

“Breaking the Dam to Reunify our Country”: Alternate Histories of the Korean War in Contemporary South Korean Cinema*

*Kristen F. Sun***

Introduction

In a meeting between South Korean I Suhyök (Lee Soohyeok), played by Lee Byung Hun (I Pyöng Hön), and North Koreans Private Chöng Uchin (Jeong Woojin) (played by Shin Hakyun) and Sergeant O Kyöngp’il (Oh Kyungpil) (played by Song Kangho) in the film *Joint Security Area (Kongtongkyöngpikuyök JSA*, hereafter referred to as *JSA*) (Park Chan Wook (Pak Ch’an Uk), 2000), after Suhyök crosses the DMZ over the Bridge of No Return to North Korea, Private Chöng, in his excitement exclaims: “You’ve done a great thing. After half a century of

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** Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California, Berkeley

division, you have breached our tragic history of agony and disgrace, broken the dam to reunify our country.” This scene demonstrates the visualization of an imagined situation in which North Koreans and South Koreans meet not as enemies, but as friends. Furthermore, unlike the history of the Korean War, which paints the picture of continued North Korean attacks (from the beginning of the Korean War in 1950 to the axe murder incident in 1976 to the Yŏngpyŏng shelling in 2010) against South Korea, it is the South Korean soldier who crosses the border first. However, this crossing is not an act of war, but rather an act of friendship and a desire by the South Korean soldier to know the North Korean soldiers on an intimate and human scale.

With this scene in mind, I set up the main research questions of this article. First, how do historians, cultural producers, and individuals imagine the Korean War within the cultural sphere? How is the Korean War imaged in film? This article, while cognizant of these two important questions, takes a slightly different approach and instead asks, how do films *reimagine* the Korean War? And, how do South Korean filmmakers *imagine otherwise* the Korean War through scenes of affect between enemy soldiers? In other words, how do films imagine instances in which South Koreans and North Koreans, to borrow from the film *JSA*, “breach the tragic history of agony and disgrace, broken the dam to reunify the country?” To this extent, I analyze three contemporary South Korean films that re(present) the history of the Korean War through imagining and imaging an alternate history: *2009 Lost Memories* (*2009 Rosŭt ’ŭmemorichŭ*, hereafter referred to as *2009 Lost Memories*) (Lee Simyung (I Simyŏng), 2002), *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (*Welk’ŏm t’u Tongmakkol*, hereafter referred to as *Welcome to Dongmakgol*) (Park Kwang-hyun (Pak Kwanghyŏn, 2005), and *Joint Security Area* (Park Chan Wook, 2000).

While these three films focus on different eras of history (Japanese colonial era in *2009 Lost Memories*, the Korean War in *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, and the present day in *JSA*), they all present the “problem” of the Korean War in similar ways. Specifically, they rewrite dominant narratives of the Korean War (Cold War logics of anticommunism v.

communism) and instead focus on North Korean-South Korean friendship/collaboration as a means by which to reimagine the Korean War. Furthermore, I argue that these films not only rewrite the history of the Korean War, but they also rewrite the “enemy” during the war as well; this results in changing the very epistemological logic of the Korean War of communism v. anticommunism and instead moves to a discourse of Koreans v. foreign invaders or anyone who is invested in maintaining the system of Korean division. In other words, the reimagined enemy of the Korean War is perhaps the Korean War itself or those states/entities invested in upholding this unending and protracted war. Specifically, in *2009 Lost Memories* the main enemies are the Japanese colonizers, in *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, they are the Americans (even though they were allies during the war), and in *JSA*, they are the South Korean and North Korean states that are invested in maintaining division of the Korean peninsula.

Each film also presents similar plot situations in which a group of disparate heroes (made up of North and South Koreans) band together to fight for a greater goal, which is the circumvention of the consequences of division and the enactment of the desire for peaceful reconciliation and unification of the two Koreas. Specifically, this article explores the historical conditions that influence the emergence of these similarly themed films as well as the film content in order to further contribute to scholarship¹ on the memorial legacies of the Korean War,² as well as to take

1 I recognize that my paper lacks Korean language sources. While I am aware of articles that exist on the topic of the Korean War and memory in relation to film, I have not yet been able to access these sources as I am still in the process of improving my Korean language ability. Some of these sources include: Hwang Yŏngmi, “Yŏnghwa e nat’anan han’kuk’chŏn’chaengki mikun gwa min’kan’in ūi kwan’kye” (“The Relationship Between the U.S. Military and a Civilian Population during the Korean War as Depicted in Korean Films”), *Hyŏn’tae yŏnghwayŏn’ku* 18 (2014): 159-185; Kim Han’sang, “Chuhan’mikuk’kongpowŏn (USIS) yŏnghwa ūi ũngsi mek’ŏnichŭm” (“The Mechanism of the Gaze in the

seriously the radical possibilities of a different future/history/temporality that each film presents.

In the next section of this article, I provide brief historical contextualization for the films as they were released in the same time period, which corresponds to the (re)emergence of the popularity of Korean cinema; Korean film scholars have termed this period the “New Korean Cinema” or the “Korean New Wave” (late 1990s – present).³ I then move to the theoretical framework through which I read the three films together, specifically taking into account how they all reflect an interest in the lived experience of the Korean War outside of the Korean War as a Cold War global

USIS Film Propaganda in South Korea”), *Yök’samun’cheyön’ku* 30 (2013): 167-201; Kim Han’sang, “Naengchönn’ch’eche wa naesyönl sinema üi hon’chongchök wön’ch’ön” (“Cold War and the Hybrid *Ursprung* of South Korean National Cinema”), *Yöngghwayön’ku* 47 (2011): 87-111); Ko Puüng (Koh Boo Eung), “<Welk’ömt’u Tongmakkol> e nat’ananün min’chokkongtongch’e” (“The Formation of National Identity in the Film *Welcome to Dongmakgol*”), *比較文學 (Comparative Literature)* 39 (2006): 191-210; Ryu Chaehyön, “Han’kukhyön Pülrok’pösüt’ö yöngghwa üi Han’kuk min’chok’chuüichök t’ük’söng: <Kongtongkyöngpikuyök JSA> wa <Han’pan’to>rül chungshimüro” (“The Korean Nationalist Characteristics of the Korean Blockbuster Films: Focusing on *Joint Security Area* and *Hanbando*”), *Han’kuk’önrön’chöngbohak’bo* 59 (2012): 116-137; Sö In’suk, “Han’kukhyöng Pülrok’pösüt’ö esö pun’tan üi chehyön’pangsik: han kwa shinp’a üi kwihwan” (“The Representation of Korean Political Division in Korean Blockbuster Film: The Return of Han and Sinpa”), *Mun’hak kwa yöngsang* (2011): 981-1015

- 2 Some examples of scholarship on the memorial legacies of the Korean War include: Youngmin Choe (Ch’oe Yöngmin), “Postmemory DMZ in South Korean Cinema, 1999-2003,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 18.2 (Fall 2013): 315-336; Suhi Choi (Ch’oe Suhi), *Embattled Memories: Contested Meanings in Korean War Memorials* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2014); Suk-Young Kim (Kim Suk’yöng), *DMZ Crossing: Performing Emotional Citizenship Along the Korean Border* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). Also see *Cross-Currents E-Journal’s* March 2015 issue on “(De)Memorializing the Korean War: A Critical Intervention,” which features articles by Suzy Kim, Keun-Sik Jung, Daniel Y. Km, Sunghoon Han, Seunghei Clara Hong, Brendan Wright, and Bruce Cumings.

battle of competing ideologies between superpowers. I then explain why I chose to put these films in conversation with one another, despite their focus on different historical time periods in order to focus on the concept of “alternate history” and how alternate history can be used to reimagine the Korean War. The Korean War and its appearances/disappearances in these three films show an understanding of the war as not only a historical event, but also as an epistemological problem that can be overcome.

What I mean by the Korean War as an epistemological problem is that the Korean War is portrayed in these three films as an “unnatural” occurrence, brought about by outside influences. The films demonstrate that the Korean War facilitated the tragic division of the Korean peninsula and people and that the only “natural” course in rectifying this division is through reunification. Thus, the films all focus on relationships between South Koreans and North Koreans to demonstrate the inherent nature of Koreans to want to be one people and that without the influence of foreign outsiders, unification of the two Koreas would be the natural historical progression. Drawing from scholars that have theorized on affect and the Cold War such as Heonik Kwon, Kuan-Hsing Chen, and Suk-Young Kim, I focus on scenes in the films that showcase the affective spaces of imagined community between North Koreans and South Koreans. The Korean War and all of its attendant discourses of communism/anticommunism are reimaged within the films into spaces/places in which these discourses are shown to not exist or desired not to exist. *2009 Lost Memories*, *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, and *JSA* are particularly powerful films because they focus on the space/place of the local and the intimate in or-

3 See Jinhee Choi (Ch’oe Chin’hi), *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010); Frances Gateward, ed., *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Darcy Paquet, *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Chi-Yun Shin (Shin Ch’iyūn) and Julian Stringer, eds., *New Korean Cinema* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

der to reimagine a world beyond division and a world that takes seriously the promise of peaceful (re)unification, even if that promise has to be broken. By depicting this promise through the visual medium of the cinematic screen through the theme of alternate history, these films also allow film audiences to visualize future peaceful reunification with North Korea in reality, thus breaking free – if only in the realm of entertainment – from the chains of the epistemological confines of the Korean War that can only see North Korea as enemy other.

Significance of the Late 1990s – Mid 2000s for South Korean Cinema

The three films that I choose to analyze were released in 2000 (*JSA*), 2002 (*2009 Lost Memories*), and 2005 (*Welcome to Dongmakgol*) and fall roughly⁴ within the genre of the “Korean blockbuster.”⁵ The Korean blockbuster, according to Youngmin Choe (Ch’oe Yŏngmin), first

- 4 I utilize the word “roughly” because *Welcome to Dongmakgol* is considered to be a subgenre film of comedy, whereas in the U.S. comedy and blockbuster genres can be interchangeable. Nevertheless, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* is thematically similar to its predecessors, *JSA* and *2009 Lost Memories*, as I will argue in the latter sections of my article.
- 5 For more on the Korean blockbuster, see Youngmin Choe, “Postmemory DMZ in South Korean Cinema, 1999-2003,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 18.2 (Fall 2013): 315-336; Jinhee Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010); Frances Gateward, ed., *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Susie Jie Young Kim (Kim Chye Yŏng), “Korea beyond and within the Armistice: Division and the Multiplicities of Time in Postwar Literature and Cinema,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 18.2 (Fall 2013): 287-313; Daniel Martin, “South Korean Cinema’s Postwar Pain: Gender and National Division in Korean War Films from the 1950s to the 2000s,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 19.1 (Spring 2014): 93-114.

emerged on an international scale with the release and success of Kang Jegyū's (Kang Chekyu) film *Shiri* (*Swiri*) in 1999. Furthermore, Choe argues that the success of Korean blockbusters beginning in the late 1990s/early 2000s also simultaneously emerged alongside a "memory boom," which not only popularized the Korean War as a subject of blockbuster cinema, but also depicted a general loosening in the formally rigid (and heavily censored) depictions of North Koreans, particularly through humanizing North Korean characters: "With each successive film, restrictions on engaging with the subject of North Korea and North Koreans eased under new political climates."⁶

Sung Kyung Kim (Sŏng Kyŏngkim) further describes the resurgence of Korean national cinema in this period with three distinctive characteristics: "1) nationalistic sentiments after the financial crisis; 2) the mixture of foreign (Hollywood) filmic forms and styles with local materials in the Korean blockbuster; and 3) national audiences' different enjoyment and expectations towards Korean cinema."⁷ Indeed, it is important to point out that despite the close dates of the films that I study were released (2000, 2002, 2005), there were many historical changes that preceded the release of each film. Most notably, the 1997 Asian financial crisis hit South Korea particularly hard and the "IMF Crisis"⁸ marked a period of surging nationalism, along with the election of President Kim Daejung (Kim Taechung) in 1998. 2002, before the release of *2009 Lost Memories*,

6 Youngmin Choe, "Postmemory DMZ in South Korean Cinema, 1999-2003," *Journal of Korean Studies* 18.2 (Fall 2013): 318.

7 Sung Kyung Kim (Sŏng Kyŏngkim), "'Renaissance of Korean National Cinema' as a Terrain of Negotiation and Contention between the Global and the Local: Analysing two Korean Blockbusters, *Shiri* (1999) and *JSA* (2000)," unpublished: 1-2. Article accessed here: https://www.essex.ac.uk/sociology/documents/pdf/graduate_journal/kim.pdf.

8 For more background on the IMF Crisis and its effect on South Korea see, Jesook Song (Sŏng Chisuk), *South Korea in the Debt Crisis: The Creation of a Neoliberal Welfare Society* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

was also an important year in South Korean history: the 2002 FIFA World Cup was co-hosted by South Korea and Japan and also introduced a surge of pride and nationalism as the South Korean team reached the semifinals for the first time. *2009 Lost Memories*, in anticipation of the World Cup, was also co-produced by South Korea and Japan and features two leading main characters played by Korean and Japanese heartthrobs. *Welcome to Dongmakgol* was released after the election of the second liberal president following Kim Daejung, Roh Moo-hyun (No Muhyŏn) in 2003.

In the same article, Kim writes that the Korean film industry and the resurgence of Korean cinema, along with the Korean blockbuster, was affected by the IMF Crisis. The nationalism that was invoked from the national crisis of bankruptcy and unemployment transformed into a direct outpouring of support for the South Korean film industry, specifically in opposition to Hollywood. The “Boycott Hollywood film” campaign called for screen quotas in theaters in order to limit the influence of Hollywood films. It was in this historical backdrop that allowed for the blockbuster films, *Shiri* and *Joint Security Area*, to break previous ticket sale records. (The film *Shiri* has commonly been referred to as the “fish that sunk the Titanic,” meaning that the film, which is named after a species of fish, outperformed the previous box-office success, the U.S. Hollywood blockbuster film *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997).)

Furthermore, the growing deregulation of the Korean film industry, which was previously heavily censored, particularly under the authoritarian rules of Park Chunghee (Pak Chŏnghŭi) (1962-1979) and Chun Dohwan (Chŏn Tuhwan) (1980-1988), allowed for a greater variety of stories and controversial topics to be represented in cinema.⁹ Kim Dae-

9 This period saw the rise of the “Korean New Wave,” of which director Park Kwangsu (Pak Kwangsu) is a representative example. His films include characters who are anti-establishment as well as labor activists and celebrate the minjung movement of the 1980s. Some of his most well-known films include *Chilsu and Mansu* (*Ch’ilsu wa Man’su*) from 1988 and *A Single Spark* (*Arĭmtaun ch’ŏngnyŏn*)

jung was also openly supportive of the film industry and encouraged talent and funding to flow into the system. As a result, the films that I study in this article are a direct result of these policies and speak to the specific topic of North Koreans in cinema, who were mostly portrayed negatively or found in anticommunist films.¹⁰

These growing positive and more humanistic representations of North Koreans also reflected policies towards North Korea beginning with Kim Daejung's presidency, which began in 1998 and lasted until 2003, and extending into his successor Roh Moohyun's presidency from 2003-2008. The Kim Daejung administration spearheaded the new "Sunshine Policy" toward North Korea, which built diplomatic relations between South Korea and North Korea and exhibited more tolerance and support towards North Korea and the goal of reunification. The Sunshine Policy also allowed for the reunions of divided families across the DMZ. Kim Daejung would eventually win a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts in 2000. This policy was continued under the Roh Moohyun administration, although the South Korean Unification Ministry officially declared it a failure in 2010.

The Sunshine Policy not only instantiated the state's turn away from anticommunism but also paved the way for human contact between North Koreans and South Koreans. As Suk-Young Kim (Kim Suk'yŏng) points out, "According to the South Korean government's *White Paper on Unification* (2000), the number of South Korean citizens who visited North Korea from 1998 to 2000 totaled 16,019, six times the number who visited the North between 1989 and 1997."¹¹ The paper also concluded that

Chŏn T'aeil) from 1995 about the labor activist who self-immolated in protest of South Korean working conditions.

10 There are exceptions, however, for the most part, portrayals of camaraderie and friendship between North Koreans and South Koreans, or of the nationalist embrace of North Koreans into the South Korean fold as "one people," is particularly evident in Korean War blockbuster films from the 1990s to the contemporary era.

11 Suk-Young Kim, "Crossing the Border to the 'Other' Side: Dynamics of Interac-

the Sunshine Policy ““contributed to the dissolution of the cultural alienation between the peoples of two Koreas due to the realities of division, and restored the homogeneity of our nation.””¹² This rhetoric sounds strikingly familiar to the speech that Private Chŏng gave to Suhyŏk in *JSA* in the passage that opens this article. While history has proven this statement to not have been entirely true, particularly in this moment with growing disenchantment and/or indifference among younger generations of South Koreans towards reunification with North Korea, similar to other Korean film scholars who have written on the subject, I also stake a claim in studying the films produced during the Sunshine Policy era for how they mirror the policies at the time as well as their enduring cultural legacy on audiences then and in the present. To that extent, I focus on the films *JSA* (2000), *2009 Lost Memories* (2002), and *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2004) because they all take seriously the claim of “the restoration of the homogeneity of our nation” that the *White Paper on Unification* points to in its analysis of the Sunshine Policy.

Building a Theory of the Korean War as an Epistemological Problem

The Korean War, outside of its historical eventness, is also primarily an epistemological rupture predicated on division and Cold War ideologies that leave no room for non-alignment or neutrality.¹³ Yet these seemingly

tion between North and South Koreans in *Spy Li Cheol-jin* and *Joint Security Area*” in Frances Gateward, ed., *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007): 224.

12 Ibid, 225.

13 I have also encountered the Korean War as an epistemological problem at museum sites throughout the course of my research. The “problem of the Korean War” becomes a literal problem at museum sites in South Korea that focus on the Japanese colonial era. In those museums, the Korean War makes virtually no appearance be-

clear-cut ideologies of “us” v. “them,” of “communist” v. “anticommunist,” of “North Korean” v. “South Korean” do not quite align as comfortably to real bodies as the rhetoric implies. These films then attempt to portray a different way of understanding the Korean War through presenting glimpses of the promise of world(s)/spaces/places that do not exist within the current division system. To this extent, following along scholarship on the Korean War and the Cold War’s “protracted afterlives,”¹⁴ I see these three films as primarily concerned with the recursiveness of the Korean War and an exploration into “division culture.”¹⁵

In order to build up to my analysis of alternate history and alternate world-making that transcends the epistemological notions of the Korean War within the films, I first discuss two scholars’ theoretical conceptualizations of the Cold War in order to build a wider framework for understanding the Korean War in relation to the Cold War and Cold War temporalities. These scholars and their texts are Kuan-Hsing Chen’s *Asia as Method: Towards Deimperialization*¹⁶ and Heonik Kwon’s (Kwŏn

cause the concept of national division shatters these museums’ triumphalist narratives of the collective Korean people’s will to resist colonial domination (often-times told alongside a long genealogy of Korean people’s repelling of foreign attacks, the most famous being the celebration of Admiral Yi Sun-shin and his defeat of the Japanese using his famous “turtle ship” during the Imjin Wars). Kenneth J. Ruoff, in his current research on South Korean museums, refers to this as the “5,000 years of Korean history” narrative, although he is not the first to do so – this narrative is espoused in many museums such as the Independence Hall of Korea. Elsewhere, I have argued that the Korean War destabilizes museum narratives of a unified Korean spirit and Korean identity during independence movements, particularly within the Independence Hall of Korea: <http://korearesearchcafe.com/2015/03/01/museums-memory-and-public-space-in-cinema-analyzing-museums-in-2009-lost-memories-lee-si-myung-2002/>.

14 Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

15 See Youngmin Choe, Susie Jie Young Kim, and Daniel Martin’s articles that I have cited above for more on division culture within South Korean cinema.

Hyŏn’ik) *The Other Cold War*.¹⁷ Utilizing Chen’s and Kwon’s discussion of the Cold War and its protracted endings as well as their discussions on the understudied lived experiences of the Cold War, I draw out my own theorization of these films as belonging to the memorial legacies of the Korean War that reflect on the promise of future peaceful reunification through the “locally specific” lives of its characters.

Chen and Kwon both focus their texts on the afterlives of the Cold War and theorize on its continuing effects/affects after its proclaimed “end” in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Chen, a Taiwanese scholar, writes of the “affective intensities” that occur in people-to-people relationships during the Cold War, such as the reunion of divided families in both Taiwan (with China) and South Korea (with North Korea). Furthermore, in his chapter “De-Cold War: The Impossibility of ‘Great Reconciliation,’” he emphasizes that in the context of North Korea and South Korea and China and Taiwan, national histories and familial histories inextricably intersect: “For subjects encountering these experiences, the emotional plane of affective desire seems to be the most prominent, overshadowing all other aspects of the reunions. Nor does it matter if the bodily experience (*tiyan*) of the event is real or imaginary. These moments of intensity are an ineradicable part of subject formation.”¹⁸ These moments of “affective intensities” are precisely what constitute the plotlines of many South Korean blockbuster films about the Korean War.

He further theorizes on these moments of intensity in order to demonstrate that it is the very presence of these continual “affective intensities” that challenge the notion of the Cold War as “over”:

16 Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

17 Heonik Kwon (Kwŏn Hyŏn’ik), *The Other Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

18 Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 118.

The effects of the cold war have been embedded in local history, and simply pronouncing the war to be over will not cause them to dissolve. The complex effects of the war, mediated through our bodies, have been inscribed into our national, family, and personal histories. In short, the cold war is still alive within us.¹⁹

Chen writes that for much of the world outside of the U.S. and Soviet Union, the Cold War is still not officially over (which is particularly true for South Korea as well), especially for those nations that have seen actual “hot” wars erupt and that are still affected by the logics and epistemologies of Cold War division and alignments. Furthermore, Chen points out that much of the Asia-Pacific region is still militarized and that these U.S. military bases (in South Korea, Okinawa, the Pacific Islands, etc.) are direct extensions of Cold War logics, particularly as the U.S. makes the claim that these bases are necessary to ward off North Korean and Chinese aggressions. As he writes, the “cold war is still alive” not just within the bodies of people and their (traumatic) embodiments of Cold War ideological divisions, but also within space and territory as well.

In this chapter, Chen also proposes the concept of “de-cold war,” which is similar to theorizations on the processes of decolonization, but to “de-cold war” means to grapple with the specific legacies of the Cold War on the lived experiences of people who are still affected by Cold War ideologies and divisions. To begin the process of to “de-cold war” is to “mark out a space in which unspoken stories and histories may be told, and to recognize and map the historically constituted cultural and political effects of the cold war.”²⁰ Following Chen’s arguments, I similarly argue that the South Korean films produced in the contemporary “post”-Cold War era (after 1989) are also grappling with “de-cold war” tendencies, which primarily occurs in themes relating to North Korean-South Korean

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid, 120.

interactions. These films that seek to carve out a space for “unspoken stories and histories to be told” can be seen as direct reactions to the Cold War/Korean War structures of power and rhetoric that emphasized the disavowal²¹ of North Korean people and familial ties across the DMZ.²² Chen’s text helps to disentangle the epistemological structures of the Cold War and the productive power of “affective intensities” and the working through of these intensities through cultural productions in order to “de-cold war,” or to “de-Korean War”/“de-division system” by extension.

Heonik Kwon, in *The Other Cold War*, similarly writes of how histories of the Cold War tend to privilege Western histories and thus ignore the fact that the Cold War was in fact a “hot war” for many countries in Asia and the global South. The Cold War was thus not just an ideological conflict between the Soviet Union and the U.S., but can be seen as a “global cold war” in which multiple smaller states were implicated in these tensions and where they boiled over into “hot wars”: “In a wide definition, however, the global cold war also entails the unequal relations of power among the political communities that pursued or were driven to pursue a specific path of progress within the binary structure of the global order.”²³ Furthermore, the (global) Cold War also “consists of a multitude of these locally specific historical realities and variant human experiences, and this view conflicts with the dominant image of the cold war as a single, encompassing geopolitical order.”²⁴ Therefore, it is important to take into account “whose” and “which” cold wars in order to recognize that the Cold War has “locally specific resonances,” which necessarily means needing to take into account non-Western perspectives of the Cold War.

21 For more on the concept of “disavowals,” see Theodore Hughes’ book *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea: Freedom’s Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

22 See Suk-Young Kim, *DMZ Crossing: Performing Emotional Citizenship Along the Korean Border* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

23 Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2010): 2.

24 *Ibid.*, 6-7.

South Korean cinema has demonstrated these Cold War alignments and how they play out within the “locally specific” Korean War as well as the smaller scale of local governments, towns, and families.²⁵

In relation to the question of alternate history and temporality, which I discuss in greater detail in the next section of the article, Kwon also questions the “end” of the Cold War and writes that it did not end abruptly in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall; rather, he argues that “the historical turning point glossed as the end of the cold war is actually an extended horizon of ‘what is not yet,’ a field of time-space that is open to creative political acting and moral imagining.”²⁶ The films that I discuss literally take on the “locally specific” Cold War – the Korean War – through the exploration of the “what is not yet” by imagining and imaging an alternate history/future that has not yet arrived. Kwon also likens the Cold War’s ends as a slow “decomposition,” a time and space that is not quite divorced of the past yet still cannot fully imagine a future: it is an “unsettling situation in which the living reality is not really free from the immediate past and has not reintegrated the past into the time present as a past history – that is, it has a kind of spectral existence.”²⁷ It is this alternate temporality of the Cold War and Korean War, as well as the alternate epistemology of the Korean War that it engenders, that is taken up literally in the alternate history films that I discuss in this article.

25 In addition the films that I discuss in this paper, Im Kwon-taek’s 1994 film *Taebaek Mountains* is perhaps the most famous example of a film that focuses on the locally specific resonances of the Korean War.

26 Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2010): 8.

27 *Ibid.*, 33.

Alternate History and Heterotopias of the Korean War in 2009 *Lost Memories*, *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, and *JSA*

Each of the three films – *2009 Lost Memories*, *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, and *JSA* – focus on the theme of alternate history, in that the historical circumstances presented within the films are different than our current history. Alternate history is in itself a generic category, most commonly found within the science fiction genre. With the exception of *2009 Lost Memories*, however, the films that I study do not conventionally fall within the alternate history genre yet they do imagine otherwise a world different from our own *and* different from the conventional history/knowledge found within the respective diegetic film worlds as well. I am not claiming for these films to be included within the alternate history genre or science fiction genre (with the exception of *2009 Lost Memories*, which *is* explicitly an alternate history science fiction film); rather, I am arguing that these films present the promise of an alternate history and future, which could lead to a different understanding of those historical events for the audience, as well as a reevaluation of the legacies of the events – in the case of this article, the Korean War. In other words, the alternate histories that I trace in this film are a direct result of alternate epistemologies of the Korean War. This section traces out the general forms of alternate history within the films. The remainder of the article then explores explicitly the thematic forms of alternate history found within the films, specifically focusing on the films’ alternate enemies of the Korean War.

Specifically, *2009 Lost Memories* focuses on the (unending) Japanese colonial era, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* focuses on the Korean War period, and *JSA* focuses on contemporary North Korean-South Korean tensions along the DMZ. The films all play around with the rhetorical question of “what if...?” and follow the logics of this alternate line of questioning through their film narratives. In other words, these films take literally the speculations, promises, and failures of an alternate history/future that is different from reality and/or does not yet exist.

I thus formulate the guiding “what if” questions for each of the three films. *2009 Lost Memories* asks the question: What would be the history/futurity of the Korean peninsula if Japanese colonization had never ended? *Welcome to Dongmakgol* asks: Could there exist a place totally devoid of conflict and war during the Korean War era, as well as completely unaware of Cold War logics and structures of feeling? If so, what would this place look like? *JSA* asks: What would North Korean-South Korean interaction look like in arguably the most ideologically-demarcated space on the Korean peninsula, the DMZ? These “what if” questions grapple directly with the issues of temporality, place, and space and their relations to history and memory.

These what-if questions that each film posits create an alternate space of difference, similar to Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia.²⁸ Foucault, in the collected writings of this topic titled “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” writes of many different examples of heterotopias but uses the example of a mirror as the main example for conceptualizing the heterotopia as a space of difference. The mirror is both utopia and heterotopia because it simultaneously represents a space that does not exist (the world inside the mirror) yet its existence in real space as well as its interaction with objects/people around it, marks it also in relation to a subject who recognizes this difference:

From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there....it [the mirror] marks this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.²⁹

28 See <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf> for the text of Michel Foucault’s “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias.”

29 <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>: 4.

In a similar way, the films’ diegesis and the audience of the films reflect the mirror and subject “I” that Foucault writes about regarding heterotopic space. The Korean War, as represented in the films, and the historical context of the films within Korean history demonstrate a space of otherness or of imagining otherwise the Korean War. Therefore, despite the different periods of history in which each film takes place, they all posit a rethinking of the Korean War and a (re)questioning of dominant Cold War/Korean War allegiances and demarcations, as well as provide glimpses of an alternate future for a peaceful end to the Korean War as well as future peaceful reunification with North Korea. As the Korean War is still not technically over, these films form part of a continued grappling with memory and memorialization of the Korean War and a working through of “de-Korean War” through the exploration of the “locally specific” heterotopias of an alternate history that dares to imagine the world differently.

Alternate Histories, Alternate Enemies

2009: Lost Memories (Lee Si-myung, 2002) is a science fiction/action film about a Korea in which Japanese colonization had never ended. The film takes place in an alternate history Seoul in 2009 and follows the stories of two JBI (Japanese Bureau of Investigation) officers, one ethnically Korean (played by Jang Donggun (Chang Tongkōn)) and one Japanese (played by Toru Nakamura) as they investigate the terrorist group Hureisenjin, who function as modern-day Korean independence fighters. Throughout the film, Jang Donggun’s character, Sakamoto, who is otherwise almost completely assimilated into Japanese society, grapples with his Korean roots and eventually joins the Hureisenjin cause.

It is later revealed in the film that the alternate history was not a natural occurrence; rather, in the “correct” timeline of the film, a Japanese scientist had gone back in time to alter Japanese and Korean history. The scientist (in unaltered 2009) time travels to 1919 Harbin and assassinates

Ahn Junggeun (An Chungkūn) before he can assassinate Ito Hirobumi, the first governor-general of Korea. This then sets in motion a new story-line and history in which the March 1st movement of 1919 is effectively dispersed, the U.S. and Japan end up as allies during WWII, and the atomic bomb is dropped on Berlin in 1945 instead of on Japan (the impetus for why the Japanese scientist wanted to travel back in time in the first place is to prevent the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki).

Although not explicitly mentioned in this film, what is left unspoken is that, in this alternate timeline, the Korean War never occurs because the peninsula was never divided by the Soviet Union and the U.S. after 1945, as Korea had never become an independent nation in the first place. Furthermore, even in the corrected timeline, the problem of the Korean War is elided as it is revealed that in “proper” timeline 2009 Seoul, North and South Korea had already been reunified. Thus, this film’s alternate history posits an altered timeline and corrected timeline that are both different from our current history.

Even though the film is not explicitly about the Korean War and the erasure of the Korean War could be seen as just a result of the failure of Ito Hirobumi’s assassination setting into place a new historical timeline, the film still ends with a restored timeline 2009 Seoul, in which the Korean War does happen and the problem of the Korean War is resolved through successful reunification between South Korea and North Korea. Therefore, I argue that, in addition to the main historical events of the film that begin with the Japanese colonial era, the Korean War is still an important site of study in this film and that its erasure within the film is just as significant to study as if the Korean War had appeared visually on the screen.

Furthermore, the Hureisenjin in the film work together despite their knowledge of the correct timeline (they have knowledge of the correct timeline because a Korean scientist had also followed the Japanese scientist back in time and informed future generations of Koreans about the timeline change). While the terrorists/independence fighters are not de-

marked by North/South division, it is assumed that with the restoration of the timeline, perhaps they might not be on the same side after all because of the impending division of the peninsula that would result from correcting history. At this point, I have to raise a difficult hypothetical question: is a future without the Korean War, which had resulted in the deaths of millions of people (soldiers, civilians, and participants from across the world), even at the expense of continuing Japanese colonization, worth it? The film sidesteps the answering of this difficult question; rather, it ends up eliminating the problem of the Korean War completely. After all, a member of the Hureisenjin explains, in regards to the “proper” timeline: “[in] 2008, after 60 years of separation North and South Korea united to become a new nation with a strong economy and military. Korea became a new icon in Asia.” The film posits this explanation of successful future reconciliation as the ultimate goal and thus, even if the Korean War were to happen, *successful* Korean reunification would justify the deaths that resulted from the war.³⁰

In the film, there is also little question of who the enemy is – the Japanese who continue to colonize Korea and despite the presence of some sympathetic Japanese characters such as Saigo (Sakamoto’s JBI partner), the film overall condemns the Japanese as they indiscriminately and brutally kill the Hureisenjin, including a young boy, and exhibit racist attitudes toward ethnic Koreans (even Saigo is guilty of racism towards Sakamoto). Furthermore, the “memory wars” that rattle contemporary Northeast Asian relations is also shown literally here: the Japanese not only distort events in textbooks or conservative museums such as the Yushukan inside of Yasukuni Shrine, but they *literally* change history in

30 Not to mention, the indirect deaths and displacements that resulted from the Korean War/Cold War in Korea, such as the civilian massacres in Jeju (the 4.3 Incident) as well as throughout the rest of the Korean peninsula, the sexual and gendered violence that occur against women, particularly in the military camptowns, and the “orphans” from the Korean War that were/were not adopted within the transnational and transracial adoption industry.

the film. Thus, the film is as much about the contemporary “memory wars” as it is about the legacy of independence movements in Korea and the erasure of the Korean War within that narrative. The film, through the Hureisenjin’s mission, argues for the rightful and “true” history, although the true history in this case also comes along with the added outcome of future (unified) Korea becoming a “new icon in Asia.” This inability for Korea to become the “new icon in Asia” is shown as a direct result of continued Japanese colonization, which reflects historiographical debates in South Korea about whether Japanese colonialism had paved the way for modernity in Korea or had stymied Korea’s development as a modern nation.

However, in contrary to these demarcations of enemy and ally within the film, I also argue, however, that the idea of enemy may not be as clear-cut as it appears in the film. Perhaps the Hureisenjin could be seen as the main “enemies” in the film because while on a global scale, their mission to fight for Korean independence and future successful reunification may make sense, on the *locally specific* scale, the Hureisenjin are fighting for a history in which the Korean War resulted in the deaths of many Koreans (and many non-Korean combatants) as well as the displacement and separation of millions of Korean families, which still affect Koreans today.

Thus, the film sets up a choice between Japanese colonization or (unified) Korean sovereignty despite the real question being the choice between continued Japanese colonization or the death toll/destruction of the Korean War, which results in a still-divided Korea today and its traumatic legacies. This is a “problem” that is perhaps too big to grapple with however. Because the film is unable to deal with the problem of the Korean War, it ends up effacing it completely. Even with the erasure of the Korean War as a historical event in this alternate history film, the problem of the Korean War continues to haunt the film, demonstrating the inescapability of contemporary Cold War consciousness.

Welcome to Dongmakgol (Park Kwang-hyun, 2005) takes place during the Korean War. The film follows a group of North Korean soldiers and

South Korean soldiers as they stumble across a hidden village called Dongmakgol. The film’s portrayal of Dongmakgol has drawn comparisons to the magical landscapes of Hayao Miyazaki (of Studio Ghibli fame). Dongmakgol straddles a realm between fantasy and reality because the villagers within Dongmakgol have no idea that there is a war occurring, let alone that the country has been divided. The village becomes a meeting point not only for the South Koreans and North Koreans but also a downed American pilot and the rescue group that comes for him, thinking that Communist soldiers have captured him.

The early parts of the film are comedic and straddle the line between utopian fantasy comedy film and realist war film.³¹ The North Koreans and South Koreans, upon encountering each other in Dongmakgol, take part in a “Mexican standoff” and as both groups threaten to kill each other, they take the villagers hostage. The villagers, however, who are unable to understand the situation, soon amble off to their own daily activities. Eventually, a North Korean soldier accidentally sets off a grenade, which results in the destruction of the villagers’ food supply shed (in a magical scene in which the corn turns into popcorn during the explosion).

The film then follows the soldiers as they end up working together in the fields to help replace the villagers’ food supply. Changing out of their military uniforms into the white clothes of the villagers, the film demonstrates the soldiers’ transformation from wartime enemies to peaceful allies under the aegis of the utopian fantasy of rural agricultural life, a life that had been disrupted by war. The village is soon under attack, however, as U.S. soldiers prepare to bomb Dongmakgol, thinking that it is the location of a Communist hideout. The soldiers – North and South Korean – band together to divert the airplanes away from the village and end up

31 Despite *Welcome to Dongmakgol*’s falling within the subgenre of comedy film, the ending of the film employs blockbuster spectacle typical of other war films and features melodramatic war film conventions. I would go so far to argue that the affect of the film, particularly in its last act, is similar to that of the film *Taegukgi: Brotherhood of War* (*T’aekükki hwinalrimyö*) (Kang Je-gyu, 2004).

sacrificing their lives for the sake of the villagers.

The main “enemy” in this film is thus displaced to the role of the foreign outsider, the Americans, who attempt to bomb the village and hence bring the ideology of the Korean War/Cold War into the peaceful pristine place of Dongmakgol. The North and South Korean soldiers, furthermore, disavow³² their identity and ideological ties as “North Korean” or “South Korean” and instead identify with the villagers, poignantly illustrated by their wearing of the same clothing as the villagers. While they do don their uniforms again at the end of the film to prevent the American attack, they do so under the guise of “allied forces,” but this time as a “North-South Joint Force.” This is spoken as a joke by one of the soldiers before their imminent deaths, but the concept rings true as the film literally rewrites the conflict of the Korean War/Cold War into a miniature war between (unified) Koreans and U.S. forces.

Welcome to Dongmakgol, like *2009 Lost Memories*, prefers to “forget” the Korean War or to erase the problem of the Korean War, which is represented in the film’s idealization of the rural utopian village of Dongmakgol with no experience of the war and how agricultural life is enough to break ideological barriers between otherwise similar peoples. In the literally neutral space of Dongmakgol, a space that is impossible within Cold War ideology, as I will further demonstrate in my analysis of *JSA*, the North Korean and South Korean soldiers’ Mexican standoff becomes absurd. In fact, the comedic elements in the film specifically arise from the villagers’ lack of understanding of the conflict while the soldiers attempt to bring the war into the locally specific place of the village. Dongmakgol (both space and film) holds the promise of a different temporality, one in which the Korean War and its attendant Cold War logics can be read as absurd precisely because they are viewed from outside of

32 Interestingly, this disavowal actually comes earlier in the film, as one of the South Korean soldiers is a deserter who attempts to commit suicide throughout the early parts of the film.

the context by which those alignments can be understood. By painting the Mexican standoff - and by extension larger South Korean-North Korean relations - as absurd in the eyes of the villagers in this alternate world of the Korean War, film audiences may perhaps also view the reality of division culture as absurd as well. The soldiers' new uniforms - that of the white village clothing - further demonstrates their disavowal of both North Korean and South Korean politics for a different revisionist position, that of (re)unified Koreans against imperialist U.S. forces.

If *Welcome to Dongmakgol* presents the fantasy of an alternate revisionist Korean War in which Koreans work together to expel American imperialist forces (similar to the Hureisenjin against the Japanese), *JSA* depicts the possibility of the political power of friendship in order to change the course of history, and then shatters that possibility. The dam that Suhyök supposedly breaks down in the introductory epigraph of this paper proves to be a stronger structure than the individual characters realize.

JSA takes place in “present-day Korea” (which would be around 2000, when the film was released) and follows the story of South Korean and North Korean soldiers stationed along the DMZ. The film traces an incident in which two North Koreans end up dead inside of a North Korean guardhouse and an injured South Korean soldier (Suhyök, played by Lee Byunghun) escapes back to the South while a firefight breaks out. It is later revealed that the South Korean soldiers (there were two also at the scene of the crime) had become friends with the North Korean soldiers and due to the boredom of working the night shift of guarding the DMZ, they exchange letters/gifts across the DMZ and begin to meet periodically at the North Korean guard station, forging bonds of friendship.

The friendship begins when a South Korean soldier, Suhyök, steps on a landmine after his platoon accidentally crosses into North Korea and is subsequently rescued by two North Korean soldiers - Private Chöng and Sergeant O. The friendship ends, however, when an unintentional discovery of the illicit meetings by another North Korean guard results in the shooting incident, which makes up the central mystery of the film (Who

shot who? Is this incident worth entering into full-on war?). However, since both soldiers present differing and contradictory depositions, the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission, under the command of mixed-race Swiss and Korean Sophie, is brought in to mediate the conflict as a neutral third-party. Throughout the film, Sophie becomes increasingly obsessed with finding the truth of the incident (mirroring the audience reaction to a crime film) despite her colleague telling her that “here [in Pammunjeom (P’anmunchŏm)] the peace is preserved by hiding the truth. What they both [South Korea and North Korea] really want is that this investigation proves nothing at all.”

Unlike the other films I discussed, in this film, the enemy is more difficult to discern as the enemy is not only external but also internal. As is evident through the film, the external enemies are the South Korean and North Korean states who, for their own interests, prefer for the investigation to “prove nothing after all,” as maintaining the status quo of division is the best way of ensuring peace. As the South Korean commander says to Sophie, “Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission? There are two kinds of people in this world. Commie bastards...and the Commie bastards’ enemies. Neutral has no place here. You have to choose sides.” This warning comes to pass as the commander eventually reports to the NNSC authorities that Sophie’s father was a North Korean POW who ended up repatriating to Argentina, refusing the choice between either North Korea or South Korea, moving eventually to Switzerland. Despite Sophie’s father refusal to make a decision for either side, by virtue of his being North Korea, Sophie is no longer deemed to be a neutral party that can mediate between the two countries and must resign from her position. Therefore, this film demonstrates the insidiousness of Cold War/division cultures of the Korean War; even the refusal of a choice between two sides can be read and coopted as opposition.

Furthermore, as the film demonstrates, the DMZ itself is easy to cross – multiple times throughout the course of the film, various soldiers cross the DMZ, whether by accident or on purpose. The friendships and easy bonds that develop between the South Korean and North Korean soldiers

resemble this porous border in order to demonstrate that on the individual level, people do not want to be divided. This radical reimagining of South Korean-North Korean friendship, itself a form of alternate history and alternate world-making, paints a scene that solidifies a different image of North Korea to the audience. In this light, Private Chōng’s words to Suhyōk are a promise of the potential of an alternate world that provide a different understanding of Korean War division culture epistemologies: “After half a century of division, you have breached our tragic history of agony and disgrace, broken the dam to reunify our country.”

However, while border crossing through the space of the DMZ remains fluid, ideologies prove still too strong to break down, at least in the historical moment within the film. Hence, the internal enemies within the film are more difficult to showcase because they manifest within the main characters and emphasize how ideological convictions become embedded onto the body. The internal enemy is the self. For example, while the film exhibits several points of tension (most notably when Sergeant O, a North Korean, is offended when Suhyōk tells him that if he defects to the South, he would be able to eat all the Choco Pies he wants), the friendship that had been cultivated throughout the film is easily shattered through tragic violence when danger becomes imminent – in the moment when they are discovered by a different (and unfriendly) North Korean guard. While the film points out that despite Cold War logics and structures that would keep South and North Koreans apart (some of these logics have rendered North Koreans as inhuman monsters), the soldiers are able to gain each other’s trusts and to develop a friendly brotherly bond with one another. Yet, at the moment in which tension breaks out, the kinesthetic response of the South Korean soldiers (ingrained into them through the militarization of South Korean society – throughout the film, the soldiers are seen shooting at cardboard cuts of North Koreans), which is to shoot, overtakes these affective allegiances. Therefore, if the film shows us the promise of an alternate world through everyday interactions with North Koreans, the film also shatters that promise by showing that ingrained militarized bodily reactions to North Koreans work just as powerfully to destroy that

friendship. Unlike *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, in which the soldiers bond together in the space of the village, friendship as praxis in this film works in theory but not in practice.

Furthermore, at the end of the film, both South Korean soldiers attempt suicide and Suhyök succeeds at the end of the film. When Sophie finds out the truth that Suhyök was the first to shoot the North Korean soldier and reveals this to him (Suhyök had previously thought that the kill-shot was fired by the other South Korean soldier, Private Nam), he ends up committing suicide. The guilt that he (and Private Nam) bears shows that despite the best intentions of friendship as alternate history/world-making, the ideological boundaries of Cold War alignments prove to be more powerful than even the physical border of the DMZ itself. Suhyök's suicide is perhaps the only way to be truly neutral – neutrality taken to its extreme is suicide, in which the self ceases to exist. While *JSA* is not explicitly an alternate history film in the same way as the science fiction *2009 Lost Memories* and the utopian fantasy *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, I argue that it is the surreal moments inside the basement of the North Korean outpost, in which the camera rotates 360 degrees to each soldier as they talk to each other around a circle, that reflects the promise of an alternate future in which friendship can be seen as an alternate model to Cold War alignments.

Conclusion: Ruminations on the Photograph as Memorialization to the Alternate History of the Korean War

In conclusion, I explore briefly the concept of temporality within the films, particularly through each film's usage of the medium of the photograph. Each of these films, in a similar fashion, attempt to capture the fleeting moments of their own alternate histories through including a scene at the end in which the main characters are captured on film (even within the cinematic apparatus).

The Korean War and the division of the Korean peninsula have often

been referred to as a stalled temporality or as a standstill or pause in time.³³ The DMZ, for example, has been seen as space of untouched purity in which nature can develop fully without human intervention. Kuan-Hsing Chen and Heonik Kwon, as I pointed out at the beginning of this article, have spoken of the Cold War’s unending recursiveness as well as the slow “decomposition” of the Cold War in spaces in which the “Cold War is still alive within us.” If South Korean museums³⁴ have shown willingness in attempt to break free of the phantom grasp of the Korean War through focus on South Korean developmentalism and globalization, it seems as if film is intrinsically interested in bringing these ghosts back to haunt contemporary audiences.

Specifically, the three films that I discuss demonstrate a fetishism for documentation and memorialization, as if knowing that these moments of alternate history/future that provide brief glimpses of a world freed from Cold War divisions are actually fantasies. Indeed, all three films show the promise of North/South collaboration and its subsequent dismantling.

In *2009 Lost Memories* the photograph appears in the last scene of the film, which takes place in restored timeline Seoul in 2009 and follows a group of schoolchildren as they learn about the independence movement from a docent at the Independence Hall of Korea. One of the children runs back to look at a display and within the display he sees a photograph of Sakamoto and his love interest alongside the other independence fighters from the 1930s. The presence of the photograph, rather than providing an authentic past, feels out of place. Sakamoto and his love interest are the only people smiling alongside the serious faces of the independence army – they almost look as if they were obviously photoshopped into the photograph.

This photograph, which captures the success of Sakamoto in being able

33 See in particular Susie Jie Young Kim’s article “Korea beyond and within the Armistice: Division and the Multiplicities of Time in Postwar Literature and Cinema.”

34 South Korean museums about the Korean War, which I read alongside South Korean cinema, are a central subject of my dissertation project.

to restore the proper timeline of the past, ends up resembling a tourist photograph at a museum (it is common for most museums in South Korea to allow visitors to take pictures of themselves with historical filters/figures as background), coopting him into a history (by association with the Independence Hall of Korea) that is a specifically *South Korean* history. Yet, it is important to note that when Sakamoto chooses to join the Hureisenjin, disavowing his Japanese collaborator identity, he made the choice to represent Korea and *not* South Korea, as the country had not yet been divided. However, the end of the film seems to contradict Sakamoto's choice as the photograph, located within a South Korean museum and within the museum tradition of photographing oneself as a part of history, seems to eerily insert the question of nationality back into the film – a specifically South Korean nationality, despite the film's assertion that restored timeline 2009 is the year after North Korea and South Korea peacefully reunified.

In *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, the photograph actually takes the form of a video camera. The downed American pilot discovers a video camera among the ruins of another plane and uses it to capture the celebration of the villagers along with the soldiers before the Americans invade the village. The results of the video are shown in the credits as each character/actor smiles and shows off to the camera. The camera/moving images of the characters are an attempt to show visual evidence of the friendship and camaraderie that has developed among the soldiers and of disavowal of Korean War/Cold War politics. That the recording scene takes place right before the brutal invasion of the U.S. soldiers and the results of the footage are depicted after the tragic ending of the film is further demonstration of the film's idealization of village life and collaborative friendship that exist outside of war.

JSA also features two photographic scenes. The first is when the soldiers decide to take a commemorative photograph of themselves in the guardhouse (like *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, this takes place right before the moment in crisis in which their illicit interactions are discovered). Since they are located within the North Korean guardhouse, the portraits

of Kim Il Sung (Kim Ilsŏng) and Kim Jong Il (Kim Chŏngil) are within the frame of the photograph. The South Korean soldier who is taking the photograph awkwardly attempts to maneuver his position in order to avoid capturing the North Korean leaders, but is unable to do so. He finally asks the soldiers to put their heads together, which succeeds in blocking the portraits. Here, friendship at the expense of ideology is shown literally through the clever manipulation of the photograph.

Another photographic scene in *JSA* takes place when at the beginning of the film, a tourist on a DMZ tour attempts to take photographs of the soldiers station in Pammunjeom despite the rules against photography. This photograph is later revealed at the end of the film, before the credits, and depicts all four soldiers who would eventually become friends within the frame of the photograph. At the time in which the photograph was snapped, they did not know who each other were. The film and its last scene that focuses on the photograph suggest at the utopian possibility of potential friendship without the reality of an unsustainable friendship that had resulted in multiple murders and suicides throughout the plot of the film.

2009 Lost Memories, *Wecome to Dongmakgol*, and *JSA* all conclude with the photograph in order to capture the promise of an alternate history and epistemology of the Korean War outside of Cold War ideological divisions. These photographs are evidence that such a future/past could exist, even if only momentarily. They allow the viewers to catch glimpses of a world that is unfamiliar yet suggests at the potential for a different praxis beyond Cold War Manichean boundaries of “us” vs. “them.” These films suggest that “us” could be “them” and that individual affective interactions on the locally specific scale could slowly deconstruct these lines – such as the DMZ that could previously never be crossed – or to “de-Korean War” to frame this discourse in Chen’s terms. Like the portrayal of the famous border in the film *JSA*, these films suggest that perhaps these borders are not so impenetrable after all. Until the reality of reunification, viewers of South Korean cinema from the late 1990s to mid-2000s can settle with its promise and with the still frame of the pho-

tograph as memorial and material evidence of this possibility.

Remembering Private Chŏng's words that Suhyŏk had "done a great thing" by "breaching the tragic history of agony and disgrace, broken the dam to reunify our country," these films that portray an alternate history/future of the Korean War and its epistemologies beyond the framework of communism/anticommunism have also "done a great thing." Chŏng's words, which open this paper, can perhaps be a self-congratulatory ode to films of this time period of the late 1990s-mid-2000s. Yet at the same time, these films, while imagining and imaging the Korean War through alternate worlds, seem aware that reunification and its promise are fleeting and may not last. These films not only act to self-memorialize these moments of alternate histories/futures in the diegesis through the technological apparatus of the photograph, but they also continue to stand as living legacies and memorials for the Sunshine Policy era in which the Korean War and reunification were almost not part of an alternate future, but existing right on the cusp of reality.

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<Abstract>

“Breaking the Dam to Reunify our Country”: Alternate Histories of the Korean War in Contemporary South Korean Cinema

Kristen Sun

This article analyzes three contemporary South Korean films that (re)present alternate histories of the Korean War: *2009 Lost Memories* (2009 *Rosūt'ūmemorichū*) (Lee Simyung (I Simyǒng), 2002), *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (*Welk'ōm t'u Tongmakkol*) (Park Kwang-hyun (Pak Kwanghyōn,) 2005), and *Joint Security Area* (Park Chan-wook, 2000). Despite focusing on different eras of history, I argue that they rewrite dominant narratives of the Korean War (Cold War logics of anticommunism v. communism) and instead focus on North Korean-South Korean friendships/collaborations. Each film also presents similar situations in which a group of disparate “heroes” (made up of unified Koreans) band together to circumvent the circumstances of division. This article analyzes historical conditions that influence the emergence of these similarly-themed films as well as film content in order to further think through memorial legacies of the Korean War, as well as to take seriously the radical possibilities of a different future that each film presents.

Keywords: Korean War, Memory, Alternate History, *JSA*, *2009 Lost Memories*, *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, epistemology, Cold War division cultures

〈국문초록〉

“우리나라 통일의 장벽 부수기”: 현대 한국영화 속 한국전쟁의 대체역사

크리스틴 선 (UC버클리대학 민속학과 박사과정)

이 논문은 한국전쟁의 대체역사를 보여주는 세편의 현대 한국 영화, <2009 로스트 메모리즈 (이심영, 2002)>, <웰컴투 동막골 (박광현, 2005)>, <공동경비구역 JSA (박찬욱, 2000)>을 분석한다. 이 영화들은 역사의 다른 시대를 조명하고 있지만 필자는 그들이 남북한의 우호 및 협력을 조명하는 대신 한국전쟁의 지배적인 서술 (반공 대 공산주의라는 냉전적 논리)을 재서술하고 있다고 주장한다. 또한 각각의 영화들은 분단의 환경을 우회하기 위해 이질적인 “영웅” 집단 (통일된 한국인으로 구성된)을 등장하는 유사한 상황을 보여준다. 이 논문은 이러한 비슷한 주제의 영화들의 출현에 영향을 준 역사적 조건과 함께 한국전쟁 기억의 유산을 통해 생각을 확장하고, 각각의 영화가 보여준 다른 미래의 근본적인 가능성을 진지하게 다루기 위한 내용들을 분석한다

주제어: 한국전쟁, 기억, 대체역사, 공동경비구역 JSA, 2009 로스트 메모리즈, 웰컴투 동막골, 인식론, 냉전분단 문화