

Growing Intimacy, Disrupted Reunion: The National Division in New Korean Cinema

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One of the most popular and recurrent themes in recent South Korean films has been the political and cultural divide between North and South Korea. The increased leniency of film censorship and the late 1990s reconciliatory shift in South Korea's policy under President Kim Dae-jung have enabled local popular culture to capitalize on themes related to North Korea. With the record-breaking success of *Swiri* and *Joint Security Area* (a.k.a. Kongdong Kyongbi Kuyok, JSA) in 1999 and 2000, several subsequent films have dealt with similar themes in various genres, including comedy, action, and drama. Indeed, recent years have seen the continued high-profile success of such films at the local box-office; the latest example is *Welcome to Dongmak-gol* (2005). But what makes these films so appealing to modern Koreans? How do they depict North Koreans? Do they exhibit a consistent bias regarding North-South relations?

In an effort to answer these questions, this paper examines three films, *Swiri*, *Joint Security Area*, and *Welcome to Dongmak-gol*. The analysis focuses on the representations of North and South Koreans and their relationships, genre-bending and the local 'blockbuster aesthetic'. In doing so, I note a number of related but potentially contradictory features in these North Korean related films. First, I point out that while these films diverge in their depictions of North Korea(ns) vis-à-vis South Korea(ns), they succeed in attracting broad audiences with their Hollywood-modeled but local mode of blockbuster film with local themes and variations. Second, I argue that although recent films show growing intimacy between North and South, even the most positive depictions of North-South alliance/intimacy/brotherhood/reconciliation reveal ambiguity and irony. I conclude that this ambiguity indicates difficulty in fully envisioning a symbolic reunion between the two Koreas resulting from the long history of distrust and separation, thus also reflecting the continued discord in South Korean public views of North Korea and reunification.

***Swiri* (1999) and *JSA* (2000): Two models for North Korea themed films**

The rise of North Korea-themed films is a prominent trend in New Korean Cinema, which coincides with the 1993 return of civilian government after thirty years of military dictatorship. To emphasize the popularity of the North Korean theme in contemporary South Korean cinema, however, is not to ignore the existence of earlier films that implicitly or explicitly dealt with the theme. But the approach of recent films to North Korea is very different. Previously, in the dark period of the military regime under Park Chung-hui (1961-1979) and Chun Du-hwan (1980-1987), South Korean films' outward position about national split was in large measure either total silence or enthusiastic support of the official anti-communist policy. Those filmmakers taking the "silence" strategy turned to seemingly "apolitical" themes and genres, such as literary adaptations and soft porn. Others responded to the political repression by readily adopting anti-Communist ideology in the film narrative. Compared to these almost propagandistic films in the past, recent films show varying degrees of sympathy and intimacy toward North Koreans.

The representation of North Korea in New Korean Cinema is also different from that of the immediately antecedent New Wave films in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The last military leader but democratically elected president Noh Tae-woo (1987-1992) loosened governmental control of media and cultural expression. This enabled the emergence of socially conscious films, the new realism in South Korean film.¹ In this period, several anti-war films were produced, including Jung Ji-young's *Partisans of South Korea* (a.k.a. *Nambugun*, 1990) and Park Kwang-su's *To the Starry Island* (a.k.a. *Ku Som-e gago sipda*, 1993). Their portrayals of North Koreans were more sympathetic than the earlier anti-communist films, but their critical examination of

ideological adherence to the national split during rendered them too serious-minded or elitist to appeal to the mainstream audiences at the time. In comparison, as their massive box-office success demonstrates, recent films tend to be more entertainment-oriented, with abundant cinematic pleasure of special effects and more stylistic sophistication. Significantly, they also reveal a new approach to the national division, which I will discuss in detail later.

The earliest and one of the most spectacular depictions of North-South relations in New Korean Cinema is the 1999 domestic blockbuster, *Swiri*, an action thriller about South Korean agents tracking North Korean spies. *Swiri* attracted 5.78 million viewers, breaking the local attendance record of *Titanic* (1998), which had sold 4.7 million tickets nationwide in the previous year.ⁱⁱ Dubbed by the local press as the “small fish that sank Titanic,” *Swiri*’s victory over the biggest of Hollywood blockbusters spearheaded the spectacular success of local cinema in the following years. Indeed, *Swiri*’s record in Seoul was subsequently broken by two other domestic films: *Joint Security Area* (2000) with 5.8 million ticket sales and *Friend* (2001) with 8.1 admissions (Korean Film Council). Moreover, two more recent hits, *Silmido* (2003) and *Taegukgi* (2004) achieved even more impressive figures, respectively attracting 11,074,000 viewers and 11,746,135 nationwide viewers (Korean Film Council). In the years between 1999 and 2004, four of the five highest grossing films, all but *Friend*, deal with the issue of national division. *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, released in 2005, is among the latest movies with a North Korean theme, and was the second highest grossing film of 2005, including foreign imports. The theme of the North-South relations has proven to be box office gold in New Korean Cinema.

This boom of North Korea related films reflects the changing perception of North Korea among South Koreans, and the increase in cross-border cultural exchanges. North Koreans in these films are depicted as much more humane than they were in the films of previous decades, which typically featured Northerners as extremely malicious, and blindly following communist ideology. Some of the more recent films, though, while continuing to highlight contrasts between the two Koreas, and to carefully endorse the South Korean perspective, portray North Koreans in a much more favorable light. For example, the main character in Jang Jin’s comedy *The Spy, Lee Chul-jin* (a.k.a. Kanchop I Chol-jin, 1999) is a clumsy spy from the North, and much of the film’s sympathetic humor lies in his innocence and his inability to blend into South Korean culture. Similarly, the North Korean soldiers in Park Chan-wook’s *Joint Security Area* and Park Kwang-hyun’s *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, and the North Korean spy in Kim Hyun-jeong’s *Double Spy* (2003) are portrayed as sympathetically as their South Korean counterparts. Yet, there is still a difference in the ways in which these films view people from opposite sides of the divided nation, a difference observable in both *Swiri* and *JSA*, the two earliest examples of the North Korean theme.

The difference is clear in the scenes in which the two films first introduce North Koreans. *Swiri* starts with the deadly guerrilla training of a North Korean special force led by agent Park. Aided by slick editing, the visual and aural presentation captures the horrifying kill-or-die nature of the training that uses real-life people as objects, and highlights the brutality and fierceness of the North Korean force. This introduction is reminiscent of the anti-Communist films of the 1960s and 1970s, and remind South Korean over thirty of the familiar imagery of vicious North Koreans that was so prevalent in earlier decades. Early in the film is revealed that Park has organized a terrorist scheme to overturn reconciliatory arrangements between the two Koreas, and he sends female sniper Yi Pang-hui to South Korea to carry out a series of murders of top officials, and then attract special agent Yu, in order to infiltrate South Korea’s intelligence system.

Complicating this initial monstrosity of the North Koreans plot is the subsequent narrative centering on Yi Pang-hui’s double life as South Korean agent Yu’s girlfriend. While disguised as Yi Myung-hyun, Yi falls in love with Yu, and adapts almost fully to her new and comfortable life in South Korea, though still performing her secret missions. Transformed by a new identity, she has not only a charming appearance, but shows a warm heart as well. Yi is tormented when Park, her boss in the North, appears in South Korea to complete his plan. Yu’s

eventual realization that his girlfriend is the North Korean assassin he has been pursuing was as shocking to many viewers as it was to Yu. Torn between a North Korean other and a South Korean self, Yi's character can be seen to fall into the initial stage of representation of North Koreans in New Korean Cinema. This fragmented and incoherent identity reflects the mentality of Korean people borne out of the history of a divided land. As a critic note, this "impossibility of securing the real "I" or ""having to live someone else's life" in Yi's experience is "symptomatic of life in a divided land, where no easy negotiation of personal identity is allowed."ⁱⁱⁱ Almost in a state of self-resignation, Yi allows herself to be shot by Yu in their final encounter, arousing a great deal of sympathy from the audience members.

It is also important to note that the Park character is not portrayed as a ruthless Communist with whom we cannot relate. Halfway through the film, Park, now relocated in the South, offers Yu stinging insults of Seoul, and criticizes South Korea's dependence on the U.S. and its capitalist luxury and pettiness that ignore the sufferings of North Korean peasants. Rather than seeing Park's view as dogmatic or foreign, many South Korean viewers emphasized with his eloquent and well-grounded critique. Partly owing to veteran actor Choi Min-shik's charismatic performance, there is something heroic about Park's faithful pursuit of his beliefs until he is killed at the hands of Yu and his colleagues in their climactic confrontation.

These aspects in *Swiri* signify a memorable change in the attitudes toward North Korea in South Korean cinema. However, the film focuses on the contrasts between North and South Korea that involve celebratory self-images of the South. In the midst of its more nuanced representation of North Koreans, and despite the mildly critical view of the petty accumulation of wealth in South Korea, much of the film's attraction lies in the eye-catching luxury of the South Korean wealth it displays on the screen. Throughout the narrative, the film flaunts the extravagant life style in Seoul, from the colorful arcades to the fancy western style restaurants to the modernized and technologically advanced intelligence system. This is in stark contrast to the images of North Korea at the beginning of the film, which are tinged with an ominous black, and coupled with the sight of blood in the guerrilla training sessions. It is also gratifying for domestic viewers to see the film's high production values evident in various special effects and camera techniques. In a way, the stylish and fast edited presentation of the North Korean guerrilla training only emphasizes South Korea's material advance. For many Koreans who have avidly watched Hollywood films for decades, these slick cinematic techniques were familiar, not only making their film-viewing all the more enjoyable but also making them proud of their national cinema now being able to produce such high profile films.

If Kang Jae-gyu's *Swiri* was more concerned with highlighting the capitalistic luxury of South Korea, while not totally disparaging North Korea, subsequent films such as Jang Jin's *The Spy* (1999) and Park Chan-wook's *Joint Security Area* or *JSA* (a.k.a. Kongdong kyogbi kuyok, 2000) are much more sympathetic toward North Koreans. *Joint Security Area*, which broke the ticket-sale record set by *Swiri*, takes a different approach to the relationship between the two Koreas. Released only one year later, *JSA*, can be seen, in many respects, as a critical response to *Swiri*. In a nutshell, if *Swiri* focuses on the heroic representation of the South Korean agents, *JSA* is marked by its anti-heroism. Against its narrative premise as a military crime thriller, much of *JSA* centers around the friendship between two South Korean and two North Korean border guards stationed near the demilitarized zone, and so the film lacks the action scenes expected of the genre. In this regard, it is not surprising that the representation of South Korean soldiers vis-à-vis North Korean soldiers does not follow the heroic contrast depicted in *Swiri*. As will be discussed later, the anti-heroic nature of *JSA* is also manifested in its darker narrative resolution.

The film's central character is South Korean sergeant Yi Su-hyok, and a considerable part of the narrative focuses on the friendships between him and his military companion, private Nam Song-sik, with a North Korean sergeant, O Kyong-pil, and his subordinate, Chong U-jin. The first half of the film promises to be a mystery thriller oriented around a military murder case and the subsequent investigation. The opening of the film sets the mood for the military mystery. A

shooting rampage occurs at the military post in the border village, Panmunjom, leaving two North Korean soldiers dead and one South Korean soldier injured. With the North and South sides offering conflicting reports on what happened, the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) brings a Swiss/Korean military officer, Major Sophie Jean to investigate the politically sensitive incident. Sophie speaks Korean but has never been to Korea. In the urgent investigation, she struggles to find the truth clustered behind the silence of the two soldiers, Sgt O Kyong-pil and Sgt Yi Su-hyok. The story unfolds by shifting perspectives between the present investigation and flashbacks based on various reports and confessions made by the characters, with a significant part of the narrative. The central narrative focuses on the secret bonding between the North and South Korean soldiers. We watch that Su-hyok befriends with two North Korean soldiers and frequently crosses over the “Bridge of No Return” to visit their barrack at night, alone and with his companion soldier Nam Song-sik, who soon joins their secret gatherings. The dangerous but liberating brotherly love these Korean soldiers forge among themselves continues until a North Korean Lieutenant intrudes their party one night.

JSA's distinct approach to North Korea is best demonstrated in the first encounter between Sgt Yi Su-hyok and two North Korean soldiers. Su-hyok is left behind during a drill, and inadvertently steps on a mine. Unable to escape on his own, he tearfully begs for help from two North Korean soldiers who happen to be passing by. The sympathetic and skillful O Kyong-pil rescues him, and makes a deep and lasting impression on Su-hyok. This humiliating image of South Korean masculinity is in stark contrast with the heroic masculinity of agent Yu in *Swiri*, who displayed mastery and competence in critical situations. Su-hyok, while quite charming and able in his shooting skills, is seen as incapable and immature next to Sgt O. In fact, the most impressive character of the four soldiers is the North Korean officer, Sgt. O, who appears simultaneously mature, skillful, smart, and warm, despite his ideological stiffness.

While the scene contrasts North and South Korean soldiers in an urgent moment, it also humanizes the two North Korean soldiers. Adroit and self-confident as he is, O is willingly taking an unnecessary risk when he stops and disarms Su-hyok. There is another significant element in the scene that shows their humane quality: a puppy. The moment Su-hyok hears a little sound and recognizes the presence of a figure after quietly struggling in the critical situation alone in the dark field of reeds, what first appears in front of him is a little white puppy. It turns out to belong to U-jin and it is clear that U-jin cherishes it warm-heartedly. Albeit a small detail, it was an effective device for constructing unusually humanistic image of North Koreans for South Korean viewers. In addition, the North Koreans are also portrayed as humorous and witty. Responding to Su-hyok's initial warning that if they get any closer to him, he will make the mine explode, O Kyong-pil and Chong U-jin pretend to simply walk away, thus provoking Yi to panic and beg them to come back and save him. The two North Korean soldiers act and talk humorously but never outspokenly humiliate or insult Yi Su-hyok. Rather, their half comical, half empathetic conversations with Su-hyok reveal them as warm personalities, rather than coldhearted communists.

Based on these and the following observations, my readings of *Swiri* and *JSA* differ from those of Bo-Myung Seo and Kyung-Hyun Kim, though I borrowed from and inspired by both of them. In his eloquent essay, “Reunifying Identities: North and South in Contemporary South Korean Cinema”, Seo examines recent North Korea-themed films, and *Shiri*, *JSA*, and *Double Agent*, in particular, to argue that these films represent “the search for a new identity, a new way of being human in the divided land, beyond the Cold War politics.”^{iv} His concise but insightful analysis makes a compelling point about the growing cinematic efforts to establish an alternative identity that acknowledges and respects the aspirations of North Korean people. Kyung-Hyun Kim also analyses *Swiri* and *JSA* in the last chapter of his intriguing work, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, in which he maintains that the two films converge in their masculinist project as they reclaim and redeploy masculine power.^v Kim notes that if the removal of Yi, the embodiment of the North Korean Other in *Swiri* ensures the recovery of masculinity, the

homosocial male bonding in *JSA* not only recovers but privileges the male, patriarchal, woman-excluding perspective. In this way, although their centers of attention differ, both Seo and Kim regard *Swiri* and *JSA* as illustrating similar positions.

While I am indebted to these eloquent claims, I want to expand and complicate them. My argument is that even though *Swiri* and *JSA* parallel each other, *JSA*'s position is differentiated from its precursor in many respects. On the one hand, Seo is right that both films reflect the struggle over the question of identity in the divided land and such struggle will continue in subsequent films. But, a close inspection reveals, subtle significant differences as well as similarities in these so-called "unification" films. One example is their contrasting representations of North and South Korea(ns) despite the increasingly favorable attitudes to the North, which is discussed above.

Similarly, although both *Swiri* and *JSA* acknowledge differences between North and South, the former focuses on differences, while the latter emphasizes similarities. Thus Seo's shrewd but incomplete observation of the success of capitalism over socialism found in both films fails to consider how the two films have chosen to illuminate or not to illuminate that issue. In *JSA*, Sgt O, half jokingly half bitterly, remarks that he longs for the day when North Korea can produce chocolate pies as delicious as the ones made in the South. But for the considerable part of the narrative, the film highlights how similar army life is on both sides of the border. For South Korean men, whether or not they have already served in the army, and to a lesser degree for South Korean female viewers, who are familiar with male military experiences, through friends, relatives, and media, the story of Korean men from both sides having to serve in the army resonates as the shared poignant reality in a divided land. It is also telling that Su-hyok's intimate bonding with North Korean soldiers is no less welcome in the South Korean army than in the North Korean. Su-hyok tells his experiences only to Sophie Jean, who belongs to neither side.

On the other hand, I find Kyung-hyun Kim's comparative analysis of the two films equally limited. Kim makes a compelling observation that links homosocial male-bonding and male-centered nationalism in *JSA*. In addition, he recognizes many parallels between the two films, including the existence of a single leading female character in each film, who, unlike the male characters, have equally troubled and fragmentary identities. However, Kim is too devoted to the single theme of "remasculinization" and equates those parallels as two sides of the same coin, failing to see how the parallels also reveal different positions with regards to various issues. For example, he argues that both Yi in *Swiri* and Sophie Jean in *JSA* exist as Other, each equally presenting herself as a threat to men. In his psychoanalytically driven analysis, both Sophie and Yi are deemed what Julia Kristeva calls the "abject" female, embodying hybrid or impure identity.

This does not explain or even recognize that Sophie's hybrid identity and her asexual quality contradicts his own assumptions that its function is to privilege the masculine subject position. First, although her identity as half-Korean and half-Swiss certainly is responsible for her initial inability to get close to Korean men from either side, Sophie's sense of self-identity changes over time. Sophie develops a subtle but growing sense of closeness to the Korean soldiers who do not find a safe place on either side as she comes to understand the complexity of the reality of the divided nation and learns about the background of her father. Her father was a North Korean POW, who defected to a foreign country when given a choice after the Korean War was over. The experience of her father, who could not choose a safe place on either side of the border, resonates with that of Yi Su-hyok and O Kyong-pil, whose friendship also cannot find a safe place on either side. Moreover, her neutral position that receives no real trust from the superiors of the both sides, in fact, parallels the soldiers' border-crossing that violates the national security law, which is too subversive to acknowledge in both sides. Through her own alienated position, and the knowledge of her father's experience, Sophie is thus closer to the Korean soldiers, rather than separated and excluded from them, as Kim argues.

Second, it is also significant that Sophie's asexual quality, contrasted with Yi's highly sexualized identity, does not privilege the male point of view. As beautiful as actress Yi Yongae

is, the physicality of her Sophie Jean character does not highlight much of her female sexuality. Kyung Hyun Kim also recognizes her asexuality, though viewing her traditionally masculine quality as calm and rational separates her from the hysterical and sentimental men in the film. But contrary to what he suggests, her gender has little function in *JSA*. Her incomplete national identity, not her sex, is what initially separates her from the other soldiers. In addition, there is no behavior from the other soldiers that indicates her sex.^{vi} It might have to do with the fact that in the original novel on which the film is based, the role of Sophie Jean is a male character. The motivation behind this change between novel and film is complex, but it is clear that Sophie is as much a witness to the tragic history of the divided nation as a product of it. In films from *Sopyonje* (Im Kwon-taek, 1993) and *Petal* (a.k.a. KKotip, Jang Sun-woo 1996) to *Spring in My Hometown* (a.k.a. Arumdaun Sijol, Lee Kwang-mo, 1998), female characters were not allowed positions as witnesses to a tragic historical event, but were instead victims embodying a history directly witnessed only by males. If the role of Yi Pang-hui in *Swiri* as a female embodiment of the tragic national history, rather than as an agent, is quite familiar to Koreans, the Sophie Jean character as a female witness to the history is refreshing, if not transgressive, to keen viewers of Korean films. In this regard, Sophie's agency is unlike that of conventional female characters in South Korean films, but not that of a femme fatale.^{vii} The femme fatale is a conventional female role, but Sophie is not even close to such a figure, whose power lies in a highly sexualized form.

This does not imply that the Sophie Jean character is fully in service of South Korean women. From a local feminist perspective, what is suspect is the fact that such a role is given to a foreign woman.^{viii} Observing *Swiri*, *Joint Security Area*, *Musa* (a.k.a. Musa 2001) and *Failan* (2001), Soyoung Kim notes that in narratives of recent domestic films, South Korean women are being replaced by North Korea, Swiss and Chinese women. According to Kim, as disguised identity, racial/national/sexual other, and privileged traditional femininity, these foreign women are taking central roles, and thereby effacing the presence of South Korean women. As Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient argue, however, the disappearance of South Korean women indicates the increased visibility of racial and ethnic others who have been absent or marginalized in a culture that has long cherished its racial and ethnic homogeneity.^{ix} In their reassessment of the notable presence of foreign women on local silver screens, Chung and Diffrient are more concerned with how their idealized femininity is linked to the precarious Korean masculine subject-position based on its double consciousness, simultaneously victim and victimizer, colonized and colonizer. But their recognition that the presence of non-South Korean women is not simplistically negative is valuable. Portrayed as a desexualized woman, Sophie is neither idealized nor condemned as a sexual other. Moreover, by sharing, though indirectly, the Korean soldiers' true story, which was unwelcome on both sides, through her own biracial identity, Sophie is not totally excluded from this all-Korean men's world.

One can also find difference in the two films' approaches to their blockbuster aesthetic and genre-bending. Here, by blockbuster I mean big-budget films with high production values that are often expected to gross large revenues and that often rely on specific genres such as action or epic drama. *Swiri* and *JSA* largely reflect blockbuster qualities. In terms of their massive market success, both films are high profile products made with large budget and other advanced technology, and display lots of eye-catching special effects and various modes of stylish presentation. *Swiri* made a strong impact in the action genre through its groundbreaking use of impressive street gun-chase scenes and various special effects that pursue the Hollywood standard. Behind the relatively restrained style in *JSA* is a lavish wide-screen image: it was the first Korean film to use Super-35. Their genre choices as espionage action and military crime thrillers also reveal their blockbuster quality.

What distinguishes the two films is the fact that one emphasizes and eagerly pursues the attribute of a blockbuster while the other does not. This is easily understood in connection with genre-bending. Contemporary Korean films routinely practice genre-bending and genre-blending. For example, Darcy Paquet argues that the success of recent films owes much to the innovative

use of genre, whether by rewriting conventions of a genre or by combining multiple genre elements to expand their audience appeal and to create a complex and original film experience.^x *Swiri* takes the Hollywood action genre as its main framework, but mixes it with the Korean melodrama to attract larger audiences. It is obvious that *JSA* borrows from the Hollywood military crime thriller, since its structure follows the investigation genre format. But like *Swiri*, it incorporates melodrama in the narrative: the sentimental male-bonding of the “male melodrama.”^{xi} This confirms the observation that, due to budget constraints, Korean action films have more drama and dialog and less action scenes and special effects than their Hollywood counterparts.

However, the use of the Hollywood genre in *JSA* is disguised in a way in which *Swiri*'s is not. In the former, the initial suspenseful mood of the film as a fast-paced thriller soon gives way to a meditative and poignant mood. Although the on-going investigation gradually reveals fragments of truth, the film's narrative development is much less climactic, if not anti-climactic, than *Swiri*'s more conventional narrative. In *Swiri*, the disclosure of the true identity of Yi Myung-hyun to agent Yu comes toward the end in a pre-climactic moment, which leads to a series of climactic confrontations between Yu and Park, and finally between Yi and Yu, that highlight action. But *JSA* is marked by a lack of action for the considerable part of the film. Interestingly, most of the highlighted action in the film appears in the scenes in which the soldiers play various children's games in their nocturnal gatherings. In this regard, *Swiri*'s genre-blending is motivated more by budget constraints and magnifying audience appeal, and less by creative and critical rewriting of the Hollywood genre, than is *JSA*'s genre-bending. This is more clear in Kang Je-kyu's (director of *Swiri*) next and more ambitious project. *Taegukgi* (2004) is a War action epic that can be regarded as *Saving Private Ryan* in South Korea. In short, *Swiri* and *JSA* set two notably distinctive models, which have been used and modified in subsequent films.

Underlying the growing interest in films addressing North-South relations, whether set in the past or the present, is their proven commercial success. This came at a time when the Korean film industry was becoming increasingly ambitious in the global arena, by looking beyond the rapidly expanding Asian audience toward Western, and particularly North American, markets. Because big budget films have greater pressure to recoup the production costs, they require commercially reliable themes. Following the impressive success of both *Swiri* and *JSA*, a series of mega-budget projects were developed to capitalize on the theme of national division. Two highly successful examples are *Silmido* (Kang U-sok, 2003), a film based on an actual incident stemming from the Cold War tensions of the 1960s, and *Taegukgi* (Kang Je-kyu, 2004), which dramatized the ramifications for their family of an ideological split between the two brothers during the Korean War. Both films were record-breaking hits, drawing 11.07 million and 11.74 million admissions, respectively (Korean Film Commission). Considering their action oriented approach and aggressive marketing, these films are more reminiscent of *Swiri* than pensive *JSA*.

For Korean audiences, big films dramatizing North-South relations proved the domestic film industry could produce glossy, home-grown blockbusters featuring local events, all with production standards rivaling those of Hollywood. In addition, part of the astonishing success of the abovementioned epic blockbusters can be attributed to the fact that they, in their close depictions of Korean War history, could draw older viewers as well as the younger audiences likely to be more attracted by the stars and special effects than the subject matter.^{xii} These domestic blockbusters are also important for competing with the increasing scale of Hollywood fare. Indeed, four of the five foreign films included on the 2004 top ten box office list are lavish action and adventure driven blockbusters from the Hollywood dream factory: *Troy*, *Shrek 2*, *The Day after Tomorrow*, and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. In comparison, the five Korean films on the same top ten list are much more diverse in genre and subject matter. Consequently, given the continued imposing presence of the Hollywood blockbusters in Korea, the huge success of local blockbusters is enormously exciting for both Korean audiences and the local film industry.

The success of these newest local blockbusters, however, has raised a serious question about the direction in which the blooming Korean film industry is headed. The ever-growing domestic market share of local films is increasingly based on a small number of large-scale productions. For instance, *Silmido*, the 2003 box office champion, sold more tickets than the combined total of the next two Korean films on the list. (Table 1-A), and the ticket sales of the following year's top seller, *Taegukgi*, amount to the sum of the next four Korean films of 2004 (Table 2-A). The aggressive promotion and marketing of these high profile films has limited the media attention devoted to smaller films and newer directors. In this regard, it is a positive sign that the 2005 top ten list is marked by a group of middle-budget, top-notch films by both new and established young directors, a relatively even distribution of box office receipts, and a wide array of styles, genres, and subject matter (Table 3-A). Among those middle-budget successes is *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2005), the latest project on the theme of reunification.

***Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2005): Reunification, Joyous Yet Violated Fantasy**

The 2005 second most-selling film of all films shown in Korea, *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, was written by Jang Jin, talented theater writer, director, and producer, also director of the abovementioned film, *Spy Lee Chul-jin*, and directed by Park Kwang-hyun, a new-comer who had only directed the *My Nike* segment of Jang Jin-produced omnibus film, *No Comment* (2002). While based on the same titled play that is written, directed and produced by Jang Jin, the film adaptation presents an almost Disney-like cheerful fantasy about the Korean War. The story is set during the Korean War in an isolated mountainous village where an unexpected encounter occurs between three North Korean soldiers, two South Korean soldiers, an American pilot, and several villagers who are oblivious to the rampant war outside. War weathered soldiers with mixed nationalities find a refuge in this peaceful village, and they build growing intimacy and friendship through a series of comical events after initial confrontation and distrust. At the center of the transformation of the soldiers from enemies to friends is the utopian community of the innocent villagers, who go about their daily routines disregarding completely the orders of the North and South Korean soldiers. The overall mood of the film is cheerful and celebratory despite a tragic ending in which all but the American pilot, Smith, die in efforts to save the village from an air strike by the U.S. forces.

The celebratory nature of the film is best demonstrated in two fantasy-like scenes. The first is the scene in which the soldiers accidentally burn the storehouse for winter food. As stored corn is popped up in the air, villagers joyfully jump around in the snow of popcorns, instead of rationally calling for an emergency village meeting to discuss a way to replace the lost rations. This moment not only momentarily creates a symbolic, fairy-tale like ceasefire, but also eventually brings North and South Korean soldiers together as allies, when they agree to help the villagers by working together in the fields. Along with the unworldly setting, the childlike villagers evoke a state of mind in which formal political life has no meaning. Its function is not so different from the children's games in *JSA* that allow the soldiers to go back to an age of innocence and forget political reality.

If the villagers' childlike reaction initially opens up the minds of soldiers toward trust, the foundation of trust occurs in the equally fantasy-like scene of a wild boar hunt. The scene starts with a few villagers running away from a rushing wild boar. Seeing them at risk, a North Korean soldier throws a stone at the neck of the boar. Changing directions, the boar charges at his assailant, who with a hilariously exaggerated expression of fright, runs away from the frantically approaching boar. When he is about to be trampled, a South Korean comes to the rescue. As the angry boar makes a slow turn in the opposite direction, it becomes the South Korean's turn to flee and be rescued. In this comical sequence, a bond between North and South Korean soldiers begins to form. Eventually, the boar is captured through harmonious cooperation between North and South Koreans, and when the hunt is over, villagers and soldiers jump up and down with joy. This entire scene is presented largely in slow motion and in a highly exaggerated and nonsensical way.

Frozen in fairy tale moments, these scenes de-historicize and downplay the seriousness of the War. But at least in the realm of fantasy, they dramatize the desire and hopes of Korean people. It is important to see the intimacy between North and South, found in earlier “reunification” films, is much more celebratory and festive in *Welcome to Dongmakgol*. Yet, even in this fairy-tale like narrative, the fantasy cannot sustain itself. The fantasy of symbolic reunification of Korean people, though cathartic and heartening, gives way to the reality of the War in the narrative world, and, by extension, the reality of the divided nation in the present.

Toward the end of the film, believing that a unit of the North Korean air defense is in the vicinity, a platoon of U.S. soldiers accompanied by a Korean translator is sent to Dongmakgol, just as the villagers are celebrating a village festival. They violently search the villagers, throwing an elder to a rock to blood, knocking people down, and accusing many of being Communists. Against this harsh treatment, the North and South Korean soldiers form a strong alliance. Appalled by the U.S. plan to bomb the village, the soldiers decide to rescue the village, risking their lives. They move far away from the village, taking with them weapons they had found in one of the U.S. planes that had crashed in the area earlier. They shoot at the attacking aircraft, thereby making themselves the targets of the bombers. Cherishing the bonds they have built among themselves, the soldiers willingly sacrifice their lives to ward off the air raid.

That North and South Korean soldiers are united as one and are bombed by a new enemy, the Americans, rather than by each other, is a significant step away from the tragic final confrontation between the two lovers in *Swiri*. Still, as all the parties die, though heroically and united, this ending does not allow the realization of a sustained reunion/alliance between North and South. The deadly ending that comes after the most cheerful representation of the intimacy between the two Koreas speaks volumes about the complex reality of the closer, yet still separated, North and South Koreas. Despite recent reconciliatory moves in the policy toward North Korea, South Koreans still live in a country in which the presence of North Korea validates various absurd realities, such as the long abuse of the outdated National Security Law, which does not officially recognize North Korea as a political entity, and has thus been used to criminalize a great deal of peaceful behavior. Living in this contradictory situation, the South Korean public has not been able to reach a consensus on issues surrounding reunification. Though their emphases vary, most reunification films display an ambiguous attitude, simultaneously demonstrating growing intimacy between the two states, and yet disrupting their symbolic prolonged reunion. This shared ambiguity is a way of negotiating the political reality of the Korean peninsula and the growing popular desire for a nationalist fantasy of reconciliation.

Concluding Remarks

Popular culture is an important site for the perpetual competition between ever fluctuating discourses of identity. In South Korea, local cinema has grown tremendously over the past decade, and this growth is manifested in the diversity of political views expressed publicly. As noted above, in response to eased censorship and the changing policy toward North Korea, recent South Korean films show renewed interest in the issue of national identity. The “reunification” films discussed in this paper all demonstrate what Bo-myung Seo labels “the struggle with identity out of the history and psychology of division in Korea.”^{xiii} According to Seo, despite the tragic endings reflecting the long history of distrust and separation, these films show a continuing pursuit of an alternative identity. Although the search for a third identity is ongoing, the progress has been made in the representation of North Korea. Recognizing North Korea as the other half, whose aspirations need to be included in what it means to be Korea and Korean, these films then show the possibility of a common future in Korea.

Notwithstanding, my analysis of *Swiri* and *JSA* notes that in what Seo views as two sides of the coin, there are significantly different positions. For Seo, the two movies represent a parallel in the idea of a divided nation. He writes that “the central discovery in [Swiri] is that of lovers turning out to be enemies, the reverse may also reveal the paradoxical truth, that the enemies are really the lovers,” as *JSA* suggests.^{xiv} Though there are parallels, the direction of each

film takes yields opposite implications. Contrasting emphases on either lovers/brothers/intimacy or enemies/confrontation are combined with distinct approach to genre-bending/blending and blockbuster aesthetic, a difference also found in subsequent films.

Recent films dealing with national division exhibit complex and contradictory ideas. On the one hand, they show growing intimacy between the two Koreas. In this regard, the latest success of *Welcome to Dongmakgol* suggests a future of increasing harmony. On the other hand, an increasing nationalism that is intensified by increasing antagonism toward the U.S. is disturbing. Equally puzzling is the co-existence of aggressive efforts to build a strong, self-sustaining local film industry, while continuing to emulate the Hollywood blockbuster production machine. It remains to be seen which of these of forces will have more influence in the future development of South Korean cinema.

Tables

The Best Selling Films of 2003

Table 1-A

	Korean Films	Nationwide	Seoul	Release Date	Weeks
1	Silmido	11,074,000	3,262,000	Dec 24*	15
2	Memories of Murder	5,101,645	1,912,369	Apr 25	12
3	My Tutor Friend	4,809,871	1,622,064	Feb 7	10
4	Untold Scandal	3,345,268	1,293,642	Oct 2	7
5	Old Boy	3,260,000	1,170,000	Nov 21*	9
6	Oh! Brothers	3,125,256	948,604	Sep 5	6
7	A Tale of Two Sisters	3,110,000	1,000,471	Jun 13	5
8	Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield	2,835,000	923,000	Oct 17	6
9	My Teacher, Mr. Kim	2,470,000	857,000	Mar 28	8
10	Crazy First Love	2,340,000	742,000	Jun 27	5

Table 1-B

	All Films	Nationwide	Seoul	Release Date	Weeks
1	Silmido (Korea)	11,074,000	3,262,000	Dec 24*	15
2	Return of the King (NZ/US)	5,960,000	1,978,409	Dec 17*	8
3	Memories of Murder (Korea)	5,101,645	1,912,369	Apr 25	12
4	My Tutor Friend (Korea)	4,809,871	1,622,064	Feb 7	10
5	The Matrix Reloaded (US)	3,600,000	1,500,000	May 23	7
6	Untold Scandal (Korea)	3,345,268	1,293,642	Oct 2	7
7	Old Boy (Korea)	3,260,000	1,170,000	Nov 21*	9
8	Oh! Brothers (Korea)	3,125,256	948,604	Sep 5	6
9	A Tale of Two Sisters (Korea)	3,110,000	1,000,471	Jun 13	5
10	Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield (Korea)	2,835,000	923,000	Oct 17	6

* Includes tickets sold in 2004. Source: Korean Film Council (KOFIC). □

The Best Selling Films of 2004

Table 2-A

	Korean Films	Nationwide	Seoul	Release Date	Weeks
1	Taegukgi	11,746,135	3,509,563	Feb 5	13
2	My Little Bride	3,149,500	876,600	Apr 2	8
3	Once Upon a Time in High School	3,115,767	1,023,601	Jan 16	6
4	Ghost House	2,890,000	751,340	Sep 17	6
5	A Moment to Remember	2,565,078	797,593	Nov 5	4
6	My Brother	2,479,585	699,725	Oct 8	5
7	Fighter in the Wind	2,346,446	634,897	Aug 12	5
8	Windstruck	2,199,359	659,380	Jun 3	4
9	Romance of Their Own	2,189,453	574,511	Jul 23	4
10	The Big Swindle	2,129,358	776,898	Apr 15	7

Table 2-B

	All Films	Nationwide	Seoul	Release Date	Weeks
1	Taegukgi (Korea)	11,746,135	3,509,563	Feb 5	13
2	Troy (US)	3,851,000	1,513,408	May 21	8
3	Shrek 2 (US)	3,300,533	1,285,594	Jun 18	5
4	My Little Bride (Korea)	3,149,500	876,600	Apr 2	8
5	Once Upon a Time in High School (Korea)	3,115,767	1,023,601	Jan 16	6
6	Howl's Moving Castle (Japan)	3,014,800	979,800	Dec 24*	8
7	The Day After Tomorrow (US)	3,006,400	959,010	Jun 3	6
8	Ghost House (Korea)	2,890,000	751,340	Sep 17	6
9	A Moment to Remember (Korea)	2,565,078	797,593	Nov 5	4
10	Harry Potter and the Prisoner... (US)	2,532,000	892,900	Jul 16	5

* Includes tickets sold in 2005. Source: Korean Film Council (KOFIC). □ □

The Best Selling Films of 2005

Table 3-A

	Korean Films	Nationwide	Seoul	Release	Weeks
1	Welcome to Dongmakgol	6,300,000*	n/a	Aug 4	4
2	Marathon	5,179,154	1,552,558	Jan 27	9
3	Another Public Enemy	3,920,000	1,167,828	Jan 27	6
4	Sympathy for Lady Vengeance	3,620,000	n/a	Jul 29	5
5	Mapado	3,089,717	922,647	Mar 10	8
6	The Big Scene	2,400,000*	n/a	Aug 12	3
7	Blood Rain	2,274,779	759,653	May 4	5
8	Innocent Steps	2,197,555	692,461	Apr 28	5
9	She's On Duty	1,908,000	432,243	Mar 17	5
10	Crying Fist	1,728,477	588,630	Apr 1	6

Table 3-B

	All Films	Nationwide	Seoul	Release	Weeks
1	Welcome to Dongmakgol (Korea)	6,400,000*	n/a	Aug 4	4
2	Marathon (Korea)	5,179,154	1,552,558	Jan 27	9
3	Another Public Enemy (Korea)	3,920,000	1,167,828	Jan 27	6
4	The Island (US)	3,788,000*	1,480,000	Jul 21	5
5	Mr. and Mrs. Smith (US)	3,750,000	1,194,100	Jun 16	5
6	Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (Korea)	3,620,000*	n/a	Jul 29	5
7	War of the Worlds (US)	3,200,000	n/a	July 7	5
8	Mapado (Korea)	3,089,717	922,647	Mar 10	8
9	The Big Scene (Korea)	2,400,000*	n/a	Aug 12	3
10	Blood Rain (Korea)	2,274,779	759,653	May 4	5

Notes

ⁱ Isolde Standish. "Korean Cinema and the New Realism: Text and Context." *Colonialism & Nationalism in Asian Cinema*. Ed. Wimal Dissanayake. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994. 65-89.

ⁱⁱ *The Korea Herald*, (21 July 2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ Seo Bo-Myung. "Reunifying Identities: North and South in Contemporary South Korean Cinema, Can Cinema Do What Politicians Cannot?" <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/52/korea.htm> (retrieved on May 15, 2006).

^{iv} Ivid.

^v Kyung Hyun Kim. ““Each Men Kills the Thing He Loves””: Transgressive Agents, National Security, and Blockbuster Aesthetics in *Shiri* and *Joint Security Area*.” *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004: 259-276.

^{vi} I am indebted to my friend, Duncan Mitchell on this account.

⁷ See Kyung Hyun Kim, 2004: 261. But Kim also soon recognizes that “Sophie resists the characterization of femme fatale.” Kim, 2004: 268.

^{viii} Pointing at *Swiri*, *Joint Security Area*, *Musa* (2001) and *Failan* (2001), Soyoung Kim notes that South Korean women are being replaced by North Korea, Swiss and Chinese women in narratives of recent domestic films. According to Kim, as double identity, racial/national/sexual other, privileged traditional femininity, these foreign women take central roles while effacing the presence of local women. See Soyoung Kim “Disappearing South Korean Women.” Ed. Kim Soyoung *Korean Style Blockbusters: Atlantis or America*. Seoul, 2001: 16-39.

^{ix} Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient. “Interethnic Romance and Political Reconciliation in *Asako in Ruby Shoes*.” Eds. Chi-yun Shin & Julian Stringer. *New Korean Cinema*. New York: New York University Press, 2005: 200.

^x Darcy Paquet. “Genrebending in Contemporary Korean Cinema.” *AASA Review: The Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia* 8.4 (March 2000): 12-13.

^{xi} Kyung Hyun Kim, 2004: 266.

^{xii} See Darcy Paquet’s overall review of Korean films made in 2004 at his website, Koreanfilm.org [http://www.koreanfilm.org/kfilm04.html].

^{xiii} Seo Bo-Myung. “Reunifying Identities: North and South in Contemporary South Korean Cinema, Can Cinema Do What Politicians Cannot?” p. 7. <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/52/korea.htm> (retrieved on May 15, 2006).

^{xiv} Ivid. p. 5