

Spies on Screen:
Representations of Espionage in Korean Films

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Abstract

This article analyzes the portrayal of spies in Korean cinema. Spies have been a significant theme in Korean films, reflecting the ideological division of the Korean peninsula into North and South. Having experienced war amid intense ideological conflict, spies represented a tangible threat in everyday life. Even today, 80 years after the division, controversies about spies continue. Given this social context, it was natural for Korean films to feature spies as a central subject. However, the cinematic portrayal of spies has evolved over time. Until the 1980s, spies were depicted as serious threats to South Korean society. After 2000, they began to be portrayed as ineffectual. This shift in representation reflected changing inter-Korean relations. Subsequently, spies were depicted less realistically and more as imaginary villains or heroes with dual identities.

Keywords: anti-communism, espionage, inter-Korean relations, Korean cinema, Korean War, spies (*kanch'ŏp*), 1988 Seoul Olympics

The Korean Peninsula and Anti-Communist Films

Korea has long lived in an era defined by spies. The spy narrative became the most common way of addressing the division in Korean cultural history. After liberation, the Korean peninsula entered a period of division—a three-year war that ended in the incomplete resolution of an armistice. This division was reflected in everyday life and culture.

The reason why the division remained a persistent theme in Korean culture was clear: it was Korea's living reality. Though not always visible on the surface, the division formed the foundation that determined the country's political, economic, and life trajectories. Popular culture reflects contemporary public psychology. "Interest" and "entertainment" become more engaging when they faithfully relate to reality and maintain tension. The division was the reality of North and South Korea, with North Korea representing a tangible and specific "enemy." In a divided nation, war was an unavoidable reality (C. Kim et al. 2020). The "6.25 War" (Korean War) ended in an armistice without victory for either side. Afterwards, the tensions of division intensified, rather than being resolved.

Films created against this backdrop of division and war were oriented toward "anti-communism." The reason for anti-communism's importance was clear: the war was still technically ongoing. Though it ended in armistice, this unfinished war brought memories and wounds into daily life. Films depicting inter-Korean relations drew attention for various reasons, sometimes involving authority intervention in the review process or influence from organizations with clear agendas. In modern history, where anti-communism was national policy, "spies" served to remind people that the war wasn't over and reinforce anti-communism as state policy.

Even today, it is difficult to say that Korea has moved beyond the era of spies. Through the peninsula's division and the Korean War, spies became a common presence in daily life. While exact numbers are unknown, it is clear that both South and North Korea deployed large numbers of operatives

to infiltrate each other (Yu 2020, 265).

Schools even taught how to identify spies. Students were instructed to report anyone who “came down from mountains early in the morning,” “wore shoes with dirt on them despite being in the city,” “didn’t know the prices of goods,” or “used North Korean speech.” Reporting was considered both virtuous and ethical.¹

¹ Notable spy incidents during the Rhee Syngman (Yi Sŭng-man) era include the 1949 National Assembly spy case, the 1952 International Communist Party incident (Pusan Political Crisis), the 1953 torture death of Kim Sŏng-ju (Ch’o Pong-am’s security guard), and the 1958 Progressive Party incident.

The spy film boom was a global phenomenon. Spy films dominated the Cold War era, evolving into various subgenres by combining action, erotic, and thriller elements. The James Bond 007 series achieved great success in 1965, representing the pinnacle of Cold War popular culture. Following its influence, films featuring North Korean spies or defected spies were produced. Some spy films were even made as international espionage films set in Southeast Asia (Chung 2020, 778).

Spies in the Era of “Anti-Communist Films”

The spy (*kanch’ŏp*) has been one of the most prevalent themes in Korean popular cultural history. Spies made perfect subject matter for adding various action elements to espionage thrillers and sometimes were ideal for incorporating erotic elements. The delicate balance between opposing sides could collapse through a spy’s activities, leading to a decisive advantage. The nerve-wracking tension and thrills leading up to that moment would keep audiences on the edge of their seats, sometimes offering unexpected plot twists.

In Korean cinema, the terms *kanch’ŏp* or *ch’ŏpcha* were more familiar than “spy.” This reflected the reality of confrontation across the military demarcation line. The situation was too harsh for the romantic term “spy.” Spies were real entities and represented a tangible threat experienced through media and news. The fratricidal war created countless stories, leaving indelible scars on villages, valleys, and people’s hearts. Sharp wounds of ideological conflict and division were carved into society. No place escaped the pain of war, and the shadow of division remained in every family’s history.

Political situations also emerged that exploited the division. Anti-communism was national policy. Construction had to proceed alongside combat readiness. Even as roads were widened and tunnels dug, war preparation was necessary. The armistice meant an unfinished war. In this context, the appearance of spies and armed guerrillas seemed natural. Those who went to the mountains or left their villages became labeled as spies.

In this environment, “anti-communist” films gained immense popularity. Their success was not solely due to directorial skill. Dealing with inter-Korean relations in Korean cinema transcended individual domains. For a film to be screened, it had to be subject to government censorship approval. Film production required substantial funding. Government support became a factor in directors choosing anti-communist films. Spy films were the most advantageous or useful material available to cultural planners in the divided system. They appealed to public taste while qualifying for government support.

The authorities’ requirements were clear: anti-communism. Anti-communist education targeted all citizens. From elementary school, it was considered proper conduct for citizens of the “Free Republic of Korea.” Opposing communism was the nation’s destiny. North Korea was an “enemy” that couldn’t be dealt with. The North Korean regime was communist, as were its allies China and the Soviet Union. Films were needed to show why victory against communist forces was necessary and how evil North Korea was. There was a shared consciousness that they had to be defeated at all costs. North Korean forces were portrayed as beasts that must be defeated and could never be cooperated with under any logic or reason. Within Cold War confrontation, victory had to be visibly demonstrated to citizens somehow. Films showing victory and superiority to the public were very useful tools for promoting government policies.

The 1960s saw an increased need to actively promote government policies. The National Film Production Center was established under the Public Information Ministry in June 1961. The Film Law required cultural films to be shown before feature presentations. Support for cultural films

² For cultural films, see Lee 1985.

increased with the 1962 establishment of the Cultural Film Promotion Committee. These policies led to rapid growth in cultural film production.²

The golden age of anti-communist films began with director Kim Ki-duk's "Five Marines" (1961). Director Lee Kang-cheon's "Leaving the Fatherland" (1962) was based on an anti-communist screenplay selected by the Defense Ministry. In addition to these, many anti-communist films were produced in the 1960s, including director Lee Man-hee's "Marines Who Never Returned" (1963) and "YMS 504 of the Navy" (1963) and director Shin Sang-ok's "The Red Scarf" (1964).

Good and Evil: South and North Korean Soldiers in Films

North Korean soldiers were portrayed as beasts that must be defeated, with whom cooperation was impossible regardless of any logic or reason. Within the Cold War confrontation, victory needed to be visibly demonstrated to citizens. War films were the most effective way to show South Korea's victory and superiority to the public. Nothing was more satisfying than watching heroic South Korean soldiers defeating the North's Korean People's Army (KPA). Until the 1970s, films depicting conflicts between South and North Korean soldiers were commonly produced. These films often portrayed the North Korean military as dehumanized embodiment of absolute evil, reflecting the strong anti-communist sentiment prevalent in South Korean cinema at the time. They clearly distinguished between good and evil. One way films dramatically conveyed the morality of friends and foes was through their attitudes toward society's vulnerable members. In other words, moral superiority was determined by how characters treated the elderly, children, and women. Virtuous characters were expected to demonstrate compassion for the vulnerable, sometimes even risking their lives. Soldiers, in particular, were depicted as embodying these qualities—devoted and self-sacrificing for both their comrades and civilians. In contrast, villain characters were violent toward the vulnerable in the films.

Violence against the weak was considered a tragedy in itself and a clear revelation of inhumanity. North Korean soldiers were portrayed this way—ruthless. The extreme portrayal of their inhuman sides was their depiction as beasts.

The animated “The General Ttori” (Ttori Changgun) series best exemplifies the characteristics of the period’s films. North Korean soldiers were depicted as red wolves, and Kim Il-sung as a red pig wearing a human mask, living in a huge castle with vampire bats. Under these evil beasts, North Korean citizens were portrayed as starving and ragged people. The series borrowed imagery from two globally popular films: “Dracula”—combining the blood-sucking vampire with pig imagery for Kim Il-sung, and “Tarzan”—the boy “Ttori” living in the forest with good animals.

The Beautiful Female Spy Series

Another type of spy film featured female spies. The first film starring a female spy was director Han Hyung-mo’s “The Hand of Destiny” (1954). It was an espionage melodrama about the impossible love and death between Margaret, a beautiful spy disguised as a hostess, and Shin Yeong-cheol, a counterintelligence captain. The film established a typical format that became popular: a beautiful spy, a special forces member, and the tragic ending. Later, Korea’s first blockbuster “Shiri” also used the basic structure of love between a beautiful female spy and a male counterintelligence officer.

The female spy character was heavily influenced by Mata Hari, the world-famous WWI spy and femme fatale, and the Kim Su-im spy case that caused a sensation in Korea (D. Kim 2010, 438–439). Kim Su-im was a beautiful intellectual who graduated from Ewha Women’s College. Working as an interpreter at Severance Hospital, she later lived with an American working in counterintelligence. She was arrested in 1950 for harboring key Communist Party figures and operatives and sending classified documents to North Korea, and was executed shortly after the war began.

Female spies appeared in films for two reasons: to expose North Korea’s immorality by showing their exploitation of women and to show defection through true love, implying

the superiority of the South Korean system. Female spies sent from North Korea fail their missions after falling in love with South Korean officers they were supposed to target. When torn between orders and love, they choose love. This highlighted the inhumanity of the communist system while emphasizing the humanity and morality of South Korean soldiers.

In the 1970s, films began focusing more on the spies' beauty and sexual appeal. Through the 1960s, the genre evolved in more commercial directions. By 1973, seven films including "The Yi Nan-hui College Student Case" and "The Life of Kim Su-im" were produced, all combining spy film formats with female sexual appeal (Hwang 2020, 108–109). Physically attractive actresses were cast in female spy roles.

Spies on Screen after the 1988 Seoul Olympics

Spy Films Go International

The 1970s' international political thaw affected the Korean peninsula. In 1971, South and North Korean authorities began their first talks since division. Following the 1971 Red Cross talks, they announced the historic "July 4 South–North Joint Statement" in 1972. It was an unexpected and sudden declaration. Though dramatic agreements were reached between the North and South, momentum for continued dialogue was insufficient. The brief period of dialogue ended with the 1973 meetings, and political confrontation continued.

Spy films, a major genre of Korean cinema through the 1960s, continued into the 1970s. Films from this period were characterized by overseas locations. Foreign settings became trendy, offering new visual attractions. Overseas location filming began in the late 1960s, with Japan as the primary setting.

However, films set in Japan differed from those in other foreign locations. Japan was not viewed as an exotic location like Southeast Asia, but rather as an extension of the division. Japan was another space of Korean peninsula division. Both Koreas were involved in the political issues of Korean

residents in Japan. The production of anti-communist films set in Japan was largely driven by political circumstances. The intense ideological confrontation between the North and South continued in Japan. The 1965 Korea–Japan diplomatic normalization and the repatriation of Korean residents to North Korea created real-world issues (Chung 2020, 785).

The South–North Korean confrontation on the peninsula extended to conflict between the Chongryon 総連 (General Association of Korean Residents in Japan and the Mindan 民團 (Korean Residents Union in Japan). One trigger for conflict between these organizations was Chongryon’s secret homeland visit program that began in 1972. Amid tensions, unofficial homeland visits for Chongryon-affiliated Koreans started, with South Korea guaranteeing safety for those wanting to visit their hometowns. The program generated significant response with many applying to visit. Director Park Tae-won’s 1974 film “The North Korean Communists Party in Japan” was based on a presidential assassination plot, connecting it to the arrival of the North Korean ship *Mangyongbong-92* at Yokohama port and factional conflicts within the Chongryon.

An actual assassination attempt occurred on August 15, 1974, when Mun Se-gwang shot at President Park Chung-hee during a Liberation Day ceremony at the National Theater, resulting in First Lady Yuk Young-soo’s death. The homeland visit program continued afterward, becoming public in 1975 with 720 visitors during the Chuseok holidays, generating significant attention through television broadcasts. This became a decisive moment in weakening the Chongryon’s influence.

Director Kim Ki-young’s 1976 film “Love of Blood Relations” also addressed the homeland visit program. It follows North Korean special envoy Choi Young-seung sent to Japan to prevent the visits. The film depicts complex operations involving defectors, loyal party members, and family conflicts, ultimately revealing North Korea’s cruel actions against families.

How the 1988 Seoul Olympics Changed History

The 1988 Olympics in Seoul marked a watershed moment. It came after the politically fractured Moscow Olympics of 1980 and Los Angeles Olympics of 1984 and represented the first mega sporting event hosted by Korea—a nation that had been among the world's poorest following the Korean War. The Seoul Olympics transformed many aspects of South Korean society, instilling a sense of national pride as the country showcased itself on the global stage. The event catalyzed improved relations with socialist nations, leading to diplomatic ties with South Korea's former adversaries like China and the Soviet Union. It also ushered in an era of liberalized overseas travel for South Korean citizens.

The event shifted Korean perspectives from an insular focus on inter-Korean rivalry to a more global outlook. It served as international validation of South Korea's success in the ideological competition with the North. This prompted a subtle shift in how North Korea was viewed—while still a security concern, it increasingly came to be seen as a potential partner for reunification. Some taboos surrounding North Korea began to lift. Restrictions on artists and writers who had defected to the North were eased, inter-Korean dialogue commenced, and joint North-South sports teams were formed. These changes eventually led to what had once seemed possible only in comic books—a summit between the leaders of North and South Korea.

This evolution was reflected in South Korean cinema, which began exploring various scenarios of North-South encounters. In director Lee Min-yong's 1996 film "Inshallah," Lee Hyang, a Korean student studying in America, meets Han Seung-yeop, a North Korean training instructor, while detained in Algeria after being mistaken for a smuggler. Director Kim Hyeon-jeong's 2003 film "Double Agent" follows Rim Byeong-ho, an operative who defected to South Korea through East Berlin in 1980. The film portrays the tragic reality that ideology leaves no room for romance—the star-crossed lovers are ultimately separated, with death as their only escape from the walls of division.

It was not until after 2000 that films began depicting

successful partnerships between North and South Koreans. Before then, such historical and temporal barriers seemed insurmountable. The 1999 film “Swiri” marked a watershed moment in this regard.” The film is often hailed as a groundbreaking work in Korean film history and as the most successful movie about inter-Korean division. It was the first Korean film to attract over two million viewers, surpassing even “Titanic’s” local box office numbers—the only domestic film worldwide to achieve this feat. The film tells the story of a fateful romance between Yoo Jung-won, an agent of the top-secret OP organization, and Lee Bang-hui, his fiancée who is secretly a North Korean special forces operative.

Spies in Films: Increasing Diversity and Complexity

The 2000 inter-Korean summit marked a turning point in how North Korean spies were portrayed in South Korean cinema. While espionage remained a popular theme, the characterization of spies underwent a significant transformation. Rather than executing dramatic missions, these new spy characters were depicted leading mundane lives while awaiting orders. Gone were the intense urban shootouts and high-tech heists of secret documents. Even the most skilled operatives were shown simply trying to navigate daily life within the capitalist system.

The improved inter-Korean relations post-2000 sparked new creative possibilities. The 2009 film directed by Jang Hun titled “Secret Reunion” (2009) notably broke from the tragic endings typical of pre-2000 films, concluding with a hopeful partnership between a Northern spy and a South Korean intelligence agent. Though initially displaced from their original positions, the two eventually find common ground. Their partnership, motivated by financial gain, is fraught with challenges. They spend their days suspicious of each other while pursuing their own objectives. Yet over time, they develop a genuine understanding that transcends their origins, connecting as men and friends. When a crucial mission arrives, they choose to collaborate one final time.

“Secret Reunion” reflected the public sentiment during a period of active inter-Korean exchange. The improving

relations post-2000 raised hopes for reunification while suggesting new possibilities for cooperation. The film's title, which literally means "sworn brothers," captured both the characters' relationship and the broader inter-Korean dynamic. After decades of division, the concept of "sworn brotherhood" felt more authentic than appeals to shared roots or family ties, suggesting a shift from emphasis on historical bonds to the potential for new relationships.

Secret Inter-Korean Relations Come to Light

Director Yoon Jong-bin's 2018 film "The Spy Gone North" was based on the real-life case of "Black Venus," the code name for Park Seok-young, a disgraced intelligence officer who posed as a businessman to infiltrate North Korean elite circles in Beijing. During his mission, he uncovers covert dealings between the two Koreas. The film reveals a secret proposal from South Korean authorities to North Korea before the 1997 presidential election, offering payment for orchestrated provocations along the border. While such rumors had circulated before, the film explored suspicions about hostile yet pragmatic cooperation between the power brokers of both sides. It concludes with the successful completion of Black Venus's advertising venture: a Samsung Anycall phone commercial featuring North Korean performer Cho Myung-ae and South Korean K-pop singer Lee Hyori. Cho had gained immense popularity as part of the North Korean cheerleading squad at the 2002 Pusan Asian Games. The 2005 commercial, themed "One Sound," added authenticity to the film's portrayal.

The Struggling Resident Spy

As inter-Korean relations improved and satellite surveillance and cyber operations became more effective, the traditional spy's role diminished. Director Lee Seung-Joon's 2012 film "The Spy" depicts this new reality through resident agents living in South Korea without clear directives. After years undercover, their identities become ambiguous. The protagonist "Manager Kim," a 22-year veteran spy, resorts to smuggling counterfeit

Viagra from China after his operational funds are cut off.

Director Jang Cheol-soo's 2013 film "Secretly, Greatly" (2013), based on a wildly popular webtoon with 300 million views and 20 million regular readers, follows elite agents from North Korea's Unit 5446. The main character, Won Ryu-hwan, despite being a top operative, lives undercover as a village idiot working at a supermarket, performing daily acts of foolishness to avoid suspicion. When their unit faces dissolution due to improving inter-Korean relations, the agents receive orders to commit suicide. Before his final confrontation with his former commander who arrives to eliminate them, Won seeks to confirm his mother's existence.

While "Secretly, Greatly" features North Korean operatives, it largely avoids political themes. Its ironic title reflects how spy work is neither secret nor great anymore. The evolution of spy characters from villains to ordinary citizens to romantic leads reflects diminishing social concern about espionage, as fictional portrayals increasingly diverge from reality.

Conclusion

Spies have been a crucial theme in Korean cinema. While Korea gained independence after Japan's defeat in 1945, this liberation was incomplete. The Korean peninsula was divided along ideological lines, unexpectedly becoming one of the world's most intense ideological battlegrounds. This fierce ideological confrontation led to war. Spies became intolerable threats that had to be thoroughly eliminated. The South Korean government actively used film to warn against the dangers of communist ideology and espionage. The government's control over film funding and censorship effectively encouraged the production of anti-communist films. Many of Korea's leading directors participated in making these films.

Spies were the protagonists of anti-communist films, a genre that persisted from the 1960s (after the Korean War) to recent times. As Hwang Byoung-joo (2020, 104) notes, "Cultural

representation played a crucial role in establishing the spy discourse. In fact, cultural depictions of spies may have been more influential than reality itself. Very few people ever encountered actual spies; most faced them through films, dramas, and literature.” However, the cinematic portrayal of spies has varied significantly, primarily reflecting changing sociopolitical circumstances. Until the 1980s, spies represented a tangible threat. The 1988 Seoul Olympics marked a turning point—as South Korea’s international standing rose, North Korea began to be viewed not just as an adversary but as a potential partner for reunification.

As the dynamic between the North and South shifted, the portrayal of spies in South Korean cinema moved from reality to imagination. Spies, once depicted as reflections of harsh reality, began appearing as cartoon-like characters in imaginative spaces. They became nostalgic figures existing more in fantasy than in reality.

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