The Representation of Refugees in Films and Its Impact on Attitudes Towards North Korean Defectors

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ABSTRACT

Widespread social prejudice and stereotypes toward North Korean refugees in South Korea further exacerbate their adversities as asylum seekers. In light of this social problem and its long and complicated context, this study aims to show the important roles, past and present, that media–especially commercial movies–have in the social and cultural perspectives of people towards refugees. In this article, I discuss the role of the media in shaping general perception through reviewing psychological theories and experiments. Furthermore, based on the cases of North Korean refugees, the study examines the challenges many refugees face in the countries they immigrated to, such as social prejudice and discrimination, but the article specifically focuses on the experiences of North Korean refugees in South Korea. The study examines how North Korea and its refugees are represented in various South Korean commercial movies to anticipate their potential impact on society. This research is necessary because it claims that portraying only the limited aspect of refugees through media can possibly spur diverse social problems. Through my research, I concluded that the future films should portray the humane parts of the characters, not using them as characters representing specific political ideals.

Impact of Media on Shaping General Perceptions

In order to meaningfully address the social problem of South Korean attitudes towards North Korean refugees living in South Korea, and the significant roots of these perceptions, it is essential to first note the general impact on people's attitudes when discussing the portrayal of minorities in the media. While an absolutist conclusion is neither wise nor possible concerning the influence of popular media on people's perceptions of others, there is ample research and documentation on this subject to draw confident conclusions and tentative calls for reform. To start, the media, especially nowadays, play a critical role in shaping peoples' perceptions, locally and globally, and people should be cautious in making decisions about refugees (social minorities) based on their portrayal through and in the media.

The Way Media Affects People: Filter Bubbles

In a digitized society where people encounter information through social media and online content, humanity has likely never been so affected by the filter bubble. The "filter bubble"–a term coined by internet activist Eli Pariser circa 2010–is a state where people are enclosed in an individualized conceptual bubble that encapsulates and restricts them from reaching or deeply understanding an opposing view in a fair-minded way. As a result of rapid algorithm development, people are more likely to be exposed to the contents of information that is on par with what they have already watched in the past– content with data that is agreeable to individuals' original ideas and searches. This mechanism, while also a popular marketing tool for social media, intrinsically causes the mind to lose the opportunity for comprehensive, in-depth thinking, consolidating the initial thoughts and tendencies and using them to create and perpetuate a template driven by the intersecting factors of predictability, desire, and profit, deepening the filter bubble at

the expense of reality so long as the results maximize profits and satisfy addictive impulses.

The Way Media Affects People: Modeling Behavior

The impact of media is not only subconsciously dominating people's minds and narrowing their thoughts. While the media restricts contact points, it also affects people's behavior. Throughout human history, imitating others deliberately and inadvertently has been a primary driver for learning. For example, according to social learning theory, imitation of models is the most critical element in how children learn gender-appropriate behavior.[1]. Nowadays, however, in many cases, information about human values, thinking styles, behavior patterns, and sociostructural opportunities and constraints is gained from modeling the behaviors portrayed symbolically through electronic mass media–behaviors and their associated values observed and imitated most often alone, in a "watching" relationship with a device rather than in a human-to-human relational context. Additionally, unlike the relatively slow modeling behavior that occurs to children when they first imitate their parents' and siblings' eating, speaking, and behaving, the modeling happening through media has a uniquely multiplicative power.

   Children modifying their parents' behavior mainly fall into the category of learning by doing and require numerous trial-and-error experiments and experiences of reality around them. One finally adapts the behavior through repetitive altering actions. On the other hand, in observational learning, a single model can instantly transmit new ways of thinking and behavior to vast numbers of people worldwide. While observational learning occurs when people actively perform their knowledge by imitating a character in the media, it also happens even if the people do not intentionally replicate the observed behavior. In addition, learning via media only has a one-way flow of information: the producer merely transmits the idea, and the receivers consciously and unconsciously accept the idea. The concern voiced for decades by well-known technology critics such as the late Jerry Mander regarding the "passive" reception of TV seems to well define our era: "We may have entered an era when information is fed directly into the mass subconscious."[2] Namely, information is conveyed in a collective, rootless, and top-down way, with little or no accountability for the social consequences.

The Way Media Affects People: Mere-Exposure Effect

Other than macro level changes—people directly imitating the behaviors they see repeatedly on mass media—micro level changes aren't trivial. Zajonc's (1968,2001) theory of the mere-exposure effect, for instance, substantiates the impact of media on people on a subliminal level. The mere exposure effect theory propounds that if individuals were continuously exposed to a particular stimulus, that stimulus would induce their preference for the same (or similar) stimulus in future events.[3] The societal issue of whitewashing–predominately casting white actors and actresses to play a character who is not white– primarily stems from the mere-exposure effect. By merely increasing the chance of exposing white actors and actresses in movies, people will later not only expect but be generally comfortable about most characters being white.[4] Further, they will have been conditioned unconsciously to feel discomfort corresponding with any overt changes to the dominance of white actors on the screen, making the increased presence of minorities feel not just surprising to many but troublesome or even disturbing. Since most people protect their self-esteem partly through the positive representation of their own group, and *vice versa*, it is clear how this cyclic effect would deepen the cultural and racial disparities—solidifying "white" as the majority and hindering diverse racial groups from getting further involved in the film industry. To avoid such an effect, there should be a deliberate effort to bring certain racial (or particular minority social) groups into the field.

   While including and representing certain racial groups would affect people's feelings and understanding of the reality around them, stereotypical representation is still prevalent. However, if the portrayal of certain racial groups is repeatedly depicted as negative, for example, it would lead to even worse ramifications. The impact of exposure to biased schema through media would be especially severe for young people. Since they are generally more

inexperienced than adults in terms of practical knowledge, it is more likely for them to form an initial perception through what they indirectly experienced through media. Salomon (cited in Manley-Casimir & Luke) insists the quality of learning from TV has much to do with peoples' pre-existing schemas; however, if children do not have a realistic schema about relationships or gender, they will use TV representations to form their schema. One can assume this effect to be likely even stronger today than in the recent past, with personalized, algorithm-directed observation and consumption of media by people on their personal devices, largely while alone. In light of the extensive literature revealing social modeling as a powerful influencer of children's concepts and behavior, it seems essential to examine popular media and probe if it contains toxic schemas regarding discrimination towards minorities.

Media's Future Orientation and Responsible Portrayal of Social Minorities

The power of media stems from its access to a wide range of scope and unequivocal speed. This power, just like any other power, can be either beneficial or malignant to society by changing people's behaviors. Thus, if properly utilized, media would be among the most powerful tools to aid societal problems. Since media production covers a wide range of human activities— from the realities of people's everyday struggles that many can empathize with to fantasies that embody hopes and dreams that make people want a better life—people relate each of their individual stories with the general contents. When various communicative channels allow viewers to form strong emotional bonds with the models, viewers can grow their familiarity with a novel subject and begin to consider unfamiliar concepts—this is where the power of media to "shed light on" issues come from. Media can enable people to put themselves into various "other" people's shoes rather than focusing on a single individualistic circumstance.

Media, in particular film and social media, is never innately neutral. The media we interact with and consume influences what we think about ourselves and others and plays an integral role in determining who we become and are. According to S. Zizek, movies are a "tool for broadcasting state ideology to the masses."[5] On a broader (less state-specific) level, to experts like T. Kashani, films are a "means of individual and social transformation."[6] As a result, many academics suggest films are expected to form beliefs, influence opinions and change attitudes.[7] Therefore, media content producers should be cautious when choosing a character or storyline representing particular groups. This would also apply to the refugee issue. Plenty of positive portrayals of refugees—though the direct message may not be "stop discrimination against the refugees"—would enhance the social status of refugees. The aforementioned paragraphs show that there is potential for today's media to lead the world into a more inclusive society—where people do not draw a line between refugees and themselves but accept them as the same, as human beings deserving of the same protections and rights and joys citizens demand for themselves.

North Korean Defectors

History/Current State of North Korean Refugee Issue

Long known as an ethnically homogeneous people, the division of Korea instigated the 'war refugee movement' between the mid-1940s and the early 1950s, the genesis of the phenomenon of Korean refugees in Korea.[8] Physically blocking the two Koreas, the 38th parallel separated the two states and prevented the free movement of people between the two, and one Korea slowly became two different Koreas. North Korean defectors can be considered as a type of refugee, as Kim (2000, 121) also described Korean society during the Korean War as a "refugee society.[9]"

The NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES PROTECTION AND SETTLEMENT SUPPORT ACT uses the term North Korean refugees to state "residents escaping from North Korea," which "means persons who have their residence, lineal ascendants and descendants, spouses, workplaces, etc., in the area north of the Military Demarcation Line (hereinafter

referred to as "North Korea"), and who have not acquired any foreign nationality after escaping from North Korea."[10]

Understanding the history and status quo of North Korean fugitives is needed before analyzing portrayals of them in films to compare and contrast real conditions and representation in media. Through this process, we can assess whether current media portrayal is contributing to or aggravating the social inclusion of North Korean defectors. In addition, understanding the history and current state of North Korean refugees will help to explain the physical and emotional challenges they are going through and provide a cue in the orientation of future films featuring North Korean defectors.

According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, since the end of the Korean War and through the March of 2023, 33,916 North Koreans have defected to the South. (This investigation might contain small variations due to defection that has not been made public.)

Immediately after the Korean War and in the mid-1950s, the number of voluntary North Korean defectors is presumed to have been low. One of the reasons given for the low defection rate during this period is that because the economic situation of North Korea was better than South Korea, which was coping with the aftermath of the war before the implementation of rigorous economic development policies, there was no strong motivation to drive North Koreans to risk their lives to come to South Korea. Moreover, North Koreans were deprived of "exit" opportunities (to use Albert Hirschman's well-known term) which can be represented by a powerful block of foreign access by a despot.[11]

Before the stark increase in North Korean refugees due to The Great Famine, from the end of the Korean War up until the early 1990s, the overall number of defectors remained relatively small. Furthermore, they mainly were made up of the North Korean elite since only a few in the privileged had opportunities or "exit options" to get safely across the national border of North Korea. According to a personally requested interview by Andrei Lankov, in his book *Bitter Taste of Paradise: North Korean Refugees in South Korea,* Kim Sung-Kuk, a ministry official of the Ministry of Unification, Settlement Support Division, the social class composition of defectors are no longer composed mainly of elites. Out of 4,716 defectors from January 2000 to August 2004, for example, 41% were classified by the Ministry of Unification as "workers," including the employees of state-run "agricultural cooperatives." 46.5% of "others" incorporated predominantly school students and unemployed housewives. Only 2.8% during this period were described as "professionals," 2.6% as "managers," and 1.5% as "sportsmen, artists, and entertainers" Of the remaining, 4.9% are made up of "service workers," and 0.7% are ex-soldiers. Thus, even by the most generous estimate, well below 10% of all recent arrivals in the early 2000s–just before the rise of the handphone, social media, and algorithmically-driven mass culture in South Korea–belong to the North Korean elite or even the educated middle classes.

On the other hand, the portion of "others" doubled in 2000-2004, increasing from 27.6% to 55%, which highlights the higher ratio of commoners (even minorities) to elites among incoming North Koreans. In this regard, it is essential to note that the share of two elite or sub-elite groups—"professionals" and "managers"—decreased most dramatically, from 9.7% in 2000 to 3.4% in January-July 2004, contributing significantly to this trend. In contrast with elite groups that have personal skills or abilities that can also be recognized in South Korea, people who belong to "others" have a higher chance of suffering from adapting to a new society, especially while starting as they try to attain stable jobs. Therefore, they constitute the low socio-economic class even though they risked their lives to escape North Korea, hoping for a better quality of life.

While the number of defectors rose, the "political" value to the South Korean state, as well as the social standing of most defectors, significantly dropped. According to the Ministry of Unification, in 2002, the percentage of women defectors from North Korea outnumbered that of men. This statistic is also significant here since, compared to men, women in North Korea are more likely to be exposed to societal-level harassment or underestimation.[12] Therefore, this gender dynamic—an increasing portion of women—among border crossers means yet another significant change to the general demographic characteristics of North Korean defectors. Whereas before the Great Famine, most North Korean defectors to South Korea were male and highly skilled in fields that made them, on the whole, deeply valuable assets to the South Korean State–for their skills as well as the threats they posed to their former country–and they came in relatively small numbers that could be easily managed by the South, in more recent years North Korean

defectors have come in larger numbers, and they have included much larger percentages of women and "underskilled" persons. In short, the demographics of more recent numbers of North Korean defectors reveal that most are bound to face isolation, job struggles, and prejudices from South Koreans that the earlier defectors didn't.
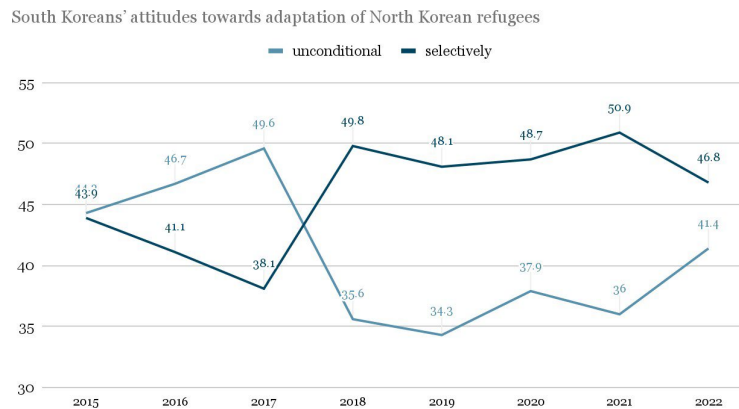

Figure 1. Source: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (2022)

Figure 1 presents South Koreans' attitudes towards adaptation of North Korean refugees based on the survey conducted in 2022 towards randomly selected 1,000 South Koreans. The light blue color represents those who argue since North Korean defectors are also Koreans, South Korea should accept everyone who wants to live in South Korea. On the other hand, the dark blue stands for those who claim it should be accepted selectively in consideration of the economic capabilities of North Korean defectors and the diplomatic burden of accepting them.

Since North Korean defectors have been categorized as one minority group, it became more critical to redefine and update the group characteristic referring to various statistics. Not only policies but also the general perception of North Korean refugees would parallel the dynamics in constituents of the group. According to the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, the decreasing portion of North Korean professionals crossing borders and the increasing percentage of workers and women strongly affect the general perception of North Koreans. In 2022 research, 46.8% of South Korean survey participants argued we should selectively accept North Korean refugees in consideration of their economic capabilities and diplomatic burdens, and further, 11.8% claimed North Koreans are a serious social burden, so we shouldn't accept them. Namely, in contrast to the past when news broadcasts regularly underscored how elite citizens of North Korea were risking their lives for the sake of freedom and to live in South Korea, nowadays, when so many border crossers are seen as weak and economic minorities, even in their home country, our conception of North Korean refugees is also adapting to the changes: the North Korean defector has been metamorphosing in South Korean perceptions from somebody of mysteriousness and charm to somebody who is a burden and needs our help. Before further analyzing the role media plays in how these demographics are interpreted by South Koreans and how ways media-induced stereotypes are directly affecting the lives of North Korean defectors in South Korea, it is important to lay out more details about the normative experiences of many of the defectors currently living in South Korea, based on numerous studies.

External and Internal Hardships that Refugees Experience

Even after North Korean defectors successfully arrived in South Korea, they faced several specific hardships. Many recent defectors attest that they suffered from human rights violations when they were forced to work while in a third country, countries en route to South Korea. It is common for recent defectors to relate that they had suffered at home or on their journeys as victims of sexual violence and exploitation as well as human trafficking.

The following section will examine the hardships that North Koreans are facing, categorizing them into four parts: economic status, education, emotional isolation, and social position. Taking these various categories into account will help to understand the status quo of North Korean resettlers.

In most cases, North Korean defectors suffer from their *low economic status*. In the 2005 study by the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, the category that took the most support was that the North Korean defectors settled in South Korea considered "economic difficulties" to be the hardest obstacle in adjusting to South Korea, resulting in 22.7 % of agreements.

Furthermore, *education gap and deficiency* result in social maladjustment. North Korean refugees couldn't afford education due to flaws in the system and deficient support in North Korea. However, in South Korea, the issue regarding education is still unsolved. In middle and high school, the dropout rate for North Korean refugee students is between 4.2% and 7.5%, while in the same period, South Korean students rated 1.2% to 1.3%.[13]

The trend of higher dropout rates continues until university. Compared to the general dropout rate in universities of 5.0%, that of North Korean refugee students reached almost 10.2%, nearly two times higher. [14] The study held by Chung Chae-Kwan, Deputy Researcher at KICE Appointment Test Center, contained a survey of 132 North Korean university students who took a leave of absence. The most prevailing reason for leaving was to catch up on English study (32.7%) since, in particular, English is the subject that North Korean refugee students who mostly have lower academic levels are having a hard time with.[15]

Due to the educational gap, North Korean students suffer from low self-esteem, comparing themselves to other South Korean students who are in the same grade. Having studied in the degraded North Korean educational system, children who were educated in North Korea before defecting show lower academic levels in South Korean schools. For third-country-born North Korean students, a significant gap in studying years when they were in transit in third countries affects their adjustment to the South Korean education system, which is known for its rigorous curriculum. [16]

North Korean defector students not only witness disparity in academic ability but cultural knowledge. A North Korean college student, Kim Seong-Cheol, said in an interview with the New York Times, "I felt like someone from the 1970s who was put on a time machine and dropped in the 21st century."[17]

Emotional isolation is one of the severe and widespread diseases among North Korean defectors. It should be highlighted that 70% of North Korean refugees are female, and in a high probability, North Korean women witnessed or personally suffered as victims of sexual violence and exploitation as well as human trafficking either in North Korea or China.[18] According to a survey conducted by the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB) in 2012, 290 sexual violence cases were reported out of 8,703 participants. In a recent study on the effects of PTSD,[19] Two-thirds of 301 North Korean refugees surveyed showed PTSD symptoms such as insomnia and feelings of helplessness that hinder them from steady careers or academic performances.

Many North Korean defectors are one-parent families, as a study conducted by the NK Refugees Foundation in 2012 found that 53.5% of those surveyed belonged to single-parent households. Since living with one parent who will be busy making a living often causes deficient parental love, as studies have shown that the lack of a strong bond between parents and children can lead to a larger role of peer influence on children's lives, this aspect of the reality of North Korean defectors also contributes to their suffering and struggle in South Korea.[20]

There are roughly three types of North Korean students living in South Korea: those born in North Korea and moved to South Korea, those born abroad (neither South nor North Korea) while their parents were on their way to South Korea, and currently living in South Korea; and those with at least one parent who is a North Korean defector living in South Korea and was born in South Korea.

Depending on what country the child was born in, the behavior and adaptation process strikingly differ. [21] Berry's model of acculturation suggests there are four acculturation stages.[22] Among the four types of acculturation (assimilation, integration, segregation, and marginalization), young people who were born in North Korea tend to show "assimilation." They have a weak will to continue their North Korean identity after a nightmarish border crossing

journey and torment experienced in North Korea.

Comparatively, members of this group feel less difficulty adjusting to South Korean society due to less difference in language and culture. On the other end of the spectrum, North Korean defectors who were born in a third country —mainly China—feel less negatively about where they were born and raised, so during the period of residence, they perceive China positively. Thus, due to significantly low motivation to adapt to a new culture, moving to South Korea results in psychological and emotional struggles due to decreased self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and stress stemming from bias and discrimination towards them. Being fluent in Chinese, they have a hard time learning Korean and expressing their thoughts and feelings. The difficulty of using Korean would be one of the severe barriers to stably residing in South Korea and a major cause of various other physical, psychological, and social problems.

North Korean refugees struggle with their *low social status and biased or fixed perception* about them. Lee Eun-Hye, who studied North Korean defector students' school experiences and identity changes, claimed under societal stereotypes and pursuit of assimilation, North Korean defector students professed that they had gone through discrimination and were put under pressure to discard or hide their origins in their host culture.[23] In this regard, she also argued the need for an inclusive social atmosphere that can deal with cultural differences.

In addition, according to a "2018 Survey on the Status of North Korean Defectors" conducted by the South-North Hana Foundation under the Ministry of Unification of Korea, only half of the respondents answered they would reveal their home countries; 1 out of 5 would "never" reveal their origins.[24] Part of the reason for their choices was worrying about discrimination and unnecessary attention after revealing their home country.

The portrayal of North Korean Defectors in South Korean Commercial Movies

The aforementioned study illustrated the highly probable common symptom that the majority of North Korean defectors share and what most of them experienced (or are experiencing). However, their representation in popular South Korean films differs sharply from their reality. Here, this part of the paper will examine how commercial movies tend to feature North Korean defectors. Generally, recent popular mainstream South Korean films could be categorized into four sectors in which the representation of North Korean defectors would differ in each sector. This study suggests that each sector has a different objective in showing North Korean defectors, with differing social consequences following resettling defectors as well as South Korean citizens who allow their views of North Koreans to be significantly shaped by mainstream media.

Korean Commercial Movies

Commercial movies are films that have a bigger budget and express a strongly proposed goal of making a profit.[25] Subsequently, they tend to highly rely on star casts and private investment. In most cases, commercial movies have conspicuous genres, such as action, horror, comedy, romance, etc.; because of the purpose of making movies, critics condemn its lack of authenticity and sincerity as an art form, and audiences complain of its trite plot. However, there is still high demand for commercial movies by those who expect to feel surprise or suspense.

The two Koreas are in a complex dilemma that shares identity as a Korean identity despite conflicts. To commercial movie makers, the North Korean defector is an attractive character to make a hybrid genre movie. It is highly controversial, but at the same time, using North Korean characters enables producers to easily manufacture an open-ended and mysterious narrative. The representations of a still-living but isolated culture like that shared in North Korea, *made from within* as well as by outside powers, are potentially highly lucrative movie material. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, a very real but isolated country in a globalized world, is both empowered and endangered constantly by the influence of a kind of "Korean mirage." And mirages are a good source of making movies and drawing attention and money from the audience. Despite numerous sources on North Korea from neighboring powers, we in South Korea lack needed, trustworthy sources from North Korea itself.[26] And the popular sources that we do

often receive are clearly far from "neutral," presenting extreme "sides" of an already ambiguous and polarizing subject. Because no one knows well but simultaneously everyone is interested, weaving North Korean defector characters into films can be the perfect suit to gain money but also spread propaganda.

The majority of commercial movies that feature North Korean (defectors) are genre films, especially spy movies. Before <Shiri>(1999), most of the North Korean characters were depicted as a threat to peace, a typical villain image. In recent years (approximately 2008~2018), films about North Korean movies have regularly contained the themes of anti-war and familism, which is a step forward toward viewing North Koreans not as means of politics but as humanistic characters.[27]

As time goes by, the representation of North Korean characters constantly changes, reflecting but also influencing the atmospheric tension toward the North Korean defector issue.

Typhoon (2005)

Analysis

Typhoon (Kwak Kyung-taek, 2005) was the first commercial movie to tackle the North Korean refugee issue. However, the movie only drew 42 million, which was a disappointing result for famous director Kwak Kyung-taek.[28] The director Kwak Kyung-taek was known for films of masculinity and macho style presentation. He cast Lee Mi-Yeon, Jang Dong-gun, and Lee Jung-Jae as the main characters, who were on the path to stardom in the Korean media industry, to create a hybrid movie merging melodramatic and spectacle.

However, Typhoon's plot got a lot of criticism from various places. The prevailing portrayal of North Korean refugees is represented through Sin (Jang Dong-gun), who became a pirate after losing his family on the way to defecting to South Korea. The target of his revenge is South Korea, which rejected his family's attempt to enter the nation due to political interrelations with China. While they were going back to North Korea, North Korean soldiers shot his family, and this traumatic loss stimulated Sin's later life—seeking genocidal revenge on South Korea. He attempts to steal nuclear waste that has the power of plutonium and scatter it above South Korea. Kang Se Jong (Lee Jung-jae) is a South Korean naval officer who acknowledges Sin's plot and tries to bring Sin to justice.

Significance and Meaning

Though the movie has its significance as a pioneer in dealing with the topic of North Korean defectors in the film industry, the issue is not deeply handled, and overall the movie is more focused on the action scenes. The characters are designed to be one-dimensional and simple, with Kan Se Jong being the good and protector of peace and Sin the evil and dangerous villain. In particular, Sin, the most conspicuous presentation of North Korean defectors, playing the role of terrorist is the part that many critics denounce. This specific conflict setting enabled two powerful characters to battle and kept people in suspense. However, it may subconsciously implant the idea that North Korean refugees are intrinsic threats to Korea's peace. Kang Sung Ryool (Assistant Professor / Kwangwoon University) wrote that Kang Se Jong is "a sample of right-wing ideology" that embodied extreme patriotism and sacrifice to the nation.

Typhoon (Kwak Kyung-taek, 2005) takes the North Korean defectors as a central motif of the movie but approaches the problem in a superficial way. Experimenting with new filming techniques benchmarking a Hollywood blockbuster, more emphasis fell on scale and action, not the plot and character. [29]

One North Korean refugee, commenting on the reaction to Typhoon in the "North Korean defectors' community," said it was disappointing that it was hard to get what message the creators were trying to convey, whether it was the hardship of a North Korean defector, peace of the Korean peninsula, etc., and further asked about the possibility of making a film that reflects the true story told by North Korean defectors to inform audiences of the state of human rights of North Korean refugees.[30]

After all, in the perspective of issuing violations of North Koreans' human rights, the movie has its worth, and it was pioneering in its use of a North Korean character in a commercial movie. However, though it touches on the issue, the main focus is concentrated on action scenes, and the main North Korean representative, Sin, is portrayed as a villain. The scene that shows his love for his sister underscores Sin's love toward family and his intrinsically humanistic values, but the majority of the movie scenes that portray his evil could only increase South Korean hostility towards North Korean defectors. The release of this movie was when the relationship between South and North Korea was amicable, and this is one reason that many critics point out as a reason for poor total admissions.

South of the Border (2006)

Analysis

The movie is the directorial debut outing of director Ahn Pan-seok. Though it was a 7 billion budget scale film, it ended up only gathering nearly 300 thousand admissions, which is a disappointing result considering the investment.

The protagonist, Kim Sun-ho, is a horn player in the Mansoodae Art Company, Pyongyang's state orchestra. He is from a wealthy family and lives a normal life dating Lee Yeon-hwa, who is working as a war memorial guide. One day, Kim's family learns that his grandfather, who is thought to be dead, is still alive in Seoul. Kim's father sent a letter to him, and they received letters from Kim's grandfather. However, North Korean authorities discovered their letter exchange, and they were put in a situation where they had to flee. Kim, who doesn't want to leave Lee, tries to persuade Lee to go with him. However, due to family conditions, Lee promises to follow him in the future. Though successfully arriving in South Korea, Kim struggles because he is no longer part of the well-to-do family in Pyongyang but a mere North Korean penniless defector. Kim works furiously to earn money to help Lee get out of North Korea. Unfortunately, one day he hears heartbreaking news—that Lee has married in North Korea. In despair, he marries a South Korean woman who consoles him and takes care of him as he settles down in South Korea, but he never forgets Lee. However, one day Lee contacts him, saying that she has successfully gotten over the border.

Significance and Meaning

Though the two main characters are from North Korea, and their tragedy comes from the reality of division, the story itself doesn't focus on the struggles that North Korean defectors go through. The love line between Kim and Lee that elicits sadness and desperate feelings is the major plot. The critics point out the film was constituted with a typical love story, only applying a specific condition for parting—the division of the Korean peninsula—compared to other melodramas that use war, disease, or class difference. The main character is from an affluent family, which is in a different condition from most of the North Korean defectors nowadays. The movie is also known for its beautiful and detailed portrayal of Pyongyang. In addition, there is no starving scene, and the film shows relatively less harsh situations that North Korean defectors might face. These settings reveal that the movie is a classical melodrama mainly about the emotional affection and pain that the two characters go through and to make scenes visually beautiful, not acutely conveying the situation of North Korean defectors represented through Kim.

One positive view about showing the North Korean defector through Kim, who is living a "normal" and peaceful life in Pyongyang, is that it can suggest that in the North of the border, there are still people just like us living.[31] The beautiful scenery of Pyongyang appears in the movie frames North Korea in a friendly way, possibly lessening the hostility. Framing North Koreans as poor helpless beings may be more detrimental for them to naturally fuse into South Korean society because, due to the media, South Koreans will treat them as someone that needs help, not someone the same as themselves. In this sense, this movie can play a role by showing that over the border, there are people just like us living, and they should not be treated as "others."

However, as the aforementioned paragraph shows, the movie does not deal with the North Korean defector issues and beautifies the struggles. Due to these reasons, though it has a background in Pyongyang and Seoul and the

main characters are two North Koreans, movie critics do not consider it a film about North Korean defectors.

Secret Reunion (2010)

Analysis

Secret Reunion proved to be very successful financially and socially for the young director Jang Hun. Secret Reunion was intended to be a more commercial endeavor from the start, but over 5 million tickets were sold and consequently pushed Jang's career into the fast lane. It stormed the Korean box office, taking in around $38 million, and further made its way to the USA and three major Asian territories despite the plot containing a representation of ideological and national conflicts.

Secret Reunion deals with the interactions between a former government agent named Lee Han-Kyu (Song Kang-Ho) and a former North Korean spy named Song Ji-Won (Kang Dong-Won). The story has the ultimate antagonist, Shadow, the North Korean spy living in South Korea. He does not show himself but through assassination and brutality, and we can feel his existence viscerally, in terror. The main characters, Sung Ji-won (Kang Dong-won) and Lee Han-gyu (Song Kang-ho), are elite agents for North and South Korea, respectively. When Sung Ji-won is helping Shadow, Shadow once again commits a crime, and that case becomes in charge of Lee Han-gyu, who was an agent working for the government. However, he fails to catch the perpetrator and, consequently, is discharged. Years later, Sung makes his living by tracking missing Vietnamese brides, and he employs Sung Ji-won as an assistant. They live together in the same house and spend much of their time like brothers. Because they both knew each other as former agents and spies, the scene where they are living together looks peaceful on the outside but creates tension. However, as they spend time together, they figure out they have much in common–especially being betrayed by their organizations–and find humane aspects in each other, building a friendship slowly. In the breathtaking action scene between Shadow, Sung Ji-won, and Lee Han-gyu, Sung Ji-won, as a former helper and North Korean elite agent, has to make a choice: either betray Lee Han-gyu or Shadow and North Korea. By sacrificing himself to protect Lee Han-gyu, the screenplay shows the bond between Lee Han-gyu and Sung-Ji Won was genuine. The movie ends with the scene where Sung-Ji Won's family and Lee Han-gyu go on a trip happily.

Significance and Meaning

Unlike manly films that focus on brutal and thrilling battle scenes, one reason for its successful result was because the plot showed a subtle relationship between two men. The spy thriller about the cat-and-mouse games between two agents from North and South Korea, united by their questioning of their raison d'etre (both political and personal), delivers a heartwarming story that trust and love of each other exceeds any other things–ideals, organization, and country. However, the movie does not completely reject weaving in political issues between the two Koreas—by showing the happy ending that Sung Ji-won safely settled in South Korea; the film seems to implicitly allude to living in South Korea and its ideal as better than that of North Korea.

The spy who became a friend of South Korean agent Lee Han-gyu, Sung Ji-won, is a three-dimensional character that breaks the stereotypical archetype of North Korean characters often appearing in films. At the beginning of the movie, Sung Ji-won represents the stereotypical character of a North Korean defector.

However, as the story goes on, Sung slowly loses his violence as a spy and feels skeptical about his job. The portrayal of Sung enhances the North Korean defector's image from a dimensional simple, violent, and aggressive man to a humane, warm-hearted being. Though the movie has a common enemy, Shadow, who is also a North Korean agent, this does not worsen people's perception of North Koreans since the major focus is on the transformation happening to Sung.

The scene where Sung sacrifices himself and falls with Shadow is symbolic. This signifies the complete abandonment of Sung's former image as a brutal North Korean agent and a stone-cold killer. After inner conflict stemming from the disparity between who he has to be seen as—a spy—and who he really is—a sympathetic, good-natured person—Sung eventually chooses the path to stay with Lee, following Lee like a brother. How the movie illustrates Sung solidifies that we shouldn't see North Koreans as "others," showing that they are just like us. However, due to the geopolitical situation revolving around North Korea, being a North Korean in a country outside of North Korea entails many struggles.

There is a common pattern that can be examined in commercial movie models, though a specific perspective when considering North Koreans: it builds on the premises of there being an economically poor underdeveloped country and people crossing the border in order to gain sufficient provisions. These kinds of images can be and have been replicated in various commercial movies. Numerous movies show that there is a fixed perspective about North Korean defectors, as aforementioned.

The trend of making North Korean spy characters as subsistence spies, not ideological spies, enables audiences to empathize, given the situation, with North Korean defectors. Many are consoled and take courage from the North Korean spy character because they find common ground; for example, they both struggle every day to make a living. In Secret Reunion, Sung had to work in a factory that required physically demanding work.

Secret Reunion portrays the protagonist Sung Ji-won, a South Korean spy, and Lee Han-gyu, a South Korean intelligence agency employee as if they were brothers. They hide each other's identities, keep watch and vigilance, and without even realizing it, the tension gradually disappears based on trust. Through this, the film seems to implicitly show that South and North Korea can become friends.

Conclusion

It has been over 77 years since Korea was split in half. Since then, North Korean defectors have been increasingly crossing borders to live in South Korea—known to the world as the country of freedom and opportunity on the Korean peninsula. However, the reality they face after years of struggles to arrive in South Korea isn't what they have imagined: financial obstacles, cultural differences, and discrimination made them live in South Korea as a minority.

We can argue that the most unfortunate scapegoat of parted Korea would be North Korean defectors. If they choose to continue to live in the North, they have to live under a tyrannical government where there is no freedom and no opportunity. If they choose to leave their home country, they most likely encounter physically and emotionally traumatic experiences when they are staying in the third country. Even after they come to South Korea and start a "dream life," the expectations crash when they notice they are not welcome and vulnerable to discrimination. Then they have two choices: to live anonymously or to squeeze themselves into a narrative that makes them completely discard and disclaim their home country.

Unlike people who have their national identity to be proud of and put their roots into, North Koreans are forced to fit themselves into narratives that decree North Korea. The more they deprecate their true origin, the more they have the opportunity to succeed in the United States or South Korea, countries where North Korea is an ultimate peace breaker. It is a grave tragedy that North Koreans, in order to succeed, essentially must deny their origin and eulogize the new Western systems. They themselves become the tool of politics, evidence that the dominant system is correct and North Korea is all wrong.

Immanuel Kant once said, "Every man is to be respected as an absolute end in himself, and it is a crime against the dignity that belongs to him as a human being to use him as a mere means for some external purpose." Following Kant's principle, North Koreans are definitely not sufficiently protected. There are various policies established to enhance the status quo of North Koreans, but there are serious steps that have to be taken to solve the problems regarding North Korean defectors. In order to make a society where even North Korean refugees can live in harmony, not only policies but people's perceptions and attitudes need to change.

Mass-scale media, for example, film, is known for affecting people's thoughts greatly in an instant. In this essay, I have scrutinized three movies—Typhoon, South of the Border, and Secret Reunion — to examine the trend in portraying North Korean characters. Typhoon has its significance in that it first tried to be a commercial movie with a North Korean defector as the main character. However, it merely portrays him as a one-dimensional villain. The second movie, <South of the Border> shows humane aspects of the North Korean protagonist but mostly focuses on the love line, and has been criticized for being only a melodrama. The last one, Secret Reunion, is one of the most recognized movies that featured North Korean defectors. It contained the transformation of the North Korean defector character, one who initially succumbed to loyalty toward one's nation at all costs but transformed into one who voluntarily chooses friendship and love of family. This ending also seems to suggest the possible healthy relationship that North and South could make.

In this essay, I underrated movies that portrayed the North Korean defector simply and mostly in a negative way. On the other hand, good movies are the ones that show the humane aspects of North Korean defectors. These days, not just films but algorithm-led consumption of media as well as tech-driven isolation, makes these issues with film and representation even more complicated. In the future, as the role of media will become bigger and bigger, it will become even more crucial to find ways to broaden the reach and diversity of what people see regularly. This is especially the case regarding minorities in algorithm-led media, as it is directly related to real-world situations. If something doesn't change in the way our social media works now, the future will be very dangerous, dangerously isolated. Ending this paper, this essay tries to emphasize the power of media (either bringing negative or positive consequences) to minority issues and examines published commercial movies that have a theme of North Korean defectors and assess them from a perspective of dealing with social issues. In the future, in order to maximize the positive aspect of media (and film), we should portray the humane parts of the characters, not using them as characters representing specific political ideals.

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