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North Koreans Through the Cinematic Eyes of South Korea

- A Comparative Analysis of 20 South Korean Films -

한국 영화를 통해 보는 북한 사람

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Abstract

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According to the Ministry of Unification, over 33,000 North Koreans have defected to South Korea since the separation of the Korean peninsula. Although these t'albungmin receive South Korean citizenship, "resettlement education," and financial assistance almost immediately upon their arrival, a large number of them continue to face severe difficulties due to their cultural and linguistic differences in contemporary South Korean society. At the same time, the South Korean cinema industry continues to release *division films* of various genres, garnering national and international attention for its Hollywood style action and unique backdrop of the divided Korean peninsula. How can these films allow us to understand the discrimination and challenges that *North Korean defectors* experience? What messages do South Korean *division films* deliver about *North Koreans*, and how do they portray the perspectives of South Koreans?

This study endeavors to combine the two different research fields of *North Korean* resettlement and *South Korean cinema* studies to understand the discrimination that *North Korean defectors* experience in South Korean society. Film and media studies is an effective method to examine how South Koreans' negative perceptions of *North Koreans* have been constructed: above any other platform, films serve as a metaphysical, audiovisual tool that delivers the human perspective in the most similar way to reality. Therefore, this study will examine how South Korean films have depicted *North Korean* characters, shedding light on the various prejudices and stereotypes that have been projected upon *North Koreans* on screen. Through comparing and analyzing 20 films produced by South Korean filmmakers, this study aims to highlight the ways in which cinematic representations of *North Koreans* reflect the conceptualization of *North Korean defectors* in South Korean society.

Chapter I demonstrates how this study will combine the two frameworks of film theory and qualitative research, unlike previous works, and Chapter II provides a historical overview of the division films along with major political changes among *inter-Korean relations*. This overview provides background context on the evolution of *division films* in South Korean cinematic history, separating each time period by their respective administration and political party. Chapter III gives an analysis of the North Korean characters in each division film, comparing their similarities and differences according to each genre. The chapter is divided into different categories of the division film, including espionage films, war films, and documentary films about North Korean defectors. With the collected analyses, Chapter IV describes interviews with North Korean defectors to examine the gap between South Korean and North Korean perceptions of North Koreans. The interview results provide an evaluation of the accuracy of North Korean characters in South Korean division films. Finally, Chapter V summarizes the various stereotypes and frameworks that South Korean filmmakers have used over the past decades, and explore what new efforts could be made in the future to create a more complex and nuanced North Korean character. Combining the interview results with the analysis of North Korean characters in South Korean *division films*, this chapter will propose ways forward for South Korean division films to present North Korean characters. Through these suggestions, this study aims to positively alter the perceptions of South Korean society towards North Korean defectors and contribute to the sociocultural integration of North and South Koreans.

Keyword: North Korean Defectors, Division Films, Inter-Korean Relations, South Korean Cinema

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Chapter I. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Motivation

Ever since I can remember, South Korean filmmakers have consistently been making films about North Korea. The first ever film about North Korea that I watched was *Crossing* (크로싱) (2008) by Taegyun Kim with my sisters, a film that portrays the challenges of a North Korean family in escaping the country. The plight of the North Korean children was unforgettable for my ten-year-old mind–the main protagonists Joon and his friend Mi-seon were even younger than us, but the sacrifices they made to care for each other in the North Korean concentration camp left a lasting impact on our minds.

However, every element of the film reminded us that it was simply fiction: the ex-football star background of the protagonist, sentimental music, and melodramatic scenes in which the characters kept erupting into tears convinced us that these events were part of a well-written story. For days after, we would reenact the father's lines to his son: "I bought your favorite chukgu-ppol (soccer ball)," we would repeat mirthfully, more immersed in the actor's awkward North Korean accent than the character's hardships. For us, the North Koreans in the film were fleeting, fictional beings that we had neither met in person nor could fully understand.

This line of thought continued in the following films that I watched. After attending the screening of Secretly, Greatly (은밀하게 위대하게) (2013) by Jang Cheol-soo with my little sister, we were enthralled by the star visuals and action of the North Korean spy characters in the film (played by Lee Hyun-woo and Kim Soo-hyun). Because the film presented a rapid spiral from the genre of comedy into dark action, our reaction to the film remained in the genre of comedy. Captivated by the charismatic fighting scenes of Lee and Kim, we were hardly impacted by the abrupt

and tragic ending of the characters; on the way home, our father had to scold us for insisting that we would marry North Korean spies when we grew up.

These films passed casually and perhaps too harmlessly over the surfaces of our consciousness. Although we were able to encounter the challenges that North Koreans faced when escaping to South Korea, they stayed behind the safety of the screen and faded away after the ending credits appeared. The films satisfied our expectations for action-packed entertainment, and that would suffice—one could hardly fathom the lives and thoughts of North Korean defectors who settled among us in South Korea.

Instead, it was through books that I discovered a more multilayered and inquisitive pathway into understanding the lives of North Koreans. The recordings of persecution that North Korean Christians endured in *The Red Christian* by Pastor Isaac, the harrowing memoir of *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* that described defector Kang Chol-Hwan's experience in North Korean labor camps, and *Dear Leader* by former North Korean poet laureate Jang Jin-sung were all equally unforgettable and more realistic than any of the films that I had encountered. Through the honest stories, I was moved to silent tears in my undergraduate dormitory room, and the issue of North Korean human rights became deeply rooted in my personal and academic motivations.

These questions continued to deepen as I began engaging with North Korean defectors in person during my internships at NGOs. As I assisted North Korean defectors in preparing for speech events and offered them one-on-one English classes, I was struck by how different the people that I met were from the characters that I had encountered in films. Many of the North Korean defectors that I spoke with were strong-minded and honest, slightly wary at first of South Korean hospitality, and more calculative and rational than any of the protagonists that I had seen in South Korean films. Some of them were crippled by survivor's guilt of leaving their family in North Korea, others striving to receive education and climb South Korea's class system, while a few insisted that they were "different"

from all the other North Korean defectors, but still didn't feel quite South Korean. Having witnessed this gap between the reality of North Koreans and fictional North Korean characters in South Korean films, I became compelled to pursue this research on analyzing South Korean films about North Koreans.

Although all North Korean defectors in South Korea receive South Korean citizenship, "resettlement education," and other financial assistance almost immediately upon their arrival, many continue to face severe difficulties in their resettlement. Studies have reported that North Koreans often struggle with mental health illnesses, experiencing discrimination based on their class, linguistic differences, and outsider status (Yang 2018). This issue has exacerbated over the years: according to the Ministry of Unification's report in 2020, the suicide rate of North Korean defectors climbed to a startling number of 10.1 percent, amounting to more than twice the suicide rate of the South Korean public (4.5 percent) (Park 2020).

There may be many reasons that North Korean defectors experience such hardships in adapting to South Korea, but one main cause is the "cultural otherness" that North Koreans experience in contemporary South Korean society. According to an article by Chun Kyung Ho, North Korean defectors in South Korea are "caught between the rhetoric of inclusion and exclusion" (Chun 2022). Even though they share the same ethno-national ideology as one minjok (nation), they are also seen as people from the "main enemy state." Chun's writings state that culture serves as a binding agent for a group of people, creating a sense of unity within the group and setting boundaries to exclude people who are not "us" (Chun 2022).

In the case of North Korean defectors, they are considered as cultural others due to the South Korean society's feelings of ambivalence towards unification. Even though unification is emphasized as a goal for the allegedly homogeneous nation, not many South Koreans are willing to accept the socioeconomic challenges that South Korea may have to endure as a developed and advanced country

(Chun 2022). To alleviate this dissonance, North Korean defectors have been turned into a cultural other: although they are ethnically the same, their cultural difference separates them from South Korean society.

Due to these issues, I am firmly convinced that it is necessary to examine the influence that South Korean films have on the perception of North Koreans. Among other factors, studies have proven that South Korean media plays an important role in constructing the cultural otherness of people. According to Bonnie Tilland's studies, "South Korea has been far from neutral" when portraying North Korea in its media, which was heavily influenced by its anti-communist ideology (Tilland 2021). In another study, Park Joowon revealed how the media representations of North Korean defectors have allowed for gendered normalization, leading to "structural violence in South Korea" (Park 2016). It has been often argued that films serve as a window to understand the collective perspectives of a nation or society: along with the mass proliferation of media, films about local sentiments have been effective in producing a "cosmopolitan memory" that shapes the public consciousness (Weiss 2021). For this reason, the platform of cinema was chosen as a subject of research to examine how it reflects the collective consciousness of South Koreans towards North Koreans.

To explore these ideas further, this research will examine how South Korean films have depicted North Korean characters, shedding light on the various prejudices, stereotypes, and phantasmatic perceptions that have been projected upon North Koreans on screen. Films can be used as a metaphysical, audiovisual tool to deliver the human perspective in the most similar way to reality: in this research, 20 films produced by South Korean filmmakers were gathered and analyzed to study the portrayal of North Koreans. The main research question is:

How are North Koreans viewed and portrayed in South Korean films? How do cinematic representations of North Koreans reflect the conceptualization of North Koreans in contemporary South Korea?

By examining the inaccurate or problematic representations of North Koreans in South Korean division films, this study will endeavor to narrow the gap between the reality of North Koreans with North Korean characters on screen and contribute to the sociocultural integration of the two Koreas. The division of the Korean peninsula has been a challenge in East Asian security since the end of the Cold War: some scholars have even termed the Cold War an "unfinished war" due to the ideological conflict in regions outside the US and Soviet Union, and the Korean peninsula has become a main source for these issues (Chen 2010). In light of the ongoing threats to global peace and security, and the challenges that North Korean defectors face in their resettlement to South Korea, I believe that this research is not only timely but also highly relevant.

1.2 Literature Review

This research is grounded on two types of existing studies: film analysis of North Koreans in South Korean films and the philosophical concepts of imagined communities and absolute hospitality.

The Portrayal of North Koreans in South Korean Films

Research about the portrayal of North Koreans in South Korean films have ranged from the role of the divided nation in South Korean blockbusters to a comparison of international films that convey North Korean ideals to a foreign audience (Lee 2016a). Some scholars have focused on the way that films present alternate histories of the Korean War, reimagining instances in which South

Koreans and North Koreans reunite, while others have analyzed documentary films on North Korea (Sun 2015). In particular, one paper was most similar to this research topic, giving a general overview of the evolution of North Korean characters from villain to superhero over the years (Husarski 2019). While these writings have provided detailed insights into the depiction of DPRK in South Korean cinematic history, they have been limited to studying the general narratives of each film rather than detailed cinematic elements.

Unlike previous writings, this research takes on a new perspective by combining historical analysis with film theory. Although past research on division films has focused on the historical backgrounds of significant films, the writings do not touch upon basic cinematic codes such as the soundtrack, cinematography, mise-en-scene, or editing in their observations. With a minor in film and media studies, the researcher's undergraduate studies in film theory were utilized to give a more in-depth interpretation of the cinematic elements used in each film. This allowed for a more detailed observation of the intentions that filmmakers had when constructing North Korean characters in their films.

Additionally, the perspectives of North Koreans were incorporated into the conclusion of the research by using in-depth interviews with film clips. Although this technique has not been used in research concerning North Korean communities, there are many instances in sociology where video clips have been used to observe the reaction of research participants. For example, in a book titled "Preschool in three cultures revisited: China, Japan, and the United States," researchers conducted a comparative study of the teaching methods in Chinese, Japanese, and American preschools by observing each country's preschool for a week and selecting a typical day at the school to film (Tobin 2011). After editing the day's records into a 30-minute video, they rewatched it with the teachers, documenting their responses to the video. Another example is *A Film Unfinished* (2010) by Yale Hersonski, which documents the reaction of five Jews to a propaganda film produced by German soldiers during World War II. All five participants in the documentary are Jewish survivors of the

Warsaw Ghetto, and their reactions allow Hersonski to examine and portray the difference between the German and Jewish perspective on the Holocaust.

These research methods provided motivation for this research to incorporate film clips into the interviews as well. As I watched the video clips with the North Korean defectors, I was able to record their vivid, tangible responses, promoting spontaneous questions and discussions on the fictional archetypes of North Koreans in South Korean films.

Philosophical Concepts of Imagined Communities and Absolute Hospitality

Finally, the philosophical concepts of Benedict Anderson and Hyunkyeong Kim were also used to guide and construct research ideas on how North Koreans should be approached in South Korean films. This was to take the research further from simply observing and analyzing films with North Korean characters to understanding the perspectives of South Koreans on North Koreans. To study the way that South Koreans view North Koreans and promote social integration among the two groups, this research includes discussion of whether North Koreans should be understood as brothers from one nation, or fellow humans deserving of respect.

In his book *Imagined Communities*, Anderson conducts research on the way that media creates imagined communities in an individual's social psyche (Anderson 2016). He focuses especially on the power of written word such as books, newspapers, and magazines, as well as governmental tools such as public education, the map, or museums to shape a mass audience in the public sphere through images and ideologies (Anderson 2016). This framework was applied throughout the research process to study the influence that South Korean films may have in shaping national identity, promoting South Korean ideology, and strengthening the viewer's desire for unity between North and South Korea.

Meanwhile, *People, Places, and Hospitality* (2015) by Hyunkyeong Kim reflects upon the evolution in human relations in modern society. Although it is not an ethnography on North Koreans, the book describes the concept of "absolute hospitality," explaining that in modern society everyone is born with a duty to treat all human beings with hospitality and respect. This idea of "absolute hospitality" was used in the conclusion to examine the relationship between North and South Koreans, suggesting a better direction that South Korean films could strive towards through their portrayal of North Koreans.

1.3 Research Methodology

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the main qualitative research methods of this study are film analysis and in-depth interviews. For film analysis, 20 South Korean films on North Koreans were selected and organized according to the historical timeline of South and North Korean relations. To provide background context for those who are unfamiliar with South Korean cinema, the second chapter starts with an overview of these films listed in chronological order of release, explaining the political tensions and government policies between South and North Korea during each relevant period. These films were comparatively analyzed with a specific focus on the recurring themes and portrayal of North Korean characters.

After summarizing the characteristics of North Korean characters in each of these films, the themes were categorized into different sections, observing how North Koreans were differently portrayed as spies, soldiers, refugees, and foreigners. Throughout the analysis, Bonnie Tilland's framework of visual sociology and anthropology was utilized to understand how movies can portray reality "through narrative content and symbolic visual data" (Tilland 2021). The research also includes sources from multiple books, journals, and historical documents in the SNU Central library and online archives that describe the history of inter-Korean relations and South Korean cinema.

Because this research is grounded on the analytical methodology of film theory, the content uses qualitative descriptions of specific film scenes or script lines to analyze the scenes by their duration, pace, editing, and more. In film theory, scholars interpret cinematic meaning through the concepts of narrative, apparatus, and ideology: narrative analysis focuses on the visual information within the multiple sequences and edited cuts, while the study of camera apparatus examines the use of camera lens and lighting to emphasize certain emotions and actions (Radner and Fox 2018). To study the underlying ideology within these techniques, film theorists break down the basic cinematic elements and codes within each scene, using the analytic tool of "segmentation" (Radner and Fox 2018).

Although the descriptive method of segmentation can be understood as an interpretative rather than empirically grounded methodology in disciplines outside of film and media studies, it is crucial to film theorists in conducting a formal and systematic analysis of filmic content (Radner and Fox 2018). As the subject of this research is cinema, this study uses segmentation to describe the function of each cinematic technique, observing the concrete, mechanical details that create meaningful relations between individual shots. It also incorporates the concept of auteurism, a theory that was first invented by film critics during the French New Wave in cinema and later popularized by American film scholars: auteurism assumes that a film contains intentional metaphorical messages by its filmmaker, viewing the director as an "auteur" (author) that uses cinema as his or her communicative system (Thompson and Bordwell 2010). Thus, thick description and segmentation have been implemented in this research to understand the ideologies that manifest within the narrative and apparatus of each film.

To incorporate the perspectives of North Koreans within the final discussion, in-depth interviews were conducted with three North Korean defectors who expressed their consent to participate. For subject recruitment, I contacted two North Korean human rights NGO officials who had worked with me in the past and requested that they deliver a recruitment notice to North Korean

defectors who were participating in the NGO's cultural and educational activities. The notice included the researcher's contact information and a brief description of the interview questions that would be asked. In addition, the method of snowball sampling was used by contacting one North Korean student that I had met through PSCORE's one-one-one mentoring program in 2017. She willingly agreed to deliver the recruitment notice to other North Korean acquaintances as well.

Those who agreed to participate in the study were provided with a consent form for research participants explaining the purpose and content of the study. During the interview, four scenes related to North Korean characters in South Korean movies were edited into short clips of about one minute each and shown to the interviewees. Although a list of questions was prepared in advance, the interviews were mostly based on an "open-ended semi-structured" format to pursue topics that the interviewees wished to focus on rather than asking short-answer yes-or-no questions. After the transcripts were analyzed, the perspectives of the three North Korean interviewees were added to the conclusion of the research.

Chapter II. Historical Overview of Division Films and North and South Korean Relations

This chapter includes a historical overview of division films along with the major political changes in North and South Korean relations to provide background context to South Korean cinema. The genre "division film" has been used by previous scholars to term the film genre specific to Korea. According to Eunjin Choi, division films in South Korea can be recognized by their background context of the divided Korean Peninsula and recurring themes such as war, espionage activities, and the desire for unification (Choi 2020). While the Korean peninsula remains divided, South Korean films have changed in their form, message, and audiovisual language along with the transition of different regimes. This overview divides the most well-known and commercially successful division films into three distinct periods, describing how they have evolved from anti-communist propaganda to blockbusters over the years.

Before delving into the historical overview, the reader should take note of the following list of 20 South Korean division films. These films have been organized and analyzed by the year of their release along with the director's names. The selection was made based on the list of films that were produced after the late 1990s, since this was when President Kim Dae-jung's decade of warmth towards inter-Korean reconciliation began; after the 1990s, there was a much larger influx of division films that portrayed North Korean characters from a humanist perspective. This list includes almost all the division films that were released after the late 1990s, excluding a few series that had not gained much attention in the box office. By focusing on the films that were commercially successful, this research has delved into the way popular films have represented the sentiments and perspectives of the national audience during each respective period.

List of 20 Division Films Analyzed		
Film Title	Director(s)	Release Date
Shiri (쉬리)	Kang Jae-gyu	1999
Joint Security Assignment (JSA: 공동경비구역)	Park Chan-wook	2000
Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War (태극기를 휘날리며)	Kang Jae-gyu	2004
Welcome to Dongmakgol (웰컴 투 동막골)	Park Kwang-hyun	2005
Underground Rendezvous (만남의 광장)	Kim Jong-Jin	2007
Crossing (크로싱)	Kim Tae-kyun	2008
Secret Reunion (의형제들)	Kim Ki-duk	2010
The Journals of Musan (무산일기)	Park Jung-bum	2011
The Berlin File (베를린)	Ryoo Seung-wan	2012
The Suspect (용의자)	Won Shin-yun	2013
Secretly, Greatly (은밀하게 위대하게)	Jang Cheol-soo	2013
Northern Limit Line (연평해전)	Kim Hak-soon	2015
The Net (그물)	Kim Ki-duk	2016
Mrs. B., a North Korean Woman (마담B)	Jero Yun	2016
The Spy Gone North (공작)	Yoon Jong-bin	2016
Confidential Assignment (공조)	Kim Sung-hoon	2017
Steel Rain (철비)	Yang Woo-suk	2017
Ashfall (백두산)	Lee Hae-jun, Kim Byung-seo	2019
Escape from Mogadishu (모가디슈)	Ryoo Seung-wan	2021

6/45 (육사오)	Park Gyu-tae	2022

2.1 Anticommunist Films Under Government Censorship (1945-1998)

On August 15, 1945, the Japanese government withdrew from the Korean peninsula, ending a military occupation of 35 years. However, the joy of liberation barely took place before the Korean peninsula was divided into two by the 38th parallel under the US and USSR occupying forces. Syngman Rhee, a Christian holding a PhD from Princeton University, was chosen by the US forces as the first president of the Republic of Korea. Rhee was known for his strong anti-communist beliefs, and the films that followed dealt with these ideologies, creating the genre of "anti-communist films." Anti-communist films have been defined as films that dramatize the ideological conflict between North and South Korea, delivering propagandistic anti-communist messages: some examples include *The Collapsed 38th Parallel* (무너진 38 선) by Yoon Bong-choon and *Breaking the Wall* by Han Hyun-mo, both produced in 1949 (Choi 2020).

Rather than portraying all North Korean characters as villains, these anticommunist films focused on the division of the Korean peninsula as a common enemy for North and South Koreans. The films presented communism as a serious, destructive threat that seeps into the narrative and becomes a driving force for the separation of families and friendships. One deviation is *Piagol* (피아골) (1955) by Lee Kang-cheon, which took a more neutral stance in comparison to the other anticommunist films. In *Piagol*, the main character Ae-ran meets a DPRK partisan camp in the Jirisan mountains, and the plot follows her dilemma between sympathizing with the partisans and rejecting the temptations of their ideology. However, censors banned the film after its release, and Lee had to insert an ending scene with a survivor walking towards a South Korean flag to have it re-released in the cinemas.

This trend of anticommunist films gained more active political support and sponsorship when Park Chung-hee came into government (1961-79) with his military coup. To legitimize his regime, Park used anti-communist ideology to divert people's attention from controversies about his dictatorship (Choi 2020). On January 20, 1962, Park established the Motion Picture Law, which dictated rigid regulations for the film industry and stronger government censorship of Korean films. Although he did not create an official state film industry as in the DPRK, Park took measures to centralize the movie companies, merging 72 companies into sixteen in 1962 (Husarski 2019). In addition, the government established a Best Anti-Communist Film Award at the Daejong Film Festival in 1966, which continued for 22 years (Choi 2020).

Park Chung-hee's newly established laws and censors constrained filmmakers from painting North Koreans in a positive light, even arresting directors such as Lee Man-Hee for his film *The Seven Female POWs* (칠인의 여포로) (1965). These regulations led to an influx of films that portrayed North Koreans as brutal, inhuman villains, brainwashed by communist ideology: in both Lee Man-Hee's *The Marines Who Never Returned* (돌아오지 않는 해병) (1963) and Im Kwontaek's *I Won't Cry* (울지 않으리) (1974), the North Korean characters appear as cold-blooded, treacherous soldiers who wreak havoc on innocent civilians.

However, the popularity of anti-communist films began to weaken after the inter-Korean joint declaration was created and announced on 4 July, 1972. As the tensions between the two Koreas decreased, the government no longer actively promoted anti-communist films, and the number of anti-communist films declined in the 1970-80s. Once Park was assassinated in 1979 and Chun usurped power with a military coup on 12 December, 1979 (Husarski 2019), he took a much friendlier approach towards inter-Korean reconciliation. Implementing the "Korean People Harmony Democracy Reunification Program," Chun replaced the anti-communist education in schools. With Chun Doo-hwan's government maintaining a more positive attitude towards reaching out to North Korea, the golden age of anti-communist films came to an end (Choi 2020).

Following Chun's government, the regimes of Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993) and Kim Young-sam (1993-1998) supported the normalization of North and South Korean relations as well. During Roh's presidency, the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, Exchange and Cooperation was signed by both Koreas in 1991, becoming the basis for future inter-Korean agreements (Jung 2021). In his approach towards North Korea, Roh used a diplomatic strategy termed "Nordpolitik," was modeled after Western Germany's Ostpolitik, which promoted normalization with ally nations of North Korea (Jung 2021). Meanwhile, the democratic regime of President Kim Young-sam eased many of the restrictions and regulations on South Korean films. To promote the globalization of South Korea's film industry, the Motion Picture Law was transformed into the Film Promotion Law in 1996, allowing filmmakers to create works apart from the state censorship (Lee 2016a). As the influence of the government weakened, South Korean conglomerates such as Daewoo, Lotte, and Samsung began to invest in South Korean films.

2.2 Films Released During the Sunshine Era (1998-2008)

Following South Korea's democratization in the late 1980s, the 1990s ushered in rapid economic development and globalization for South Korea (Bechervaise 2022). As mentioned in the previous section, South Korean chaebol companies began to invest in the film industry, allowing South Korean directors to produce Hollywood big-budget films. These films combined Hollywood conventions with local and historical elements and became commercially successful, receiving international acclaim from various film critics (Husarski 2019).

Furthermore, President Kim Dae-jung released a historic decade of warmth and positivity towards inter-Korean reconciliation through his "Sunshine Policy" (1997-2008), setting a long-term goal of reunification. The policy pushed for more contact between the two countries, creating several historic events in the relations between North and South Korea. Three summit meetings were hosted

in Pyongyang between the two states (2000, 2007, and 2018) and two meetings in Panmunjom (both in 2018), along with many brief meetings for family members who had been separated by the Korean War. Under these policies, filmmakers had the liberty to create more optimistic films about the two Koreas.

In 1999, Kang Jae-gyu's *Shiri* (쉬리) (1999) was released, creating a landmark for the growth of the Korean film industry. Released before the Lunar New Year holiday, the film became a huge commercial success: it hit the theaters with an explosive record of 5.82 million viewers, ranking number one at the box office (Choi 2020). The film was watched by one-tenth of the Korean population at the time, and its success proved to South Korean studios that combining Hollywood conventions with local backgrounds was an effective way to compete in the international film market (Choi 2020). Many films produced after *Shiri* would use a similar template, leading to continued expansion of the Korean film industry.

Starring Han Suk-kyu, Choi Min-sik, Kim Yoon-jin, and Song Kang-ho, *Shiri* depicts the espionage of two South Korean agents who are trying to hunt down a North Korean assassin. Impacted by Kim's left-wing progressive policies, the film was one of the first to portray a blurred division between the hero and villain for North Korean characters. In the narrative, the viewers are invited to sympathize with the moral dilemmas of North Korean agent Lee Bang-hee, who falls in love with one of the South Korean agents Yu Jong-won and struggles to avoid shooting him to death. Rather than dividing the two into clear-cut good and bad characters, the film paints each of them as complex, tormented characters who are turned against each other by the division of their country.

The next big hit was Park Chan-wook's *Joint Security Area* (JSA: 공동경비구역) (2000), released two months after the first inter-Korean summit had taken place between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong Il. The film became a huge commercial success as well, selling more than 5 million tickets and featuring current movie stars such as Lee Young-ae, Lee Byung-hun, and Song Kang-ho. The

narrative follows the secret friendship that develops between several North and South Korean soldiers who are put in charge of guarding the DMZ. However, when a different North Korean soldier discovers them all together, the meeting escalates into a tragic shooting incident. Even though the film shows a dark conclusion, *Joint Security Area* explores the topic of inter-Korean reconciliation through the comic and endearing scenes of the budding friendship between the young soldiers.

In this way, the post-Shiri period coincided with the thaw of the Cold War, ushering in a wave of division films that took a more humanistic approach towards North Korean characters. Several examples of these include Kang Jae-gyu's *Taekgukgi: Brotherhood of War* (태극기를 휘날리며) (2004), which drew in more than 11 million viewers, Park Kwang-hyun's *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (웰컴 투 동막골) (2005), and *Crossing* (크로싱) (2008), each portraying the North Korean characters as brothers from one nation rather than enemies. Scholars termed these films as "humanistic" because they were capable of examining North Koreans from a sympathetic perspective, reflecting the residual war trauma that both North and South Koreans had received from the division of the nation (Choi 2020).

2.3 Films Released Under Conservative Presidents (2008-2016)

The premiere of *Crossing* (2008) marked the end of the "Sunshine Era," and the next decade followed with the conservative administrations under Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013-2016). These leaders took a much less reconciliatory approach towards North Korea: as soon as Lee was elected in 2008, he stated that the Kaesong Industrial Region would only be expanded if the North resolved its nuclear weapon issues (Lee 2016b). Relations between Seoul and Pyongyang dissolved again, and North Korea began a series of short-range ship-to-ship missile tests.

These reignited tensions between North and South Korea were reflected in the division films during the 2010s, which began to focus on the genre of espionage and action. Even though the films were no longer under state censorship, they presented North Korean spy characters that symbolized the ongoing conflict between North and South Korea. During this period, filmmakers produced notable films such as Ryoo Seung-wan's *The Berlin File* (베를린) (2013), Won Shin-yun's *The Suspect* (용의자) (2013), and Jang Cheol-soo's *Secretly Greatly* (은밀하게 위대하게) (2013), which gained popularity for their fast-paced storyline and spectacular action scenes.

Although the espionage division films no longer featured stereotypically evil North Korean characters, using young stars such as Lee Hyun-woo and Gong Yoo instead to present North Korean spies as muscular and attractive characters, the tragic ending of these films reflected Lee and Park's rigid approach towards North Korea. In the end of most of these films' narratives, the spy characters were shown murdered or betrayed by their cold-blooded leader in the North. By setting North Korean and South Korean agents against each other in merciless action sequences, these films visualized North Korea's existential but invisible threat, representing the chronic anxiety on the Korean peninsula.

This cinematic theme of anxiety continued into the Park administration, with films such as *Northern Limit Line* (연평해전) (2015) by Kim Hak-soon and *Operation Chromite* (인천상륙작전) (2016) by John H. Lee focusing on the violent battle events that erupted between the two Koreas. *Operation Chromite* (2016) was especially notable for the controversy that it caused: although it was a box office success, gaining more than 7 million viewers, the film received negative comments after President Park Geun-hye promoted the film on the official Cheong Wa Dae account, tweeting, "How about watching *Operation Chromite* this weekend at the peak of the heat wave?" Because it had only been a week after the film was released, people criticized Park's behavior as inappropriate for the President of South Korea (Choi 2020).

Even though the film advertised that it would present the thrilling, fast-paced Inchon landing operation of the US Marines during the Korean War, its scenes focus on elaborating the ideological conflict between the South and North Korean soldiers, presenting both characters as clear-cut villains and heroes. Some film critics even called it an anti-communist film, and the film received critical reviews for its lack of meaningful dialogue and over-dramatized scenes (Choi 2020). In this way, *Operation Chromite* serves as one example among the several films that returned to a more anti-communist theme during the conservative administrations of Lee and Park.

2.4 Films Released Under the Moon Jae-in Administration (2017-2022)

Finally, this overview describes the films that were released under President Moon Jae-in's administration (2017-2022), which generally favored peaceful reunification policies towards North Korea. As the previous leader of the Democratic Party of Korea, Moon held liberal views towards inter-Korean cooperation with North Korea, even supporting the reopening of the Kaesong industrial park during his 2017 presidential campaign. His policies closely aligned with the Sunshine Policy of President Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, supporting a "Sunshine Policy No. 2," and this approach brought in a new wave of blockbuster films dealing with the division of the two Koreas (Husarski 2019).

The common themes in these films reflected Moon's friendlier approach, focusing not only on the two Koreas but also on complex tensions that arose among broader international relations. Films such as *Steel Rain* (철비) (2017) by Yang Woo-suk and its prequel *Steel Rain 2: Summit* (철비 2) (2020), *Take Point* (PMC: 더 벙커) (2018) by Kim Byung-woo, and *Illang: The Wolf Brigade* (인랑) (2018) by Kim Jee-woon cover the geopolitical conflict between not only the two Koreas but

also the US, Japan, Russia, and China. These films take into consideration the impact that foreign countries can have on inter-Korean relations, offering the viewer a bigger picture of future difficulties that may impact the Korean peninsula.

Reflecting the liberal views of President Moon Jae-in's party, some films have even portrayed the South Korean government as the primary antagonist, causing confusion and suffering for the main character. For example, *The Spy Gone North* (공작) (2018) by Yoon Jong-bin portrays the internal conflict of a South Korean spy who finds out that the South Korean leaders are reaching out to North Korea for assistance in manipulating the country's political elections. Rather than vilify the North Korean government or ideology, the film delivers a critical message about the corruption of the South Korean government.

Meanwhile, *Escape from Mogadishu* (모가디슈) (2021) by Ryoo Seung-wan is another film that deals with international relations outside of North and South Korea: set during the Somali Civil War in the 1990s, the film depicts the true story of an escape mission by North and South Korean embassy workers. *Escape from Mogadishu* was selected as the South Korean entry for best international feature at the Oscars: its intense action scenes, elaborate production design, and vivid acting performances allow the viewer to catch a glimpse of not only Somalia's regime collapse, but also the underlying tensions between North and South Korean relations.

In summary, this section provides a background context of the history of division films and inter-Korean relations. Ever since the end of the Japanese colonial period in 1945, filmmakers have portrayed the fragile relations between North and South Korea with the use of various genres and conventions. After organizing and studying the films in alignment with the historical timeline of North and South Korean relations, it was found that the style and message of these films have continued to shift along with the political discourse of each administration and its political party.

Even though the government no longer enforces state censorship on division films as it used to during the 1960s, each administration's stance towards North Korea has still influenced inter-Korean relations in different ways. Administrations led by presidents from the left-wing party have promoted inter-Korean reconciliation with food assistance and high-level summit meetings, while administrations from the right-wing party have taken a more hostile and retaliatory stance towards North Korea. Because films serve as an allegory of their time period, division films have reflected these changes in the relations between North and South Korea, influenced by different government parties and policies.

By dividing the section into four different chapters, this overview has examined the evolution of division films from anticommunist to humanistic and recently international blockbuster films, according to each time period. Following President Moon Jae-in's support of the Sunshine Policy, the recent ideological trends of South Korean division films have leaned towards the progressive viewpoint. However, with the current conservative president Yoon Seok-yul taking office in May 2022, films such as *6/45* (육사오) (2022) and *Confidential Assignment 2* (공조 2) (2022) have yet to be examined in detail by division film scholars. The following chapters describe how South Korean division films have continued to expand and deepen in their exploration of inter-Korean relations, focusing specifically on the portrayal of the North Korean as a brother, refugee, and foreigner.

CHAPTER III. Spies, Soldiers, Defectors, or Foreigners? Character Analysis of North Koreans in Division Films

The second chapter organized the historical timeline of Korean relations along with the evolution of South Korea's division film genre, allowing for a clearer interpretation of the influences of each period and administration on division films. This third section will analyze the North Korean characters in each film, reviewing the similarities and differences between the North Korean characters. The list of 20 selected division films were categorized by genre and character occupation, ranging from films about spies and soldiers to documentary films about North Korean defectors.

Although it may be questioned whether the category "North Korean defector" can be considered as a type of character, one must acknowledge that films about North Korean defectors' journeys and hardships have starkly different narratives from those about North Korean spies or soldiers. While North Korean spies and soldiers are active under the hierarchy of North Korean leadership with a specific mission or goal to fulfill, films about North Korean defectors focus on the narrative of North Koreans who live as South Korean citizens among South Korean society. As such, this category for films about "North Korean defectors" was used in the research to separate these films from other films of the war or espionage genre and provide a more detailed analysis of the recurring stereotypes and predominant narrative frameworks. The following four chapters will compare the various images of North Koreans in each of these films.

3.1 The Spectacle of Espionage: North Koreans as Spies

The spy films reviewed for this chapter include *Secret Reunion* (의형제) (2010) by Jang Hoon, *The Berlin File* (베를린) (2013) by Ryoo Seung-wan, *Secretly Greatly* (은밀하게 위대하게)

(2013) by Jang Cheol-soo, *The Suspect* (용의자) (2014) by Won Shin-yun, *Confidential Assignment* (공조) (2017) by Kim Sung-hoon, and *Ashfall* (백두산) (2019) by Lee Hae-jun and Kim Byung-seo. After viewing these films and analyzing the characteristics of the North Korean spy in each narrative, it was observed that many of the division films in the spy genre contained clear-cut good and bad North Korean characters that were either glamorized as charismatic heroes or vilified as merciless leaders of the communist party.

Although division films in the spy thriller genre have become largely successful over the years, receiving international acclamation for their action scenes, creative mise-en-scene, and Hollywood-style techniques, the North Korean spies in these films were generally portrayed as two-dimensional characters with more action than dialogue. The two most prominent stereotypes were the North Korean spy and the North Korean villain: the North Korean spy would often be played by a good-looking South Korean top star, showing extraordinary fighting skills, while the North Korean villain would take form as a merciless official or inspective fellow spy who questions the North Korean protagonist's loyalty to the communist government.

The common trope of the mysterious, charismatic North Korean male spy first began in the early 2010s, becoming more common throughout the decade. Among other espionage films, the first commercial hit film *Shiri* (쉬리) in 1999 presented the North Korean spy as the most relatable and emotional: in Shiri, the spy Lee Bang-hee is a female character rather than a male, and she has more lines than almost any other North Korean spy character in the following films. The first scenes portray Lee as a cold-blooded, skilled murder machine trained in an elite North Korean camp; however, as the film progresses, the viewer is introduced to her moral dilemma and internal conflict between betraying her country and assassinating her lover.

For the first half of the film, South Korean agent Yu Jung-won (played by Han Suk-kyu) has difficulty even encountering Lee as he struggles to catch her. In these scenes, the only information

given about Lee is her harsh training and professional shooting skills. Lee is depicted as brutal and brainwashed by the North Korean military, practicing shooting between the shoulders of other soldiers and lighting a childhood picture of her family on fire. From Yu's perspective, Lee is like a mirage, appearing out of nowhere to shoot important figures and slipping away before Yu can reach her.

The mystery of Lee Bang-Hee continues until Yu follows her secretly and arrives at his fiancé's fish store, discovering that Lee's double identity was his fiancé. This sequence is particularly impactful, using film noir elements and camerawork to highlight the revelation. On the way to Lee's fish store, Yu passes through dark, damp roads with only the glowing neon signs to guide his footsteps: the low-key lighting (using one key light that creates a sharp dark and bright visual contrast) perpetuates an atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety, and the streets are reminiscent of Hong-Kong cinematic aesthetics. Once Yu arrives at the fish store, he witnesses Lee changing her clothes, and the film uses camerawork to follow Yu's emotional breakdown.

As Yu waits behind the walls with his gun pointed towards Lee, the camera refocuses onto Lee's figure, then pans to show his gradually changing expression from suspense to realization and horror. The camera follows Yu as he retreats slowly into the shadows, backing away from the lighting until he physically disappears from the audience's point of view into the darkness. This long-take expresses Yu's despair as he progressively comes to terms with the fact that the woman he has to shoot is his fiancé. The scene continues without any editing as Yu falls to his knees and muffles his gasp: meanwhile, a cello plays a sorrowful rendition of the recurring theme music that represents Yu and Lee's love. This music was first introduced when Yu and Lee embrace each other in front of a hotel, and it continues to repeat whenever the film shows scenes of them together. As the romantic theme is replayed at a lower octave, Yu remembers how he wondered about Lee, "She always used only two bullets (when she shot me). If it were me, I wouldn't have left the three remaining bullets unused."

In this way, *Shiri* combines the elements of a recurring musical theme, slow-paced editing, and low-key lighting to create an aura of nightmarish mystery. The scene in which Yu backs into complete darkness allows for a brief time lag, creating a gap in the temporality of the film itself. Film noir has often been called a genre of "anti-enlightenment," portraying darkness leaping out of light to go against the Enlightenment ideals of human progress and knowledge (Conard 2005). As such, the various film noir elements in *Shiri* portray Yu's powerlessness and inability to grasp the true identity of North Korean spy Lee Bang-hee.

However, in the second half of the film, the camera turns to Lee's perspective, following her personal struggles as she faces the wrath of her North Korean leader Mu-young (played by Choi Min-sik). When Mu-young confronts Lee about her failure to assassinate Jung-won, Lee replies that for a moment she thought that she could truly become Lee Myung-hyun (Yu's fiancé). "I was wrong," she cries, preparing to shoot herself, "I simply became a Lee Bang-hee that has to kill the man she loves." She tries to pull the trigger, only to find that there is no bullet in it. Mu-young wrestles to take the gun from her, and Lee screams and sobs wildly, wishing to take her life. This is a scene that marks *Shiri* out as an extremely unique film among other division films of the spy genre: Lee's lines are one of the most honest and personal among all the other scripts of North Korean characters in spy genre films.

Ironically, the confusion and sorrow that Lee feels portrays the crisis of identity that North Korean defectors experience in real life when they arrive to South Korea. Like Lee, they also must struggle to preserve their humanity within a divided society of political and ideological conflict. Although Lee wants to commit suicide, she is forced to embark on her last mission to shoot the political leaders of South Korea. In the last scenes, Lee is not shown speaking, but the camera provides a close-up shot of her tearful eyes as she faces Yu at gunpoint. Lee never breaks contact with Yu's eyes, even as he shoots her and she falls in slow-motion to the ground. The same romantic soundtrack theme is repeated in this scene, played by the straining notes of a violin with the faint

melody of a harp behind. As the notes progressively climb, each a half-key higher than the last one, their dramatic vibration conveys Yu and Lee's yearning love for each other.

In summary, the film *Shiri* is exceptional in the way it explores the thoughts and emotions of its North Korean spy character. Although some critics commented that the film was overly melodramatic, containing emotional hysteria "which may seem exaggerated and out of place," these scenes give Lee Bang-hee the agency to portray her complex and intense feelings (Axmaker 2002). The film even allows Lee to conclude her own story, leaving a recorded message for Yu about her true feelings towards him. Near the end, when Yu is being questioned by other South Korean officials about Lee, Yu leaves his own commentary on her character: "Do you know Hydra?" He asks the officials. "She's a goddess with six heads in Greek mythology. She has multiple personalities in one body. Lee Bang-Hee and Lee Myung-hyun… they're different beings, a Hydra of our times. The reality of our separated country turned her into a Hydra."

This metaphor is an accurate representation of not only Lee Bang-Hee, but also many North Korean defectors who arrive in South Korea and feel overwhelmed by the dual nature of their experiences, education, and lifestyle from both North Korea and South Korea. Undergoing a change in their language and sometimes even values, these defectors struggle with reconciling their new and old identity. Even though *Shiri* undoubtedly has its limitations in creating an accurate image of the North Korean character, especially in its presentation of the aggressive North Korean terrorist Muyoung Park, Kim Yun-jin's performance transforms Lee Bang-Hee into a relatable and sympathetic woman. Lee was one of the last complex North Korean characters that the Korean audience would see in division espionage films: in the following films of the 2010s, the spy characters transform into a more commercialized and uniform stereotype, molded according to the expectations of the Korean audience.

The 2010s brought in an influx of espionage and action films, with characters reflecting the North Korean superhero trope. These films focused even more on global commercialization, at the cost of losing their character development: no longer would there be any complex female spies such as Lee Bang-hee. In Jang Hoon's *Secret Reunion* (의형제) (2010), Ryoo Seung-wan's *The Berlin File* (베를린) (2013), Won Shin-yun's *The Suspect* (용의자) (2013), and Jang Cheol-soo's *Secretly Greatly* (은밀하게 위대하게) (2013), the main protagonists were played by handsome young actors such as Gong Yoo, Gang Dong-won, and Kim Soo-hyun. These characters appeared as cold-blooded, wordless North Korean spies who were immaculately trained for fighting, and their Hollywood-style action succeeded in gaining the attention of foreign audiences.

In the following paragraphs, this chapter will examine the similar themes in these films, examining their character stereotypes and narrative framework of brotherhood. To contrast their similarities and differences from a more objective perspective, various reviews by film critics will be incorporated in the analysis. The most prominent theme was the character stereotypes of the young, mysterious North Korean agent and the aged, talkative South Korean agent, which are first introduced in the film *Secret Reunion* (의형제) (2010). These archetypes appear repeatedly in various espionage division films of the 2010s.

In *Secret Reunion*, former South Korean agent Lee Han-Kyu (played by Song Kang-ho) forms a relationship with an exiled North Korean spy named Song Ji-Won (Gang Dong-Won). The North Korean spy Song is presented as a "silent, melancholic guy" who has humane instincts despite his role as a killing machine: during one of his agent missions, he insists on saving a child from gunpoint (Kotzathanasis 2021). Meanwhile, Lee "switches between traits of hero, everyman and clown" as he ends up working and living together with Song. Even though he is a former agent, Lee is shown making clumsy mistakes such as handcuffing himself to a pole in his apartment or failing to defend himself against a street mob. As time passes, the two of them gradually form a bond; their

buddy chemistry is shown in scenes of slapstick farce, allowing the film to combine the two genres of action and comedy.

These character stereotypes are repeated almost identically in *Confidential Assignment* (공조) (2017) by Kim Sung-hoon, where South Korean detective Kang Jin-tae (Yoo Hae-jin) is assigned to watch over North Korean agent Im Cheol-ryung (Hyun Bin), and they collaborate in a mission to track down a dangerous fugitive from North Korea. Just like the character Lee Han-Kyu in *Secret Reunion*, detective Kang is presented as a goofy, miserable family man who struggles to make ends meet; burdened by the constant whining of his daughter for a new iPhone, Kang takes on the collaborative assignment in hopes for a new promotion.

The actor Yoo Hae-jin has often been casted for leading comic roles in films such as *Luck Key* (럭키) (2016) by Lee Gae-byok, and *Love + Sling* (레슬러) (2018) by Kim Dae-woong, which explains why his casting in *Confidential Assignment* has also been intended for comic relief. Yoo's performance brings zest and humor to the intense action. From his first encounter with North Korean agent Im, Kang mutters to himself that Im is "damn good-looking," acknowledging the differences in their physical appearance. While Im is immaculately dressed and remains deadpan serious throughout the film, Kang is portrayed as a middle-aged man who employs Yoo's typical loudmouth acting style to complain about his low wages and dreams of financially supporting his family.

The classic buddy-cop formula from Secret Reunion is repeated as Lee and Kang end up living together, this time with the addition of Kang's family members. When Kang brings Im home, he introduces him to his nine-year-old daughter, scolding wife, and freeloader sister-in-law, and the film uses their comic interactions to make a few self-reflective jokes about the common South Korean stereotypes about North Korea. For example, Kang's sister-in-law Park Min-young (Im Yoon-ah) becomes an embodiment of South Korea's fetishization of the North Korean spy. Developing a crush on the mysterious Im, Park tries to cook elaborate meals for him and dresses herself in fancy outfits.

Even when she discovers that Im is a North Korean agent through television news footage, Park squeals, “He’s so amazing!” earning a smack on her head from her sister.

Meanwhile, *The Berlin File* (베를린) (2013) by Ryoo Seung-wan and *The Suspect* (용의자) (2013) by Won Shin-yun portray the North and South Korean characters in a less light-hearted manner. In contrast to *Secret Reunion* and *Confidential Assignment*, these films are committed to exhilarating action sequences rather than comic or warmhearted scenes, and the North and South Korean protagonists are set in the backdrop of heavy political turmoil and adversarial distrust. The main reason for this is that the South Korean agents are played by Han Suk-kyu in *The Berlin File* and Park Hee-Soon in *The Suspect*, both serious actors that take on stern, tenacious roles. Even when they end up collaborating with the North Korean agents, their dialogues are brief and terse, marking a stark contrast from the friendship in *Secret Reunion* or *Confidential Assignment*.

However, the archetype of the good-looking, solemn North Korean spy remains consistent throughout these two films. In *The Berlin File*, Pyo Jong-seong (played by Ha Jung-woo) is portrayed as a silent, dedicated North Korean agent committed to protecting his pregnant wife. Pyo narrowly escapes South Korean agent Jung Jin-soo (Han Suk-kyu) in the beginning of the film, but they later end up forming an alliance against a North Korean agent named Dong Myung-soo (Ryoo Seung-bum), employing the classic buddy trope used in previous films.

Meanwhile, *The Suspect* stars Gong Yoo as its main protagonist Ji Dong-cheol, another professional and straight-faced North Korean spy who only relents to emotional scenes when they are related to his lost daughter. Both Pyo from *The Berlin File* and Ji from *The Suspect* are well-built, expert killers with the same determined goal to save their family members: the two films share a similar narrative, in which the North Korean spies can neither trust their government nor settle down in South Korea, always on the run from both sides. The feeling of precariousness permeates throughout both films, symbolizing the tension and instability between inter-Korean relations.

One stark difference between the two films *The Berlin File* and *The Suspect* is that *The Suspect* contains more reflection upon the relationship between North and South Korea. While *The Berlin File* uses international relations and arms deals to propel its narrative, setting its film background in modern-day Germany, *The Suspect* follows the mystery of a secret contained inside the glasses of an assassinated chairman. At the end of the film, *The Suspect* reveals that the secret in the glasses was simply instructions on how to make genetically modified buckwheat. This ending signifies a deep understanding of the *han* (unresolved grievance) between North and South Korean relations, portraying the importance of food for North Korean citizens. Although both *The Berlin File* and *The Suspect* became popular for their fast-paced, striking action scenes, *The Suspect* gained some more recognition for striving to understand the situation of North Korea in the film.

In summary, most of the South Korean division films that were watched from the espionage genre were generally focused more on commercialization than exploration of North Korean characters. This has led to the development of the buddy-cop formula between North and South Korean characters. Ever since the release of *Shiri*, division films in the spy genre have used brotherly love rather than romance between men and women to sustain their narrative arc. Filmmakers have employed attractive young stars as North Korean spy characters to appeal to the female fanbase in South Korea; at the same time, they have also casted famous middle-aged actors to provide comic relief to the general Korean audience by piquing at the challenges in South Korean society with relatable working-man roles. The buddy-cop framework has prompted directors to create recurring stereotypes of silent, good-looking North Korean hero and the more aged, talkative South Korean agent who is seeking for recognition in his workplace.

While the conflicting personalities of each character have added comedic elements to the films, the buddy-cop genre has also served as a reminder that both North and South Koreans need each other to achieve their mission. In real life, this framework could be applied to the mission of

reunification: because the two Koreas remain firm in their differing ideologies and values, mutual guidance and collaboration is crucial to achieve reconciliation among both communities.

3.2 North Korean Soldiers in Imagined Spaces of Unification

While there have been many war films of South Koreans fighting against North Korean soldiers, some of them contain brief or faraway shots of North Koreans that do not depict their personality in detail. To conduct a closer analysis of the North Korean soldier character, the list of war films was narrowed down to several films that portrayed North Korean soldiers as main protagonists rather than side characters. These films include *Joint Security Area* (공동경비구역) (2000) by Park Chan-wook, *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War* (태극기를 휘날리며) (2004) by Kang Jae-gyu, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (웰컴 투 동막골) (2005) by Park Kwang-hyun, *Underground Rendezvous* (만남의 광장) (2007) by Kim Jong-Jin, and finally *6/45* (육사오) (2022) by Park Gyu-tae.

As these films were studied chronologically, it was observed that they became progressively more light-hearted and idealistic, perhaps because the early 2000s was a period that coincided with the thaw of the Cold War. This prompted me to divide the films into two groups, one with *Joint Security Area* and *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War* and the other group including the rest of the films. *Joint Security Area* and *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War* were more disparate in tone than the other films, charged with bloody scenes of violence. Although the theme of brotherhood between North and South Koreans is emphasized in both films, with the main characters in *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War* being literal brothers separated by war, both of their final scenes are tragic. *Joint Security Area* ends with the death of Sergeant Lee Soo-hyeok, while *Taegukgi* shows the death of the older brother Lee Jin-tae. Both characters take their own lives, and the camera shoots a dramatic, slow-motion zoom-out of the heroes dying.

However, as President Kim Dae-jung's sunshine policy extended throughout the early 2000s, a more comical, surrealist set of films followed, such as *Welcome to Dongmakgol* and *Underground Rendezvous*. These films rarely contain intense scenes of soldiers shooting one another: instead, they deliver a more hopeful message about the reunification, using a remote village as their setting and adding elements of romance between the soldiers and village inhabitants. Although *Welcome to Dongmakgol* does contain a tragic ending, the last scenes preserve the happy, dreamlike quality of the film by avoiding close-up shots of dead bodies or wounds. Both films use the naivete of the village people to express nostalgia for peaceful times in Korea before the division took place.

A common theme that was found in many of these division films was an "imaginary setting" or space that allowed for temporary unification between the North and South Korean soldiers. The narrative between the soldiers would develop in this space, creating an alternate world for the films to explore North Korean characters without being criticized as pro-communist. Due to the sheer amount of details in each of these films, the analysis for this category was narrowed down to a comparison of *Joint Security Area* (2000) by Park Chan-wook and *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2005) by Park Kwang-hyun (one film from each group). The following paragraphs will describe their main differences in detail, focusing on the depiction of the North Korean soldier characters that takes place in these imagined spaces of unification.

The first division film analyzed in the war genre was *Joint Security Area* (공동경비구역) (2000) by Park Chan-wook. As mentioned in the first section's historical overview, *JSA* was the second film after *Shiri* to bring commercial success to the Korean film industry, earning 1.7 million admissions in its first four weeks in Seoul alone (Elley 2000). As the first Korean film to employ the Super-35 format of widescreen lensing, the film was praised by critics as "quality mainstream cinema" that "showcases the best elements of modern Asian cinema" (Brooks 2001).

Joint Security Area (*JSA*) is a mystery-drama that follows Major Sophie Jang (Lee Yeong-ae)'s investigation of a shooting incident between North and South Korean soldiers at the border crossing. Born in Geneva to a Korean Father and Swiss mother, Jang has been selected to resolve the issue, but the soldiers give different narratives that cause more confusion and hostility among the two countries. As the characters slowly open up to Jang, the film unfolds the events leading up to the incident in flashbacks. What follows is a heartwarming sequence of the rival soldiers becoming friends (giving each other gifts, sharing snacks, and playing games together): the film creates a peaceful and even comical ambience until the scene in which their secret meetings are discovered, and the ensuing panic causes a tragedy of multiple deaths.

Besides the clumsy English dialogue between Jang and her officer, which according to one critic "urgently needs to be revoiced," the acting of the characters in the film is quite convincing. Critics praised the film for treating each of its characters "as individuals rather than political stereotypes, with no favor shown to either side" (Elley 2000). In general, Song Kang-ho received the most recognition for his performance as North Korean Sergeant Oh Kyeong-pil, a light-hearted, honest older brother figure to the other South Korean soldiers (Fitzgerald 2021).

Unlike the merciless North Korean official Muyoung Park in *Shiri*, Oh is an open-minded, compassionate character who supports his nation out of patriotism rather than blind loyalty to the Communist party. In one of the scenes, when South Korean Sergeant Lee asks him to defect to South Korea with the promise of more Choco Pies, Oh sternly refuses, saying, "My dream is that one day our country can make sweets just like these." These lines show that Oh has pride and hope for his country, even as he recognizes its problems. As one critic commented, Oh challenges the stereotypical North Korean soldier: he is neither "the calculating nationalistic drone nor the terrified victim of an oppressive military order that we might see… in American media" (Fitzgerald 2021).

Using these characters, *JSA* brings them together in the Joint Security Area as a symbolic space of reunification between the North and South Korean soldiers. The soldiers secretly meet at the North Korean post, and the small cabin becomes a temporary metaphor for the film to imagine what unification would look like for North and South Korea. These scenes are shot in warm lighting with multiple close-ups, making a contrast from the dark, wild mountainous fields and the symmetrical fences of the demilitarized zone outside. The soldiers call each other "hyung" (older brother) and "dongsaeng" (younger brother), embracing each other and playing gonggi (a traditional game similar to throwing marbles) with their bullets. These scenes are not only comical but also satirical, making a critique of the military tensions surrounding them. As one critic mentioned, these details "paint the division as ludicrous; like a line drawn down the middle of a bedroom by rivalrous siblings."

However, the brotherhood between the soldiers is short-lived when they are discovered. A violent and bloody shooting sequence follows in the same space, bringing the viewers back to reality, and throughout the investigations more characters decide to take their own lives. This conclusion transforms the film into a mourning for the state of division between North and South Korea. As the film shows the soldiers shooting each other or themselves, it shows that violence may be the only reaction possible in this repressive Korean society.

Meanwhile, the film *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (웰컴 투 동막골) (2005) by Park Kwanghyun preserves its imagined space of unification rather than completely destroying it. Although *Joint Security Area* allows the soldiers' hideout cabin to become a place of murder, symbolizing the failure of attempted unity, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* chooses a more optimistic and idealist approach by showing the soldiers all together in the village in its last nostalgic scene. Both films show the North and South Korean soldiers dying, but *Welcome to Dongmakgol* makes their deaths meaningful by painting them as a sacrifice to protect the innocent village civilians.

The film is set in 1950 during the Korean War, and it narrates the confusion of several North Korean soldiers, South Korean soldiers, and a US navy pilot when they encounter one another in a remote village named Dongmakgol. Each soldier has lost his way or been deserted from the rest of their troops: although they are enemies, their rivalry is taken lightly by the villagers of Dongmakgol, who have never heard of the war or even the war weapons they have. After one of their grenades accidentally destroys the food supplies in the village, the soldiers reluctantly come together to help the villagers replenish their food stocks, and they gradually become accustomed to the happy-go-lucky atmosphere of the village. Near the end, however, the US forces advance on a rescue mission to find their lost pilot, and this plan threatens the survival of the entire village.

Although both films use imagined spaces, the village in *Welcome to Dongmakgol* is presented in a more surrealist method than the North Korean post in Joint Security Area. The village in *Welcome to Dongmakgol* is portrayed as magical, with strange statues lit up by lanterns, butterflies swarming in the skies, and corn turning into popcorn at the explosion of a grenade. As one critic has commented, all these elements combine to provide "an extraordinary place to break down prejudices, examine the war and come to terms with violence" (Horn 2015). Part of the elements that create this atmosphere is the mystic film score by Studio Ghibli composer Joe Hisaishi, which includes high-noted violins and a xylophone that creates twinkling sound effects. The oblivious, lunatic village girl Yeo-il adds to the surrealism as well: her other-worldly curiosity acts as the catalyst that brings the soldiers into the same space.

While the remote environment of *Welcome to Dongmakgol* is certainly unique and artistically accomplished, critics have commented that the characters are underdeveloped and at times stereotypical (Horn 2015). Because the film focuses on the village itself, there are few scenes of the soldiers communicating and learning to care for each other: the South Korean soldiers swear at the North Korean soldiers in the beginning scenes, calling them "commies" (빨갱이 새끼들), and they only bond after a wild boar hunt when they share boar meat in front of a campfire. Rather than using

meaningful dialogue, the boar hunting sequence is depicted with mostly CG and comical action, and the moment where they eat together is shown briefly before cutting to the next scenes.

Another reason for the unconvincing development of friendship between the soldiers could be the sudden jump in the timeline of the film from summer to winter. Although there are symbolic scenes of the soldiers changing into the same villager clothes to work comfortably in the fields, or a humorous scene of both generals finding each other pooping in the same area, these moments do not allow for reflective conversations that directly address the prejudices they have against each other.

Due to these reasons, the final bonding scenes between the North Korean, South Korean, and American soldiers in *Welcome to Dongmakgol* may appear sudden and unrealistic to the viewer. As the soldiers prepare to defend the village against advancing US airplanes, one young North Korean soldier asks hopefully, "Are we a united army?" and another South Korean general adds, "It would have been fun if we had met someplace else, not in this situation." Although these lines are friendly and positive, they are unconvincing because they lack the necessary buildup and character development in the first half of the film.

Nonetheless, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* delivers a powerful message by making the villagers in the film act as a mediator for the enemy soldiers. Showing indifference towards the ongoing war, the villagers of Dongmakgol serve as a completely unbiased and uninformed space for the North and South Korean soldiers to reunite. The Korean war was unable to end completely because even the UN, which usually mediates international conflicts, was associated in the war and could not serve as a mediator for both sides. However, the village Dongmakgol provides a place of human understanding and love that both Koreas never had, exploring what could happen if they did.

Another difference from *JSA* is the theme of human friendship in *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, which transcends the concepts of nationhood or brotherhood that was present between the soldiers in *JSA*. In *JSA*, every scene of friendship is presented under the framework of "hanminjok" (being one

nation), with the South Korean soldiers calling the North Korean general Oh “hyung (older brother).” However, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* focuses on international friendship and kindness by adding an American soldier among the North and South Korean soldiers.

Comparing the different types of unity in each film (brotherhood in *JSA* and human friendship in *Welcome to Dongmakgol*) allows us to reflect on the viability of these two approaches. The concept of nationhood in *JSA* is portrayed as a limited and imaginary one that is eventually destroyed by distrust and panic. As scholar Benedict Anderson introduces in his book *Imagined Communities*, the nation is an “an imagined political community” constructed by socio-material forces that are sovereign and independent from any dynastic monarchy (Anderson 2016, 7). “All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined,” Anderson argues, explaining that these boundaries are first conceived within the mind of each member of the community (Anderson 2016, 6). Anderson emphasizes that the nation is imagined in terms of its historical destiny: in the case of the Korean peninsula, one may question whether our historical destinies should be considered as one or two separate paths leading to different conclusions.

Even though Anderson claims that the nation is conceived as a “deep, horizontal comradeship” that makes it possible for many people to give up their own lives, *JSA* portrays the soldiers killing each other due to their trained military instincts. The ending of *JSA* challenges the concept of nationhood among North and South Koreans: in the face of political and military conflict, the film shows that this bond may shatter, just as it has during the Korean War. In this way, comparing the relationships in *JSA* and *Welcome to Dongmakgol* allows the viewer to explore and question different approaches for creating reconciliation between North and South Korea.

3.3 The Dramatization of North Koreans as Defectors

Throughout the research, it was observed that there was a much greater number of division films with spy characters than division films that portrayed North Korean defectors. This was difficult to understand at first, because the most common type of North Koreans that a South Korean citizen would be likely to encounter in reality is a defector rather than a spy. One presumed reason was the vulnerability of the topic: the unification of North and South Korea has been a politically debated issue for decades, with the resettlement of North Korean defectors becoming a challenge for South Korean society. If filmmakers were to create films specifically about North Korean defectors, they would have to accurately portray the complexities of North Korean defectors living in South Korea, since delivery of incorrect information could result in fabrication of truth or even a minor offense against human rights. These issues would not be applied to division films in the espionage genre, which have a fictional plot centered on entertainment and action.

While spy division films are the most popular genre of division films both nationally and internationally, a few fictional or documentary independent films about North Korean defectors have also garnered attention, such as *Crossing* (크로싱) (2008) by Tae-gyun Kim, *The Journals of Musan* (무산일기) (2011) by Park Jung-bum, and *Mrs. B.* (마담 B) (2016) and *Beautiful Days* (뷰티풀 데이즈) (2018), both directed by Jero Yun. The analysis of these four films is grounded on the different qualities of fictional and documentary films, examining which films allowed the most nuance and realism for their North Korean defector characters without exacerbating any stereotypes.

The film that was analyzed was *Mrs. B.* (2016), a documentary film produced by the French-educated South Korean film director Jero Yun. Shot by a nearly entirely French technical crew, the film uses various techniques to deliver extreme realism in its portrayal of North Korean defectors (Tsui 2016). Throughout the film, the camera focuses on the story of a North Korean woman called Mrs. B., who transitions from working as a human trafficker in China to an office janitor in South

Korea. The first scenes of the documentary take place in February 2013, introducing the viewer to Mrs. B.'s human-trafficking business: Mrs. B. hardly takes notice of the camera as she busily transports female defectors to her clients, associates, and karaoke parlors. In one scene, she even confesses to have smuggled drugs such as meth, explaining that "if you are an illegal immigrant, there aren't many things you can do to make money" (Kotzathanasis 2017).

However, Mrs. B.'s recognizable voiceover in the background soon acquaints the viewer to her troubled past: while her original plan was to work in China for only a month to financially support her family, she was deceived by a broker and "sold" to a farming Chinese family in a rural area. After marrying their mentally challenged son, she worked at a cow farm for two years, hoping to return to North Korea with money, but realized that it was not enough.

These difficulties lead her to become a human-trafficker herself, and in the latter half of the film, Mrs. B. takes the route she often used for others to journey from China to Thailand and then to South Korea with a few other North Korean women. Although her original plan is to join her North Korean family and gain South Korean citizenship before returning to her Chinese husband, Mrs. B. is caught in allegations of criminal or even espionage activities by the South Korean Intelligence Services for her trafficking past. Even in the last scenes, the film leaves no clear answers for the viewer to clarify whether Mrs. B. is truly a spy from North Korea or simply a marginalized defector who takes all measures to ensure her family's survival.

Director Yun's refusal to paint Mrs. B. in a black-and-white narrative is precisely what gives the film its nuance and extreme realism. Throughout the film, Mrs. B. defies the usual stereotype of North Korean female defectors: instead of remaining helpless and submissive, she determinedly works her way up to become the breadwinner of the Chinese house, maintaining friendly relations with both her Chinese husband and his mother. In multiple scenes, Mrs. B. is shown taking agency of her relationship with both her Chinese family and South Korean family. When her Chinese husband

gives away one of their puppies without her permission, she shouts and even swears at him, calling him a "son of a b–ch (개새끼)" who makes "idiotic (머저리같은) mistakes." Unable to match Mrs. B.'s fiery temper, her husband chuckles bemusedly and pleads for her to calm down. This scene provides a deviation from the submissive, subservient image of North Korean female defectors, which are often portrayed on South Korean television and virtual reality shows such as "Nam Nam Buk Nyeo."

Mrs. B. also exerts agency in her relationship with her Chinese husband's parents: she receives their permission for her to leave to South Korea, and they tearfully depend on her promise to return someday. The mother-in-law banters with Mrs. B. in her efforts to give her some extra money before the trip, but Mrs. B. refuses her, saying that she has a lot of money already. These scenes reveal the unexpected power dynamics in Mrs. B.'s relationship with her Chinese family. Even though she was sold into a forced and exploitative marriage, Mrs. B. makes her own decisions and delivers them honestly to the Chinese family. To the interviewer, she expresses sincere gratitude for the way they treated her in China, and even asserts her wishes to return to China to look after them again. The dialogues that they share affirm that the lives of North Korean female defectors in China may have more than one typical narrative.

Another aspect that gives the film its complexity is Mrs. B.'s ironic transition from human cargo to handler: even though Mrs. B. was a victim of human trafficking herself, she later starts her own business as a trafficker of other North Koreans and finally transports herself and her family to South Korea. Throughout the film, there are multiple scenes in which the camera shoots a dark road from inside the front window of a car, bus, or truck. This is a quintessential technique that is used in film noir, where the camera focuses on the darkness of a road at night without any signposts. The scene is shot without any cuts, giving the viewer a feeling of receding into a timeless and unfathomable space. In the case of Mrs. B., the driving scenes emphasize that there is no great difference between the way she transported others and the route she takes to transport herself; this

lifestyle has become normal to Mrs. B., a continuous road of traveling forward without looking back, not knowing what dangers may lie ahead.

Rather than introducing a traditional "good vs. evil" scenario, the film shows Mrs. B. as a North Korean defector standing in the gray zone as both a victim and an alleged criminal. In a later interview with BBC, Mrs. B. insists that she only became a broker for her family's survival and explains that all the female defectors involved in her trafficking business were informed in advance and had expressed their consent to be sold to Chinese families (Kim 2018). She said that she thought this was the only way female North Korean defectors would be able to survive in China without being "caught in the middle of the road and sent back to North Korea" (Kim 2018).

Due to Mrs. B.'s complex character, her unique life story, and the realistic, metaphorical camerawork, the film *Mrs. B.* succeeds in capturing the reality of North Korean defectors in China. The film received awards at the 2016 Moscow International Film Festival and the Zurich Film Festival, and critics praised its depiction of Mrs. B., saying that it "revealed sentiments very much out of sync with the mainstream representations of North Korea, its people and its relationship with its neighbors" (Tsui 2016). One reason for this could be attributed to director Jero Yun's extensive experience with North Korean defectors: four years before *Mrs. B.*, Yun had released a documentary about the defectors living in Chinese border towns, and this is where he met Mrs. B. His four years of interaction with Mrs. B., her living space, and other North Korean smugglers in China may have allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the plight of North Korean defectors.

However, Yun's following film *Beautiful Days* (뷰티풀 데이즈) (2018) proves that it may have been Mrs. B.'s character that gave more life to Mrs. B., rather than the director himself. When *Beautiful Days* was first released, the film received high expectations for being Yun's first narrative feature film (Debruge 2018). Being a dramatized take on the previous documentary Mrs. B, Yun promised that *Beautiful Days* would deliver "answers to the unresolved questions from Mrs. B" (Song

2018). However, the film soon received criticism by film critics for its over-dramatic storyline and lethargic pace. Critics commented that the film was "weighed down by a cliched narrative and simplistic moral binaries," exactly what Yun had succeeded in subverting in his original film Mrs. B (Tsui 2018).

The plot of *Beautiful Days* revolves around the tumultuous relationship between Korean Chinese university student Zhenchen (Jang Dong-yoon) and his mother (Lee Na-young). Zhenchen hears from his dying father that his mother is living in South Korea. He travels to South Korea, only to find her working as a bar lady and living with her boyfriend (Seo Hyun-woo), and walks out with frustration and disappointment that she would choose such a lowlife in South Korea over him and his father. The film provides an explanation through her diary, which Zhenchen's mother secretly slips into his luggage: she was raised as an orphan in North Korea, and a human trafficking thug (Lee Yoo-jun) had facilitated both her escape to China and her marriage with Zhenchen's father. Through flashbacks, the film shows how Zhenchen learns about the violence and murder that stained his mother's past, forcing her to flee to South Korea.

Produced by French funds and reflecting director Yun's French academic background, the film was acknowledged for its unique production values and imagery. Critics used descriptions such as "mesmerizing" and "gorgeous" to describe the blue and red neon lighting, which characterizes the nightlife setting of the film (Debruge 2018). However, it fails to deliver the powerful and original depiction of North Korean defectors that was presented in *Mrs. B.*, resorting to the common villain-and-hero narrative of a stereotypically evil human trafficker who takes advantage of weak, abused female defectors.

While this situation is certainly true for many cases in China, the dialogue that Zhenchen and his mother share is also unconvincingly tense and rigid, lacking any kind of emotional development. The film refrains from painting its characters in a sentimental light, reducing their lines and using

close-up shots of their faces instead, but in doing so their interactions become difficult to understand. Even though it is the first time she has seen her son in years, Zhenchen's mother hardly shows any emotions or gives an explanation for her absence, and Zhenchen in turn is depicted as an angsty, rebellious boy who cannot express his feelings calmly. Without any emotional buildup, he suddenly bursts into fury at the South Korean bar and shouts that his mother is a "dirty b–ch" in Chinese. The harsh insults he makes and the murderous violence he inflicts on his mother's new husband is one devoid of any convincing context.

Despite its technical accomplishment of stylized lighting, slow-motion sequences, and jump cuts, *Beautiful Days* fails to portray its characters in a realistic or relatable manner. Like its title, the film ends up painting a rather beautified version of the actual sex industry in China and South Korea: rather than showing the actual shame or abuse that North Korean women are subjected to during their work at bars, the film focuses on slow-motion sequences of Zhenchen's mother dancing and smoking a cigarette under the neon lights. Some critics criticized the narrative as well, saying that the film "required a few too many jumps in an increasingly cluttered timeline" (Ide 2018).

Reading through a newspaper interview with Yun allows the viewer to understand why the two films *Mrs. B.* and *Beautiful Days* had produced such contrasting results, even though they were directed by the same person. During his interview, Yun explained that the two films reflected the difference between creating a documentary film and a fictional film: "Documentary films allow me to capture unexpected moments, while fictional films require my own intentions to lead the narrative. Since documentary films rely on luck, it takes very long to find the right moment," he said (Song 2018). Yun's words prove that the production of *Mrs. B.* often relied on the unplanned lines of Mrs. B., giving the film its harrowing and realistic effect.

Meanwhile, Yun said that when he directed *Beautiful Days*, he wanted to "compress his personal message into the short film time" (Song 2018). Because it was his first narrative feature film,

he admitted to feeling conflicted between keeping a strong opinion and making the film more accessible for a larger audience. These struggles are reflected in *Beautiful Days*, which oscillate between using vivid imagery and stereotypical, one-dimensional characters. In this way, an in-depth comparison of the films *Mrs. B.* and *Beautiful Days* allows one to recognize how difficult it is to accurately depict the lives of North Korean defectors through the genre of fictional films. Even though Yun had acquired extensive qualitative data on the lives of North Korean defectors in China, *Beautiful Days* fell short of the nuance and complexity that was portrayed in the documentary film *Mrs. B.*

Crossing (크로싱) (2008) by Kim Tae-kyun reaffirms this argument by presenting another example of a fictional film that situates its North Korean defector characters in a typical mainstream narrative. The film follows the struggles of Kim Yong-soo (Cha In-Pyo), a former soccer player of North Korea who travels to China to earn some money for his ill wife and son. Although the film was the first South Korean commercial film to deal with the topic of North Korean defectors, some critics observed that it was a predictable tearjerker with overly dramatic acting (Jo 2008). Cha In-Pyo and the child actor Shin Myeong-cheol were criticized for their unconvincing shedding of tears, and one critic from Cine 21 described the film as "a movie that is faithful to the conventional devices of the melodramatic genre from beginning to end" (Park 2008).

The reason why the characters in *Beautiful Days* and *Crossing* are one-dimensional is because they only deal with the aspect of suffering and depression among North Korean defectors. Although I do not wish to undermine their pain, I believe that films should also include momentary scenes of relief, happiness, or nostalgia in their narratives of North Korean defectors: the memories and emotions are also an integral part of their lives, and their concept of happiness may be different from the Western understanding of happiness.

Anthropologist and professor Byung-Ho Chung explains this concept in his book *A Nation of Trials and Laughter*, which he wrote after conducting fieldwork in North Korea for over 20 years. He challenges the dominant Western perspective that North Koreans are in constant misery, reminding the reader that the original definition of happiness in psychology is "extremely subjective, with experiences and relationships being more important than material wealth or competition." Rather than simply living in the absence of pain, Chun says that happiness could be defined as leading a meaningful life: to feel happiness, one must seek a clear goal, experiencing a sense of achievement and transcendence through love and self-restraint (Chung 2020, 62). Because many North Koreans sincerely believe they are following the right path of loyalty to the regime, Chung argues that even in dire circumstances they may still experience feelings of happiness (Chung 2020, 62). This interpretation allows us to understand the factors that *Beautiful Days* and *Crossing* may have overlooked in their general portrayal of North Korean defectors.

Finally, I will add my analysis of *The Journals of Musan* (무산일기) (2010) by Park Jung-Bum as a rare example of a fictional film that succeeds in showing the lives of North Korean defectors from a complex and realistic perspective. The film was lauded by many critics and audiences for its true to life depiction of North Korean defectors, receiving awards such as the New Currents Award at the 2010 Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) and the Tiger Award (Grand Prix) at the 40th International Film Festival Rotterdam. The film is based on the experiences of Park's North Korean defector friend, whom the director met during his college years: the director plays the protagonist himself, who has the same name as his defector friend (Jeon Seung Chul).

In the film, Jeon is portrayed as a miserable North Korean defector who repeatedly fails to find a stable job because his resident registration number reveals that he is from the North. With his bowl haircut and chubby figure, the director plays Seung Chul as a pathetic character who can hardly survive in South Korean society. Every day, he roams the streets to put up advertisements on walls and is repeatedly beaten by gangsters who do not want him in their turf. As one critic observes, Jeon

is “bullied, cheated, ostracized, and hurt at every turn:” as the film nears its end, Jeon’s battles worsen, and the viewer realizes that the dire circumstances may strip him completely of his hope for humanity (Lee 2010).

The *Journals of Musan* contains two main North Korean defectors (Jeon and Gyoung-chul), but it steers carefully away from portraying either of them as simplistic or binary characters. The first character is Gyoung-chul, Jeon’s flatmate: throughout the film, he transitions from a seemingly friendly companion to a rude and merciless liar. In the first scene, he cheerfully lends all his clothes to Jeon and worries for Jeon’s safety in the streets, even insisting on purchasing an expensive padding jacket for him. However, Gyoung-chul slowly changes as the following scenes reveal his criminal behavior, such as shoplifting at department stores, scamming other North Koreans, and showing abusive behavior towards Jeon’s dog. Rather than portray Gyoung-chul as a clear-cut villain from the beginning, the film presents him as a complex character who shows both good-natured and manipulative behavior. This allows the viewer to relate with Jeon’s feelings of confusion and later disappointment towards his so-called friend.

Meanwhile, Jeon himself is an equally complex character, even though he does not express his thoughts as much as Gyoung-chul does. Played by the director himself, Jeon is the main protagonist of the film, an ordinary peasant who left his hometown in Musan out of hunger. Despite the fact that Jeon is a Job-like character, the film takes extra measures to ensure that none of these scenes are dramatized. None of the scenes contain romantic, tear-wrenching music as in Crossing, or emotional flashbacks of familial relationships as in Beautiful Days: even when Jeon shows tenderness for his dog, the camera shows him petting it aimlessly without a smile. Instead of focusing on the dramatic dangers that Jeon had to deal with on his journey to South Korea, the film remains true to its title and presents a daily record of Jeon’s struggles in South Korea.

This quality of realism is enhanced by the film's camerawork and cinematography as well. The neo-realist cinematography, harsh lighting, and gritty DV image texture add a dusty, serious atmosphere to the depressing setting of tall city buildings and trash dumps in the film. In addition, there are very few close-up shots of the North Korean defectors (unlike the previous films that I analyzed), allowing the viewer to observe Jeon's movement from afar rather than invoking any emotions through his facial expressions. Due to these techniques, many critics praised the director Park Jung-Bum, writing that the film provides a "bleak, clear-eyed look at the murky heart of human nature" (Lee 2010).

In summary, *The Journals of Musan* is a thought-provoking film that probes through the underlying issues in not only South Korean society and churches but also North Korean defector communities. The film shows how North Korean defectors suffer from discrimination, isolation, and poverty, living in a state of limbo, giving a liberal-humanist critique of South Korean capitalism and modernization. According to the program description of the 48th Seoul Independent Film Festival, director Park wrote that he wanted to show the perspectives of North Korean defectors after arriving to South Korea: "I wanted to project a number of people who crouch on the floor, as there are more and more skyscrapers" (Seoul Independent Film Festival). While the film uses characters such as Sook-young to personify the common mistakes that South Koreans make when interacting with North Korean defectors, it refuses to take one side over another. Even within the North Korean defector community, the film shows that there can be selfish people like Gyoung-chol who take advantage of others' hardships.

Through my analysis of the four films *Mrs. B.*, *Beautiful Days*, *Crossing*, and *The Journals of Musan*, I was able to summarize that films about North Korean defectors were more likely to have complex characters when created in documentary-style rather than fictional. This was because fictional films allow the director more power over the script and narrative arc: even though *Mrs. B.* and *Beautiful Days* were both created by the same director, the female North Korean defector in *Mrs.*

B. is more realistic and relatable than the silent, mysterious mother in *Beautiful Days*. However, *The Journals of Musan* is a film that breaks these limitations, proving that non-documentary films can also contribute to the accurate portrayal of North Korean defectors' lives in South Korean society. While some critics have described it as long and "unrelievedly glum," *The Journals of Musan* is exactly the kind of film that South Korean society needs to reveal the voices of marginalized North Korean defector communities (Hale 2011).

3.4 Transitioning from Brother to Foreigner: Comparing Themes of Brotherhood, Collaboration, and Friendship Across the Decades

The previous examination of 20 division films and their North Korean characters from each genre can be summarized into an overall analysis of the relationship between North and South Korean characters in each film. Ever since the beginning of the Sunshine Era, the themes of family, collaboration, and compassion have become an increasing focus in division films; through these themes, it was concluded that the relations between North and South Korean characters have gradually transitioned from brotherhood into friendship over the decades. To describe these changes in detail, this section will describe one film each from the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s and compare the relations portrayed in each narrative.

The three films elaborated in this chapter are *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War* (태극기를 휘날리며) (2004), *The Berlin File* (베를린) (2013), and *Escape from Mogadishu* (모가디슈) (2021). These films are representational of each decade, showing the trends of division films during that period: since *Taegukgi* was released in the early 2000s, it uses melodramatic conventions to explore the concept of nationhood, while *The Berlin File* is one of the many typical spy genre films of the 2010 that use themes of collaboration between North and South Korean agents to add comic elements

into the film. Finally, *Escape from Mogadishu* is a recent film of the 2020s, and it takes a unique approach of understanding North Koreans as foreigners rather than brothers from one nation.

Examining these films allow us to observe how the North-South relations in South Korean cinema have evolved from the concept of brotherhood in *Taegukgi* to collaboration in *The Berlin File*, and finally friendship in *Escape from Mogadishu*. For the classification of each relationship in these films, this research refers to criteria presented by Lee Woo-Young and Kim Myoung-Shin. In Lee and Kim's writings, they categorize the character relationships in division films according to the titles used to address each other: for the characters who called each other "mom, son, brother," and other familial terms, their relations were classified as "family" (Lee and Kim 2017). Even the characters who were not blood relatives, such as lovers, close neighbors, or sworn brothers in the films, were categorized as family. The term "brotherhood" will be used throughout this analysis to classify character relationships that use the term "hyung" (older brother) and "dongsaeng" (younger brother) among each other, regardless of whether the characters are blood related.

Firstly, *Taekgukgi: The Brotherhood of War* is a film that uses the universal themes of brotherly love to describe the suffering and separation that took place during the Korean war. Produced by *Shiri*'s famous director Kang Je-gyu with a $14 million budget, the film became the largest production in South Korean cinematic history during the time of its release. Although *Shiri* was a film of the espionage genre, *Taegukgi* bears strong resemblance to *Shiri* due to its dramatic music and emphasis on the concept of nationhood: in *Shiri*, the metaphor of "kissing gourami" (a type of exotic tropical fish that die when they are separated) is used to describe the tragic separation of the country, and two lovers are turned against each other because of their loyalty to each nation. Similarly, *Taegukgi* shows how the ideologies of the Korean war tear apart brothers, lovers, and even village friends, planting seeds of distrust among one another.

In *Taegukgi*, the main characters are two brothers. Jin-Tae, the older brother, is an uneducated but hardworking shoeshine boy who works to support his brother Jin-Seok's education, and the first scenes are filled with upbeat music as Jin-Tae and Jin-Seok are shown chasing each other and

laughing playfully in the Korean markets. However, the peaceful family is separated as soon as the Korean War begins, and both Jin-Tae and Jin-Seok are forcibly conscripted to the final defense line of the South Korean military. As they encounter the brutal violence of the battle front, Jin-Tae becomes determined to earn a medal of honor and send his little brother home.

The following half of the film depicts Jin-Tae's dramatic transformation from sacrificial older brother into a merciless killing machine: as the South Korean Army advances into North Korean territory, Jin-Tae keeps jumping into dangerous missions earn his medal of honor. However, his obsession with the medal worsens as time goes by, becoming entangled with the desire for power and addiction to violence. When Jin-Tae succeeds in one of his missions, he receives affirmation for his bravery by an older general, participates in interviews with news reporters, and gets thrown in the air by the rest of his soldiers. These scenes show the praise that Jin-Tae earns from his fellow soldiers every time he makes an achievement in the battlefront.

For Jin-Tae, the medal symbolizes power and status in the masculine hierarchical society of military, taking priority even over his care for his family or friends. When Jin-Seok asks Jin-Tae to write a letter with him to send to their family, he says, "Do I have to do it now? Let's do it later. I have to go to a reception." As soon as a different soldier calls him, he rushes off, asking Jin-Seok to write it for him instead. These lines show how Jin-Tae's priorities have been distorted by his desire for power: although his original goal was to send his brother home, he dismisses taking care of his brother and family to spend time with his fellow soldiers instead.

As the war continues, Jin-Tae becomes desensitized to the bloodthirst of violence, even forgetting to attend to his fellow soldiers' needs. In one of the scenes where Jin-Tae is on a mission to catch an important North Korean leader, the film uses the synchronization of audio and visual techniques to show his obsession with the medal. As soon as Jin-Tae seizes the captain of the North Korean forces, he begins screaming repeatedly, "I'm the one who caught him!" His shouts continue neurotically as he punches the North Korean leader, shooting at the ground on both sides of his head.

Even though his fellow soldier Yongman has been shot behind him and all the soldiers rush to Yongman's aid, Jin-Tae can no longer hear or understand the situation.

As the camera cross-cuts between a medium close-up shot of Jin-Tae lunging at the North Korean captain and a medium shot of Yongman bleeding to death, the viewer can hear Jin-Tae's shouts overlap with the voices of other soldiers speaking to Yongman. Even when the scene stops cutting back and forth, only focusing on a close-up shot of Yongman's face, Jin-Tae's hysterical voice continues in the background. In this way, the audio as well as the cross-cutting techniques are used to portray Jin-Tae's obsessive mental state and desensitization to his fellow soldier's death. As one film critic observes, these scenes show the "unglorified reality of war, which manipulated the norms and values of ordinary people and ultimately defeated its original purpose of reuniting families and the nation" (Lee Jinhee).

In order to construct this critique, the film uses the theme of "brotherhood" throughout its narrative, not only between the two brothers Jin-Tae and Jin-Seok, but also among other characters from the North Korean front. This is made possible by the Korean language, which allows younger men to call older male acquaintances "hyung" or older brother: in the film, Jin-Tae and Jin-Seok are placed in a moral dilemma whenever they meet characters from the North Korean side who call them "hyung" and ask for mercy. The first instance is when Jin-Tae and other soldiers try to shoot a group of miners working for the North Korean army: Jin-Seok recognizes one of the miners as their village friend and urges Jin-Tae to spare the miners, since they claim to have been forced into labor against their own choices. "Hyung! Can't you recognize me?" the miner cries out to Jin-Tae as he tries to prove his innocence, and these lines place them in a relationship of brotherhood.

In a similar scene, Jin-Seok tries to shoot a North Korean soldier at the battlefront, but he pleads with Jin-Seok to spare his life, calling him "hyung." As Jin-Seok shows a moment of hesitation, the North Korean soldier stammers tearfully, "I'm only 15. Hyung! I'm just a 10th grader. Please don't kill me." In this moment, the camera shows both of their faces in close-up, cutting back and forth between the young North Korean soldier's desperate expression and Jin-Seok's look of moral

confusion. The close-up angle and camera editing gives a pause to the fast-paced action in this sequence, humanizing each of the characters, and the pause gives the viewer a moment to wonder whether the North Korean soldier should be killed as well. However, in the split moment of hesitation, the North Korean soldier overpowers Jin-Seok with a punch and strangles him, and the handheld camera returns to shooting their movement from a distance, making both soldiers barely recognizable in the dark lighting. In this way, the camerawork and script are used repeatedly throughout the film to emphasize the tragedy of divided "brotherhood" among each character.

To summarize, the film *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War* constantly portrays the relationship of North Korean and South Korean characters as brotherhood, using the universal theme of family to appeal to a broader audience and deliver the tragedy of the Korean War. In one scene where the South Korean soldiers are fighting, one of the soldiers shouts, "I don't know what ideology even is. Is it important enough for brothers to be shooting each other?" These lines summarize the message of the film, which is literally reenacted by the two brothers Jin-Tae and Jin-Seok who end up taking opposite sides and shooting each other in the battlefront.

Using the metaphor of actual brotherhood between Jin-Tae and Jin-Seok, the film extends this concept into a larger theme of nationhood for all North and South Koreans. Here it must be clarified that the terms "brotherhood" and "nationhood" will be used interchangeably, as some South Koreans still consider North Koreans their "brothers" for sharing the same history and familial ties. In this analysis, both terms will be used to represent the traditional idea of "han-minjok" (one nation) that unites the two Koreas based on their shared history.

Throughout its narrative, *Taegukgi* refuses to create a clear divide between the North Korean and South Korean soldiers: some South Koreans are taken into forced labor to work for the North Korean forces, while some soldiers such as Jin-Tae changes loyalties and joints the North Korean military. Thus *Taegukgi* entangles these characters in the larger framework of "han-minjok" (being one nation), showing their conflict and confusion as they try to fight an unending war against each another.

The reason for this overarching theme can be found in the time period when *Taegukgi* was released: the early 2000s was still a period relatively close to the end of the Korean War, with president Kim Dae-jung releasing his "Sunshine Policy" to promote a new decade of warmth and positivity towards inter-Korean relations. As Kim's policies allowed for many separated families from the Korean War to meet temporarily across the border, the concept of family and "han-minjok" (being one nation) was felt and understood in waves across the country. Due to the residual war trauma among the audiences, *Taegukgi* was a film that both mourned and critiqued the tragedies of the Korean War, concluding with a message that brothers are inseparable even by war or death.

Meanwhile, the two films *The Berlin File* (2013) and *Escape from Mogadishu* (2021) by director Ryoo Seung-wan deviate from the theme of brotherhood portrayed in *Taegukgi*: rather than using words such as "hyung" to express the relationship between the North and South Korean characters, these films use the theme of collaboration and friendship to propel their narratives. While *Taegukgi* paints the tragedy of the Korean War with melodramatic conventions, using brutal war scenes and a romantic film soundtrack to create emotional cues for the viewer, both *The Berlin File* and *Escape from Mogadishu* paint a more restrained relationship among their characters. The North and South Korean characters in Ryoo's films rarely express affection to each other, even though they wish for each other's well-being: unlike the characters in *Taegukgi*, who are shown as loving brothers from the start of the film, the characters in Ryoo's films are first introduced as enemies with contempt or distrust for one another. One reason for this could be that Ryoo's films are released after the 2010s, using the division of the nation as a given background setting for the narrative.

Even though the two films contain similar themes of friendship and collaboration rather than brotherhood, they starkly different in their portrayal of collaboration and friendship among North and South Korean characters. Although *The Berlin File* and *Escape from Mogadishu* were both directed by the same filmmaker, they are 8 years apart from each other: this space allowed me to compare the two films, analyzing how Ryoo as well as other South Korean filmmakers had changed over the decade in their understanding and representation of interKorean relations. The following paragraphs

will introduce the different themes of friendship in each film, outlining the two film's key differences in their portrayal of North Korean characters and North-South friendships.

To begin with *The Berlin File* (2013), the film is a contemporary espionage thriller that details the story of North Korean agent Pyo Jong-seong (played by Ha Jung-woo) in modern-day Germany. After failing in an illegal arms deal with a Russian broker, Pyo becomes entangled in the political battle between agents from South Korea, North Korea, and the C.I.A over the departed Kim Jong-il's bank account. At the beginning of the film, Pyo narrowly escapes South Korean agent Jung Jin-soo (Han Suk-kyu); however, North Korean ambassador Lee Hak-su (Lee Kyung-young) warns him to stay alert, because Pyongyang has dispatched another agent named Dong Myung-su (Ryoo Seung-bum) to watch over him.

Once Dong enters Pyo's house, he tells Pyo that his wife Ryun Jung-hee (Jun Ji-hyun) is suspected for treason, and gives him only 48 hours to incriminate her. The scenes where Pyo is forced to investigate his wife are high-strung and intense, with their constant drumbeats and fast-paced cuts. However, two things happen that completely change Pyo's relationship with his wife: first, he finds out that they have been set up under a scheme by Dong's father for the bank account, and secondly, his wife reveals to him that she is pregnant with his child. In a spur of a moment, Pyo decides to remain loyal to his wife, and they try to escape together. As Jung continues to investigate the conspiracies linked to the arms deal, he ends up making an alliance with Pyo against Dong.

While preparing for the film, director Ryoo met with several North Korean defectors to create the documentary *Spies* (2011) for the Korean broadcaster MBC (Ju). After these encounters, Ryoo said that he wanted *The Berlin File* to focus on the "solitude and sorrow of those who live as secret agents" (Ju). However, once the film was released, many critics commented that its narrative was "lethargic" or "inoffensively generic" (Humanick): the casting of Han recalls his nostalgic role as a secret agent in *Shiri*, but he remains unsympathetic to Pyo throughout the film, and the characters of Pyo and his wife are granted very few lines. Although the film was praised for its skillfully composed action scenes, it fails to fully flesh out the complexity of human relationships among its characters.

Meanwhile, the political drama *Escape from Mogadishu* (2021) shows considerable development over the past 8 years in Ryoo's casting, film production, and portrayal of the North Korean character. The film depicts the true story of an escape mission by North and South Korean embassy workers during the Somali Civil War in the 1990s and was selected as the South Korean entry for best international feature at the Oscars (Kim). Its intense action scenes, elaborate production design, and vivid acting performances allow the viewer to catch a glimpse of not only Somalia's regime collapse, but also the underlying tensions between North and South Korean relations.

Escape from Mogadishu opens with the backdrop of President Siad Barre's corrupted regime in Somalia, as South Korean ambassador Han (Kim Yoon Seok) works to secure more votes in support of his country's admission to the United Nations. However, veteran North Korean ambassador Rim (Huh Joon-ho) has already been operating for 20 years in the country, and repeatedly foils Han's attempts to approach the dictator. Their competition intensifies when Han's KCIA officer Kang Dae-jin (Jo In-sung) arrives, getting into petty conflicts with the provocative DPRK intelligence officer Tae Joon-ki (Koo Kyo-hwan).

The real conflict begins when Barre is overthrown by rebel fighters, and Mogadishu descends into anarchy. As chaos engulfs the capital, with gangs of children shooting on the streets, Rim decides to leave with his team to the South Korean embassy for sanctuary. Han eventually lets them in, and he and Rim plan out an escape mission together against the protests of their intelligence officers. As the ambassadors struggle to improvise their way out of the country, realistic issues arise between the family members. Rather than portraying the characters as villains or heroes, Ryoo succeeds in painting them as flawed humans.

The main difference between *The Berlin File* and *Escape from Mogadishu* lies in their depiction of friendship between the North and South Korean characters. In *The Berlin File*, the main theme of North and South Korean alliance is seen in Pyo and Jung's relationship. Although their first encounter involves a gun-holding standoff, they later form an alliance when Dong takes Pyo's wife as

hostage. Desperate to find his wife, Pyo reveals important information about Dong's father to Jung, who finally agrees to track down Dong together at the risk of losing his life.

Despite what this narrative may imply, Jung's sympathy or understanding for Pyo is rarely addressed throughout his lines in the film. When Pyo pleads with Jung that his wife has a child in her belly, he replies tersely, "Not mine." Unlike what the viewer expects, the two do not unite over the issue of family, but rather on the condition that Pyo will defect to South Korea. Even when Pyo and Jung prepare to invade Dong's safehouse together, hiding in the fields, there is little meaningful conversation between the two–"I don't understand why you would risk your life for this," Pyo says to Jung, and he replies, "It's my job. There's no reason for doing your job. You just do it." The scene darkens, heightening the dramatic suspense, but the viewer learns nothing about Jung's thoughts concerning Pyo.

As the film reaches its final scenes, Jung's insensitivity towards Pyo seems to worsen. After a brutal fight with Dong, in which Pyo kills Dong with an injection, he stumbles back to his wife only to find that she has died from the crossfire. Pyo calls for her to wake up desperately, crying, "Jung-hee-ya, let's go," and looks desperately towards Jung for any sense of human empathy. However, Jung remains awkwardly still; even throughout a desperate sequence of Pyo falling down repeatedly as he runs through the fields, trying to carry his wife on his back, Jung takes no action to support or comfort him.

The ending of the film perpetuates this problematic dynamic. After Jung learns that the South Korean government made a deal with Pyongyang to hand Pyo over to them, he pulls over at a road in the forest and tells Pyo to run away. In contrast with his helpful actions, Jung's last lines are unnecessarily condescending and aggressive. "I can't stand to see a commie like you eat and live well," he says. After a sigh, he gives Pyo a glare and spats, "Go." Intense drums begin playing as Pyo rushes through the brushes, and the film cross-cuts between the scene and a close-up shot of Jung, adding a voiceover of his continued words. "You failed to protect your wife and the child inside her

belly…Just stay hidden and live like that your whole life…like a speck of dust. Don't you dare try to confide in someone or take some flopsy revenge. Just live your life taking little breaths of air."

Despite the fact that these words are possibly Jung's last farewell to Pyo, they are disturbingly offensive and disrespectful. Jung's ending lines reveal that the film itself lacks true understanding or pity for the North Korean agent: without giving the character enough time to grieve for the death of his wife and his child, the film pushes Pyo into action again, whipping on his sunglasses and calling Dong's father with a warning of revenge. From a commercial perspective, the final scene leaves the viewer with suspenseful anticipation for a sequel; however, within the narrative of the film alone, one must realize that Pyo is forced to live as a political pawn, always on the run from both South and North Korean officials.

Perhaps this is the reality that North Koreans experience after defecting to South Korea–life in a constant limbo, with the loneliness and confusion of a spy caught between two countries. However, the problem with *The Berlin File* is that this type of treatment or situation is normalized by Jung's antagonistic rhetoric, even though he seems to support Pyo in action. His last words serve as a conclusion of the film, and they leave Pyo with the image of a vengeful North Korean spy rather than a relatable father or a husband. Even though top star Ha Jung-woo does an excellent job in delivering Pyo's emotions through his limited number of lines, the film rarely develops the character beyond his mission as a spy.

In some ways, the collaborative but indifferent attitude that Jung shows towards Pyo can be interpreted as a representation of the Lee Myung Bak government's view of North Korea during the early 2010s. Although Lee was open to collaborating with North Korea, he firmly believed that improving North-South relations would be impossible without first addressing the nuclearization issue in North Korea, forming the 'De-nuke, Open 3000' initiative to place priority on denuclearization (Moon 2011). According to one scholar, Lee's policy towards North Korea was summarized as "reactive, retaliatory, and even unrealistic," rejecting several summit talks and allowing the ROK military to use pictures of the three Kims (Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un) as shooting

practice targets (Moon 2011). These actions angered the North Korean military, heightening tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Thus, the relationship between Pyo and Jung in *The Berlin File* reflects the antagonistic relations between North and South Korea during Lee's administration: in the end, the two characters go their separate ways without truly sympathizing with one another. Although North Korea also threatened South Korea with its belligerent behavior, causing incidents such as the Cheonan sinking, Lee's administration was criticized for its hawkish and hardline security stance against North Korea. Just like Jung's attitude towards Pyo at the end of the film, Lee's policies failed to acknowledge and respect the separate identity of North Korea, relying instead on pragmatic projections of its future collapse (Moon 2011). In this way, the relations between the characters in *The Berlin File* serves as a hyperbolic representation of the two Koreas during the early 2010s.

In contrast, *Escape to Mogadishu* does an excellent job in bringing out the tentative friendship and mutual respect that form between South and North Koreans. In the beginning scenes, the North Korean ambassadors are shown in direct conflict with the South Koreans: when KCIA officer Kang tries to deliver his goodwill package to the president, they are intercepted and raided by a group of robbers that were paid by the North Koreans. Once Kang finds out that the North Korean intelligence officer Tae was the one responsible for bribing the rebels, he also bribes a Western journalist for photos that show North Koreans supplying weapons to the Somali rebel forces.

The two teams come to a confrontation when they meet, arguing over the robbery and the photos, and ambassador Rim tells Han to "stop selling your own fellow countryman just to get into the UN." Almost on cue, shots ring out outside the hotel, signaling that the war has reached Mogadishu. The ambassadors run to take cover as people spiral into panic–beginning from this scene, the viewer can see a shift take place in their relationship. While the two teams were shown in juxtaposed, loose close-up shots during their argument, after the war begins, the four people are shot from the same angle, running away towards the same direction.

Compared to *The Berlin File*, Ryoo manages to develop a more complex and trusting relationship between South and North Korean ambassadors Han and Rim. The main themes that unite them together are basic human necessities such as food and survival: when Han finally decides to let the desperate North Korean team into his embassy, he sighs and asks, "Have you eaten?" which is an inherently Korean question, one that gained significance after the Korean War.

In the next scene, the families sit down to dine together at the same table. The details in the scene hold great significance for the relationship between the North and South Koreans. "Aren't you hungry?" Han asks, as the North Koreans remain silent in the dark candlelight. It is only when he changes his bowl with Rim's, taking a large spoonful to show that the food is not poisoned, that the North Korean team can begin eating hungrily. Han's gesture serves as another example of genuine empathy: instead of treating the North Korean characters with prejudiced scorn as Jung does in *The Berlin File*, Han puts himself in their shoes and makes decisions in consideration of their needs and concerns.

During this dining scene, the camera cuts to the two mothers, who work together to peel a seasoned perilla leaf from the dish. Even though their eyes avert quickly away from each other to look down at the table, their care for one another is shown in the way their chopsticks continue to meet. The North Korean mother holds down the other leaves with her chopsticks, so the South Korean mother can take her share. In these shots, Ryoo uses the theme of food to symbolize the budding understanding and trust among the South and North Korean characters.

While these interactions portray indirect gestures of kindness, the conversation that Han and Rim share privately is the most striking in its personal honesty. "You don't think we plan to defect to South Korea, do you?" Rim asks, leaning forward to stare directly at Han. After a pause, Han says, "I'm sure you didn't come all the way here just to get a meal." Even though Rim tries to use his well-refined diplomatic language to explain that the North Koreans haven't given up on their pride, Han cuts him off, asking, "Do you have to give a speech even in this kind of situation? There's only the two of us here. Let's talk to each other rather than give speeches."

Although it is difficult to define Rim and Han's relationship as brotherhood, their mutual respect for each other comes across as more realistic and achievable than the relationship between Jung and Pyo in *The Berlin File*. Neither actor is glamorized as having good looks or fighting skills, and this deviates from the typical masculinity of North Korean characters in South Korean films. Their interactions are based on logic and reason rather than the sentimentality often found in South Korean films: as they open the map of Somalia together, Han reassures the North Koreans, "Let's state our goal clearly. We're not here to create some kind of reunification, we're just here to find a way out."

Han's words are powerfully ironic, making a point against the endlessly repetitive high-level talks, forums, and conferences that take place about Korean reunification. Through his conversations with Rim, the film teaches us that honest empathy is more powerful than bureaucratic speeches. While it was unclear what united Pyo and Jung together in *The Berlin File* (supposedly Pyo's agreement to defect), the alliance that Han and Rim form is much more simple and straightforward. When North and South Koreans are able to see each other as the same humans with mutual needs for food and survival, the film shows that this in itself is a step towards reunification.

Even though the last scenes of *Mogadishu* are solemn and quiet, they deliver a much deeper meaning for the North Korean characters than the ending of *The Berlin File*. As they are about to step off the plane to each of their own country's separate delegations, Rim says to Han over the loud whirring noise, "I know it's late, but I want to sincerely thank you." When Han calls out to the families to say their goodbyes inside the plane, there is no weeping, even among the children, but it is clear to the viewer that both teams are filled with unexpected sorrow as they shake each other's hands tightly.

Once again, this performance of getting off the plane separately is mutually agreed for the safety of both the North and South Korean families. As the gentle music of strings and piano keys trickle out, the camera shows the families walking alongside each other towards their separate buses, unable to make eye contact with each other. Substituting words for solemn music, Ryoo leaves the

viewer with much more space at the ending of *Escape from Mogadishu* to reflect upon inter-Korean relations than he does in *The Berlin File.*

In this way, *Escape from Mogadishu* focuses on the realistic portrayal of the personal bond formed between North and South Koreans, while *The Berlin File* provides a thrilling and entertaining spy movie with hardboiled action shot in iconic locations. Both films clearly have their own strengths and weaknesses: while *Escape from Mogadishu* delivers a raw, stripped-down version of what North and South Korean unity could look like, *The Berlin File* captures the grim isolation and hopelessness that North Korean agents might experience, with no one to rely on even until the end.

Another difference between the two films could be the historically different backgrounds. Ironically, the Somali civil war creates a safe space of peace for the North and South Korean ambassadors in *Escape from Mogadishu*, where they are given reasons to break their national security regulations and collaborate with one another. In addition, the film events are set in the late 1980s and early 1990s, while *The Berlin File* takes place in modern-day Germany. For the characters in *Escape from Mogadishu,* this was a time when South Korea had a lower economic status than today, and the nation still viewed North Korea as its competitor. This setting allows the North and South Korean diplomats to be able to see each other more eye-to-eye, whereas today South Korea views North Korea as a recipient country of national aid.

The transformation in the message of South Korean films from *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War* to *The Berlin File* and finally *Escape from Mogadishu* sends out a hopeful message for the potential of the South Korean film industry. Throughout the past 20 years, the film industry has been politically charged by the Cold War rhetoric against North Korea, creating both stereotypes and fantasies for North Korean characters. Now more than ever, filmmakers should strive to portray North Koreans as flawed human beings rather than borrowing from dominant tropes of villains or superheroes.

Through *Escape from Mogadishu*, Ryoo proves that the theme of friendship and collaboration among North and South Korean characters may be more effective in our modern society than director

Kang's melodramatic theme of brotherhood in *Taegukgi.* According to an interview, Ryoo said that he "wished to paint North Korea as a country of its own, rather than viewing it as a subject of political reunification." While this deviates from the original values of "han-minjok" and nationhood that South Korea used to hold onto, it is a relevant and necessary approach for the younger Korean generation.

Unlike the 2000s, when *Taegukgi* was first released, Korean audiences no longer mourn for the separation of the Korean War or consider North Korean citizens as their "brothers." Instead, the concept of separation has become time-worn and unsurprising to South Koreans, having endured over seventy years of developing apart from North Korea. According to a survey conducted by the Seoul-based Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS), support for unification among South Koreans has drastically decreased over the past 15 years, hitting its lowest percentage recorded in 2021 (Chung 2021). The IPUS reported that only 44.6% among 1,200 South Korean respondents said that they believed reunification of the Korean peninsula is necessary, showing that South Koreans generally prefer peaceful coexistence with North Korea rather than reunification (Chung 2021). Taking these trends into consideration, Ryoo abandons the emphasis on reunification, and instead tries to convince South Korean viewers to understand North Koreans as different but respectable humans.

Even though Ryoo had to postpone the film's release due to the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic in Korea, it received a ranking of number 5 at the worldwide box office only during its first week of release: the success of *Escape from Mogadishu* proves that political thrillers can provide both top-class entertainment and a serious illustration of national separation (Jang). Through a comparative analysis of *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War, The Berlin File*, and *Escape from Mogadishu* throughout the decades, we may anticipate that South Korean cinema is evolving and growing in its understanding of North Korean characters and North-South relations. Hopefully, these changes may influence the public South Korean perspectives on North Koreans in a positive light.

Chapter IV. Interviews with North Korean Defectors

The fourth chapter of this research observes the perspectives of North Korean defectors on South Korean films through semi-structured interviews with three interviewees. This chapter was added to incorporate the voices of North Korean people into the conclusion of the research, contributing to a more nuanced interpretation of the representation of North Koreans in South Korean media.

4.1 Selection of Research Participants and Film Clips

The selection criteria for research participants was specified as North Korean defectors who were born and raised in North Korea. To conduct as many face-to-face interviews as possible, the participants were also limited to those who were currently living in Seoul. It was important that these participants had a clear memory of their time spent in North Korea, allowing them to provide their perspectives on the differences between actual North Korean people and the North Korean characters in South Korean films.

During the research period, South Korean government's COVID-19 regulations lifted and all three of the interviews were conducted face-to-face on the condition that the interviewees had no COVID-19-related symptoms. The interviews took place for about an hour per participant in cafes accessible to them, and a gift of 50,000 won was sent to each participant's Kakaopay account as a sign of gratitude. As mentioned in the research methodology, the interview included a screening of four 30-second film clips, which was an idea inspired by the Yale Hersonski's approach in *A Film Unfinished* (2010). Just as Hersonski documented the responses of five Jews to a propaganda film produced by German soldiers, examining the difference between German and Jewish perspectives on

the Holocaust, the interviews presented three North Korean defectors with four edited film clips (about one minute each) to record their responses.

Below is a description of these film clips along with their time stamps, and a brief explanation of why they were selected as significant for the interview. The following clips were chosen for their portrayal of not only North Korean characters, but also their relations with South Korean characters in the narrative: due to time constraints, the defectors viewed one scene that represented the North-South relations from each film. The selected clips portrayed various types of North-South relations in division films that showed South Korea's negative perceptions, fantasies, suspicions, and respectful attitude towards North Koreans. Clips from division films of the war genre were avoided due to risks of triggering traumatic memories of violence among the participants.

Scene 1) *The Berlin File* (베를린) (2013), (1:54:46-1:56:01)

This first clip was chosen because it represents the portrayal of South Koreans' negative perceptions towards North Koreans in division films. The scene is one that was mentioned in section 3.4, where the South Korean agent Jung decides reluctantly to let North Korean spy Pyo run away. Even though the South Korean government has made a deal with Pyongyang to return Pyo to them, Jung pulls his car over in the middle of the forest and tells Pyo to flee.

Among other scenes in *The Berlin File,* this last scene was chosen because it was used in the previous character analysis to examine Jung's condescending and demeaning lines towards Pyo. "I can't stand to see a commie like you eat and live well… Go." He says to Pyo as the camera cuts to Pyo's escaping sequence in the forest, "You failed to protect your wife and the child inside her belly…Just stay hidden and live like that your whole life…like a speck of dust. Don't you dare try to confide in someone or take some flopsy revenge. Just live your life taking little breaths of air." These

lines were chosen to discuss the negative perceptions that South Koreans have towards North Koreans, which manifests in Jung's scornful lines towards Pyo.

Scene 2) *Confidential Assignment* (공조) (2017), (47:02-48:40)

The second scene chosen from *Confidential Assignment* portrays the South Korean detective Kang Jin-tae (Yoo Hae-jin) and his family dining with the North Korean agent Im Cheol-ryung (Hyun Bin). This clip shows multiple dynamics that portray the fantasies and stereotypes of South Koreans towards North Korean people: in the same scene, Kang jokes that Im is like a "poor North Korean starving to death," while his family members reprimand him severely and speak encouraging words to Im. Additionally, Kang's sister-in-law Park Min-young (Im Yoon-ah) represents the fantasies of South Korean audiences by complimenting Im, saying, "Do you think all North Koreans are hungry? It's different for each person." Pointing to Im's face in admiration, she adds, "How can this be a hungry person's face? He's glowing."

This clip was selected because it portrays both the stereotypes and fetishization of the North Korean spy. Kang speaks dismissively towards Im, asserting against his family's scolding that all North Koreans are starving ("Haven't you seen the newspaper?"), while Yoon-ah hints at the crush she has towards the stoic and well-built North Korean spy. These comments serve as representations of the various assumptions and fantasies that South Koreans have towards North Korean people, highlighting the solemn and charismatic North Korean spy archetype that was observed in division films of the espionage genre. Through the screening of this short dining scene, the researcher was able to discuss with participants how North Korean characters—specifically North Korean male spies—are fetishized in South Korean media.

Scene 3) *Mrs. B* (마담 B) (1:02:30-1:04:55)

The third selected clip is one that portrays the contrasting desires of a North Korean woman defector (Mrs. B.) and her son that lives in South Korea. While the son wants his mother to remain in South Korea with him, Mrs. B. is determined on returning, and their conflicting thoughts are shown through individual interviews with the filmmaker.

When the son is questioned, "What would you do if your mother said she wanted to go back to China?" He answers, "I will stop her. China is dangerous… Even if you have South Korean citizenship, it can still be dangerous, so I'm going to stop her from returning there. Even when my mother left North Korea, I asked her not to leave me, and that's how we were separated. So this time I'm going to stop her." The camera shows a close-up of his face, which is darkened with concern as he stares at the ceiling, wondering about his mother's future decisions.

Meanwhile, the mother Mrs. B. is shown in her worker uniform, preparing her motorcycle for a ride through the South Korean streets as her voiceover is added to the shot. "I'm sick and tired of South Korea, so I'm not going to stay here, I'm returning to China," her voice affirms as she speeds through the Korean highways. "Even though I was sold to that person (her Chinese husband), I was under his shadow, and that gave me comfort… The man even understood when I didn't want to have children because of my two sons. How could I just forget about him now that I'm in a better place?"

While there are many important scenes in *Mrs. B.,* this clip most adequately represents the complexity of Mrs. B.'s feelings towards staying in South Korea, especially after receiving multiple interrogations by the government for being a potential North Korean spy. Even though Mrs. B. wishes to care for her sons, she is "tired" of the suspicious South Korean capitalist society and feels obliged to keep her loyalty to her Chinese husband. By showing this clip to the North Korean defectors, the researcher was able to discuss with them about the suspicious perceptions that South Koreans have towards North Koreans and the significance of portraying them in documentaries.

Scene 4) *Escape from Mogadishu* (모가디슈) (2021), (1:10:36-1:11:37)

Finally, a clip from *Escape from Mogadishu* was chosen as an example that shows how North and South Koreans' "mutual respect" can take place in the filmic narrative. This scene was presented in section 3.4 as well, following a private conversation between the two North and South Korean diplomats Han and Rim while they are trapped in Mogadishu during the middle of the night. When Han asks Rim about his stance towards the South Korean government, Rim answers, "You don't think we plan to defect to South Korea, do you...As humans have humanity and nations have nationality, diplomacy should have its own dignity. We didn't throw away our pride in our decision to come here."

Rather than criticize the North Korean government or people as the other South Korean characters have done in *The Berlin File* and *Confidential Assignment*, Han asks earnestly what Rim's thoughts are. "Diplomat Rim, I get that you have much more experience than me, and you're a very skilled man," he says carefully, "But do you have to give a speech even in this kind of situation? There's only the two of us here. Let's talk to each other rather than give speeches. Do you even have any gratitude towards us?"

This scene was selected as one that portrays honest empathy between two North and South Korean characters. The respectful request of Han to Rim to "talk rather than give speeches" is one that emphasizes humanity over high-level speeches and ideological messages. While watching the scene, the research participants discussed how North and South Koreans could engage in mutually respectful and sincere conversations for the sake of collaboration.

In summary, these were the four clips that were screened during the interview, allowing for the North Korean defectors to provide their own thoughts and analysis of the various South Korean fantasies, suspicion, stereotypes, and respect towards North Korean people. Although a list of questions was prepared in advance, the interviews were mostly based on an "open-ended semi-

structured" format to pursue topics that the interviewees wished to focus on rather than asking short-answer yes-or-no questions. Below are the five questions that were asked:

1) How long have you been living in South Korea? How was your experience in South Korea?

2) Have you ever watched a South Korean movie that contains North Korean characters?

3) What are the initial feelings and thoughts that come to mind after watching the four scenes of South Korean division films about North Koreans?

4) In your opinion, are the North Korean characters in Korean movies realistically portrayed? If not, what are some keys differences between the film character and North Koreans in real life?

5) What changes would you want to see in South Korean films that contain North Korean characters?

Whenever necessary, arbitrary questions were added to allow space for the interviewees to explore themes that felt important to them, promoting more spontaneous questions and discussions on the fictional archetypes of North Koreans in South Korean films. For the participants that gave permission to record their interviews, their conversations were audio-recorded and transposed into research notes, then translated from Korean to English to use for further analysis.

4.2 General Responses of North Korean Defectors

The three North Korean defectors that participated in these interviews were all women over their 50s who had defected to South Korea during the early 2000s. For the sake of anonymity, their

names were changed to pseudonyms when describing their perspectives in this section. Each of the North Korean defectors had contrasting thoughts about both the film clips and the concept of han-minjok (one nation) in general: because they were from different levels of the hierarchical system in North Korea, their narratives were different as well.

To provide a brief introduction of the background of the three interviewees, the first participant Soo was a 50-year-old female North Korean defector whom I had encountered during my summer internship at a nonprofit organization's English-teaching program in 2019. Soo was born and raised in Chongjin, the capital of North Korea's North Hamkyong Province (함경북도). Because her father was from South Korea, Soo said that she was regarded as a child of "South Korean heritage" and grouped in a lower ranking than others. After the Arduous March (also known as the North Korean Famine) affected Soo's living situations, she escaped to China with her daughter for survival. While her daughter managed to defect to South Korea and enter an educational facility, Soo was caught by North Korean officials and imprisoned until she escaped to South Korea in 2008. Having found her daughter again, Soo currently lives with her daughter and South Korean husband in Seoul, working at the counter of a dental clinic.

After the interview, Soo introduced her other two defector friends to the research as well, whose names were replaced with the pseudonyms Jeong and Hae. Jeong was a 56-year-old female North Korean defector, born and raised in the Northern shores of Nampo. She had a starkly different narrative from Soo's in her childhood: Jeong's mother was the director of a government childcare center and her father a high-ranking official in the military, allowing their family to receive consistent financial support from the North Korean government. Due to this background, Jeong said that she never had to worry about her meals, even eating sushi occasionally with her family. Jeong's journey to South Korea was unique as well: having been legally dispatched as a secretary to a company in China, Jeong became acquainted with a Korean manager and accompanied him for four years in Indonesia before flying directly to South Korea in 2007. After arriving she worked for National

Medical Center and the Seoul Central Medical Clinic for 8 years as a counselor, and now provides counseling services at Hanawon, a North Korean resettlement facility.

The third interviewee Hae was a 62-year-old woman who defected from North Korea in 2006. Hae was from a rural farming village, and like Soo had struggled to find a meal every day before escaping to China with her son. Hae worked for four years in China, serving at restaurants and foot massage shops, but eventually she got discovered and was sent back to North Korean prison three times. Before her last imprisonment, Hae said that she wanted to stay in China rather than defecting to South Korea because she felt reluctant to give up her loyalties towards North Korea. However, after the third time she was captured and interrogated violently by the North Korean police, Hae decided to escape and defect to South Korea. She traveled through Mongolia and arrived in 2006, later paying a broker to bring in her son as well. After working as a water purifier saleswoman for a while in South Korea, Hae began her own hair salon and managed it for three years. She currently works for a part-time job at a restaurant.

The following paragraphs compare the similarities and contrasts in these three participants' responses after watching each film clip. In general, it was observed that all three North Korean defectors felt more comfortable speaking about their own life experiences and thoughts than South Korean media, most likely because all of them were more accustomed to giving speeches or participating in interviews about their journey to South Korea. Soo said that she used to give speeches for nonprofit human rights organizations, and Hae and Jeong were both leaders in their churches, often sharing their experiences in multicultural church programs. Due to these reasons, their answers during the interview often diverted from the topic of South Korean cinema and elaborated the suffering or hardships that they had encountered in North Korea, China, and South Korea.

As meaningful as these conversations were, this created an unexpected challenge in focusing the discussion on their thoughts about South Korean division films. Rather than analyze the film clips

that were shown, the three interviewees spoke freely of whatever came to mind after watching the scenes, providing their opinions on the concept of "han-minjok" (one nation) and absolute hospitality. Nevertheless, these voices were extremely helpful in thinking about the ways forward for South Korean filmmakers; the following paragraphs will organize the general overlapping themes from their responses on both the film clips and South Korean films in general.

While watching the last scene of *The Berlin File*, the defectors unanimously showed negative responses towards the condescending lines that South Korean agent Jung spoke as he released North Korean agent Pyo. As soon as the scene finished, Hae exclaimed that Jung's lines were "completely trampling the North Korean agent character (Pyo)." Her main concern was that these types of scenes could influence the perceptions of viewers who had never encountered North Koreans in their lives. "This is so messed up," she repeated, "Why did they treat the character like this? It's only teaching bad things to South Koreans."

Hae added that Jung's lines reminded her of her own experiences of discrimination in South Korean society. When she first defected to South Korea, she said that she had many dreams and ambitions about finding a better life. However, when she tried to adapt to South Korean society, Hae found that it was often discriminating towards North Korean defector, just like the way that Jung told Pyo to live like a "speck of dust." "When I actually tried to settle down, I realized that it is like the efforts of a crow-tit (뱁새, a type of Korean bird) trying to walk like a stork (황새)," she recalled. "I didn't have any college degree, connections, or even basic education… it was like diving headfirst into the ground."

Hae described how she was rejected from interviews for being a woman in her mid-40s without any college degree: even her work as a water purifier saleswoman was unsuccessful because her North Korean accent was too strong. When she finally began a more stable job as a hairdresser, she encountered customers who asked her if she was from China because of her accent. To make

things worse, Hae suffered a traffic accident while working as a delivery woman: seeing Jung's scornful expression towards Pyo, Hae said that it reminded her of how cold South Korean society had seemed to her. "I always felt as if I was facing a huge concrete wall that was blowing ice-cold wind in my face," she said.

Jeong's response aligned with Hae's as well: she said that these types of scenes were the reason why preferred to avoid watching South Korean dramas or films about North Koreans. "Do you (filmmakers) even know a thing about North Korean spies? That's what I always think," she said. "I just can't believe they could make films this badly. Why discriminate North Koreans like this?" Jeong said that she wished for South Korean films to treat North and South Korean characters equally, making them speak respectfully to each other within the narratives. "Treating others equally is a basic concept that all humans should understand, including South Koreans," she asserted. The responses of both Hae and Jeong can be interpreted as an extension of their frustration with South Korean society. Due to the hardships that Hae had encountered in adapting to South Korean society, she empathized directly with the North Korean character Pyo, speaking openly about her feelings of discomfort and concern.

While the interviewees' negative reactions towards *The Berlin File*'s film clip were generally overlapping in their criticism of the treatment of North Korean characters, the family dining scene in *Confidential Assignment* brought forth more diverse responses. Soo said that she thought the contrast between South Korean detective Kang's dismissive comment that "all North Koreans are starving" and the rest of his family's objections was mainly due to their generational gap. "I think Kang is just treating the North Korean spy like that because he is an old man, and he probably received anti-communist education," she said. "Even my South Korean husband was educated like that when he was young. People who were educated like that tend to have more prejudices against North Koreans." She said that the daughters who reprimanded Kang for being rude were probably more open-minded because they didn't know much about the history of antagonistic relations between North and South

Korea. “Overall, I think this scene actually reflects a generational difference in perspectives,” she explained.

Meanwhile, Jeong said that the entire scene itself was unrealistic and could never happen in real life. “This is all exaggerated,” Jeong said, “Even if somehow this North Korean spy managed to stay over at a South Korean detective’s house, why would he have spoken to the South Korean family with his North Korean accent? Don’t you think he would have been well-trained to speak like South Koreans in his base camp? No real spy would act like this.” Jeong added that when she was working in Indonesia under her South Korean manager, no one knew that she was North Korean because she had practiced her South Korean accent. Jeong also objected to Kang’s generalization that all North Koreans were starving. Having come from Pyeongyang, she said that she had never felt risk of starvation and concluded that it was unfortunate how South Korean filmmakers were creating such inaccurate scenes for the sake of commercial success. “When I watch these types of films, I think… ‘They’re playing around again (놀고 있네),’” she said. “The lines are like a comedy script!”

Through Jeong’s heated response, one can observe that the participants generally favored a “realistic” portrayal of North Korean characters, whether spies or soldiers or defectors. Hae expressed her distaste towards films that portrayed inaccurate North Korean characters as well, commenting on the film *Crossing* that its escape scenes were like “a drop of blood on bird feet (새발의 피)”—a traditional Korean expression to describe something very trivial—compared to her own journey to South Korea. “Instead of wasting time with dramatic crying scenes, couldn’t they just show the journey from China to Mongolia in a realistic way?” she asked. “That would shock everyone. Even just documenting my own journey here would have been more exciting.”

Among all the clips, the defectors’ responses towards the film clip of *Mrs. B.* were the most divided: Soo praised the film as one that shows the complexity of North Korean defector’s lives, while Jeong spoke up strongly against the way that these documentaries were revealing North Korean

defectors' private lives. After watching Mrs. B. share her thoughts about returning to her Chinese husband, Soo said that the scene adequately portrays how there is no "set answer" to how North Korean defectors' lives are. "In this woman's case, I think she suffered a lot under the South Korean government," Soo explained. "Just like how I became tired of North Korea, she's become tired of struggling to adapt to the South Korean society. She just needed someone to treat her warmly like the Chinese husband." Even though Soo said that she would never be able to even imagine leaving her children like Mrs. B., she understood that their situations were different and commended the way that the documentary shed light on these experiences. "I think we need more films like this, to show that every North Korean has a unique and individual story (사연)," she added.

However, Jeong's perspective was entirely different: having worked as a mental health counselor for many North Korean defectors at medical centers, she thought that the film was revealing too much of Mrs. B.'s private life without casting her in a positive light. "This film does provide a complex portrayal of North Korean defectors' lives, but at the same time, it's almost advertising that North Korean defectors are illegal drug-sellers," she said. "This woman had to bring her sons to South Korea as well: imagine how difficult it must have been for her to find enough money for all of that! She probably had no choice but to resort to those methods." Jeong added that she felt disturbed whenever she saw media portrayal of the private lives of North Korean defectors, such as the recent news reporting about a North Korean defector who had died at home and been left there for months without anyone discovering the body. "I just don't want them to be portrayed negatively like this, with all their privacy open to the world," she said. "I think that's just wrong."

While the previous chapter that analyzed films with North Korean defectors led to a similar conclusion as Soo's, Jeong provided a fresh perspective from a North Korean counselor into the potential problems and prejudices that could arise from media coverage of North Korean defectors. Even though in Mrs. B.'s case, she had agreed to film the documentary with full consent, later Mrs. B. mentioned in an interview with BBC that the choice had been made solely for financial purposes

(Kim 2018). Considering the vulnerable and precarious financial circumstances that many North Korean defectors are in, one must question whether their participation in such documentaries or other types of media representation should be seen as completely consensual. Jeong's comments remind us that filmmakers, researchers, and news writers should always approach the subject of North Korean defectors with careful consideration of their capability to make yes-or-no choices.

Finally, the film clip from *Escape from Mogadishu* elicited interpretations that later expanded to a larger discussion on the concept of nationhood. Soo said that she had watched the entire film on Netflix and was surprised to see the North and South Korean diplomats come together for the sake of survival. "That's when I thought, those strictly trained North Koreans can be humans, too. They all have the same desire to survive." She explained that the North Korean diplomat Rim was probably refusing to defect to South Korea because he was satisfied with his social position as a foreign diplomat: "If he was poor like I had been in North Korea, he would shout hurray (얼씨구) and defect immediately," she said with a laugh. "But I'm sure he can't let go of the honorable position that he's acquired in North Korea." She added that he was probably indoctrinated for over 70 years by the North Korean government ideology and wouldn't be able to let go of his worldview easily.

Jeong provided her own analysis as well, saying that although she hadn't watched the entire film, this clip made her feel that diplomat Rim was being very careful with his words. "You South Korean people wouldn't understand, but North Koreans have this instinctive cautiousness because we know we're always being watched," she explained. "When the diplomat Han asked Rim to speak honestly instead of giving speeches, of course he would have wanted to speak whatever was on his mind. But someone could have been watching him...He probably had no other choice but to speak like that." However, Jeong said that she highly approved of the way that the diplomat Han was speaking to Rim: "I wish there were more films like this about North Koreans," she said, "films that could just show North Koreans and South Koreans speaking eye-to-eye and helping each other out."

Despite their positive reviews of the film clip of *Escape from Mogadishu*, when Soo and Jeong were informed about the director Ryoo Seung-wan's approach of portraying North Korea as a separate country rather than han-minjok (one nation), they strongly objected to the idea. "Of course we're still han-minjok," Soo insisted, "I'm sure a lot of North Korean defectors agree with me: in North Korea, we receive this kind of education, that North and South Korea are one nation." Soo described that even during her everyday marriage life, she is often surprised to find similarities with her South Korean husband: "Because he was born and raised in Gangwon-do, my husband's dialect is pretty close to North Korean." When he used the word "Damanaegi (다마내기)" to describe a red onion, which was a word that she had used only when she lived in North Korea, she said that she thought to herself, "We really are one nation."

Because of this, Soo asserted that she believed North Korean defectors should try to change the way they speak and adapt to South Korean society. "You know the saying, 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do.' If they've decided to come to South Korea, they should try to speak as South Koreans do, not just ask people to treat them without prejudices. Some defectors have lived here for over 10 years, and they still sound the same! It makes me wonder, 'Is that so hard to change?'" This idea was also influenced by Soo's South Korean husband, who according to Soo had experienced a lot of conflict trying to work with North Korean employees. "Because we had opened a ramen restaurant together, I wanted to hire as many North Korean defectors as possible and help them out," Soo said. "But my husband kept getting offended by the way they spoke! Even though they sounded perfectly normal to me, he thought they were speaking aggressively because of their dialect."

Although Jeong's views aligned with Soo that North and South Korea are still one nation, she spoke differently of the ways that North Korean defectors should adapt to South Korean society. "Yes, we are one nation, but we have to understand the differences within that unity," she said. "It's just like the regional differences of Busan and Seoul. Just because a Busan person comes to Seoul, does that mean his accent changes at once? Of course not. But trying to change a North Korean's dialect is just

silly—that thought in itself is wrong!" Jeong emphasized that the integration of North Koreans and South Koreans should be sought with equal efforts on both sides, instead of North Koreans changing their entire way of speaking and thinking. "Instead of discriminating North Korean defectors, we should accept them for who they are," she said. "This is an important lesson that South Korean society still hasn't learned."

Lastly, Hae was the only participant who agreed with director Ryoo's mindset that North and South Korea should be viewed as individual countries that do not necessarily need reunification. "I think our differences are too big at this point to be seen as 'regional differences,'" she said, after hearing the metaphor that Jeong had used about Busan and Seoul dialects. "North Korea is a country with a nuclear weapons program, while South Korea isn't—that can't be seen as a regional gap." Hae voiced her opinion that North and South Koreans shouldn't try to unify their language or culture, but instead view one another as people of separate national identities. "Even though I've lived for over 10 years in South Korea, I still consider myself North Korean," she said. "If I meet my North Korean defector friends, I sound the same as when I first got here. It'll take way too long for us (North and South Korea) to unite these differences. Instead, we should just strive to respect each other as individual countries."

In summary, the three interviews conducted with North Korean female defectors produced both similar and contrasting thoughts on the various ideas of discrimination, documentary films, anticommunist education, and nationhood. It was observed that their different opinions were grounded on their diverse backgrounds and life experiences: because Jeong had worked as a counselor for North Korean defectors, she was critical of media portrayal of North Korean defectors and desired for them to remain free from changing their dialect. Meanwhile, Soo was an advocate for the concept of "han-minjok" stating that North Koreans should adapt their behavior and dialect to South Korean society: these views were heavily influenced by her satisfactory marriage with her South Korean husband. Unlike the other two participants, Hae had experienced the most disappointment in her job search in

South Korea and reacted strongly against any film scenes or lines that implied discrimination towards North Koreans.

There were certainly several limitations in conducting the interviews, such as the fact that only three participants were interviewed due to time constraints of the research period. Although the defectors shared generously about their personal lives as well, since this research is focused on South Korean cinema rather than the life experiences of North Korean defectors, their narratives were narrowed down to specific responses concerning the film clips that were screened. These limitations made it difficult to draw out an overlapping consensus, and the minimal number of interviewees was insufficient to represent the perspectives of all North Korean defectors.

However, the format of in-depth interviews allowed the North Korean defectors to speak freely about the concept of nationhood, and these responses provided a more nuanced perspective on the way that North Koreans should be viewed and represented in South Korean cinema. Through the interviews, the researcher was able to conclude that the concept of "han-minjok" does not necessarily mean that North and South Koreans must unite all their differences: as Jeong explained above, the two countries may simultaneously be understood as one nation and also separate groups of people.

Chapter V. Conclusion

After watching and analyzing the list of 20 South Korean films with North Korean characters, this research has sought to organize the general frameworks that Korean filmmakers have used in the past and summarize what efforts they could make in the future to create a more complex North Korean character. Because these films were widely different for each genre, their analyses were organized in separate paragraphs for each genre. The ideas that I propose for future South Korean division films are simply suggestions rather than set answers: however, understanding the existing stereotypes and prejudices will allow us to search for better ways to treat North Koreans both in cinema and South Korean society.

For division films of the spy genre, a more complex North Korean character would be one that defies the current stereotype of the charismatic young male spy. Rather than continue to present stoic and serious but physically immaculate heroes, division films could explore with new characters that show more emotions or speak various lines. These North Korean characters could be female, like Lee Bang-Hee in *Shiri* (쉬리) (1999) by Kang Je-gyu, or an aged, even comical male figure played by actors such as Yoo Hae-jin. Any of these options would deviate from the typical buddy-cop framework of an aged South Korean man collaborating with a heroic and young North Korean man.

The lack of male-female romance between South Koreans and North Koreans in films should also be addressed: most of the spy films that were released in the 2010s focused on male-male bromance instead, almost as if preventing the male North Korean from developing feelings for a South Korean woman. Even in *Confidential Assignment 2* (공조 2) (2022) by Lee Suk-hoon, Yoona expresses affection towards Hyunbin, but he remains uninterested and indifferent, and these scenes are used only for comic effect.

The reason why this absence of male-female romance is problematic is because it could also become a form of “other”ing North Koreans in South Korean society. In the book “Person, Place,

Hospitality" by Hyun-Kyung Kim, she describes the stigmatization that foreigners experience in a new country, explaining that some of them are not allowed to marry or love the citizens. "Once they take 'our' jobs and approach 'our' women, the hospitality given to them will be withdrawn," she quotes from the perspective of those who stigmatize foreigners (Kim 2015, 60). According to Kim, this type of stigmatization happens when those who are considered "insiders" witness "outsiders" deviating from a particular line of action (Kim 2015, 60).

Perhaps this is why *Crash Landing on You* (사랑의 불시착) (2019-2020) directed by Lee Jeong-hyo has gained such popularity both nationally and across the seas. Although the specific details will be spared as this is a television series rather than a film, *Crash Landing on You* was one of the first media portrayals in decades that allowed for an extended relationship to develop between a North Korean man and South Korean woman. Unlike other works in South Korean media, the series allows its South Korean female protagonist Se-ri to reunite with her North Korean lover Captain Ri in Switzerland. Hopefully, more of these films will develop in the years to come, with a diversity of North Korean spy characters in gender, age, personality, and their relationship with other South Korean characters.

For division war films, the theme of "brotherhood" was consistently projected by films such as *Joint Security Area*, *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War*, and *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, using the language of "hyung" among the North and South Korean soldiers. However, analyzing these films brought forth a realization that this concept of nationhood and brotherhood may not be helpful for the current generation, where many South Koreans have become adjusted to the state of division.

In Hyun-Kyung Kim's book, she proposes the concept of "absolute hospitality" as an essential right for every human living in our global society; however, Kim emphasizes that extending this hospitality should not be defined as destroying all national or familial boundaries (Kim 2015, 175). She claims that absolute hospitality does not require an "absolute community (절대공동체)" that denies all the walls between groups of people (Kim 2015, 175). Instead, separate spaces and boundaries must be understood as a necessary backdrop for a person to extend hospitality in the first

place. One can only invite another guest into their home if they have a home, and if they have a door: like this example, I wish to argue that we can only properly welcome and understand North Koreans when we accept that they come from a different background with different sociocultural values that developed over the past several decades.

If all boundaries were to be denied, as in the imagined spaces of *Welcome to Dongmakgol* or *Joint Security Area*, I realized that the concept of absolute hospitality itself could become an idealized and utopian imagination of reunification rather than a serious application to the North Korean defectors that coexist in our society. While recognizing the divide that already exists and exerts influence across our peninsula, we must embrace North Korean defectors with the concept of "absolute hospitality": this concept is based on the understanding that everyone as humans were once welcomed into this world, and therefore all must show absolute hospitality to one another. For division films, it was concluded that it is better to use the concept of "absolute hospitality" rather than "nationhood" in exploring solutions for inter-Korean reconciliation. Emphasizing nationhood may pressure North Korean defectors into the duty of sameness, such as constantly struggling to speak and dress like a South Korean. But unity and uniformity are not alike; perhaps what South Korea's current society lacks is the desire for unity rather than uniformity with North Koreans.

Meanwhile, *Escape from Mogadishu* embodies this concept of "absolute hospitality" by drawing clear boundaries between North and South Koreans. From the beginning, the North and South Korean diplomats are portrayed as separate, and at the end they part their separate ways again. Unlike many other division films of the war genre, the conclusion does not paint them as together in death: their separation is regulated by each of their respective governments and mutually followed. Unlike *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War*, these scenes are not dramatized with loud crying or sentimental music, but quietly accepted and understood.

With the acknowledgment of differences and boundaries, *Escape from Mogadishu* thus shows the relationship between the North and South Koreans as a bond of trust and respect between two humans rather than familial loyalty between two brothers. Although the concept of "nationhood" in

Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War adds a sense of patriotic duty to the mending of North and South Korean relations, the concept of "absolute hospitality" in *Escape from Mogadishu* respects their different backgrounds, giving a voluntary nature of sincerity to their friendship.

For division films containing North Korean defectors, regardless of documentary or fiction film, I observed that they were most accurate when produced with the efforts to create a "visual anthropology." Even though it is a feature film with fictional characters, *The Journals of Musan* succeeds in painting a realistic narrative of North Korean defectors' hardships in South Korean society. However, *Crossing* dramatizes its North Korean defectors by turning them into victims that weep and suffer under melodramatic music, and *Beautiful Days* makes its characters unrelatable by replacing most of their lines with sudden acts of violence. Rather than accurately presenting the situation of North Korean defectors, it was found that these one-dimensional approaches could victimize or even criminalize North Korean defectors.

The reason why it is crucial to be more careful and sensitive with the portrayal of characters is because North Korean defectors are currently marginalized in South Korean society. Trying to fictionally create a new story can easily perpetuate the stereotypes that already exist. The films that succeeded in portraying complex characters showed their oscillation between good and evil, such as the friendly but deceptive North Korean defector Kyung-chul in *The Journals of Musan,* or the fierce and independent female defector in *Mrs. B.*, who turns her own fate from victim of human trafficking into being a human trafficker herself.

Because film noir is a genre that questions the basis of knowledge, promoting the theme of non-knowledge and the perpetuation of uncertainty, it may be helpful to use elements of film noir in these films to help the viewers "unlearn" the prejudices or stereotypes they have been taught through media or government propaganda. Examples of these include the low-key lighting in *Mrs. B.* and the cluttered, claustrophobic framing of Seung-chul and his dog in *The Journals of Musan.* These elements could help create an accurate portrayal of the bewilderment and disenchantment that a North Korean defector may experience while adjusting to South Korean society.

While the initial research on 20 division films concluded that filmmakers should prioritize "absolute hospitality" over "nationhood," conducting interviews with North Korean defectors added a new perspective to this idea. The responses of the three interviewees allowed me to realize that being "han-minjok" (one nation) was still an important concept for North Koreans due to the national education in North Korea: just as Busan and Seoul use different ways of speaking, North and South Koreans could be viewed as one nation with entirely different dialects and cultural backgrounds. These conversations added a meaningful interpretation that the concept of nationhood should not be devalued or abandoned completely, but rather considered as a larger framework to envelop the differences of North and South Koreans.

The defectors also expressed their wishes for South Korean films to use more North Korean actors for their North Korean characters. Hae said that after watching *Crossing* (크로싱) (2008) by Kim Take-yun with her church friends, she had been very disappointed by the protagonists' unconvincing North Korean dialects. "Can't they use more North Korean actors for these roles?" She asked. "There are so many intelligent North Korean defectors. Why not use them?" However, taking into account that the other interviewee Jeong had been critical of any North Korean defectors starring in South Korean films and risking their privacy being revealed, one must acknowledge that the representation of North Koreans is a complex issue with various answers even within the North Korean defector community.

In conclusion, I do not wish to argue that using dramatic music with emotional cues as in *Taegukgi* or *Crossing* is a "wrong" approach, or that all films about North Koreans should be produced without a soundtrack. Neither am I proposing that spy films should avoid the buddy-cop framework completely because it has been overused. What I wish to emphasize in my conclusion is that whatever camerawork, cinematography, film score, or script the film employs, it becomes a direct reflection of the filmmaker's understanding of North Korean defectors: this ideology is what may influence the perception of North Koreans in South Korean society.

Film theory is a way that filmmakers write their own philosophy: their films enact and perform their ideas. Once a filmmaker thoroughly understands the complexities of human nature, these messages will be delivered through the rhetoric of filmmaking. As Douglas Sirk once said, "Angles are the director's thought. The Lighting is his philosophy." When this philosophy is based on a nuanced understanding of North Koreans and the concept of absolute hospitality, only then do I believe that it can produce a complex portrayal of North Korean characters that can narrow the gap between the stereotypes and reality of North Korean defectors.

Over the decades, the representation of North Koreans in cinema has continued to evolve, impacted by the changing film industry and interKorean relations. In recent years, division films have strived to be commercially successful, experimenting with action-packed Hollywood techniques, handsome, charismatic actors, and melodramatic soundtracks and conventions in their diverse genres of film. However, I wish to argue that films with contain deep and reflective philosophical messages can also become successful, such as *Escape from Mogadishu*. Absolute hospitality argues that a society cannot stand without hospitality being given to one another: rather than encouraging North Korean defectors to change their ways completely and act like South Koreans, we must extend a warm welcome to them for being absolutely different, but absolutely human.

North Koreans Through the Cinematic Eyes of South Korea - A Comparative Analysis of 20 South Korean Films -

한국 영화를 통해 보는 북한 사람: 한국 영화 20 편 비교 분석

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Keyword: North Korean Defectors, Division Films, Inter-Korean Relations, South Korean Cinema
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통일부에 따르면 현재까지 한국의 탈북민 (North Korean defectors)은 3 만 3 천명 이상이라고 한다. 한국에서는 이러한 탈북민들의 원활한 정착을 위해서, 도착한 즉시 대한민국 시민권과 "정착 교육" 그리고 여러 재정적 지원하고 있지만, 그들 중 많은 수는 여전히 한국 사회에 정착하는 데 많은 어려움을 겪고 있는 것으로 나타났다. 탈북민이 한국 사회에서 적응하는 과정에서 어려움을 겪는 데는 사회 시스템의 근본적인 차이를 포함한 여러가지 이유가 있겠지만, 한국 사회가 탈북민을 바라보는 시선이 긍정적이지만은 않기 때문일 것이다. 실제로 이런 시각으로부터 탈북민이 한국 사회에서 느끼는 “다름” (otherness)은 그들이 공동체에 적응하고 소속감을 느끼는 것에 큰 걸림돌이 되고 있다. 따라서 탈북민에 대한 한국 사람들의 부정적인 혹은 편협된 관점이 어떤 식으로 만들어지는가를 분석함으로써 탈북민들에 대한 인식을 개선하기 위한 방법을 모색하는 것은 우리 사회에 필요한 일이라고 생각한다.

이때 영화는 북한 주민에 대한 한국 사람들의 부정적 인식이 어떻게 구성되어 있는지 보여주는 유용한 통로가 될 수 있다. 다른 플랫폼보다도 영화는 인간의 시각을 현실과 가장 유사한 방식으로 전달하는 형이상학적, 시청각적 도구의 역할을 한다. 그렇다면 한국 영화 (South Korean cinema)에서 북한 사람들은 어떻게 묘사되는가? 한국 영화는 현대 한국 사회가 가지고 있는 북한 사람들에 대한 인식을 어떤 방식으로 반영하고 있는가? 한국 영화 속에 묘사된 북한 인물과 실제 북한 사람의 차이를 어떻게 좁힐 수 있을까? 본 연구는 이러한 질문들에 답하기 위하여 한국의 분단 영화들 (division films)을 시간대별로 분석하며 그동안 북한 사람에게 투영된 다양한 편견과 고정관념, 환상 등을 파악하고자 한다. 1990 년대 후반부터 한국 영화 속에 등장하는 북한 인물은 변화하는 한국 영화산업 및 남북관계 (inter-Korean relations)의 영향을 받으며 계속해서 발전해왔다. 따라서 본 연구는 한국의 영화 20 편을 비교 및 분석하면서 한국 영화가 드러내는 북한 사람에 대한 관점을 포착하는 것을 목적으로 한다.

본 연구는 북한 관련 영화에 대한 기존연구와 달리 영화 분석 및 연구를 심층 인터뷰와 접목한다. 심층인터뷰를 통해 탈북자들이 북한 사람에 대하여 가지고 있는 관점을 한국 영화 속에 드러나는 한국의 시각과 대조하여 한국 영화가 북한 사람에 대한 탐구를 어떻게 하고 있는지 알아보고자 한다. 제 2 장에서는 남북관계의 주요 정치적 변화와 함께 발전해온 분단영화의 역사적 개관을 시기별로 구분하여 소개하며, 제 3 장에서는 각 분단영화에 등장하는 북한 인물들을 분석한다. 이때 분단 영화들은 전쟁영화, 간첩영화, 탈북자들이 나오는 다큐멘터리 영화 등으로 각 장르와 북한 인물의 직업별로 나눈다. 제 4 장에서는 영화

속의 인물들을 분석한 결과를 가지고 한국 영화 속의 북한 인물에 대한 북한 사람의 견해를 연구하기 위해 탈북민을 대상으로 진행한 인터뷰 내용을 설명한다. 한국 영화에서 북한 인물이 등장하는 주요 장면들을 클립으로 편집하여 탈북민에게 보여줌으로써 한국 사람이 가지고 있는 북한에 대한 잘못된 인식을 탐구한다.

제 5 장에서는 한국 영화들 속에 드러나는 북한 인물에 대한 한국 사람들의 다양한 고정관념들을 정리하고, 남북간의 인식 차이를 좁히기 위하여 한국 영화가 앞으로 어떤 새로운 노력을 할 수 있을지 모색한다. 인터뷰 결과와 한국 분단영화의 북한 캐릭터 분석을 결합하여 분석함으로써 한국 분단영화가 앞으로 나아가야할 방향성을 제시하고자 한다. 본 연구는 이러한 분석들을 통해 탈북자에 대한 한국 사회의 인식을 긍정적으로 개선하고 북한과 한국 사람의 사회문화적 통합에 기여하는 것을 목적으로 한다.

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