely absent is any sense that the club is simply wrong to exclude Africans and Middle Easterners. Later Yi-seo even supports their right to do so: "They don't accept Africans. That's up to the owner." No one disagrees. During the scene, the club's institutionalised racism is never called into question, only the fact that this racism has impacted someone who has Korean blood and therefore has a reasonable claim to Koreanness. Rather than arguing that Korea's racial hierarchy should be abolished, *Itaewon Class* suggests that people with Korean heritage who are on the bottom tiers (H. Kim 2020) should be bumped up to a higher level.

The issue is partially resolved a few scenes later in the same episode when Seung-kwon, Hyeon-yi, and Yi-seo are shown smirking at something while cheerful music plays in the background. The shot pans to the sight of the club's entrance daubed in graffiti which says "You racist, you're an embarrassment to our country" and "You humiliate Korea." It later becomes clear that it was Saeroyi who sprayed the graffiti. Even at this moment, the point where the protagonist—and by extension the whole show—most explicitly condemns racism, the focus of the condemnation is again directed inwards. Just as when Hyeon-yi claims that the security guard is

embarrassing the country, racism is not presented here as inherently wrong; rather, the problem is that it brings shame to Korea. Here, at the time the show is trying its hardest to condemn racism, the attention is inwards: the primary problem with racism, as presented by *Itaewon Class*, is that it hurts Korea.

Near the end of the episode, this element of Toni's subplot comes to its conclusion when Yi-seo writes a blog post detailing the experience at the club, stating that Toni was denied entry because he is African. At the bottom of the article are hashtags which translate as "racism" and "bringing shame on the country," again demonstrating a focus on Korea itself. The comments below the article are all critical of the club and supportive of Toni. Toni confronts Yi-seo over her refusal in the article to acknowledge Toni as a Korean and over her decision to instead identify him as African. He repeats his mantra "I'm Korean" and Yi-seo repeats hers, insisting that he does not look Korean and asking how he could be Korean. Toni replies as follows:

My dad is Korean. My dad came to Korea to meet my grandma. And I came to Korea to find my dad. Once I find my dad I can acquire Korean nationality. I'm Korean.¹⁰

Yi-seo's reply represents the denouement of the subplot concerning Toni's identity. She states that it is a "fact" that Toni is not Korean yet because he has not found his father and thus received citizenship, so she promises to search for him: "I'll do anything to help you. I'm sorry I didn't take your side." At this point the conflicting notions of Koreanness are resolved, with Yi-seo implicitly acknowledging that she was wrong to reject Toni's claim of Koreanness but simultaneously promising to help him become *more* Korean (or more firmly Korean) by acquiring Korean citizenship and thus moving closer to the centre of the circle of Koreanness. With the most strong-headed character in the show finally accepting Toni's claims to Koreanness, the show argues strongly in favour of a wider view of Koreanness, even as it acknowledges that legally Toni does not yet have Korean citizenship and is

10. Episode 8. Translation slightly edited from the Netflix subtitles.

not yet “in fact” a Korean—though this in time will come. Yi-seo’s narrative arc in her relationship with Toni is a manifestation of the show’s promotion of a wider conception of Koreanness.¹¹

Later in the series, the show further reinforces the notion that Toni really is a true Korean through his relationship with Kim Soon-rye, who eventually reveals herself to be his paternal grandmother. She can be seen, essentially, as the uber-Korean: her age brings her closer to an older Korea that existed prior to the rapid modernisation of the late 20th century. Moreover, she speaks with an accent from the southern part of South Korea, marking her as safely outside the modern, Westernising influence of Seoul. In accordance with one stereotype of Korean women from her generation, she is outwardly feisty, verbally berating and indeed physically beating a man for drinking his money away, while also demonstrating a great capacity for love underneath her apparently harsh exterior. In addition to all of these aspects, she is a successful businessperson, which *Itaewon Class* presents as the highest mark of worth: the whole series, after all, is the story of Saeroyi defeating his rival Jang Dae-hee commercially and taking over his company Jangga Group. Soon-rye is the investor who had allowed Jangga Group to grow in its early years, just as she is the one who provides the funding for IC to expand, leading to Saeroyi’s eventual victory. She is the physical embodiment of Korea’s successful economic development and yet retains the charm of an older Korea that existed outside of Western influence.

With the revelation of Toni’s relationship with Soon-rye, the show provides an external validation for Toni’s repeated insistence that he is Korean. Twice Toni is shown with his grandmother in the hospital; the first time provides an opportunity for her to apologise for rejecting Toni’s father after he married Toni’s mother, providing what Han identifies as “racial melodrama” that produces “a catharsis of social expression” (B. Han 2022, 9). After Episode 11, the subplots revolving around Toni are for the most part

11. The shift towards the acceptance of Toni as Korean echoes that of literature’s “first Black-Korean character,” Il-nam, who also “transforms...from a despised outsider into a noble Korean at the end of the narrative” in Sankkul’s novella *Teugi* (Lee 2015, 9, 12). Significantly, Il-nam was born in Colorado and the son of an African American: even Toni’s intertextual forerunners are American.

resolved and Toni's role reverts to a much more minor one; he only appears a handful of times in the final five episodes. Nonetheless, it is clear that Toni becomes fully accepted as a Korean member of the group once he finds and reconciles with his grandmother: after this point no one refers to him as a foreigner or mentions his skin colour, in stark contrast to the numerous previous instances. Toni's foreignness disappears the moment he finds his grandmother. In this way *Itaewon Class* presents an unusually open image of what it means to be Korean. It attempts to abolish a racialised vision of what it means to be Korean, promoting the idea that members of what Kim defines as the "collective dark" should not face discrimination as long as they have claims to Koreanness.

Foreigners in Itaewon Class

While *Itaewon Class* may promote an open view of what it means to be Korean, it simultaneously presents an exclusionary attitude towards foreigners. Counting Toni as a Korean, the foreigners who appear on screen all perform one of two purposes: either they play minor roles to highlight or facilitate the development of the plot or the central characters, or they roam in the background to create an exotic *mise-en-scène* for the action in Itaewon. An example of the former, as discussed above, is the pair of couples who enter Danbam in Episodes 7 and 16 to demonstrate Toni's development of English. Another instance is the way Soo-ah is twice seen with foreigners, presumably her friends, in Itaewon: in Episode 2 she takes a selfie with three foreigners, and in Episode 4 she is playing darts. The friends have no speaking roles and simply lurk in the background. The presence of these foreign friends contributes to the notion of Soo-ah as a cosmopolitan young woman who is culturally fluid, able to move between her foreign and Korean friends with ease. Another example of foreigners taking roles as background characters comes in Episode 3: a dark-skinned child drops a basketball and runs from his mother to the street, causing a minor accident and thus facilitating Saeroyi and Yi-seo's first meeting. In these cases, the foreign characters are performing minor roles in the same way that Korean extras may well have done.

However, the strangest incident with foreigners acting as background figures comes when the villain Geun-won, chasing Yi-seo through the streets, is confronted by a group including several foreigners. Yi-seo tells Geun-won of the “gentlemen” in Itaewon who come “from all over the world,” implying that they will protect her from him. However, Geun-won responds by throwing wads of 50,000 *won* notes in the air and the group scrabbles on the ground to collect the money. It is only the arrival of first Saeroyi and then the police that saves Yi-seo. This incident demonstrates that, contrary to Yi-seo’s expectations, the foreigners are mercenary, willing to watch a woman being attacked on the street as long as they can gain financially from it. This notion of foreigners, and specifically Westerners, as superficially friendly or reliable but ultimately untrustworthy or motivated by selfish financial gain, is a trope played on in numerous Korean films and dramas, but rarely is it so explicit as in this scene.

Furthermore, Itaewon as a neighbourhood acts as a site of Bacchanalian revelry, and specifically a locus for sex and sexualisation which is rarely seen in the staged world of K-Dramaland.¹² Indeed, Lo and Kim note that the “English multilingualism of Korean women is often negatively associated with hypersexualization and immoral behavior” (Lo and Kim 2012, 261). This concept is clearly linked to notions of highly sexualised Western women in contrast to more sexually conservative Koreans. Furthermore, Saeji notes that it “has long been common for non-Korean bodies to be used in Korea to provide a level of sexualisation that is perhaps more comfortable to see on the body of the Other than on the body of the girl next door” (Saeji 2015, 280).¹³ However, *Itaewon Class* does not limit the sexualisation of Itaewon to the foreign characters; in Itaewon—and only in Itaewon—Koreans and foreigners alike transgress social boundaries through their words, clothing, and of course actions. The most striking example of the presentation of Itaewon as a sexualised location comes in Episode 2 when

12. For a brief history of the neighbourhood of Itaewon, see B. Han (2022, 5–7). It is true that K-Drama is becoming more sexualised, but the kind of sexualisation seen in *Itaewon Class* is still taboo in the world of many, if not most, Korea dramas.

13. See Saeji (2015) for a detailed exploration of the hypersexualisation of foreign bodies (especially women) in K-pop videos.

the neighbourhood is introduced through unashamedly exoticised tones. Hundreds of foreign and Korean revellers wearing Halloween costumes gather in the streets of Itaewon as Soo-ah narrates a letter to Saeroyi. A party atmosphere pervades the scene; and as Saeroyi comes up the escalator into Itaewon for the first time, in front of him is a young woman wearing thigh-high boots and a short skirt. Soo-ah tells Saeroyi that Itaewon feels like a foreign country and that everyone there “looks free.” It is, furthermore, this sexualised location where the masked Soo-ah vigorously hugs Saeroyi when she first sees him, where famous gay celebrity Hong Seok-cheon flirts suggestively with Saeroyi, and where Soo-ah directly asks Saeroyi to come in and sleep with her.

The show creates a geographical link between foreignness and sex, contrasted with the sexual innocence found in Korean locations outside of Seoul. The only place foreigners are seen in *Itaewon Class* is in the neighbourhood of Itaewon itself, just as it is the only place where there are implicit or explicit references to sex. Even the scene at the airport in Episode 12 contains no foreigners in the background. While all references to sex occur within the confines of Itaewon, other locations in Korea often link to childhood and children: Saeroyi and Soo-ah grow up in the fictional Pajin City located somewhere outside of Seoul. It is also Pajin where Hye-won appears, an example of the sweet and innocent little girl stereotype often found in K-Drama. It is true that locations outside of Seoul are also associated with bullying, corruption, violence and even murder; but it is never sex. During the brief moments of romance in locations outside of Itaewon, the characters wear unrevealing clothes and for the most part are physically separated from each other by a metre or so; as happens for example in Episode 1 when Saeroyi and Soo-ah sit by the lake. Itaewon, with its links to foreignness and sex, provides a safely non-Korean or quasi-Korean location for the transgressive elements of the drama to take place. It is the neighbourhood's foreignness that makes this possible, as the location is safely separated from the rest of Korea.

Of course, the link between foreignness and sex is not necessarily associated with all forms of foreignness: it is an image primarily related to the collective West, and particularly to the United States. Indeed, every

depiction of foreignness in *Itaewon Class* equates foreignness to Americanness. As argued above, the foreignness of Toni is conceived of as American rather than Guinean, and in all of Toni's encounters with foreigners in the pub, the characters speak with American accents. Furthermore, the only language other than Korean that is heard is English, and specifically English with a North American accent. Indeed, it is not only linguistic aspects of foreignness that are presented as American. In Episode 2 Soo-ah describes Halloween as an American festival, despite the fact that the day's origins predate the country's existence. Furthermore, in the Halloween scene there is even a person dressed up as the magic carpet from the Disney animation *Aladdin*: even the show's momentary presentation of Middle Eastern culture is mediated through an Americanised vision of the region. Every encounter with a foreigner throughout the series is essentially an encounter with an American. For *Itaewon Class*, to be foreign is to be American, just as much as to be American is to be foreign. Indeed, even critics struggle to escape the power of American dominance: in his otherwise insightful essay, Han describes *Itaewon Class* as being "invested in representing Toni through... 'televisual reparation'" (B. Han 2022, 7), a concept centred fundamentally on American history and racial conflict. By applying American critic Monk-Payton's theories, Han demonstrates an inescapably American notion of racial injury, even going so far as referring to trans-Atlantic slavery (B. Han 2022, 7) despite its irrelevance in the Korean context.

Conclusion

Itaewon Class is a clear example of exoticising a foreign Other, of showing no real attempt to understand other cultures or identities, and perceiving foreigners as essentially all the same. The best it can do is to depict all foreigners as American—and this is even the case with the foreign aspects of Toni, even though the show itself argues that his claim to a Korean identity should be accepted. No foreigner appears outside of Itaewon, just as all foreigners speak American English and none speak Korean. As a group,

the show's foreigners are both sexualised and essentialised: they are interchangeable background figures who exist primarily to provide an exotic foreign allure to the drama. Fundamentally, *Itaewon Class*—noted for its liberal politics and for explicitly addressing racism in Korea—excludes foreigners as outsiders: they truly are the “outside country people” that the word *oegugin* implies. This analysis thus correlates with the conclusions of Istad, et al., who argue in the context of South Korean multicultural-themed reality television programs that “the premise of these programmes is the existence of a differentiated—yet ultimately one-dimensional—foreign other who encounters a strictly homogenous Korean ‘us’” (Istad et al. 2022, 16). *Itaewon Class* is different in that it argues for a more open view of what it means to be Korean. It seeks to expand the central circle of Koreanness, to reorder the three-tiered hierarchy by boosting multi-racial Koreans to a higher level, but it remains just as exclusionary: redrawing the boundaries of Koreanness does nothing to eliminate the fundamentally insular notions that the show presents. Despite the show's obvious attempts, and some real successes, at making a positive impact on the debate, there remains a clear distinction between *us* and *them* in *Itaewon Class*.

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