Buddies and Partners: The Inter-Korean Relationship in Korean Division Films

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Abstract: Recent Korean division related box-office films in South Korea have moved away from mourning the loss of the other half and wishing for unification but instead pursuing coexisting with the opposite side with amicable and respectful understanding. This paper aimed to examine the representation of the inter-Korean relationship in recent Korean division films and its possible social implications. In this line, this research was designed to conduct a comparison between earlier films that came out in the late 90s and early 2000s and films that came out from 2010 and onward. As a way to compare the inter-Korean relationship in films, this research first conducted a qualitative comparison of how the relationship between South and North Korean characters are depicted and how it ends. This research used the method of looking at narrative structures of a plot—equilibrium, disequilibrium, and restoration of equilibrium—and the differences in masculinity between the two male leads of each film. Firstly, how the equilibrium was restored in the end and what this equilibrium looks like gave a clear distinction in the inter-Korean relationship depicted in the films examined in this research. Secondly, to examine the dynamic of the inter-Korean relationship more closely, this research examined the masculinity of the male leads because in action-packed films, like the ones that were chosen for this research, masculinity is often equated with narrative authority. It was revealed that in a span of a decade, division related films changed how they use the relationship between South and North protagonists. First, the friendship between the two functioned as a key element that brings back the equilibrium in the plot, and this new equilibrium may not be perfect, but it is not tragic either. Second, it is observed that the two male leads represent a divided Korea together and deliver the possibility of being mutually cooperative and equally invested in the peace of the two Koreas. Based on the findings, this research concludes that in recent Korean division box-office films, friendship and cooperation are the central modes of South and North Korean relationship. This research is meaningful because it adumbrates recent Korean division films' major shift from earlier films by hinging upon friendship and equal partnership to exemplify possible coexistence with North Korea instead of bloodline nationalism and ultimate unification as the only way to peace.

Keywords: Double-protagonist, Korean Division Film, National Cinema, Plot Structure, South Korean Films, Textual Context

1. Introduction

Films in the sixties to eighties portrayed North Korea as the ultimate enemy as a rule. However, as South Korea moved towards a more stable and democratic government and implemented policies such as the Sunshine Policy in the late 90s, South and North Korean characters started showing a more multilayered, complex, and friendlier relationship. The relationship and the dynamic between South and

Received: August 26, 2022; 1st Review Result: October 11, 2022; 2nd Review Result: November 12, 2022
Accepted: November 30, 2022
North Korean characters have slowly but surely moved towards mutual recognition and an amicable partnership. Most people will not yet label the real situation of Korean division as amicable, but they will agree that they prefer coexistence without unification to unification with war. People prioritize peaceful coexistence more than unification, and very few people (about 3% of 1200 survey participants) believe that unification should take place no matter the cost[1]. Recent Korean division related box-office hits seem to reflect this change.

The popularity of Korean domestic films started with films such as Swiri (1999)[2] and Joint Security Area (2000)[3] which gained unprecedented success. To date, series of films with South and North Korean division as its central theme continue to be one of the most favored types in the Korean film industry. With Korean division related films being a consistent type of films in the Korean film industry, there has been previous research on Korean division films and their social implications [4-9]. Some researchers focused on whether the film advocates a certain political discourse[4]. Others explored how North Korean characters are depicted[5][8][9], how the collective trauma and recognition of Korean division is depicted in films throughout the post-armistice years[6][8], and Korean division films’ overall message of coexistence[7]. These previous studies have one overarching similarity. They were mostly focused on whether the representation of North Korean characters was positive and humanistic. Discussions around the relationship between South and North Korean protagonist was incidental to their main research. However, this research examines the two male leads simultaneously and their relationship dynamics as part of the research.

This research aims to examine four Korean division box-office films and their noticeable changes compared to earlier division films such as Swiri[2]. Most of the previous studies on Korean division films have analyzed one or two films closely. However, this research will focus on four major hit films to gain insight about the general direction of representation of inter-Korean relationship. Pronounced similarities and traits in the recent Korean division box-office films will be collected.

Films are a reflector or index of movements of our society. This research will specifically look into the changes in the portrayal of South and North Korean protagonists’ relationship in recent Korean division films and how it changed from early 2000s division films in general. This research thus analyzes four recent Korean division box-office films to see how they take part in the (re)production of the South and North Korean relationship. The specific focus of the study is placed on the two main characters: one South Korean protagonist and one North Korean protagonist. The research questions are: (1) what does the relationship between South and North Korean characters look like? (2) how does this relationship end? (3) how are the dynamics between inter-Korean relationship represented in recent Korean division films?

2. Related Studies

The specific genre of works discussed in this research, Bundanyŏnghwawa [division film], was first coined by Lee Yong-II in 1984[10]. He suggested that films with social issues and narratives born out of the divided state of Korea to be called division films. Korean film critics, film companies, and scholars then took up this term and is now widely used. Generally, scholars support that early Korean division films mourn the tragedy of separation and meaninglessness because of ideological differences and external forces. Scholars such as Lee Hyun Lee Hyun Jin[8] ans Park Ila[11] purports that gancheop is connected with the social subconscious of national division and points out that the representation of gancheop in early 2000s are fun, friendly, and sympathetic characters and no longer embody communist ideology and fearful evil enemies. Park Ila purports that the first half of 2000s were largely comedies that don't get a happy ending. According to Park Ila, the post-armistice generation that never experienced the tragedy of ‘division’ can approach the issue of division more easily when comedic elements are involved. These comedic elements do not come from “making a mockery of North Koreans but by
making a mockery of the forbidden, rigid situation caused by the ideological difference”[11]. However, when comedy has a tragic ending, the audience feels a strong sense of irony and is urged to rethink about the divided state of Korea which most of them have ignored as their normal. So the underlined theme is that of mourning in earlier films (from the 90s to early 2010s) even when the film is, for the most part, a comedy.

In such manner, early Korean division films intensely depict the tragedy of division and sentiments of sorrow and resentment[12]. Seo In-Sook criticizes early films like Swirl[2], Joint Security Area[3], and TaeGukGi: Brotherhood Of War (2003)[13] for only supplying sentimental sympathy towards protagonists’ misfortune due to national suffering. She asserts that Korean division films should go beyond national tragedy discourse. They should instead accomplish post-colonial resistance by presenting a specific sense of resistance and independence and a vision for unification.

Whether it is to emphasize the national tragedy or to present a specific sense of post-colonial resistance, the notion of sharing one ethnicity is the underlying assumption in studying division films. Hence, most previous studies concerning division films consider it a shared norm. Most previous studies believe that sharing one ethnicity is the origin of national identity and that the South and North Korean protagonists transcend their ideological differences by experiencing a brotherly familial similarity. For example, gancheop [spy, espionage] films that have been the primary trend since the early 2000s have North Korean characters who can easily be mistaken as South Koreans. Their looks, language, culture, and sentiments were identical to South Koreans because they were gancheop and because they were of the same ethnicity. In other words, their hanminjok [ethnicity of Han] traits were emphasized. Moreover, as time went by, division films showed less inner conflict due to ideological differences and loyalty to North Korea but instead turned to family-centered gancheops. For example, Kim Young-jun and Seung-kyung Kim purports that gancheop films that came out in 2010s such as Secret Reunion (2010)[14], The Berlin Film (2012)[15], and Secretly Greatly (2013)[16] have a more relatable gancheop because these characters no longer suffer from ideological conflict [17] and instead are loyal to their families rather than their nation. In this manner, because ganchoeops became more family-centered, not nation-centered, they became relatable over the years.

In recent years, inter-Korean cooperation films have been the predominant trait of Korean division box-office films. For example, Kim Young Jun and Lee Hyun Jin’s research[18] on Escape from Mogadishu (2021)[19], one of the inter-Korean cooperation films, suggest that such films build a sense of kinship before the characters work on the same goal and cooperate. According to Kim Young Jun and Lee Hyun Jin’s research, earlier inter-Korean cooperation film find their kinship in the burdens of the broken familial relationship and emotional trauma of division, while more recent inter-Korean cooperation films like Escape from Mogadishu[19] mainly use friendship and partnership to conceptualize South and North Korea as imagined nation of one minjok.

One of the primary hypotheses that originated this research was that the notion of one minjok is weakening, and so the inter-Korean relationship is built upon mutual partnership and cooperation necessary for peaceful coexistence rather than depending solely on one minjok kinship. As Kim Young Jun and Lee Hyun Jin’s research [18] points out, friendship and partnership form kinship between the two main protagonists in recent inter-Korean cooperation films. In this sense, unlike most previous studies, this research does not only focus on how North Korean characters are depicted or presupposes one minjok narrative. Instead, this study examines the overall representation of the inter-Korean relationship depicted in division films from the late 90s to the late 2010s and how it progressed by comparing earlier films with recent films. This research will provide a deeper understanding of how division discourse is progressing in films by examining how films depict the relationship between South and North Korean characters in terms of the plot and characterization of two male leads differently.
3. Research Methodology

This is a qualitative study conducted to examine recent Korean division box-office films that have changed from early 2000s division films. More specifically, how friendship and partnership are portrayed in recent inter-Korean cooperation films conceptualize South and North Korea's kinship and oneness will be the main focus of this research. Hence, four films that follow the inter-Korean cooperation plot line were chosen. These films are Secret Reunion (2010)[14], Confidential Assignment (2017)[20], Steel Rain (2017)[21], The Spy Gone North (2018)[22]. These films all have two protagonists who gradually form a friendship and work together to solve the major crisis of the plot.

First, these recent films will be compared with Swiri[2], The Spy[23], and Joint Security Area[3]. Swiri[2] and Joint Security Area[3] are one of the first early major box-office hits that portray an amicable relationship between South and North Korean characters, and The Spy[23] is also a critical division film of that era. For the comparison, this research borrows Tzvetan Todorov’s[24] idea of basic narrative structure. The basic narrative structure starts with a stable situation (equilibrium) followed by a disturbing situation (disequilibrium), and eventually, a different but stable situation is restored (equilibrium). The three research questions while comparing recent Korean division films with earlier films in this research are: (1) what does the relationship between South and North Korean characters look like? (2) how does this relationship end? (3) how are the dynamics between inter-Korean relationships represented in recent Korean division films? The research is designed to answer the first two questions by examining the three stages in Todorov’s narrative structure. The analyses of this research will be able to collect data about how the relationship between South and North Korean character look in each of the three stages. In other words, the research will collect what the relationship between the South and North Korean protagonists looks like at the beginning of their relationship (in the first equilibrium stage), in the disturbed situation (disequilibrium), and in the new stable situation (equilibrium) at the end. Furthermore, by comparing these data with each other, a clear view of the relationship between South and North Korean characters and how this relationship ends will be possible.

Second, to answer the third research question, this study will examine the dynamics between the two main protagonists by examining the masculinity and narrative power of each character. Since recent Korean division films are inter-Korean cooperation films, the two main protagonists are positioned as partners, and it is essential to examine whether this partnership is a horizontal relationship or more of a vertical relationship. Four recent films that are analyzed fit within the buddy film genre—a genre where both characters coordinate and claim equal narrative power—and because action-packed box-office films that feature two male leads, masculinity often equates to narrative power. Hence, the two characters and their narrative power will be compared with a special focus on the differences in masculinity.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Friendship Is No Longer a Tragedy but a Solution

In earlier films such as Swiri[2], The Spy[24], and Joint Security Area[3], the relationship between South and North Korean characters were forbidden, and characters who committed this forbidden rule and formed a meaningful relationship with the 'enemy' were punished. However, in recent films, the friendship between South and North Korean characters is not something that is forbidden but something that is admired and celebrated. In most cases, their friendly relationship is what solves problems and saves lives. Instead of being punished due to their love or friendship with each other, South and North Korean protagonists’ friendship and love have now become key in solving the plot’s central conflict.

Tzvetan Todorov, in the Poetics of Prose[24], corroborates the basic structure of narrative:

An "ideal" narrative begins with a stable situation that is disturbed by a particular force.
These results from a state of disequilibrium; by the actions of a force directed in the opposite direction, the equilibrium is re-established; the second equilibrium is similar to the first, but the two are never identical[24].

For Korean division box-office action films, primary disequilibrium is created through events that can disrupt the Korean peninsula's peace and its state of armistice. The stable situation is set on the current state of South and North Korea, where both countries are not actively seeking war. Since the armistice, South and North Korea have been functioning as two separate countries for more than seventy years, and this separated state is the normal and the only peaceful state most Koreans have ever known. In this respect, the plot enters the disequilibrium stage when this normalcy is broken. For example, in Swiri[2], the disequilibrium is the return of the infamous North Korean sniper Lee Bang-hui's and her attempts to infiltrate South Korea to steal a newly developed weapon, CTX. In The Spy, Cheol-Jin (the main protagonist and a North Korean spy sent to South Korea) is used and betrayed by the North Korean authorities, and his previous beliefs are broken in many ways when he interacts with South Koreans. In Joint Security Area[3], one of the North Korean soldiers stationed in the Joint Security Area and both South Korean soldiers and North Korean soldiers are suspects of this death. In this respect, in both Swiri[2] and Joint Security Area[3], the main disequilibrium is events that can elevate the animosity between South and North Korea and may even result in war. And the underlying force that brought such disequilibrium is the love and friendship between South Korean and North Korean protagonists. Because Lee Bang-hui and the male lead fell in love, the male lead's normalcy in the Korean division is genuinely shattered. Also, because the South Korean protagonist in Joint Security Area[3] became friends with North Korean soldiers on the opposite side of the Military Demarcation Line, his normalcy of aiming his gun toward North Korea no longer feels impersonal or normal. [Table 1] summarizes the comparison between the older division box-office films and recent division box-office films according to their narrative structure.

[Table1] Equilibrium-Disequilibrium-Equilibrium of Korean Division Box-office Films

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Structure</th>
<th>Late 90s &amp; early 2000 Films</th>
<th>2010–2018 Films</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Equilibrium</strong></td>
<td>Divided state is natural, and it is their job to stay as enemies to protect their country.</td>
<td>The divided state of Korea is a natural state. It is the only state that they know and although they work as national servants, they do not necessarily see North Korea as the ultimate enemy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disequilibrium</strong></td>
<td>Protagonists go through critical difficulties due to outer circumstances and their true disequilibrium happens internally: division is no longer impersonal state but becomes personal.</td>
<td>One or two antagonists become a threat to the peace of the Korean peninsula. These antagonists are either South Korean or North Korean. The two male leads become friends and the divided state of Korea suddenly becomes very personal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Equilibrium</strong></td>
<td>The protagonist's mission as a spy is complete but he is betrayed by the nation for it. The male lead and the female lead who are in a romantic relationship aim guns at each other. The female lead is eventually killed.</td>
<td>The investigation ends, and the story behind the death of North Korean soldiers is revealed. The protagonist kills himself.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* SRU: Secret Reunion
* CA: Confidential Assignment
* SR: Steel Rain
* SGN: The Spy Gone North

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As Dissanayake elucidates, "this presumption of solution affects the way a film can treat the subject matter related to social and political problems. An attitude toward the subject matter is already taken by the very structure of the narrative form, which requires a solution"[25]. He explains that films place the resolution of the problem raised in the film on the shoulders of individual characters' ambitions and actions. In this sense, the solution for the issue raised in the film and how they are solved represents how the film approaches the subject matter. Hence, how the characters devise a solution for the main disequilibrium is important in understanding the film's overall attitude towards a subject matter. Compared with earlier films such as Swiri[2] and Joint Security Area[3], recent Korean division box-office action films that this research focuses on have shown that it is the partnership and friendship that brings equilibrium, whereas Swiri[2] and Joint Security Area[3] have ended the disequilibrium with the death of the main characters. As Dissanayake points out, the film's attitude toward the subject matter related to social and political problems can be presumed based on how the characters solve the problem—the main disequilibrium in the plot[25].

In Swiri[2], The Spy[24], and Joint Security Area[3], the disequilibrium happens in various forms. Still, in all three films, the death of the characters is the only means employed to achieve equilibrium. Protagonists of Swiri[2], The Spy[24], and Joint Security Area[3] reach the second equilibrium through death; characters are punished either by a former lover or friend or by themselves. For example, in Swiri[2], Lee Bang-hui is shot to death by her South Korean fiancé. In The Spy[24], Lee Cheol-jin, a North Korean espionage, kills himself when he learns North Korea betrayed him to cover up its mission right after he succeeded in carrying out that exact mission. In Joint Security Area, Lee Su-hyeok also kills himself out of guilt when he finds out that his gunshots accidentally killed his North Korean friend, Jeong U-jin. These films approach division only with sorrow, a sense of helplessness, and a wish for a permanent and final unification. As a result, these films highlight the tragedy of the plot by showing that the efforts individual characters make are so meager that they cannot achieve peace unless a more significant change, such as unification takes place. In essence, having deep emotional and personal interaction and relationship with the 'enemy' did not save anyone or bring peace. Instead, they were only punished with death by themselves or others for being involved in the forbidden: befriending the other side. Considering how these films resolve the disequilibrium, it can be assumed that characters cannot move out from it, however hard they try when the root of the disequilibrium resides in political and social division. In other words, the ultimate solution to reach the equilibrium would not be reached until Korea is completely unified and t'ongil is achieved'.

However, recent division films have come up with different 'solutions' for the disequilibrium than those employed in earlier Korean division box-office films. In other words, friendship or love between South and North Korean characters regarded as a reason for punishment has become the solution that 'solves' problems. For example, in films like Secret Reunion[14], Confidential Assignment[16], Steel Rain[21], and The Spy Gone North[22], instead of the death of the main protagonists, the friendship between the South and North Korean protagonists becomes the key that solves the problematic situations. This shows that recent films take a different stance in dealing with social and political disequilibrium. The characters are no longer powerless characters who can only reach equilibrium through their deaths. Instead, they are capable agents who can make a difference. Such change in recent division films shows their stance regarding the divided state of Korea; divided Korea is not doomed for endless suffering that would never stop until final unification. Instead, recent films' attitude toward divided Korea is more positive and more willing to believe in the possibility of an amicable relationship with North Korea even without a resolute and final t'ongil (unification).

In Secret Reunion[14], Lee Han-gyu—who is fired from the National Intelligence Service—and Song Ji-won—a North Korean spy who is misunderstood and labeled as a traitor from North Korea—work together and arrest the main antagonist called the Shadow. It is not the police or the national security professionals but two civilians that save the day. Not only do they capture the antagonist, but also their
friendship and partnership are not punished and are rewarded with a somewhat happy ending. In Confidential Assignment[20], Im Cheol-ryeong and Kang Jin-tae work together to stop Cha Gi-seong’s crimes. Without their friendship and teamwork, the copper plate to print counterfeit US dollars would have caused more conflict between South and North Korea. They disobey the order to retrieve the copper plate but discard it because they both agree that either South or North Korea should not possess it. Their friendship is not punished but rather celebrated in the last scene of Kang Jin-tae arriving in North Korea to join the assignment and meet Im Cheol-ryeong. In Steel Rain[21], two Um Cheol-woo and Gwak Cheol-woo form a friendship and recognize their shared desire to prevent war and protect their family and country. They successfully stopped the military coup d’etat in North Korea by working together. Although North Korean Um Cheol-woo sacrifices himself in the process, it is to protect his people by stopping the war from happening. His death is not because he is punished for his friendship with Gwak Cheol-woo. In this manner, narratives in recent Korean division box-office action films show less inner turmoil and denial or fear in forming a friendship with the other side. They do not think such a relationship is a betrayal of their own countries like in Swiri[2] or the Joint Security Area[3].

The Spy Gone North[22] is based on a true story set in 1993 when nuclear weapon development in North Korea elevated tension in the Korean peninsula. Park Seok-yeong is a secret agent of NSP (National Security Planning) who went to North Korea disguised as a businessman. He witnessed North Koreans’ struggles while visiting North Korea as a businessman and formed personal friendships with honorable North Korean officials like Lee Myeong-un who tries his best to help the starving North Korean people. In the end, Lee Myeong-un risks his career and his life to help Park Seonk-yeong escape North Korea when his undercover identity is revealed. The last scene in The Spy Gone North[22] is of Park Seok-yeong and Lee Myeong-un making eye contact with relief filled in their eyes when they meet each other at a South and North collaborated television commercial shooting set in the year 2005. Despite their different nationality and situations, they both arrived in a place where mutual cooperation—a joint commercial featuring both South and North Korean top celebrities—is officially taking place.

In contrast with how they both had to keep secrets and could not open up to each other without reservations, in 2005, they saw each other under the bright light. Unlike earlier films like Swiri[2], The Spy[23], and Joint Security Area[3], Lee Myeong-un and Park Seok-yeong both survived and neither committed suicide nor did they get discarded from their own country for their friendly relationship with the other side. Even Lee Myeong-un is alive after he helped Park Seok-yeong’s escape. By having Lee Myeong-un—a fictional character in this film—survive even after he defied a direct order to arrest Park Seok-yeong, this film chose the friendship between the two protagonists to be honored and cherished instead of being punished.

4.2 Balancing Narrative Power in Korean Division Buddy Films

Another massive shift in the narrative of recent Korean division related box-office films made during the last decade is the inter-Korean cooperative (South and North Korean protagonist) films. These films do not have one primary South Korean protagonist taking the lead and having most of the narrative power. Rather, like the typical buddy film genre, both South and North Korean protagonists stick together, and the story is told by both, whereas early 2000s films such as Swiri[2], Joint Security Area[3], and The Spy[24], have been told by one main protagonist. In this case, Korean division box-office films with two buddies as main protagonists seek ways to balance the narrative power.

Robin Wood, in his essay "From Buddies to Lovers,” discusses that the popularity of buddy films "testifies, no doubt, to the contemporary 'heterosexual' male audience's need to denigrate and marginalize women, but also, positively, to its unconscious but immensely powerful need to validate love between men”[26]. In the context of Korean division films, however, division films with two male
leads becoming buddies are not so much about homosexuality or misogynistic masculinity but more about the audience's need to validate a peaceful partnership between South and North Korea. Ethnic oneness and familial relationships are no longer clearly recognized in the inter-Korean relationship after more than 70 years of separation, and North Korea being a hermit nation, most of the general public has never visited or seen North Korea or met North Koreans.

Kim Young Jun and Lee Hyun Jin purport that the friendship in Korean division buddy films symbolizes minjok community [ethnic oneness] and horizontal comradeship [18]. These ideas are persuasive and can be applied for the most part in this research. However, Kim Young Jun and Lee Hyun Jin did not address the warring elements of manhood which is one of the typical clichés in most buddy films that seemingly pose a fundamental hindrance in horizontal comradeship.

For the most part, North Korean protagonists in recent films tend to be linked with terms with better connotations, such as youth, beauty, strength, loyalty, and intelligence. For example, in Secret Reunion[14], Confidential Assignment[20], Steel Rain[21], and The Spy Gone North[22], North Korean protagonists are younger, more handsome, physically stronger, or more knowledgeable in science and technology. In contrast, South Korean characters are often comedic and less intense and are not good fighters compared to North Korean protagonists. In The Spy Gone North[22], although age, appearance, and physical strength are about the same, Lee Myeong-un appears to be more loyal and honorable in that he tries to be honest as possible, even toward Park Seok-yeong. He also assists Park Seok-yeong in escaping even after it is revealed that Seok-yeong has been lying about his true identity and intentions. Yoo Jae Eung observes that the dynamic of the double male leads is the personification of South and North Korean dynamics and that from the Joint Security Area to Secret Reunion and to The Spy Gone North[22], the relationship was that of a friend in Joint Security Area[3], brother in Secret Reunion[14] and lastly, a Dongbanja (partner) in Spy Gone North[22]. Spy Gone North's whole story is about a spy who goes to North Korea disguised as a businessman who cooperates and works as a middleman for South Korea and North Korea’s joint business project. The relationship between Lee Myeong-un and Park Seok-yeong starts as a cooperative partnership. Moreover, it is important to note here is that it is the North Korean Lee Myeong-un who ‘saves’ Park Seok-yeong. [Table 2] below summarizes the comparison between South Korean protagonist and North Korean protagonist characterization.

[Table2] South Korean Protagonist and North Korean Protagonist Characterization Dynamics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film Title</th>
<th>South Korean and North Korean Characterization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secret Reunion</td>
<td>S.K: Hot headed, fired from national security intelligence and works as a private investigator and takes on not noble jobs for money, divorced and did not meet his children for a long while</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N.K: naïve and loyal to North Korea, very skilled in combat, compassionate, good-looking, young, devoted to his family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidential Assignment</td>
<td>S.K: not very competent in his job as a cop, not good in combat, outsmarted by N.K, not good-looking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N.K: very competent in his job as a soldier and agent, very skilled in combat, good-looking, young, saves the South Korean protagonist’s family using his fighting skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steel Rain</td>
<td>S.K: not good-looking, intelligent but not skilled in combat, likes to make jokes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N.K: very competent in his job as a soldier and agent, very skilled in combat, good-looking, terminally ill and sacrifices his life to stop war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spy Gone North</td>
<td>S.K: works as a spy, abandons his family for his assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N.K: risks his life to save S.K even when S.K betrayed his trust</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* S.K: South Korean protagonist
* N.K: North Korean protagonist
This study suggests that such a narrative of 'the North Korean hero' helping and even saving South Korean protagonists promotes balance between the two protagonists. Having a masculine and heroic North Korean character may look like favoring the North Korean protagonist and causing an imbalance in narrative power. In films, North Korea is not positioned as a weak and poor nation that always needs help. However, in the real world, South Koreans know that South Korea is economically more developed and has better living conditions than North Korea. Their biggest reservation about a unified Korea is the economic burden they would have to endure[1]. Authentic partnership and friendship occur between two equals. Because of the imbalance in real-life situations between South and North, films have a charismatic and admirable hero North Korean protagonist to counteract the imbalance in the economy and overall living situations of North Korea and South Korea. As a result, partnership or friendship between two individuals becomes more probable and convincingly horizontal with the dynamic of South and North Korean protagonists in the film being of equal and mutual respect and contribution.

Comparing this with earlier films like Swiri and Joint Security Area, we can see that having a hyper-masculine North Korean protagonist helps balance the narrative power between the two characters. The narrative power between South and North Korea was lopsided towards South Korean protagonist. Swiri[2] mainly follows the male protagonist Yu Jung-won. The female protagonist North Korean sniper Lee Bang-hui is the spy who intentionally approaches Yu Jung-won. Although Bang-hui suffers heartache and dilemma in her true feelings for Yu Jung-won, she is a threat to South Korea and is the one who lies and deceives the person who loves her. While playing the role of a loving girlfriend and fiancé, Bang-hui steals confidential information and jeopardizes South Korea's operations. And it is Yu Jung-won who heroically chooses his country and ends their relationship with his gun. Another display of power of South Korea is CTX. South Korea has a more advanced technology that creates the powerful liquid explosive called CTX, and North Korea is the one who is trying to steal it from South Korea. In general, Swiri[2] actively promotes and enhances the power and sense of superiority of South Korea. In Joint Security Area[3], South Korean soldiers always show more 'freedom' in initiating and ending a story. After O Gyeong-pil helps Lee Su-hyeok from the landmine, it is the South Korean soldier Lee Su-hyeok who initiates friendship with him. He writes to O Gyeong-pil and gives music tapes, porn, and magazines. It is also him who starts visiting the North Korean guard post with Nam Seong-sik. It is also the two South Korean soldiers Lee Su-hyeok and Nam Seong-sik who decide their own death and the end of the investigation. Lee Su-hyeok confesses how he accidentally shot North Korean Jeong U-jin and shot him again intentionally to cover up the friendly meetings they secretly had with O Gyeong-pil and Jeong U-jin. All in all, South Korean soldiers Lee Su-hyeok and Nam Seong-sik had greater narrative power. Their story starts and ends with their own actions as opposed to North Korean O-Gyeong-pil and Jeong U-jin. However, in recent Korean division films, more attention is given to North Korean characters and is given more elements that draw the viewers to relate more to North Korean protagonists. Unlike Swiri[2] and Joint Security Area[3], which heavily accented the superiority of South Korea and placed North Korea as a competition, recent Korean division films characterize North Korean protagonists as more attractive and favorable than South Koreans to avoid power imbalance between the two protagonists. Although North Korea is the weaker nation in this capitalist world we live in, in the world of film, North Korean protagonist is not the weaker one but a heroic one.

Such justification of having a more masculine North Korean protagonist has profound implications for the cinematic construction of horizontal relationships in Korean division buddy films and for a gradual decline in minjok nationalism in Korean division films. Different from Kim Young Jun and Lee Hyun Jin’s study about inter-Korean cooperative films and other previous researches[6-9], this study suggests that minjok nationalism is not the main source of kinship. Instead, Minjok nationalism is replaced by a humanistic oneness and cooperative coexistence. Mono-ethnicity [Danilminjok] based nation is a fantasy that does not exist and such a notion of mono-ethnicity is no longer what protects and defines national identity[27]. In his analyses of Secret Reunion, Lee Yo Han contends that the partnership
Buddies and Partners: The Inter-Korean Relationship in Korean Division Films

in *Secret Reunion* breaks away from *minjok* based national consciousness [28]. He observes that the inter-Korean relationship shifted from *dong-jok* [people with the same ethnicity] to *dong-ryo* [partner][28].

4. Conclusion

This study was conducted to examine the changes in the representation of the inter-Korean relationship over the years and its possible social implications. For this purpose, this research answered following questions: what does the relationship between South and North Korean characters look like?; how does this relationship end?; how are the dynamics between inter-Korean relationship represented in recent Korean division films? This study used the basic narrative structure concept by Tzvetan Todorov[25] and the dual narrative power of two protagonists that is entailed in films with two-male protagonists. After the analysis, it was found that, unlike *Swiri*[2] or *JSA*[3], recent Korean division films do not present the friendship between South and North Korean characters as the root of the disequilibrium. The restored equilibrium in the end of the plot is not the death of the characters but the elimination of the threat to peace. Hence, in recent films, friendship is not punished but celebrated as a key to reaching a peaceful equilibrium in the end.

As for the dynamics between the two main protagonists in recent Korean division films and their implications, the type of relationship these films promote is that of equal partners. Their shared goal is to have a peaceful and cooperative two Koreas. Generally, in real-life situations, ordinary partnerships rely on balanced power and mutual contribution. Moreover, this would likely mean balanced narrative power and cinematic presence in the inter-Korean cooperation division films. Most of the films this research studied depict the North Korean protagonist as a physically stronger and dedicated character who leads major action scenes and is the main 'hero.' In action films, such stronger masculinity would lead to strong narrative power and cinematic presence. With this finding, this research discussed how giving the North Korean character more masculine characteristics depicts a relationship of two equal partners more effectively than having a more masculine South Korean protagonist. Although South Korean characters are less combat-ready, they contribute by providing hospitality and money. In the real world, it is true that South Korea is more economically advanced and is not suffering from a shortage of food. So for North Korea, it is important to depict North Koreans as capable and helpful partners to validate having a 'partnership' with them. To do this, the films tend to give North Korean the necessary fighting skills and the role of saving South Korean characters.

This study examined how the representation of inter-Korean relationship has changed in Korean division films over two decades. This research is meaningful because it showed how recent films stopped mourning the differences between South and North Korea but began to acknowledge the gap between South and North openly and with acceptance. Based on the results, it was revealed that Korean division related films are moving towards embracing diversity and differences and hoping for partnership and cooperation rather than depending solely on the fantasy of mono-ethnic sameness for the foundation of their relationship. Hence, it can be implied that perceptions about North Korea and the inter-Korean relationship of the audience have also changed during the last two decades.

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Buddies and Partners: The Inter-Korean Relationship in Korean Division Films


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