



# When the alcohol flows in K-dramas

Léa Baron

**There isn't a Korean series without a scene where the characters drink and end up completely drunk, or even unconscious. This omnipresence of alcohol in fiction also reveals a particular socio-cultural reality in South Korea.**

She's a force to be reckoned with. And as popular as the *idols* with whom it shares the *K-drama* poster. Recognisable by its small, slender size and its green colour, the bottle of *soju* is internationally renowned. This rice alcohol, the most popular in South Korea and widely exported, has become so emblematic of the country that its bottle is available as pins or socks for tourists who arrived with the Korean cultural wave. Just like in their favourite *K-dramas*, they also drink *soju* in *BBQs* or *pojangmacha*,

(street restaurants) in Seoul.

"I would never have recognised this green bottle if I hadn't watched these Korean series," says Rubini Pasupathy with a smile. She is a professor of public health at the Health Sciences Centre at Texas Tech University in the United States.

In 2021, she published a study on the representation of alcohol consumption in *K-dramas*. The idea of her research came to her while watching Netflix. From *Squid Game* to *Crash landing on you*, via *Business Proposal* and *Itaewon Class*, there's always a moment when alcohol plays the leading role. This immediately caught her attention.

## Alcohol-related rituals

By analysing 96 hours from 8 series released in 2018, including *Something in the Rain*, *Radio Romance* and *What is wrong with secretary Kim*, Rubini Pasupathy observed that alcohol is referred to every 12.7 minutes on average. This recurrence reflects "*the cultural and social importance of alcoholic beverages in South Korea*", says the academic.

The rituals we see on screen are still rooted in Korean society, which is very respectful of social and age hierarchies. It is common to see a character offering a glass of *soju* as a mark of respect to an elder or someone of higher social status, following a particular protocol. The beverage must be poured with both hands, and younger people must turn their heads away as they drink. A glass of liqueur may also be drunk or poured at the grave of a deceased person.

When going out with friends or colleagues, it's common to have a three-stage evening: a drunken dinner, a toast with karaoke and a nightcap in a bar. It's an institution in the country.

It's easy to see how the average South Korean adult comes to consume almost 53 bottles of *soju* a year - or one a week - of alcohol over 20 proof. →



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This high figure from a report by National Tax Service and Customs has still fallen by 13% since 2017.

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**Refusing to drink is frowned upon**

Alcohol consumption is also an important ritual in the working environment, where it is part of a strong social pressure. In many series, we see the protagonists - employees and chiefs - get together at the end of the day for a drink or dinner. This is known as the *hoesik*, a special time for relieving stress and strengthening bonds within a team. In theory. In practice, everything irrevocably drives people to consume. Even outside working hours, it's frowned upon not to go or to refuse to drink. And it's impolite to leave someone's glass empty.

*"In reality, things are changing a little"*, says Eun-Jong (her first name has been changed), a 38-year-old Korean policewoman who has experienced this in her professional life.

*"Today, the younger generation can politely refuse a drink offered by a superior or an elder without being frowned upon. But people still make the joke that if you don't drink, you're not Korean." And the pressure is even greater on the women, as in the series Something in the Rain.*

It's during the *hoesik*



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where everyone is drinking, that the female characters are subjected to harassment, which they end up denouncing. Or when fiction meets reality. "Around 45% of all cases of work-related sexual harassment, including sexual harassment in the workplace, are reported to the police." Hawon Jung, former AFP correspondent in Seoul, reports in her book *Flowers of fire* (BenBella, 2023) on feminism in South Korea.

This subject, still taboo in this patriarchal society, remains little denounced and little shown in TV series.

### Binge drinking is widespread

With colleagues, friends or couples, in restaurants or at home, the characters drink beer, *soju* (the most popular) and wine (for the wealthier classes) without moderation. This *binge drinking*, which is also widespread in the country, inevitably leads the protagonists - men and women alike - to become inebriated, or even to end up in an alcoholic coma.

While South Korea's level of alcohol consumption is in line with the OECD average (7.7 litres/year of alcohol per person in 2021 thanks to COVID, compared with 9.5 in 2008), it is excessive. According to a 2016 report by the World Health Organisation, 30.5% of adults over the age of 65 drink were heavy drinkers, far more than in the United States, for example (26.1%).

This excessive consumption is reflected on the streets of Seoul by the presence of large numbers of drunken Koreans, unable to return home and thus at the mercy of the police.

Eun-Jung is regularly confronted with this. *"My colleagues and I joke about it, but we almost regret the curfew during Covid. Bars and restaurants closed at 10pm. That meant fewer drunken people in the street.*

*We were happy!"*

### Alcohol, the answer to everything

Alcohol abuse is part of a tolerant and permissive Korean culture. On screen, it is never criticised or seen in a negative light. It is often treated with humour to ridicule the characters or make them endearing.

In romantic comedies, it's the perfect opportunity for Prince charming to take care of his sweetheart, and rarely the other way round (*with the exception of manhwa and webtoon categorised as yaoi*).

It also helps to remove inhibitions from shy people, who are more inclined to open up to their crush, boss or friends in a very modest society. "Korean culture is such that you don't say things to each other directly or frankly at the risk of appearing impolite or rude," says Eun-Jong, the policewoman.

*"Alcohol helps to overcome these social conventions." "But it's also presented as a solution to all of life's difficulties in K-dramas," laments American academic Rubini Pasupathy.*

*"Every time the characters encounter a problem, such as a lovers' quarrel, family arguments, stress at work, the next scene shows them drinking."*

### A positive image of alcohol

In the ideal world of fiction, there is no such thing as a hangover. The characters return to work the next day refreshed and ready to go. The good news is that they never get behind the wheel after a drunken night out. There's always someone sober to drive them home. *"It's also very rare to see people arguing, getting drunk, or even vomiting,"* reports Rubini Pasupathy. So there are none of the abuses that sometimes occur in drunken situations. With a few exceptions, such as the sexual harassment denounced in *Something in the Rain*.

This positive portrayal of *binge drinking* and the publicity it receives around the world through the K-drama, worries the academic.

These series, which are widely watched by an audience of under-25s, could lead young people to mimic them and consider these behaviours to be "normal".



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THIS COLUMN  
Crash landing on you



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ABOVE Jungkook des BTS.

BELOW *Itaewon class*.



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Especially as *idols* also advertise these drinks.

Alcohol has also become the credo of many entertainment shows, where guests come to drink. BTS rapper Suga, for example, has launched his own online show with the evocative title *Suchwita, drinking time with Suga*, on which he invites friends and artists to exchange over a drink.

Each guest brings his or her own bottle, which is drunk during the show.

#### Live drinking

It's more or less the same concept as rapper Lee Young Ji's *My Alcohol Diary* broadcast on YouTube, where everyone ends up very emotional, even singer Jisoo from BlackPink, who is known for her restraint. The famous Korean gastronome Paik Jong-won also welcomes famous guests to his show *Paik's Spirit*, described on Netflix as follows: "*They talk about life, cooking, and alcohol, over a drink and some intoxicating food.*"

Not to mention *idols* like Jungkook from BTS, who drinks beer and highballs (a mixture of whisky and soda or another non-alcoholic drink) on his live broadcasts on the Weverse platform for fans. Like him, many young Koreans are crazy about whisky. Imports reached \$247 million in 2022, compared with \$175 million the previous year.



Lea Baron

ABOVE Photo of a street bar in Seoul, May 2023.

**A necessary discussion**

In 2021, the Korean Institute for Health Promotion studied 438 of these reality TV shows and 219 of the most-watched *K-dramas*. Each episode contained an average of 2.3 scenes involving alcohol.

And almost half of the 1,000 people questioned admitted that they felt like drinking while watching these programmes.

Public health professor Rubini Pasupathy points out that alcohol increases *"the risk of violence, falls and accidents. Not to mention the proven damage to health, with a higher risk of heart disease and stroke, diabetes.*

She hopes that the subject will not be romanticized, but treated as a serious societal problem.

Even though campaigns and policies are being run by the Korean government, attitudes are struggling to change.

*"We really should get rid of it in the country," insists policewoman Eun-jong. But most people think it's neither serious nor a danger."* ❀

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ABOVE *Something in the rain* .

BELOW The programme *Suchwita*, drinking time with Suga.



ALCOHOL IN K-DRAMAS

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