

# In South Korea, tourists in search of the perfect man

Published August 06, 2023 at 5:00 PM



*In South Korea, tourists in search of the perfect man. - iStock / Leonardo Patrizi*

Influenced by the romanticism of Kdramas broadcast on Netflix, European and American women come to Seoul to find love. Some are disappointed, others find their husbands. They recount their lives as couples, fantasized by others on social networks.

By Léa Baron

When she began her investigation, Min Joo Lee thought she was following [Kculture](#) fans on a trip to [Seoul](#). But the academic soon discovered a different reality. "The young women I met in my hostel would get up at 12pm and start their day at 4pm," says the assistant professor of Korean Studies at California's Occidental College. Min Joo Lee quickly realized that these tourists were in fact spending their time... on Tinder. "They were only going out to meet men in bars or clubs, not to visit Korea."

## THE MAJORITY COME WITH THE IDEA THAT KOREANS ARE BETTER THAN THE MEN THEY MEET IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY

Between 2017 and 2018, the researcher interviewed 123 young women, all in their twenties. Most came from Western Europe (France, England, Germany). A few from Russia, Canada and the United States. Many of them are actually looking for a boyfriend with whom they can maintain a relationship, even from a distance," observes Min Joo Lee, who is now continuing her study. And if it works out, they see themselves married to a Korean." These young women think they find in them a masculine ideal. "The majority come with the idea that Koreans are, in any case, better than the men they met in their own country or with whom they were dating", stresses the academic.

Teresa, 30, from Germany, thinks so too. Her blue eyes still full of stars, she tells us about her recent "princess wedding" in Korea with Hyukjoon, 29, whom she met three years ago. He's different from the men I dated back home," she says. He's gentler, more respectful of the family in particular." Respectful, romantic, caring, protective. This idyllic image is in fact widely spread by [Korean series on Netflix](#). The international popularity of Kdramas began in the 2000s," observes researcher Min Joo Lee. At first, they were more popular with Japanese and Vietnamese fans. Ten years later, these series are reaching a Western audience, thanks to online platforms that ensure their wider distribution outside Asia." There's also the growing influence of [Kpop with BTS](#) and its video clips.

## WHEN KDRAMAS RHYMES WITH DREAMS



Song Hye-kyo, Lee Do-Hyun in the drama "The Glory" © Netflix

The rise of Korean culture, the famous Hallyu wave, is thus conquering the world and attracting more and more female tourists. According to the [Korean Statistical Information Service](#), in 2019 - just before Covid - almost 10 million women traveled to South Korea, compared with 6.8 million men. That's four times more than 15 years ago. Of course, it's difficult to accurately count the number of women who came purely in search of love. But their enthusiasm is also reflected in the popularity of the TikTok and Youtube accounts created by a foreign woman in a relationship with a Korean man. Their posts rack up millions of views. And some even earn a living from it.

"When I share content about Korea, especially those with my husband, it's a hit!" admits Teresa with a smile. The result: four million views for her wedding video on her TikTok account [@tereasa.kwon](#). Through the messages she receives, she understands that she leads a life "that many would dream of having". Teresa isn't the only one to be the envy of others. Mélanie, 27, realized this when she started sharing her daily life in Korea with her husband Gunil on her TikTok [@la\\_vie\\_en\\_kimchi](#).

Now the parents of little Theo, they met in Seoul in 2017 while she was traveling with friends.

Mélanie receives disconcerting messages: "How did you do it? Where can I find a Korean?" "My husband was nothing more than a fantasy object," jokes this Frenchwoman, who nevertheless makes no attempt to idealize her relationship. "I realized that these Internet users had to watch Kdramas. They're young and don't necessarily realize what they're saying."

## **MY HUSBAND IS NOT THE ROMANTIC KOREAN OF KDRAMAS. IT'S NOT REALITY!**

For Manal, it's becoming a "fetish". On her TikTok account [@ladymanaal](#) (followed by 1.5 million subscribers), the 23-year-old Frenchwoman has decided to show very little of her 32-year-old husband Junwoo. Coming in 2019 out of curiosity for the country, her stay was supposed to last 23 days. Manal stayed for six months. In the meantime, she met her future husband in Seoul. After a "match" on a dating app, she disconnects. They meet again by chance in a nightclub. I don't blame those who fantasize and come here looking for this masculine ideal," she says. "In the end, it shows that the country's soft power is working. But my husband isn't the romantic Korean of the Kdramas. That's not reality!"

## **KNOWING THE DIFFERENCE**

Our interviewees keep telling us: Koreans are men like any others, living in [a society that is still very patriarchal](#), with strong family traditions. At first, Manal's husband's friends were "shocked" by their relationship "because I was the first of my group of friends to go out with a foreigner", confides Junwoo. "It was unusual." While they sometimes remain a curiosity, international couples are becoming more numerous than before. According to government figures, they accounted for just 1.6% of marriages in 1993. After peaking at 13% in 2005, they have stabilized in recent years at 7 or 8%.

In 2022, out of 191,690 marriages, 12,007 were between a Korean man and a foreign woman. That's three times as many as between a Korean woman and a foreigner. "I feel less isolated than I used to," admits Sarah, casting a knowing glance at her

husband Kyuho. This thirty-something couple met in a Seoul bar 12 years ago. She, a Canadian, had come to teach English for a year. He was on weekend leave during his compulsory military service in the country. It was love at first sight, and four years later they married. "In 2011, our type of couple was quite rare," explains Sarah. "People looked at us a lot in the street because the population was even more homogeneous. As soon as you were a foreigner, you were bound to get noticed."

Today, they share their lives on their Youtube channel [2hearts1seoul](#), which has almost 210,000 subscribers. Their audience records: the video of their wedding, with over 1 million views, and the one on the story of how they met. This friendly couple also show the country from their Canadian-Korean point of view, and poke fun at their cultural differences. But not everyone's story is as beautiful as Sarah and Kyuho's.

### **AS THE ELDEST SON OF A WIDOW, HE WAS TECHNICALLY IMMUTABLE IN KOREA.**

This idealization of the Korean man through TV series or his popularity on social networks also puts pressure on men, who turn to women from elsewhere. There are single men who are approaching thirty, the marriageable age in Korea. Those who prefer a "less demanding" foreigner to a Korean woman who can expect them to meet high social standards. "These couples are often men who have only one parent, not enough money, or not the educational or professional pedigree to marry a Korean woman", explains Ida Daussy.

This 53-year-old Frenchwoman has had the experience. She has lived in Seoul for over 30 years. Ida Daussy is a professor at Sookmyung Women's University, an administrator at the Franco-Korean Chamber of Commerce and a media columnist. At the age of 22, during her business studies, she came to learn the language, then thought of returning to France to finish her doctorate. "Except that I met the father of my two children, who was charming," she recounts. "He started talking about marriage. Being the eldest son of a widow, he was technically immariable in Korea." In 1993, a year after they met, they got married. "The classic plan," she says.

The couple's relationship, a novelty at the time, aroused such national curiosity that it became the subject of a comedy TV series in which she starred, launching her

career. 16 years later, she divorced her husband. From French curiosity to pariah. She tells her story in two books, "Ida, au pays du matin calme" (ed. Lattès) and "Corée à cœur" (ed. Ateliers des Cahiers). "Suddenly, I was the bad Westerner again, even though I was in a way the victim of the affair", she recalls. Today, back in the national spotlight, she is once again extremely popular.

## A DIVERSITY THAT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY

Many of the Franco-Korean couples around her have been disappointed by the arrival of a child, as they approach forty or because of cultural differences that are not always easy to manage. Among the witnesses to her survey with whom Min Joo Lee keeps in touch, two out of three finally broke up with their Korean boyfriend after a few months. For these young foreigners, Korean reality sometimes rhymes with disillusionment and bad encounters. The influence of the Kdramas and the feeling of security in the country reinforce the naivety of these young women. Some end up as victims of sexual abuse, drugged with GHB, the so-called "rapist's drug".

## **LONG-LASTING INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGES ARE RARE, BUT THEY DO EXIST**

Others experience the "white horse" phenomenon. The sexual fantasy of some Koreans for Western women. "They equate them with 'white horses' that they can 'ride' whenever they want, considering that they are at their disposal," explains researcher Min Joo Lee. Only to quickly let them down. There are good people everywhere, even if we're a long way from the Kdramas," insists Ida Daussy. International marriages that last are rare, but they do exist! For those interested.

By Léa Baron

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