

# The Ambivalence of Host and Discourse on Multiculturalism in Korean Reality TV Show

Fadhila Hasby<sup>1\*</sup>, Lilawati Kurnia<sup>2</sup>, Suma Riella Rusdiarti<sup>3</sup>

Department of Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia

Author Email: [fadhila.hasby@gmail.com](mailto:fadhila.hasby@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>, [purplemoon08@gmail.com](mailto:purplemoon08@gmail.com)<sup>2</sup>, [sumariella@gmail.com](mailto:sumariella@gmail.com)<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract.** South Korea implemented multiculturalism in 2006. The implementation of this policy became the backdrop for the emergence of multicultural television programs. Among the existing genres, reality TV shows were chosen by television stations to feature more immigrants on the screens of Korean viewers. Today, television programs have become an important space for representing immigrant identities to local audiences. This study analyzes a reality TV show titled *My Neighbor Charles* to gain a deeper understanding of the construction of immigrant representation in this program. This study assumes that the construction of immigrant representation is greatly influenced by how host Hong Seok Cheon frames the narrative of immigrant representation. Previous studies have not considered the important role of the host in framing the multiculturalism phenomenon in Korea. This study employs textual analysis and applies Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the data. Findings show that Hong simultaneously reinforces and criticizes the values and norms of the Korean majority. Rather than weakening Korea's cultural dominance over immigrants, Hong's ambivalent attitude strengthens its cultural hegemony.

**Keywords:** Reality TV Show, Host Ambivalence, Representation, Multicultural Discourse, South Korea

## 1 Introduction

Since the South Korean government adopted a multicultural policy in 2006, television programs showcasing immigrants have emerged. These television programs are typically reality TV shows that feature foreign immigrants as their main characters (Keung Jung, 2019). Between 2005 and 2020, several television stations in Korea produced approximately 20 immigrant reality TV shows. To further emphasize cultural diversity, the producers of the shows focused on stories about the daily lives of immigrant participants in Korea. Their interactions with the local community also received considerable camera attention (Istad et al., 2022). With the increased appearance of immigrants on television, there has also been a greater representation of immigrants and the discourse of multiculturalism on television.

Earlier studies on Korean immigrant reality TV programs have tended to focus on how participants' spontaneous reactions shape the show's discourse [2], [3], [4], [5], [6]. But they are giving little attention to the host's role. In many cases, studies have prioritized unscripted participant expression and treated the host as peripheral (Lorenzo-Dus & Blitvich, 2013). Basically, reality TV shows rely on their hosts to maintain control (PAVEL, 2024). Although reality TV shows are often claimed to be unscripted, they are not entirely free. The reality TV show production team appoints a host who manages the production process for the show to run as planned. The host's control in the production process includes aspects related to how they ask questions, respond to discussions with participants, and create an atmosphere appropriate to the context of the situation. With such dominant control, a reality TV show's host can steer the production team's discussions in the desired direction.

This study concerns the role of the immigrant reality TV show *My Neighbor, Charles* (MNC) host, Hong Seok Cheon, who played a significant ideological role as a regular host. MNC has technically used three hosts to guide studio discussions. While the other two hosts have changed four or five times, Hong Seok Cheon has remained irreplaceable. This study assumes that Hong—with his identity as a native Korean with extensive social connections with foreign immigrants—has a magnetic effect that attracts a large audience to the program.

In the show, Hong is more active than the two co-hosts sitting next to him. Hong has been presented to the viewers as an expert in Korean culture since the beginning. Viewers can easily feel that Hong's main task is to

explain Korean cultural norms to migrant participants. As a native Korean, Hong's explanations carry authority and help define what constitutes "proper" Korean culture. Before Hong, this role was given to foreign immigrants who had already assimilated into Korean society. The reason was that they were considered credible as cultural bridges. The shift in strategy, from adapted immigrants to native Korean, shows that MNC feel the need to include native Koreans when explaining Korean cultural norms to immigrant participants.

This study highlights the discursive role of Hong Seok-cheon as a cultural mediator. In multicultural media contexts, cultural mediators play an important role in facilitating understanding between different cultural groups. Cultural mediation involves interpreting social norms, translating cultural meanings, and clarifying differences [9]. Cultural mediators help explain to those who may not share the same cultural framework, negotiating misunderstandings that arise from cultural differences [10], [11]. However, mediation is not a neutral process. Mediators belong to the dominant group and tend to reproduce power relations by framing their own culture as normative, superior, or more desirable. This often results in the subtle marginalization of minority cultures. This study argues that Hong plays this role by positioning Korean cultural norms as the standard within the show's multicultural setting.

## 2 Literature Review

More recent studies have shown that television program hosts play a role in shaping viewers' interpretations of a particular culture, case, issue, or social discourse. Rebecca Burditt (2019) conceptualizes reality TV as a constructed genre in which hosts contribute to 'shaping the real'. Arulchelvan Sriram (2019) also emphasizes that hosts function as authoritative interpreters who reinforce cultural norms. These two studies show that hosts play an important role in mediating meaning. Zhang Qiying (2022) argues that good hosts are influential meaning-makers. Ruth A. Deller (2019) also highlights that some hosts play hybrid role as both mediators and celebrities.

Other studies show that from the start host's role was intentionally regulating discourse. Martin Hájek, Daniel Frantál, and Kateřina Simbartlová (2021) show how hosts frame judgment and at the same time can make uncomfortable situations become entertainment. Altman Yuzhu Peng [17] shows that hosts can reproduce dominant ideologies through interpretations and legitimated viewpoints.

Previous studies shows that hosts shape discourse. However, they see them as generic narrative agents. Study focuses on their role in multicultural mediation contexts is still limited. Existing studies not yet examine how hosts interact with migrant participants. This study is to fill in that gap. Therefore, it addresses this gap by examining how the role of Hong Seok-cheon goes beyond merely hosting into a cultural mediator. Specifically, it studies how Hong interprets and negotiates cultural differences.

## 3 Methods

This study uses close reading and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine Hong's use of language in reinforcing power relations between Korean cultural norms and migrant participants. The aim of CDA is to analyze the use of language to show "manipulation strategies, legitimization, consent formation, and other discursive methods to influence people's thoughts (and indirectly actions) for the benefit of those in power. In CDA, it is assumed that "those in positions of power will strive to disseminate discourse throughout society that serves their own interests" [18], [19], [20].

The analysis highlights the host's role as a cultural mediator. Ways of how Hong explains norms, evaluates behavior, and offers advice to participants are the focus. For data, 21 episodes of MNC that aired between 2020 and 2023 were selected. This period was chosen because full episodes were accessible online. We also focusing on episodes involving mixed-marriage couples between Koreans and non-Koreans that exhibited greater cross-cultural interaction. Between 2020-2023, there are 71 episodes featured mixed-married couples. At the end, this study identified 21 episodes in which the host's discursive role was most evident.

## 4 Results and Discussion

Hong Seok-cheon is important figure that shapes *My Neighbor, Charles* as immigrant reality TV show. His presence as a regular host gives the show a sense of its style. Before he joined, the show felt formal. His emotional reactions—such as crying—make the show feel more relatable. Combine with entertainment, he also explains Korean cultural practices and gives advice to participants. He does this using jokes, gestures, and body language. The production team dramatize moments with visual effects, such as flames to show anger or Confucian symbols

when he gives cultural advice (Figure 1). His nickname, “Hongromon,” materializes his image as cultural commentator. He entertains, guides, and interprets cross-cultural interaction which making him reliable figure in how audiences experience the show.



Figure 1. Episodes 272 and 418

Source: YouTube channel @KBS World TV (My Neighbor, Charles)

#### 4.1 Hong as a Cultural Mediator

The analysis shows that Hong’s role as a cultural mediator operates across two interrelated dimensions: (1) assimilative mediation and (2) conflict mediation (Table 1). Table 1 shows that cultural mediation in MNC is influenced by cultural hierarchy and selective negotiation.

Table 1. Categorization of Hong’s Role as Cultural Mediator

Normative–Assimilative mediator	Positions Korean culture as a standard and encourages migrant participants to adapt accordingly.
Conflict mediator	Mediates intercultural tensions but tends to support Korean perspectives.

Hong has served as a cultural mediator who interprets the immigrant experience. While responding to participants’ stories, Hong actively frames how these stories should be understood within the context of Korean cultural norms. As a normative-assimilative mediator, Hong’s mediating role is performed through several recurring strategies, such as explaining Korean cultural concepts, evaluating participant behavior, and offering advice. These discursive actions position Hong as a cultural authority who translates Korean social expectations into accessible meanings for migrant participants.

The aspect of Korean culture that Hong most frequently highlights are respect for elders (*dongbang yeui jiguk*, 동방예의지국). In Korea’s hierarchical society, how one treats elders determines whether they are regarded as good citizens. This includes giving priority to elders, preserving their dignity, and expressing affection toward them. Hong praises participants who treat elders in their Korean families with respect and “scolds” those who are insensitive or reluctant to be kind. For example, Hong praises Jay (ep. 293) and Malika (ep. 343) for explicitly expressing their closeness to their in-laws. Jay was praised as a rare, good son-in-law (*what kind of son-in-law is that~ Korean sons-in-law would never do that, but an American son-in-law goes and does it!*) and Malika was affirmed as deserving of being a beloved daughter-in-law after she praised her in-laws (*very well said, Malika. The elders would love hearing that*). Hong also praised Andy (ep. 272) and Stephani (ep. 397) for taking the initiative to gift their Korean in-laws.

In a different episode, Hong criticized and taught participants who didn’t understand how Korean society treats elders. Hong taught Zachary (ep. 290) about the concept of *nunchi*—or the sensitivity to read situations—when Zachary remained silent while his father-in-law massaged his shoulders and neck. What *nunchi* means is this: *when your father-in-law gives you a massage like that, Zachary should say, ‘Oh! Dad, I’ll do it for you,’ and return the favor by giving him a massage. That’s what Nunchi is*. In episode 335, Hong scolds Dave for deliberately refusing to yield to his father-in-law during an arm-wrestling match and accuses him of lacking social sensitivity (*Aigoo... seriously, Dave! You’ve got no sense at all*).

Hong’s structured mediation in those episodes defines the proper behavior that migrant participants should

engage in. We may see that through his assimilation-oriented advice, Hong simplifies a complex cultural concept, such as respect for elders and *nunchi*, into a normative expectation. His explanation not only educates the participant but also implicitly establishes prescriptive guidance on how to adapt in Korea. Here, Hong position assimilation as the primary pathway to successful integration into the host country.

**Table 2.** Other Episodes Reflecting Hong’s Discursive Role

Episode Number	How Hong Mediates	Hong’s statement
Ep. 234	Portraying Korea as a country that helps people become better versions of themselves.	“There are a lot of people who used to act like kids in the U.S. but have really grown up since coming to Korea.”
Ep. 238	Hong supports the eastern (Korea) postpartum system and criticizes Jeff’s western way for letting his Korean wife experience baby blues.	“In the UK, the Princess Royal goes out with her baby the very next day—or may be the day after that—after giving birth. In the East, that’s unthinkable. The cold wind will get in, and later your bones will ache! You must know exactly what you’re doing!”
Ep. 241	Hong critiques Laura’s egalitarian stance as too rigid to be practiced, while at the same time she is living in her Korean mother-in-law’s house.	Hong: “Mother, let me highlight something essential. The apartment you’re living in right now—who owns it?” Mother-in-law: “I own it.” Hong: “Then does your son and daughter-in-law at least pay rent?” Mother-in-law: “No, they don’t.” Hong: “These... these people...” (in an irritated tone)
Ep. 272	Frames Korean family norms as standard by criticizing marriage without informing parents.	“Still, marriage is the most important thing. You should ask for permission, introduce her, and get their blessing beforehand.”
Ep. 273	Affirmation of respect for elders by praising those who treat their fathers-in-law well.	“From a daughter-in-law’s perspective, being loved by her father-in-law is considered a lovely and admirable response. Chan-chan is doing very well.”
Ep. 296	Emphasizing the expression of filial piety and family hierarchy.	“Shouldn’t there at least be an envelope (of money) for grandfather? Something must come out. Ah~ but from what I see, in Umman’s case, it’s all about words. No action—just words. Well, they say a single word can pay back a thousand debts.
Ep. 343	Rewards the performance of Korean norms by praising participants for appropriately complimenting their in-laws.	Malika: “Don’t you think we look alike? We do, right? pretty like my mother-in-law, and tall like my father-in-law.” Hong: “Hey! Well said. The elders would love hearing that.”
Ep. 344	Promotes adaptation through culturally coded <i>ago</i> to build relationships with mother-in-law	“You should try being a little cute with your mother-in-law.
Ep. 362	Reinforcing the cultural superiority of Korean food	Hong: How’s Korean food? Hedi: I live in Korea because of the food. Hong: Exactly! Once you fall for Korean food, there’s no way out~

Hong’s role as a mediator is not neutral. His explanations consistently align with Korean values, especially when there are intercultural conflicts in the participant’s multicultural family. In such intercultural conflicts, it mostly occurred due to the culturally different perspectives that participants and their Korean family members hold. Acting as a conflict mediator, Hong somehow finds a way to intervene and reinforce his value as a Korean. Hong strongly disagreed with Jeff’s (ep. 238) French-style parenting practice, then frames Korean family parenting style as standard, as he asked rhetorically, “can you really say that raising a child in the French way is better than doing it

like that (your mother-in-law’s parenting style)?” Hong also showed his firm stance on traditional parental approval in terms of marriage when he heard that Andy (ep. 272) married his Korean wife without his parents’ approval (*oh... I don’t really like this kind of culture*). *You should get permission first, don’t you think?* Episode 387 highlighted the long-standing and complicated ancestral rite (*jesa*) which Stefi wants not to follow even though her Korean family insists. Hong then suggested to Stefi and her husband to simplify the *jesa* ritual. Here, Hong bridges the gap between Stefi’s in-laws’ desire to continue the *jesa* ritual and Stefi’s refusal to participate in the ritual preparation process. Hong taught Stefi how to conform to Korean traditions without having to completely put aside her personal views that non-Korean should not be forced to attend Korean family ancestral rites. His suggestion reinforces the importance of family hierarchy and collective decision-making in Korean culture. It is clearly shown that Hong’s mediation functions as a mechanism through which cultural norms are normalized within the show.

#### 4.2 Ambivalent Mediator: Questioning and Reframing Cultural Norms

While Hong frequently reinforces Korean cultural norms, the study also identifies moments where he adopts a critical stance toward those norms. Hong does not always position himself as defending Korean families and only criticizes participants. He challenges rigid traditions, questions discriminatory assumptions, and expresses support for immigrant participants. For example, in episode 302, Hong responds to a Korean father-in-law who distrusts his Uzbek son-in-law. He was afraid that Alex (his son-in-law) would return to Uzbekistan and not come back. Instead of supporting his father-in-law’s concerns, Hong reframed the issue by stating that “*people who intend to leave will leave anyway*,” regardless of their nationality. He further challenges the perception of Uzbekistan as threatening by emphasizing that such assumptions are unreasonable (*what’s very special about Uzbekistan? Oh dear, better hop on a plane, hahaha*). This response shifts the discourse from cultural difference to individual behavior, thereby rejecting the idea that immigrant identity inherently carries risk. In doing so, Hong disputes the dominant narrative that depicts immigrants as culturally unsuitable. This is further confirmed by a scene showing Alex’s warm attitude towards his mother-in-law, as opposed to the stereotypical cold behavior of his father-in-law (*from the mother’s perspective, she sees such a caring man like this for the first time*). Hong’s statement implies that Alex’s warm attitude is rare among Korean men and reveals the limitations of traditional Korean patriarchal society.

Similarly, in episode 264, Hong criticizes the patriarchal structure of the *jesa* ritual by taking sides with Aliona and stating that such practices “*should be changed*.” This stance is not only a form of solidarity with immigrant participants but also a critique of Confucian traditions. In another moment of the same episode, Hong scolds Aliona’s Korean husband for not helping her with housework and taking care of their children. In a joking but sharp tone, Hong told Aliona’s husband that he is an “*idiot!*”. Although humorous, this reprimand serves as a cultural criticism that highlights the common assumption that men do not need to be involved in domestic responsibilities. In episode 254, Hong praised Sara, a participant from India, for her courage in standing up to discriminatory remarks from a Korean resident. Some Koreans have called Indians dirty for eating with their hands, even though they use their fingers when eating vegetable wrap. Hong’s stance appears heavily laden with ideological undertones, as he is essentially criticizing racist attitudes by drawing on the context of how vegetable wraps are eaten. In Korean dining etiquette, eating directly with one’s hands is not entirely acceptable, as there is a cultural significance attached to using spoons and chopsticks as eating utensils [21].

**Table 3.** Episodes Showing Hong’s Ambivalences

Episode Number	Why It Shows Hong’s Ambivalence	Hong’s statement
Ep. 235	Criticizing the Korean mother’s approach to her teenage child and affirming the friendly approach adopted by the New Zealand father.	“I really like your dad’s solution. Did his advice help you?”
Ep. 264	Criticizing the arrogance of Korean husbands who expect their wives to do and help with everything. He is challenging patriarchal norms within Korean culture.	“You’re saying you take off your socks and put them on the dining table? You’ve got some nerve.”
Ep. 317	Challenges the stereotype of Daegu men as emotionally distant by praising Raheel’s Korean husband as a lovely husband.	“Are you a Daegu guy? A Daegu guy acting like that?”
Ep. 328	Challenging Korean seniority culture in a multicultural context.	“KBS does not endorse (toxic) senior-junior relationships.”

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Ep. 330	Hong explains that Koreans may need time to understand the differences. He is reducing tension while still normalizing the Korean perspective.	“When it comes to different things, at first Koreans may take a little time to understand.”
Ep. 387	Suggests modifying <i>Jewish</i> practices rather than rejecting them. He is promoting compromise between tradition and change.	“This might be a good opportunity to simplify the ancestral rituals a bit—cutting back on the frequency and talking it over with your in-laws. They don’t seem like the type to be overly rigid. Whether you cook all the food yourself or buy some ready-made dishes, making a few adjustments can help you navigate the situation wisely. If you refuse outright, the elders will feel hurt.”

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By encouraging participants to conform to Korean norms while also highlighting flaws in Korean culture, Hong showed that he works within ambivalence. He not only upholds tradition, but also does not completely reject it. Instead, he moves between both positions. This dual role reflects what Homi K. Bhabha describes as ambivalence: a condition where people living within dominant system both accept and oppose the values of that system [22]. Bhabha’s theory helps explain that ambivalence is not a flaw but a structural feature of cultural discourse. Dominant norms endure through repetition, but each repetition also opens opportunities for new interpretations. Hong’s humor, emotional expressions, and advice illustrate this dynamic. His jokes ease the pressure to conform, while subtly guiding participants to embrace Korean ways. His critiques must be understood as a strategy to highlight gaps in the Korean culture, but not to overturn it. Hong’s ambivalence, then, is the very condition that allows him to function as both a guide and a gatekeeper in the show’s cultural negotiations.

Public figures such as Hong function as hegemonic apparatuses that produce social “consent” to dominant values. For example, when Hong affirms the norms of family hierarchy, he reinforces traditional hegemony. However, when he criticizes discrimination against immigrants, he indirectly opens the door to reject the dominant discourse. Ambivalence becomes a space for the media to reinforce and undermine the dominant discourse. This explains that ideological power does not operate coercively but rather through representations that appear neutral, rational, and morally based.

Hong’s ambivalence perhaps makes the show feel relatable for a cosmopolitan Korean society that still holds on to its long tradition as a monocultural country. In ep. 330, Hong explains that Koreans may need time to understand cultural differences and asked Niousha (a mixed Korean-Iran) to be patient with her Korean adjustment rather than questioning why her Korean family may be less open to foreigners like her. Hong appears supportive, but his mediation still centers on Korean cultural comfort as the main standard. In episode 317, Hong is extremely happy when he discovers that Raheel’s softhearted Korean husband is from Daegu, a province known for being stiff and emotionally distant from their family. Hong’s expression reminded everyone that he does not always reinforce fixed cultural assumptions. Hong remains one of those who control how cultural tensions are discussed, even when he appears to challenge dominant views.

### 4.3 Humor as a Tool: Lighthearted Delivery but Strong Cultural Messages

Reality TV programs need hosts who entertain with humor and jokes. Jokes here are more than just making people laugh. They are an act of building solidarity (Morizumi, 1997; AoRan & Malashenko, 2024; Natarajan et al., 2023). They can take the form of facial expressions, tone of voice, and eye contact. In most episodes, Hong consistently responds to what the participant says by making a joke about it. When everyone in the studio laughs, it enhances the positive image by acknowledging the intelligence and truth in Hong’s statements. Morizumi (1997) also adds that the host’s jokes are intended not only to entertain those in the studio but also to entertain viewers at home. Gün and Kaya [26] also emphasized that the structure of a talk show is based on the interaction between the host and the participants. For that role, TV producers mostly choose a host who is energetic, famous, and able to draw emotional openness. The host will increase interactivity and give a sense of realism not only in the studio but also to viewers at home. The hosts are not merely acting as an intermediary between the producer and the audience; they serve as a mediator among the audience themselves, representing the audience in their interactions with the participants.

Compared to other hosts, Hong clearly expresses his emotions. He cries when watching touching segments,

widens his eyes and raises his eyebrows to show surprise, and pounds the table or points at participants with his finger when expressing anger. All of this is part of the humorous style he maintains as a host on MNC. Hong uses his sense of humor to reinforce his authority as a cultural mediator. In episodes featuring intense intercultural conflicts, Hong's mediation—spiced with jokes—makes the process seem less intimidating, especially when met with laughter. For example, Hong responds to Daniel (ep. 382), who criticizes her father-in-law's habit of eating on the sofa. Hong jokingly defends the father-in-law with a sense of sarcasm by saying that eating in such a way has its own "enjoyment." (*Food tastes better when you eat it on the sofa or in bed—are you trying to take that joy away from him? Daniel... who do you think you are?*) The laughter from others in the studio confirms that Hong's comment is accepted as a form of humor.

Hong also confronted Andy (272), Chanchan's Korean husband, and Umman (296) with his playful comments by teasing them for Andy's poor academic performance (*if that's the case, then your grades must not have been very good, Andy*), Chanchan's husband blind love (*hey! How can you say that?! All the men in Korea are watching right now!*), and Umman's inability to eat pork (*It'd be nice if you ate some pork skin, haha*). *Umman... you'll really go downhill fast! You've got to eat everything, stay healthy*). We see that Hong's playful comments both question the participants' preferences and point to Korean culture. Hong's remarks reflect how language is used to gain cultural authority. Humor plays an important role in this process. By framing normative expectations as jokes, Hong reduces potential tension while still conveying evaluative judgments. Laughter from other hosts further legitimizes Hong's remarks as it transforms them into socially acceptable forms of cultural instruction.

## 5 Conclusion

According to the study's findings, Hong Seok-cheon's role as a host in MNC shows an ambivalent pattern in mediating multicultural discourse. His mediation tends to put Korean cultural norms as the primary reference. This indicates that the construction of multiculturalism in MNC still leans toward an assimilative direction. Cultural difference is managed rather than equally negotiated. However, Hong occasionally expresses critical views toward rigid traditions and discriminatory attitudes. Nevertheless, these acts remain selective, limited, and do not fundamentally challenge the dominant cultural norms. This study contributes to the study of television media by showing that multicultural discourse promoting inclusivity is not only determined by the representation of participants, but also by the way the hosts manage it. Further research is recommended to explore more different hosting styles and media formats.

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