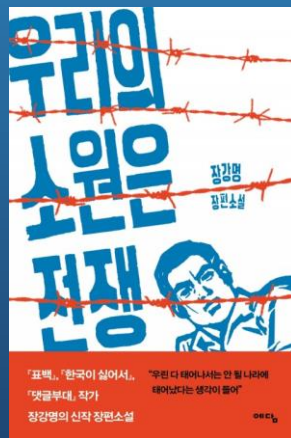


Recent Images of North Korea in South Korean Popular Culture



Changing South Korean Understandings of North Korea

- Sunshine Policy (2000 summit)
- tours to Mt. Kumgang and Gaeseong
- numerous official and semi-official visits
- rise in N. Koreans in South
- Changing S. Korea:
 - Korean Wave,
 - 2002 World Cup
 - digital technology powerhouse
 - increase in labor migration
 - rise in international marriages, etc.



Guiding questions

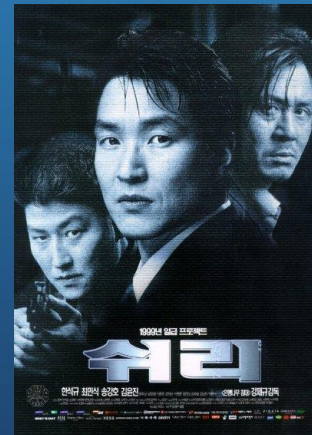
- S. Epstein, “The Axis of Vaudeville” <http://apjff.org/-Stephen-Epstein/3081/article.html>
- How has South Korean understanding of North Koreans evolved during this century?
- How does South Korean popular culture reflect that understanding and, in turn, shape ongoing transformations in that understanding?
- Significant policy implications:
 - Can the South Korean imagination make room for an identity that accepts both parts of the divided nation?
 - Or, are mental boundaries hardening in tandem with (lack of) progress towards unification? (cf. E/W Germany; Taiwan/PRC?)

Representations of N. Korea

- SK: Pre-1998, one-dimensional, evil incarnate, spies
 - Children's song for skipping rope: "Let's kill off those Commies/ It's about time."
- Western images: nuclear issue/food shortages/human rights
- SK Post-'98: notable trend to lighter approach - irony, farce
 - Perhaps reflects gen'l postmodern turn, but also strategy to deal with growing sense of heterogeneity?

Changing Film Representations

- Earlier depictions of N spies as evil incarnate, such as:
 - *Crisis 113*; 1966
 - *Spy Catcher General Ttori*; 1979
- “Sunshine Policy Blockbusters”:
 - *Shiri*; 1999
 - *JSA- Joint Security Area*; 2000
 - *Taegukgi*; 2004
 - *Welcome to Dongmakgol*; 2005



Famous shot from *Joint Security Area: JSA*



A liminal state: the Dallae Eumakdan at the DMZ



Run-DMZ - homage to JSA



Southern and Northern Sisters? Lee Hyori and Cho Myung Ae



Sunshine Policy Romcoms

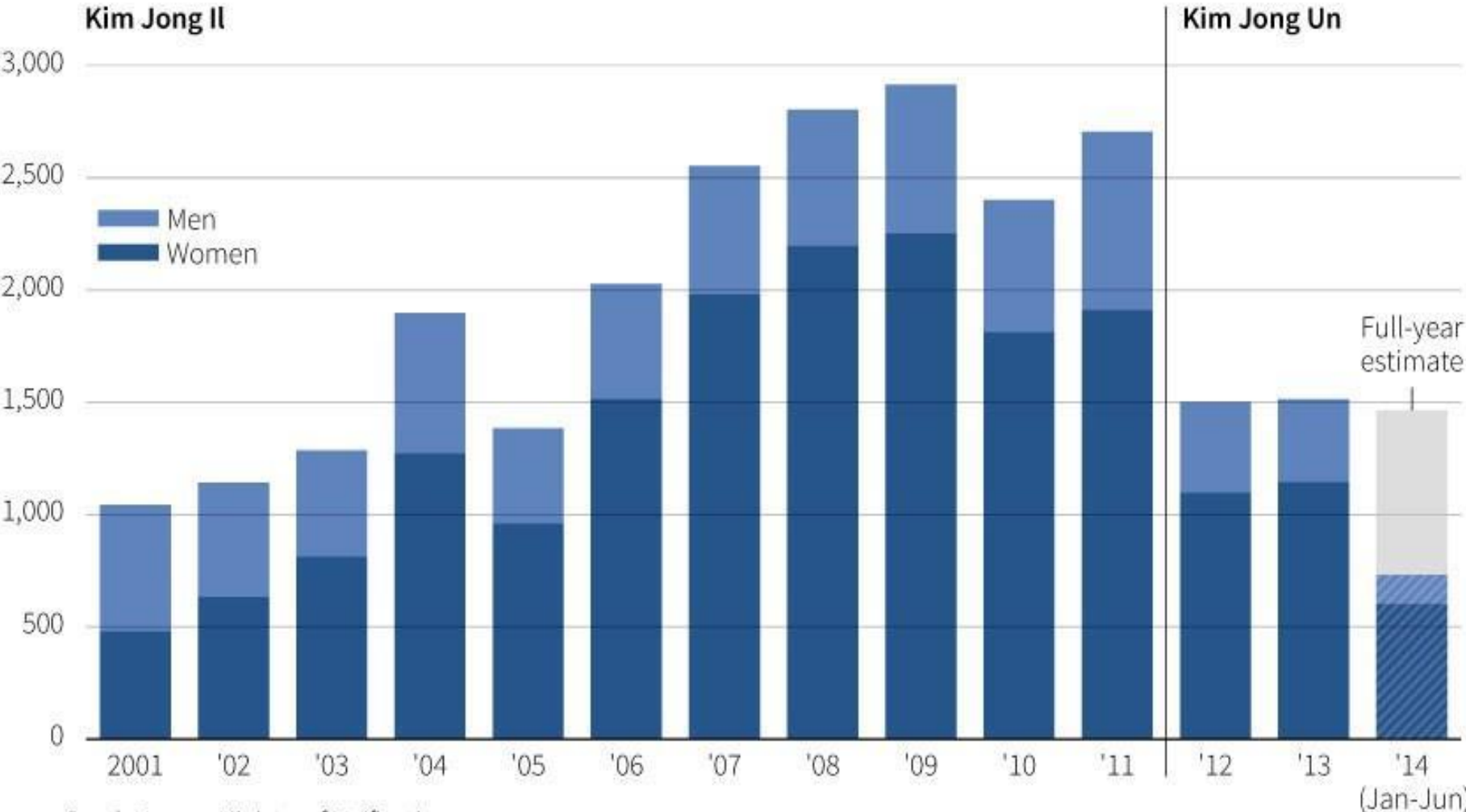


Taepodong Art Troupe sketch on *Gag Concert*



North Korea defections

The number of defectors fleeing to South Korea dropped by almost half following Kim Jong Un's rise to power.



Source: South Korean Ministry of Unification.

Now on My Way to Meet Who?
The Two Faces of *Ije Mannareo Gamnida* (이제 만나러 갑니다)



Christopher K. Green and Stephen Epstein,
<http://apjjf.org/2013/11/41/Stephen-Epstein/4007/article.html>

More recent geopolitical and sociocultural background

- Anti-communist ideology -> Sunshine Policy -> Deterioration under Lee Myung Bak -> Concern over Kim Jong Un's early belligerence
- Increasing specific attention to multiculturalism within rise of cultural industries
- Increasing popularity of *yeneung* (variety) talk shows
- Forerunners and influences:
 - *Misuda* (미녀들의 수다: KBS Global Talk Show)
 - 그 사람이 보고 싶다/*Geu sarami bogo shipda* (The Person I Miss)
- Significant (and gendered) rise in defectors



Weekly progression

From humor, performance,
information and flirtation...

...to tragic narratives of
escape, hardship and death.



Research Questions



- How do we understand *Now on My Way to Meet You* within the context of S. Korea's evolving screen cultures?
- In what ways does the show attempt to humanize N. Koreans for a S. Korean audience? What recurring tropes appear on the show?
- Does the show succeed in its announced aims or does it (perhaps unintentionally) reinforce hierarchical regimes of knowledge and impede the integration of N. Korean refugees?

Idol Republic: 미녀들의 수다 vs. 이제 만나러 갑니다

Misuda, KBS Global Talk Show

Now on My Way to Meet You



그 사람이 보고 싶다/*Geu sarami bogo shipda* (The Person I Miss)

- Family separations
- Memories of poverty, S. Korea's upward trajectory
- Public re-experience of private tragedy
- Slow shift to internationalization



Regular Tropes



- Music and dance interludes
- Athleticism
- Use of sinister or playful background music
- Editorializing subtitles
- Shocked reaction shots (hosts, male guests, fellow panelists)
- New members



...fun with North Korean culture..

이제 탈북가수 최금실의
우여곡절 탈북스토리

CHANNEL

딸의 그리움으로
가득 채워진
찰떡 상자

...and close in harrowing style: *talbukseuteori*.

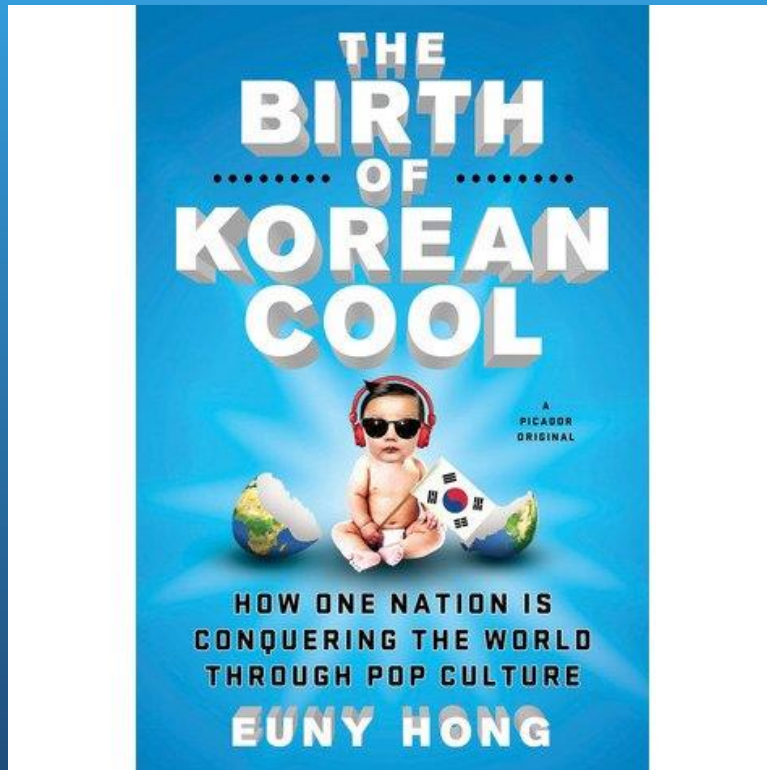
New Developments: Defection Success Stories



Tensions between desire for *dongjilseong* (homogeneity) and *tajahwa* (othering)



Euny Hong on “Now on My Way to Meet You”



- "When I lived in Korea, we were basically led to believe that North Korea was the spawn of an orgy between Satan, Beelzebub, Emperor Nero and Pol Pot. This sentiment has since evolved into "stop discriminating against NK refugees who choose to settle in our country. Especially the women; they're hot."
- "Watching this show makes you feel as though you are flipping television channels between the Lawrence Welk Show, the Miss Universe Pageant and Schindler's List."

Proliferation of *Talbukja* Programs

Good Life

*Love Reunification: Southern
Man, Northern Woman*



Male *Talbukja* in SK Cinema

South of the Border



Hello Stranger



Ttak joeun chingu- Best Friends



“Friends from the North with Abundant Charm”



Ipyeong: A range of material

A little bit of trendy self-commodification



Ipyeong's *talbuk* story



New media developments and male *talbukja*

- Expansion of media platforms allows for some optimism in democratizing NK male voices, challenges remain
- Growing generational split within SK society can be observed in depictions of NK
- NK migrants in increasingly ambiguous position as number of foreigners generally increases
- Room in SK imagination for NK *minam*



“South’s new heroes? Spies from North”

- “They are handsome, daring, patriotic and multilingual elite fighters who dodge bullets while remaining loyal to their women and families. Meet the new heroes of South Korean cinema – North Korean spies.” - Jung Ha-won



Research Questions about Spy Films

- What factors lie behind this spate of films with North Korean spies as protagonists in early part of this decade, and what are its popular culture antecedents?
- What tropes recur in these films, and what can they tell us about evolving South Korean imaginings of the North?
- What does the choice of K-pop/drama/*hallyu* stars in lead roles for these films reveal about South Korean screen culture today?



Main arguments

- 1) Salience of North as a threat has returned. Current transition and possible instability firing the imagination.
- 2) Greater knowledge of Northerners made possible by increased contact is reconfigured by free play of filmic fantasy, and encourages new “schizophrenic” displays.
- 3) Changing demographics of South Korea (outsiders who pass/outside who can't) problematizes security/cohesion of nation-state.

의형제 (*Secret Reunion*; 2010)



- N undercover in S society, ordered to assassinate defector
- NIS tailing
- Botched operation leads to life in hiding for N, dismissal for NIS
- Uneasy partnership between N and NIS: private investigators after runaway VN brides
- Shoot-'em-up finale
- Evil N counterpart defeated
- Reunion with family for N, but headed to UK away from Lorea

간첩 (*The Spies*; 2012)

- Undercover N spies in S, lower middle class lives
- Ordered to assassinate defector
- Botched operation
- Uneasy partnership between NIS and key N protagonist
- Shoot-'em-up finale
- Evil N counterpart(s) defeated
- S Family saved; N family still intact, but little possibility of reunion.



베를린 (*The Berlin File*; 2013)



- Berlin setting; complex (convoluted?) plot
- N protagonist and tailing NIS in botched operation
- Internal N machinations
- N protagonist ordered to incriminate wife by evil N
- Uneasy partnership develops between N and NIS
- Shoot-'em-up finale
- Evil N counterpart defeated
- N cannot save wife, set free by NIS

은밀하게, 위대하게 (*Secretly, Greatly*; 2013)

- N spies in S await mission, never eventuates
- Ordered to commit suicide with internal purge
- Extensive interaction with S society
- Shoot-'em-up finale
- Uneasy relationship with NIS who encourage surrender
- Evil N counterparts defeated
- Tragic demise, ambiguous for family



동창생 (*Commitment*; 2013)



- Father in botched operation
- N sent S to assassinate spy from rival group; will secure sister's release from labor camp
- Incognito in middle class S high school
- Uneasy relationship with NIS
- Shoot-'em-up finale
- Evil N counterpart defeated
- Tragic demise, but sister saved

Emerging themes:

1a) N vs N > N vs S

- Decomposition: presentation of good N vs. evil N;
- Repeatedly instantiated with a face to face showdown
- Good N - no expressed hostility to S; often urges compassion/shows act of kindness



붉은 가족



Mute

▶ ⏩ 🔊 59:45 / 1:39:02



Emerging motifs:

1b) N vs N > N vs S

- proxy battles occur outside of N, since internal revolution unlikely
- S represented as bystander (as opposed to catalyst) for this conflict
- frequency of botched missions highlights precariousness of good N's liminal position outside of N



2) Family > Nation

- Collective still overrides individual, but for family not nation
- Family members hostage to state
- Films evoke in turn all primary relationships: parents, children, spouses, siblings...



3) 남남북녀 -> 북남미남

(Southern Man, Northern Woman -> Northern Man, Handsome Man)



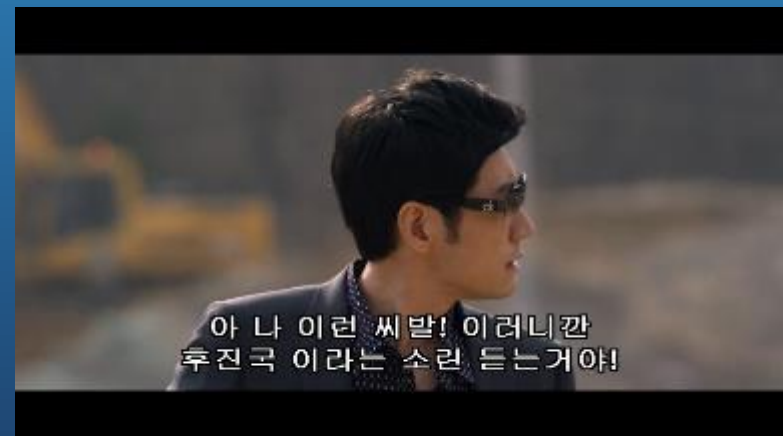
- N women relatively absent; if appear, attached to N man, not S
- N spies = pop idols: responding to new market conditions and geopolitical logic; mystery of spies allows reconfigured signification.
- S intelligence officers: established older stars (Song Kang-ho; Han Suk-kyu)



4) N gaze brings S society into focus



- Cognitive estrangement of seeing S through N lens
- Funhouse mirror perspective, both critical AND appreciative
- Corruption; harassment; prosperity/consumerist decadence; diversity



...and some tentative conclusions

- More pragmatic outlooks: thus, decreased (?) sense of tragedy of division per se...
- ...likewise, little indication of hope for overcoming it.
- Despite/Because of instability, N entrenched as place apart--but border can be crossed.
- A desire for choice over what N to allow as member of S nation and whom to exclude.



Postscripts

