

## The City of Yanji as a Liminal Space to Imagine Korean Unification in Yi Munyŏl's "An Appointment with His Brother"\*

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### Abstract

The end of the Korean War did not bring about the end of Korea's division. The theme of division runs through many South Korean literary works of the twentieth century. This so-called "division literature" can be characterized by its focus on the psychological pain of separation, and the (im)possibility of unification. The personal tragedies of separated families, of dashed hopes and dreams due to history's vicissitudes, all these aspects appear in Korea's modern literature and have their root in the Korean War. South Korean author Yi Munyŏl has been personally affected by the Korean War, and his trauma can be found in many of his writings. In "An Appointment with His Brother" (*Auwa-ŭi mannam*), published in 1995, he tries to find a means through literature to reach common ground with the other side (North Korea) for a possible future unification. He chose the Chinese city of Yanji as the setting for his story, a place where the majority of its population are ethnic Koreans who from 1992 onwards, have had connections with both North and South Korea. The city and its inhabitants serve as a liminal space where Yi Munyŏl can explore possibilities for reconciliation and to give shape to an imagined Korean unification.

Key Words: Division Literature, Yi Munyŏl, Liminality, Yanji, Korean-Chinese

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## 1. Introduction

In the West, the Korean War (1950-1953) is often termed the “Forgotten War”. Even though many Western countries fought under the UN flag against North Korea and China, the events of the Second World War and the Vietnam War have dominated the memory and imagination, and pushed away the importance of the war on the Korean peninsula.<sup>1)</sup> For the Korean people though, the war has left an indelible stain on the Korean psyche. One important and obvious reason for this is that the war did not have a victor.<sup>2)</sup> Instead, the status quo of the division between a North and a South that had formed before and during the war is still intact. While before the war there were still hopes that a solution could be found for the “unnatural” partition of the peninsula, which was seen by many Koreans to be caused by the USSR and the US, the outcome of the Korean War served to dash these hopes and leave Koreans facing the bitter legacy of their division.

The division is a theme that runs through many South Korean literary works. This so-called “division literature,” or *pundan munhak* in Korean, can be characterized by its focus on the psychological pain of separation, and the (im)possibility of unification. The personal tragedies of separated families, of dashed hopes and dreams due to history’s vicissitudes, all these aspects appear in Korea’s modern literature and have their root in the Korean War.<sup>3)</sup> This tragedy forced the Korean people to inhabit spaces that were not in existence before and are (still) impossible to traverse. One author who was directly affected by the Korean War and has written numerous novels to depict the psychological impact of the division is Yi Munyŏl (1948-).

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1) Recent works that have reinvigorated discussions on the memory of the Korean War and the trauma of Korea’s division are among others Bruce Cumings’ *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Random House, 2010), Heonik Kwon’s “Legacies of the Korean War: Transforming ancestral rituals in South Korea,” (*Memory Studies* 6:2, April 2013), and Brendan Wright’s *Civil war, politicide, and the politics of memory in South Korea, 1948-1961* (PhD Thesis, 2016).

2) Jung Sook Lee stresses the war’s inconclusive conclusion and the important effects this had on Korean people’s minds when he mentions that “The armistice did let us escape the ravages of the Korean War, but since this signified the war’s suspension instead of its end, we are still divided.” (Lee 2010, 9)

3) Lee broadly defines division literature as works that directly or indirectly deal with tragic lives, individual and communal traumas, separation of families, the clash of ideologies, and the effects of the division caused by the war. (Lee 2010, 7-8)

In this article I will be focusing on Yi Munyŏl's writings where he deals with Korea's division, and look in particular at his novella, "An Appointment with his Brother" (*Auwa-ŭi mannam*) which was published in 1995. The novel fits in with the division literature theme as it tries to find a way through literature to reach a common ground with the other side (North Korea) for a possible future unification. The story was written at a time when there was a genuine sense that the issue of separated families could be resolved for the first time since the end of the Korean War. I argue that the story contains a tension between the urgency to find a method to bridge the ideological chasm that exists between the South and the North, but at the same time there is an undercurrent present, that feels the need to justify its own topic to the South Korean reader audience.

An important element in Yi's story is the Chinese city of Yanji, a place where the majority of its population are ethnic Koreans who from 1992 onwards, have had connections with both North and South Korea. I will show in my analysis that for Yi Munyŏl, the city serves as a liminal space where he can explore possibilities to reconcile the ideological divisions that exist between the North and the South. It is my argument that the novella shows how the Korean-Chinese inhabitants function as mediators for the North and South Koreans, while the city and its surroundings gives shape to an imagined Korean unification.

## 2. Division Literature in South Korea

The traces of the Korean wartime legacies are found almost everywhere in South Korean literature. Right after the armistice was signed and came into effect on the 27th of July 1953, many novels that were published in South Korea dealt with the effects of the war: disaster, poverty, death, injury, starvation, mental trauma, and the destruction of values were common themes. The 1950s saw many stories with a bleak outlook, with Yi Pŏmsŏn's story "A Stray Bullet" (Obalt'an, 1959) being the most representative of its kind. After the initial shock of the war, the bleakness of the immediate postwar period gave rise to stories that attempted to come to terms with the division itself. Ch'oe Inhun's *The Square* (Kwangchang,

1960) was a pivotal novel that took South Korean literature into a new direction. In the novel, Yi Myōngchun gets caught up in the maelstrom of the war, and when he gets to decide whether he wants to live in the North or the South, he instead chooses a neutral country to live in. On the boat taking him to this new country, however, the despair drives him to commit suicide, hereby concluding that the ideological division is extremely difficult, maybe even impossible to resolve. After Ch'oe Inhun's novel, many other writers started to reject the sentimental escapism that had marked post-war literature. Literature started to function more as a tool to address social and political issues, and with the rise of Park Chung Hee's authoritarian regime in which freedom of speech was muffled, literature became the vehicle for voicing alternative views. At the same time, the wounds of the division were certainly not forgotten and three common themes could be seen running through the stories written in this period. First, some novels addressed the war's irrationality and the domino effect it had on people's lives with Hwang Sunwōn's *Trees Standing on a Cliff* (1960) being the most poignant novel describing how people's lives got wretched due to war. Secondly, the theme of the pain of separation also started to make frequent appearances in South Korean literature, the aforementioned "A Stray Bullet" being an example of this, with the mother of the protagonist crying out that she wants "to go North." Third, one also sees novels that describe the possibility to overcome the division, in contrast to Ch'oe Inhun's novel. Again it is Hwang Sunwōn who is the voice of this strand of thinking, and already during the Korean War his short story "Cranes" (Hak, 1953) shows his hope in humanity to overcome any ideological differences.

A novel that fits all these three themes is Yun Heunggil's *Rain Clouds* (Changma, 1973). Through the eyes of a child it not only addresses the effects of war on families, but also the split that occurs due to the two uncles' different worldviews that drives the families apart. The grandmothers in the family eventually find common ground in shamanism to reestablish their blood bond. Another novel worthy of mentioning in the history of South Korea's division literature is Yi Wōnil's *Twilight* (Noŭl, 1978). Here, Yi Wōnil depicts the problems arising from the confrontation between the different ideologies through the eyes of a pure and innocent boy. The novel's main point is that the problem of the

division is not purely of an ideological nature, but is also a direct effect of the still remaining social structure in society.<sup>4)</sup>

### 3. Writer Yi Munyŏl

It is within this lineage of South Korea's division literature that one can place and view Yi Munyŏl's novella "An Appointment with his Brother". For Yi, the physical division of the Korean peninsula is not only a national tragedy, but a deeply personal one as well. Yi Munyŏl was born on May 18, 1948 in Yongyang, North Kyŏngsang Province, Korea. Yi was born two years before the outbreak of the Korean War. When the war began, his father, Yi Wŏnch'ŏl, defected to North Korea. His father's action meant that Yi Munyŏl and the rest of his family had to contend with poverty, social stigma, and police surveillance. These factors played an important part in Yi's decision to drop out of school when he studied Korean Literature at Seoul National University in 1970. He suffered from deep depressions and even came close to committing suicide. He read omnivorously, and this helped him to deal with his personal pain. This curative effect of literature also led him to start writing.<sup>5)</sup>

Yi made his debut on the literary scene in 1979 when his novella was one of the winners of the New Spring Literary Contest sponsored by the Dong-a Ilbo newspaper. After writing several realistic stories that centered on social problems, Yi showed that he was gifted in tackling other themes as well. In *Son of Man* (Saram-ŭi Adeŭl, 1979), he explored the determined quest of a young seminary student seeking transcendence, running through numerous Western and East Asian theologies. *A Portrait of My Youth* (Chŏlmŭn nar-ŭi ch'osang, 1981), a trilogy

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4) The above mentioned works are just a few that are representative of the genre of division literature in South Korea. For more coverage on division literary works and their contents, I refer to Lee 2010, 7-33; Kim 1992; Hong 2000, 72-88; and Chang 2010, 55-69 among others. For an in depth discussion and review on the nature of Korea's division and its impact on South Korean society and the meaning of unification in the Korean context, I refer to Nan Kim, *Memory, Reconciliation, and Reunions in South Korea: Crossing the Divide* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).

5) Suh Ji-Moon, "Yi Munyŏl South Korean Author," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Access date June 20, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Yi-Munyol>

of novellas, can be considered an autobiographical tale of Yi's efforts to overcome his romantic nihilism and his impulse to commit suicide. Yi's much acclaimed novel *Hail to the Emperor!* (Hwangche-rŭl wihayŏ, 1982) is a biting satire on the delusions of imperialism. *The Age of Heroes* (Yŏngung shidae, 1984) is a novel in which Yi imagines what his father's life might have been like after his defection to North Korea. Recurring themes in many of his writings are the abuse of political power and how this affects the lives, morality and consciousness of the Korean people. His novels *Our Twisted Hero* (Uridŭr-ŭi ilgŭrŏjin yŏngung, 1987) and *The Poet* (Shiin, 1991) are emblematic in this regard. Yi has been the recipient of many literary awards, such as the Hyundae Award in 1992, the Twenty-First-Century Literature Prize in 1998, the Ho-Am Prize in 1999, the National Academy of Arts Award in 2009, and the Dongni Literature Prize in 2012.

#### 4. *An Appointment with His Brother*

Already in 1984, Yi Munyŏl tried to come to grips with the decision of his father's past in *The Age of Heroes*. In 1995 Yi would again approach the topic in "An Appointment with His Brother". The social circumstances in South Korea in 1995 were clearly different from those of ten years ago. The authoritarian regime had given way to a fledgling democratic system. While during the dictatorship periods any positive or even neutral mentioning of the North was punishable under the dreaded anti-communist law, writers now had the opportunity to write on such issues in a more direct way. Another major shift was the thawing relation with the North itself. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany, Koreans were positive that a Korean reunification was in the offing. From the side of the North as well, goodwill was forthcoming: Several North-South joint communiques were issued, with the result that reunions were held for families who had become separated during the Korean War. It is in this atmosphere that Yi Munyŏl wrote his novella "An Appointment with His Brother".

In the 1990s, a new attitude also started to spread among South Korean youth in which unification was not seen any more as the most important goal in

North-South relations.<sup>6)</sup> The main reason for this was that the Korean War had receded further and further in the past and the youth had no direct connection to the events of the Korean War anymore. Many writers, therefore, started to write stories that introduced and tried to convince their (younger) readers that keeping ardor and interest in the Korean War's legacies was a very important task if Korea was ever to overcome its division.<sup>7)</sup> Other stories dealing with the issue of separated families are Yi Chŏngjun's *White Royal Azaleas* (Hũinch'ŏlchuk, 1985), Ch'oe Yun's *His Father's Keeper* (Abŏji-ũ kamshi, 1990) among others.<sup>8)</sup> Yi Munyŏl's story fits in the tradition of division literature in general, as it addresses the aspects of the pain of separation and the future possibility of unification, while also addressing issues that were relevant to the contemporary South Korean society of the 1990s.

In Yi Munyŏl's novella, a man is travelling to the Chinese city of Yanji in the hopes of meeting up with one of his North Korean brothers. His main reason for this is his wish to know about his father's life. Unfortunately he had received news that his father had passed away one year before and that he is only able to meet his younger brother. While he is waiting impatiently for the meeting to take place, and while struggling with the fact that he will never be able to meet his father face to face, he is surrounded in Yanji by his fellow travelers from the South, who all have differing views on Korean reunification. When he finally does meet up with his brother, they are off to a shaky start at first, but soon they find many similarities that they share. In the end they feel that in the short time they were together they have become true brothers.

6) For a more thorough discussion on this trend, see Shin, Gi-Wook. *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), especially chapter 10.

7) Hong Yonghũ classifies literature that emerges with this theme from the 1990s onwards as "unification literature". (Hong 2000, P. 72)

8) The setting in *His Father's Keeper* in particular would lend itself to an interesting comparison with Yi Munyŏl's story, as here the city of Paris is used in a liminal way to attempt to overcome ideological divisions. It should also be mentioned that North Korean literature has its own genre of division literature. For further reading on North Korean division literature, one can look at Kim 1996, 262-283. Yi Ch'ŏngjun's story has also found its way in the North Korean short story collection *Sumancha-ũ Moksori* (The Voices of those who Suffer) which was published in 1996.

## 5. Yanji as a Liminal Space to Imagine Unification

The setting of the story, the Chinese city of Yanji, plays an important part in the story. The interactions and thoughts of the characters in the story are often related to the place in which they find themselves. Yanji is the prefectural capital city of the Yanbian Autonomous prefecture which lies just north of the border with North Korea and is the home of a large number of Korean-Chinese (Chosŏnjok).<sup>9)</sup> The importance of the location in a story, either real or imagined, is, according to Mucignat, due to the fact that “locations give texture and ‘feel’ to a story, characterizing it even more immediately and profoundly than human figures or episodes in the plot.”<sup>10)</sup> The novelistic portrayal of Yanji in the story certainly fits this description, but is even more significant to the characters: it serves the important role in the story as an in-between space, the only place available for the North and South Korean characters to be able to meet and interact with each other. It is this liminal position of Yanji that brings the characters together but also informs many of their actions and conversations with each other. Liminality is defined by Robert Tally as “that auspicious space or place of in-between-ness”.<sup>11)</sup> He makes use of Tuan Yi-Fu’s observation that the ideas of “space” and “place” in this definition are important, as they “require each other for definition.”<sup>12)</sup> Words that are associated with space in this definition are openness, freedom, but also threat, while place signifies security and stability. Liminality, therefore, is understood here as a constellation that is made up of the position takings within the ways space and place are (re-)defined.<sup>13)</sup> The openness

9) The city has around 541,300 citizens, 308,400 of whom are Korean-Chinese, and is notable for being the home of two Korean language television stations, Korean language press and publishing houses, Korean-Chinese elementary, middle and high schools, and a university where Korean is one of the languages of teaching.

10) Mucignat 2013, 1.

11) Robert Tally, Forward to *Landscapes of Liminality*, eds. Downey, Kinane, Parker (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), x

12) *Ibid.*, xi

13) I will be using this definition of liminality and the concepts of space and place for the analysis that follows. For an extensive discussion on the concept of liminality, I refer to Downey, Kinane, and Parker’s introduction in their book *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place*. For an overview of different definitions of the relationship between space and place, I refer to Setha Low “Genealogies: the concepts of space and place” in her book *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place*.



and freedom assigned to space allows movement and thereby creates possibilities to transform space into place, or, as Bjorn Thomassen puts it, "the liminal is also defined by its very potentiality and contingency, wherein structural realities 'can be moulded and carried in different directions.'"<sup>14)</sup> For Kathleen Kirby "The postmodern landscape ... has now opened to the reorganizational capacities of discourse. If space is only an effect of discourse, then a new way of speaking and imagining can change it. It is as if by foregrounding metaphors of space the gap between metaphor and reality narrows, the bridge is shortened, the interchange takes place that much more quickly: space itself is the aperture through which discourse can effect reality."<sup>15)</sup> It goes without saying that literature is in this definition a frontier in which discourse can be changed and a new way of speaking and imagining can be shaped. Kirby is of the opinion that such re-imaginings have enough force to instigate a change in reality.

How do we see this reflected in Yi Munyŏl's story? The liminal space of Yanji is used in such a way that the discourses surrounding Korea's division (the structural reality) and the (im)possibility for a future reunification can be imagined through his work. The story makes a strong political argument for Korean unification. Yi Munyol writes his story with the idea in mind that in South Korean society one can broadly identify two different views regarding the issue of reunification: one who does want to reunify whatever the costs because of history, and those who do not want to unify without substantial foreign financial help, as the costs would be too high for the South. In the story, both sides of the argument are portrayed in the form of the characters of the "businessman" and the "unification man". The businessman thinks that it will cost too much of the South Korean economy and that North Koreans will merely be exploited for their labor, turning the relationship between South and North into that of a colonizer-colonized. This appears when the businessman mentions that "The first thing I think of is how we can feed the twenty million hungry people, and how we can make North Korea even superficially resemble the South."<sup>16)</sup> He argues that first North Korea

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14) Kirby 1996, 110

15) Thomassen 2014, 13

16) Yi Munyŏl 1999, 107

should economically be on a par with the South, before there can be any possibility to consider the unification. The unification man on the other hand, disagrees with this argument and says that the attempt to attain economic parity in North Korea first and then unification later is never possible. Instead he is of the opinion that people should realize that Koreans have to bear the burden equally to restore Korean history to its natural order when he states that “both sides should transcend the wall of ideology through realizing the homogeneity of nationhood and the commonality of blood.”<sup>17)</sup>

The first part of the story, therefore, presents the argument of the businessman and its implications. The latter part of the story, though, is a reversal, in that it shows the argument of the unification man and why unification should be solely based on historical grounds. The argument is clearly summed up in the story when the Korean-Chinese professor Liu, recalls North and South Koreans quibbling with each other over who they want to meet. The story shows that there is still no attempt to be found that both parties try to reach an ideological middle ground between each other. Instead when South Koreans ask for meetings with the North they want to meet those with the most radical and most staunch communist views, while the North for their part only want to meet those who are firm believers in the capitalist system. Professor Liu therefore reprimands this attitude and asks himself “Shouldn’t an exchange aim at listening to the other side and finding a point of mutual understanding? But both sides are seeking only to strengthen their own position by drawing support from sympathizers. How can that be a preparation for the day of unification?”<sup>18)</sup>

The ending with the businessman handing the main character some very rare paintings from the Chosŏn period underlines the economic exploitation that will be in store for North Korea in case of a reunification according to the businessman’s views. The unification man himself is also depicted in a negative light early on in the story as he is portrayed to just squander all his money on futile efforts to establish connections with the North.

Yi Munyŏl explores the implications of these two different views on possible

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17) Ibid., 106

18) Ibid., 114

unification scenarios through the liminal space of Yanji. The city of Yanji and its Korean-Chinese inhabitants not only serves a role in the story as a mediating and middle ground for North and South Korea, but is also portrayed as a testing ground for what Korean unification would look like as well. When the main character hears the story of the owner of the tea house he enters to get a drink, he is presented with “another view of the businessman’s prediction for Post-unification problems.”<sup>19)</sup> The tea house owner tells him about her experiences of her time in Seoul. Even though she considers herself to be Korean in every sense of the meaning, she was exploited by the South Koreans she met, as they only used her for cheap labor. She is deeply disappointed with the South Korean capitalist attitude and offended that in the way she was being treated, she felt she was being equaled to such people coming from Bangladesh or the Philippines. “How can you compare us with them? We’re of the same blood, though we may have lived apart for a few decades.”<sup>20)</sup> This last sentence poignantly shows the situation between the North and the South as well, and the narrator feels that the experiences of the tea shop owner may very well be replicated in case of reunification. The Korean-Chinese characters in the story are depicted in a sympathetic way, and Mr. Kim and Professor Liu in particular are willing to help bridge the divide between the North and South Koreans. The unification man tells the narrator about the down-to-earth and honest lives of the Korean-Chinese, only for them to be taken advantage off and corrupted once South Koreans came to the area.<sup>21)</sup>

Even though such passages show overall sympathy for the Korean-Chinese, there are more instances in the story where the Korean-Chinese are portrayed in a disparaging manner. The narrator of the story, for instance, is quite disinterested in Mr. Kim. “Mr. Kim lingered on, after he told me all he had to say. I became bored. Perhaps sensing my boredom, Mr. Kim began talking about the state of affairs in North Korea. But he had very little to tell me that he hadn’t told me before or that I hadn’t gathered from other sources. [...] Mr. Kim, like other

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19) Ibid., 113

20) Ibid., 112

21) Ibid., 96

Koreans in the Korean autonomous region in China, gave out information about how things are in North Korea as a way of showing friendliness or ingratiating himself to South Koreans.”<sup>22)</sup> In this way, the Ethnic Koreans are depicted merely as information brokers between North and South Korea and are not given much agency. Instead of showing personal interest in Mr. Kim, the narrator only wants to use him to broker the meeting between him and his brother. This derogatory attitude also appears towards the end of the story when the narrator pays Mr. Kim. “Mr. Kim, perhaps because he was new to the kind of work, did not inflate expenses or exaggerate the difficulties he had to cope with. I ended up paying him much less than I had expected to.”<sup>23)</sup> Even though Mr. Kim may have acted here out of kindness, the narrator does not think of this possibility, but classifies Mr. Kim’s action as being ignorant about how to do business. The South Korean characters in the story, including the narrator, do not consider the Korean-Chinese characters’ own autonomous lives to be relevant, but continuously ascribe their actions and motives to efforts in trying to gain money or favors from them. This creates a binary in the story that reads similar to the relation between a colonizer and colonized subject, in which the colonized subject does not have its own voice, but is always seen and depicted through the colonizer’s gaze.

The city of Yanji and the landscape surrounding it itself also shows signs of this gaze. The landscape is described by the unification man, for example, as follows. “Look at this landscape. Isn’t it just like our own? I say this land must belong to us, not just because so many of our people live here, but because it is totally unlike China in all respects. This piece of land would just blend in with any part of Gyeongsang-do or Chungcheong-do.”<sup>24)</sup> The liminal space is discursively objectified to be part of (South) Korea. It hereby strips the place of its autonomous status and becomes an object for appropriation by the South Korean characters. This aspect also appears in the story when the narrator walks on the streets of Yanji and discovers a Korean language sign on the street. “The signboard [of the café] was written in big letters in Korea, for the benefit of tourists from

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22) Ibid., 8

23) Ibid., 98

24) Ibid., 22

South Korea. [...] The signboard somehow looked familiar. Perhaps it was because it was the kind often seen in the streets of Seoul.”<sup>25</sup>) Here, the narrator mistakenly thinks the sign he discovers, was created specifically for South Korean tourists not knowing that in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture all signs have to be bi-lingual by law since 1952. The narrator is constantly looking for places (and food) that can match those found in Seoul, but they all fall short of his expectations and are seen by him as “second-rate”. The South Korean characters’ gaze of Yanji and its citizens permeates the story, and combined with the other descriptions in the story, leaves the reader with a sense of what a possible South Korean unification with North Korea might look like for North Koreans. In this way the liminal space of Yanji and its inhabitants are stand-ins for the North Korean territory and its people. The message that the story conveys, is that a reunified Korean peninsula may look beneficial to South Korea, but exploitative and even as a South Korean colony for the northern territory.

## 6. Yanji as a Space to Reconcile Ideological Divisions

The story therefore shows that both sides of the unification argument are extreme and unlikely to be a satisfactory resolution. To overcome such a fate, the story gives a third option to this dilemma. Convincing the reader of this last point is clearly the aim of Yi Munyŏl in writing this story and the meeting between the main character and his brother serves to provide a different approach to how unification may be attained. This argument is all about feeling compassion for the other side, trying to understand the other person’s situation not from an ideological standpoint, but from the position of viewing the other first and foremost as a fellow human being who is culturally still very close to one’s own. While the main protagonist’s North Korean half-brother initially speaks of a good life in the North, this shifts when the Northern brother confesses that life in the North has not been good. The situation of his brother makes the main character realize that the

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25) *Ibid.*, 31

hardship he suffered in the South because of his father's decision to move North, is parallel to that of his father's family in the North. Before this confession, the main character felt a bit jealous, and even angry that his younger brother has experienced living and being with his father, while the main character could not. But now the brothers discover they have a lot in common. Their names and those of their siblings contain the same generational character (*tollimcha*), to the surprise of the younger brother.<sup>26)</sup> The main character is surprised to hear that his brother has heard a lot of their father's hometown and while the main character felt jealous that his brother lived with his father, the brother on his part is jealous that the main character is able to visit the hometown that was always described by father as a magnificent and beautiful place.<sup>27)</sup> Their rites for commemorating the dead, although changed somewhat, are still very similar.<sup>28)</sup> They also have mutual antagonistic feelings over the "other" family that father had and this feeling has been a big influence on both brothers' identities. Both families also had to face social ostracism because of their father's actions and the existence of blood relations in the other part of Korea.<sup>29)</sup> When meeting at first, therefore, the brothers initially seem to be deeply divided by ideological differences, leading to misunderstandings and antagonism. Once both brothers set aside their ideological views, however, and only look at their mutual similarities, they start to have no problem with each other anymore and find a common ground. The division and possible unification of the South and the North is symbolized by each brother's views on the other's respective mothers. Initially the brothers feel antagonism towards the women their father chose to marry, but once they start to know each other better and find mutual similarities both brothers eventually accept the other's mother as their own. This appears when the main character thinks to himself: "Should I call her "mother in the North?"...but she became "our mother" in my mind at the moment of parting from my brother."<sup>30)</sup> The commemoration ceremony the two brothers hold for father on Haishan Mountain, overlooking the

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26) *Ibid.*, 117

27) *Ibid.*, 132

28) *Ibid.*, 118

29) *Ibid.*, 131, 148

30) *Ibid.*, 137-138

Tumen River and the North Korea landscape beyond, is the moment where both brothers overcome their differences, and through the liminal act and space of Yanji attain a brief sense of what a possible unification might look like. Robert Tally describes the liminal as a "Utopia of the in-between," a space that cannot be adequately represented.<sup>31)</sup> The power of the liminal, however, lies in his opinion in the "always tentative, provisional, and exploratory efforts to make visible the potential so often obscured by a tyrannical status quo, to transform the limit into a threshold, and to cross over into alternative domains, perhaps also creating in them new spaces of liberty."<sup>32)</sup> This definition of the liminal shows well what aim Yi Munyŏl had in mind. Not only does he explore his own autobiographical experience of having a direct link to the issue of the separation of Korean families because of the war, he also shows a deep concern with the views on unification that are going on in South Korean society. Posing different views on reunification and his main argument to find a common ground shows a tension in the work between the urgency to find a method to bridge the ideological chasm that exists between the South and the North, but at the same time it shows a need to justify this topic to the South Korean reader. By foregrounding the setting of Yanji and its inhabitants, he is searching for ways to overcome the status quo of division, by creating an alternative space in which one can come close to liberation, which in his novella should be understood to mean the reconciliation of ideological divides between North and South Korea.

## 7. Conclusion

In this article I focused on Yi Munyŏl's novella "An Appointment with his Brother". His story fits in well with the themes commonly addressed in the literature of division found in South Korea from the end of the Korean War to the present day as it tries to find common ground with the other side. Yi Munyŏl's

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31) Robert Tally, Forward to *Landscapes of Liminality*, eds. Downey, Kinane, Parker (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), xiii

32) *Ibid.*

personal interest in the division comes directly from his father's choice to move to the North due to his communist affiliation, and this decision affected the life of Yi deeply as he and his family were ostracized from South Korean society. In the novella, Yi searches for the possibility for a future reunification and focuses in particular on the issue of separated families. Through an analysis of the story one can see that it contains a tension between the urgency to find a method to bridge the ideological chasm that exists between the South and the North, but at the same time there is a deep undercurrent present, that feels the need to justify its own topic to the South Korean reader.

The city of Yanji serves as a liminal space where Yi explores possibilities to reconcile the ideological divisions that exist between the North and the South. The novella shows how the Korean-Chinese inhabitants function as mediators for the North and South Koreans, while the city and its surroundings gives shape to an imagined Korean unification. By foregrounding the setting of Yanji and its inhabitants, he is searching for ways to overcome the status quo of division, by creating an alternative space in which one can come close to liberation, which in his novella should be understood to mean the reconciliation of ideological divides between North and South Korea.



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