

## A Cinematic View on North Korean Spies from the South in *Secretly Greatly* (2013)

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North Korean spies in South Korean cinema are by no means a recent phenomenon. South Korean anti-communist genre films, which had their beginnings in the late 1940s, emphasized nationalism and positioned South Korea as being in deadlock with communist North Korea. As evidence of the popularity of such anticommunist films, there were seventeen anticommunist films made between 1949 and 1960 (Shim, 2011). Most of these genre films consists of stories of “split families, partisans, spies and armed infiltrators to the South” (Shim, 2011, p.179).

In the 1960s, President Park Chung Hee reinforced anticommunist policy in South Korea in fields like the defense system and in education. Many elementary schools had to hold anticommunist speech contests and draw political posters as well as slogans (Shim, 2011, p. 190). A gap emerged between the propaganda of the Park regime and the films that directors wanted to produce. While the government sought to portray communism in a negative light, film directors wanted to jump over the limited anticommunist plots and narratives to broader artistic possibilities. Because of these expectations of having to satisfy government propaganda, filmmakers had to make anticommunist films in order to get state level censorship shortcuts (Shim, 2011, p. 191). Shim also noted that it was only by 1985 that film policy stopped favoring these types of anticommunist films.

Before the early 1990s, anti-communist film characters consisted of monstrous and heartless spies that attacked South Koreans. The turning point in the representation of spies was *Shiri*, produced by Byeon Moorim and Lee Kwan-hak and directed by Kang Je-Gyu, in 1999 that featured a tragic love story between a female North Korean spy and male South Korean agents (Diffreint, 2001, p. 41). After *Shiri* became a blockbuster hit, spy movies have trickled steadily down the box offices. As *Global Times* reporter, Park Ga Young (2013), voices:

[O]ver six decades of division between the two Koreas has created many spy characters, beginning with child-killers during the anti-communism sentiment, then livelihood seeking spies that reflected the North Korea's harsh economic situation, and now attractive young boy spies that are more about glamour than ideology. (para.2)

Still, there are fairly recent films nowadays that show faint hints of the anticommunist genre, such as *The Spy* (1999), *JSA* (2002), *Tae Guk Gi: The Brotherhood of War* (2004), *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2005) and *Secret Reunion* (2009).

However, in 2013—the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the cease-fire in the 1953 Korean War—spy movies have become the trend of *Chungmuro* (since the 1960s, *Chungmuro* was the street of culture, artists and the Korean film industry), giving a different spin by casting young and trendy boy actors that have sex appeal, intelligence and bravery that had not been attributed to North Korean spies before the 1990s. The representation of North Korean spies has undergone various changes directly related to the politics of the South Korean government, and a variety of genres such as comedy, drama, thriller, romance have been released into box offices. The year 2013 marked an abundance of North Korean spy movies in the box offices, to the point that some commentators joked that if one wants to be a successful male actor, they should aim to be cast as a North Korean spy.

One of the Korean box office hits of 2013 arrived in the form of *Secretly Greatly* (Kim & Jang, 2013), a spy blockbuster that mixes comedy, thriller and tragedy genres. Other than *Secretly Greatly*, there were other similar films such as *The Berlin File* (Kang & Ryoo, 2012), *The Suspect* (Yu, Shin & Won, 2013), and *Commitment* (Choe, Park, Lee & Lee, 2013), that portrayed North Korean spies at war with other North Korean spy groups in South Korea or in other foreign nations. While a few movie critics and scholars such as Aaron Han Joon Magnan Park (2015) have written reviews about the overall content of *Secretly Greatly*, not much attention has been given to how the undercover boy spies are romanticized through their final

death scene in the film and their appeal to humanism, although there is still emphasis on apparent anti-communism sentiment. This study demonstrates that the representation of North Korean spies in the movie *Secretly Greatly* was a great success in terms of ticket sales due to the casting of “flower boys,” the basing of the film on a webtoon, and its humanist appeal, although there are still traces of accentuating the cold South-North political relationship. Moreover, this paper will examine the film through the theoretical term “statelessness” from Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Who Sings the Nation State?* (2007).

### **Ticket Power: Flower Boy Actors and a Webtoon**

The director of *Secretly Greatly* (2013) is Jang Cheol-soo, who also produced the 2010 horror movie *Bedeviled*. As many viewers note, the film is based on a webtoon called *Covertness* by the artist Hun which was popular in South Korea. Director Jang revealed in a 2013 interview that he was familiar with the webtoon and came up with the idea that there could be a film adaptation (Velez, 2013, para. 2). When asked about his “strong sense of individuality” in his filmmaking and his influence from director Kim Ki-duk, Jang acknowledges that he has been “more or less influenced by Kim Ki-duk” (para. 11) but he emphasizes that his films have “a hint of hope and warmth and I would say they are not from Kim Ki-duk, but more of my personal touch that came from myself or my upbringing” (para. 12).

One of the points that Jang wanted to change from the original webtoon was “to portray the characters more like real people” (Velez, 2013, para. 4). Jang articulates that the casting of top star Kim Soo-Hyun, Park Ki-Woong and Lee Hyun-Woo as the three young undercover North Korean spies was intentional, in that he thought that “they had to match the visuals” (para. 6). Jang goes on to say, “I needed actors with enough talent to portray not only the visual, but what the characters are going through inside” (para. 6). In another interview, Jang is reported to have said that “Because ‘Covertness’ [the webtoon] was such a hit, there was immense pressure, and we thought the only way to live up to the expectations was with a great cast” (MacDonald, 2013, para. 5).

Among the “three flower boy stars” (the term ‘flower boy’ [*kkotminam* 꽃미남] is used to refer to delicate, slightly feminine-looking boys), it is most notably Kim Soo Hyun, 25, who has been looked up to as one of the most popular Korean Wave (also known as *hallyu*, the spread of South Korean culture worldwide) stars who starred in dramas such as *Dream High*, *Moon Embracing the Sun*, and recently *My Love from Another Star*. Many film viewers gladly applaud the casting of Kim Soo Hyun since he has enormous “ticket power.” Co-stars such as Park Ki Woong, 28, was cast

in *Bridal Mask*, and Lee Hyun Woo, 20, starred in *To the Beautiful You* (MacDonald, 2013).

As evidence of the boy actors' ticket power, Joan MacDonald (2013) notes in her article "The Success of 'Secretly Greatly' is No Secret" that "the film had the highest single day opening for a Korean film then broke the record for sales of a film based on a webtoon" (para. 2). Critic Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park (2015) also reports the following about the film:

*Secretly Greatly*...succeeded in setting new box office records: the highest number of tickets presold; the highest single day opening of all time with 497, 560 tickets; fastest film to sell 1 million tickets (36 hours), 2 million tickets (seventy-two hours), 3 million tickets (five days), and 4 million tickets (eight days); largest single day admissions for a domestic film at 919,027 admissions on June 6, 2013; and the highest grossing webtoon-based film (p. 459).

### **Espionage, Home and Family**

As the poster phrase for *Secretly Greatly* (Kim & Jang, 2013) betrays, it is a movie about a young North Korean spy that is "born as a wild dog, raised as a monster and infiltrated [into South Korean society] as an idiot." The film starts at Beepa Cape, North Korea with a voice over by Won Ryu-Hyun (played by Kim Soo Hyun). His commanding officer gives the order that Won can meet with him in the future under two conditions: 1) under the re-unification of the two Koreas; and 2) meet alive to be enemies to kill each other. The officer gives him the cautionary advice that, under all conditions, Won must "Stay alive!" He elaborates that Won must stay alive to see the glory of the re-unification. Won is sent off to South Korea on a mission called the "Red Cliff Flower Infiltration to South Korea."

Throughout the film, the figure of the Mother and Motherland are significant motifs. To Dong-gu (Won), there is nothing as important to him as his only family member who is up North—his mother. Touching upon this soft spot for his mother, the mail carrier man, who is also a comrade from the North, offers Dong-gu a small token of a black and white photo of his dear mother. Dong-gu is touched and he writes a letter with the words: "Mother, it's been 11 years since I paid respect to you."

Because the North Korean "state" casts out the "ranks of citizenship" for Won and his comrade spies in the South, they are in a state where they can only drift from one place to another without any location to call "home." Because they are cast into a state of not belonging to either the motherland North or the enemy South, they are not protected, and their lives are at stake. Judith Butler (2007) suggests in *Who Sings the Nation-State?* that "the

state signifies the legal and institutional structures that delimit a certain territory” (p. 3) and that the state might be able to “signify the source of non-belonging, even produce that non-belonging as a quasi-permanent state” (p. 4) asserting that there is a condition called “statelessness” to be defined. As Butler argues, if “one is cast out...the bios of the person is no longer linked to its political status. By ‘political’ here is meant the membership in the ranks of citizenship” (p. 39). While Butler and Spivak speak from a postcolonial point of view, the spies in South Korean cinema can be attributed “statelessness” due to the fact that they are thrown out or “cast out” of the North Korean regime and are no longer linked to its political status. They are North Koreans, but they have been removed from the legal and institutional structures that delimit a certain territory. In this way, they can be seen as being in a condition of “statelessness.”

Interestingly, one of the undercover spies, Hae-Rang, compares the plight of the North Korean spies with the salmon. According to Hae Rang, salmon risk their lives by going against the stream and die after they have reached home and spawned. This North Korean spy is an outsider to North Korean ideology, and an insider in that he is intellectually analyzing their situation to other un-enlightened North Korean spies such as Dong-gu (Won). This is significant because in the film, the top-officials in North Korea refer to the spies in South Korea that are part of the 5446 Corps as “salmons.” The fish, salmon, can be a metaphor for the plight of the spies that try to finish their mission in the South but are left to die after they have “spawned,” in other words, after they have finished their initial task. These boys are not attributed as North Korean or South Korean, giving them the only option of accomplishing the “secret and great” mission given by the North of taking their lives while they continue to long for a place to belong.

The North Korean spies in *Secretly Greatly* are no longer fighting their South Korean counterparts, as in *Shiri* (Byeon, Lee & Kang, 1999), which was released more than a decade ago; but these teenage boy spies are fighting their former colleagues dispatched from Pyongyang. As Nick Schager (2013) points out in his film review for *Commitment* (Choe, Park, Lee & Park, 2013), these later movies are “a critique of North Korea as a ruthless country willing to sacrifice anything – including its people – for self-interested reasons” (Schager, 2013, para. 5). These boys are in a condition of “statelessness” that leads to their vulnerability and complex plight, which in the end results in their death. *Secretly Greatly* (Kim & Jang, 2013) shows North Korea defectors reduced into North Korean spies who are still ideologically different and cannot be incorporated into South Korean society because of their “otherness.”

The movie *Secretly Greatly* (Kim & Jang, 2013) can be linked back to the policy regarding North Korean defectors. According to South Korean law, the South Korean government sees the North Korean government as an illegal entity (Bradley & Petro, 2002, p.48). Therefore, North Koreans are automatically given citizenship when they defect. While there is a steady stream of discourse regarding “foreigners” in multiculturalism in academia, North Korean defectors have comparatively received little proper attention. As Sook Do Kwon (2014) reports in his article, “A Study on South Korean Social Integration Policy for North Korean Defectors,” there are data that North Korean defectors in November 2010 have reached 20,000, and the number is growing, so that by the end of 2013 there were approximately 26,124 defectors (p.101). Nonetheless, North Korean defectors are not acknowledged by South Koreans. Kwon also noted that according to a survey done by Institute for Peace and Unification Studies Seoul National University, only 42% felt friendly towards North Korean defectors, showing that more than half of South Koreans did not feel sympathetic towards them. Moreover, different from multi-cultural “foreigners” that come to South Korea by marriage or for jobs, North Korean defectors are coming from a communist country, the North, in the age of division of the two Koreas.

### **Humanism and Romanticized Spies**

As Kwon Mee-yoo (2013) posits, “Older moviegoers dragged into the theatres by their daughters to watch the movie might notice the changes in how North Korean agents and their Stalinist government are portrayed if compared to similar movies in the previous years” (para. 4). Kwon further states:

Now with the South-North relations taking a turn for the worse, filmmakers seem to be limiting the scope of their stories to the internal problems within North Korea as it goes through a generational power transition. The source of conflict between the North Korean spies is the uncertainty of Pyongyang, not the hostile environment in the South. (para. 7)

Also known as *gancheop* in Korean (Lee, 2013), North Korean spies have evolved from being portrayed as a menace and threat to South Korean military and intelligence security to having a more humanized and romanticized portrayal of their plight as people who do not have a place to belong but ultimately will have to be killed off because they do not fit into either North or South Korea (Kwon, 2013, para.7).

In the film, after fighting with the commanding officer, Kim Tae-Won, of 5446 corps (played by Son Hyun Ju) and Hae Rang fall off the building to die. The remaining two 5446 corps spies, Hae Jin and Won, are left speechless when they see Hae Rang has chosen to end his life. While Hae Jin is trapped between his wish to survive with Won and his wish to die than rather be assimilated into South Korean society, the South Korean intelligence officer gives orders to fire at the two boys while the former 5446 spy now turned NIS agent tries unsuccessfully to save the two boys. When Hae Jin is fired at ruthlessly by South Korean agents in his South Korean NIS outfit, Won embraces him and has his back be a shield for Hae Jin who is being shot. Even while Hae Jin is shot and near death, he is moved by his Captain taking care of him and being responsible for his cohort. To end the brutal pain, Won jumps off the top of the building with Hae Jin in his arms. There is a voice over that these “salmon” have in their afterlife. Each has a different desire to be someone else when they were reborn but the overarching theme of these wishes is that they wish to be ordinary, average citizens. Afterwards, the movie ends with “granny” Jeon Soo Im reflecting on what people told her that her Dong Gu was actually a ruthless North Korean spy, though she cannot believe that to be true. She puts up a picture frame near a wall that has graffiti of Dong Gu in his green sportswear: “Dong Gu drop me a line if you’re alive.” And she is remorsefully surprised when she finds under the picture frame the words: “Don’t be ill, Mom.”

The filmmakers used top “boy” actors that were especially appealing to the public, but this move might be covering up the reality of South-North relations. The year 2013 was the start of President Park Guen-hye’s regime, and South-North relations were very grave, with months of tension that included the first shutdown of the inter-Korean Kaesong industrial zone. Rather than emphasize the frozen South-North relations, North Korean spies in the later films of *Secretly Greatly* are caught up in North Korea’s internal struggle within spy groups that fight for the cause of survival and power relations. Sensitive issues regarding the South-North relationships are at best entirely avoided, flower boys are cast to appeal to a humanist message of brotherhood, and the old message of anti-communist sentiment is turned into a new story that appeals to South Korean film viewers.

## Conclusion

As viewers can see from this film, South Koreans no longer see North Korean spies as monstrous beings that are cold-blooded, and it is probably hard to go back to past stereotypes. The recent films show that the ideological stereotypes have certainly been shaken off in the portrayal of North Korean spies. *Secretly Greatly* accentuates the fact that North Korean spies

come down to the South, and their family members are an easy target for authorities up North to keep as hostages. These young boy spies have their internal fight on South Korean soil not with their supposed enemy, South Koreans, but rather, surprisingly, with their spy comrades from the North. In the film, the teenage spies are used as consumables and then thrown out by the communist state after they have finished their mission in the South.

These young North Korean boys are forced to infiltrate the South posing as high school students, an idiot and an aspiring singer. In the movie, the young spies find themselves threatened by the South Korean intelligence agents and their repressive government. The North sends assassins to dispatch the three boys in *Secretly Greatly*, and the entire group of boy spies are killed off by the North Korean assassins that are part of the spy unit. However, these movies portray and conform to the suspicion that South Koreans have had of North Korean defectors all along: the suspicion that they are spies from the North and not defectors that need protection and a home to live in the South. Part of the tragedy of the movie is attributed to the loss of “home,” a place to belong for these young teenage boy spies.



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