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Master's Prospectus
MS-GMC
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Introduction and Methodology

This master's thesis will examine depictions of borders and liminal spaces with regards to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea, in popular and documentary film and television of the 21st century. It will explore portrayals of the physical border between North Korea and the Republic of Korea (ROK), or South Korea, specifically the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along the 38th northern latitude, which will include examples of terrestrial, aquatic, and airborne crossings between the two states. In addition, this thesis will feature North Korea's physical land border with the People's Republic of China (PRC), or China, and the imagined liminal space between North Korea and Japan, which houses a sizable North Korean expatriate population.

This thesis will present the analyzed texts in three parts: one about South Korea, one about China, and one about Japan, in that order. Besides being a useful way to categorize the films being analyzed by country of origin, this approach will introduce the reader to North Korean border spaces with its most contentious neighbor, then broaden in scope from physical borders with South Korea and China into the virtual border with Japan. I believe organizing the project this way will ease the reader into understanding borders as more than hard lines on maps, and give them the framework to view the texts examined in this project as documenting how different groups see the borders that separate them.

I also intend to include a section for historical context and a final section after the analysis that compares media portrayals of North Korea with regional opinion polls. I believe a historical framework is necessary so that readers who are not familiar with the history between

these states can contextualize these works that often feature tension and animosity between various groups. The historical section will not be divided by region and will instead be centered around the Korean Peninsula. In the section comparing opinion polls with media portrayals, I will demonstrate whether the analyzed texts accurately reflect public sentiment towards North Korea in the three regions discussed.

This thesis will employ a theoretical framework largely informed by border studies, a branch of the humanities that includes anthropologists, sociologists, and media analysts, among others, dedicated to borders between human communities. My theoretical research will include more than just East Asian border depictions; I intend to also read academic writing on American media portrayals of the U.S.-Mexico border, as those film texts are a body of work that I, as an American media consumer, have been engrossed in my entire life. Furthermore, this project will analyze depictions of migrants in multiple forms: as soldiers, as prisoners, as refugees, and as expatriates. I intend to research the different lived experiences of these groups to strengthen my analysis of these texts and give the reader insight into how these migration narratives are formed.

By analyzing my chosen film texts through a framework of historical context and border studies, I will demonstrate how the shapes of the borders between North Korea and its neighbors influence the narratives made about those borders and how those narratives reflect real-world attitudes towards North Korea.

Tentative Outline

- I. Introduction
 - A. Thesis statement (see above)
- II. Short history of North Korea's international relations, context for 21st century
- III. South Korea
 - A. *Joint Security Area*
 - B. *The Net*
 - C. *Crash Landing on You*
- IV. China
 - A. *Dooman River*
 - B. *Savage*
 - C. Young Pioneer Tours videos
- V. Japan
 - A. *Go*
 - B. *Break Through!*
 - C. *Dear Pyongyang*
- VI. Comparison of public opinion polls - What do average citizens think of North Korea, compared to media portrayals?
- VII. Conclusion

Literature Review

Most academic writing on films regarding North Korean border spaces tends to focus on individual filmmakers' visions of the border and interactions between parties on either side of that border. In these analyses, border spaces are where identities are formed and challenged, especially where people on either side do not speak a common language.

Writing on Park's *Joint Security Area*, Cho Young-chul makes the case that the act of South Koreans crossing the border into North Korea complicates the identities formed on either side through their own national narratives that stand opposed to one another. This is a common theme among analyses of South and North animosity: The two nation-states, despite being unified as one Korea for centuries, currently stand in opposition because of their different economic philosophies. Cho argues that the complications arise from Koreans recognizing their common humanity and cultural roots by "transgressing" that border. This act of transgression leading to complication is essential to many South Korean films about the North, where long-held beliefs are challenged by some accidental meeting. There is an undercurrent of forbidden love in many of these texts.

In regards to China and Japan, border spaces are still seen as places of complication of identity, but their differences are more difficult to reconcile because of cultural and linguistic separation. Furthermore, the land border between China and North Korea is complex: In some places, there are bridges designated for travel between the two countries, while in other places there is harsh wilderness. Ma Ran, writing on Zhang's *Dooman River*, makes out China's border situation as similar to a refugee crisis, where the border is porous enough to allow people through, but their stay is not guaranteed or protected. Ma links this form of migration to China's economic sway over North Korea making it necessary for people who want to find work to resort

to desperate means. However, the importance of shared humanity remains as in South Korean films, as Ma points out, in that Chinese and North Koreans can find common ground despite their assumptions about one another.

Rhee Jooyeon examines Yang Yong-hi's autobiographical films about North Korean residents of Japan who eventually returned to North Korea, and her work shows how difference is reinforced between Japanese and North Koreans in that virtual border space. Koreans already experience systemic racism in Japan, but the semi-isolated North Korean expatriate community that venerates Kim Il Sung and his teachings further complicates existing cultural and linguistic differences between the two groups. The largely unknown stories of those who returned to North Korea further strains the relationship between Japanese and North Koreans, as this shroud of secrecy, combined with North Korean kidnappings of Japanese citizens during the 20th century, causes North Koreans to seem alien to their fellow citizens.

Tentative Film List

Park Chan-wook, *Joint Security Area* (공동경비구역 JSA), South Korea, 2000

Two pairs of South and North Korean soldiers form an unlikely but tragic friendship at a border crossing. There are two distinct border spaces in this film that contrast official and unofficial relationships between the two Koreas, and the soldiers from both sides display how their national identities are constructed in opposition to and with affinity for one another.

Kim Ki-duk, *The Net* (그물), South Korea, 2016

A North Korean fisherman accidentally drifts into South Korean waters and suffers culture shock when brought to Seoul. In addition to a fluid physical border, this film portrays the creators' vision of how far South and North Korean urban cultures have strayed apart with little contact and differing economic visions. However, it also explores how both states manufacture consent among their peoples to perpetuate their own systems.

Studio Dragon, *Crash Landing on You* (사랑의 불시착), South Korea, 2019

A South Korean *chaebol* heiress and a North Korean Army captain begin a romance after she accidentally finds herself in North Korea. This limited television series contrasts South Korean corporate culture with the strict regimentation of North Korean society. The romance at the core of the series deliberately obscures the differences between South and North Koreans.

Zhang Lu, *Dooman River* (두만강), South Korea and France, 2010

Two boys on either side of a river separating China from North Korea become friends. The harsh environment of this northern physical border plays an important role in the dangerousness of this border space.

Cui Siwei, *Savage* (*Xue bao*), China, 2018

A policeman stationed near the border mountainous China-North Korea border chases after a group of criminals holed up in the area. This film's action takes place near Mt. Paektu, a sacred site for Koreans and a national symbol of North Korea. While the central conflict is not about China-North Korea relations, the harshness of the environment reinforces the danger of border spaces.

Yukisada Isao, *Go*, Japan, 2001

A North Korean-Japanese high school student experiences prejudice for his heritage and attempts to start a romance with a Japanese girl. The protagonist is specifically North Korean and attends a North Korean school before the events of the film. Depicted are instances of anti-Korean racism in Japanese society largely dependent on the protagonist's economic situation.

Izutsu Kazuyuki, *Break Through!* (パッチギ!), Japan, 2005

Japanese and Korean students in 1960s Japan learn to coexist despite their differences. Japan-North Korea relations are not a major factor of this film, but the *zainichi* Korean-Japanese community portrayed in this film include a large number of North Korean expatriates. Japanese-Korean relations in Japan in this film will inform a more narrow discussion of Japanese-North Korean relations.

Yang Yong-hi, *Dear Pyongyang*, Japan, 2005

This autobiographical documentary depicts the aftermath of the director's father sending her brothers to live in North Korea during the prosperous 1970s. The director and her family remaining in Japan are cut off from her brothers, and the DPRK's deteriorating state at the end of

the 20th century causes her father to reevaluate his loyalty to North Korea and his decision regarding his sons.

Proposed Schedule

May 21	all academic literature and film texts viewed
June 4	I. Introduction and II. Short history completed
June 18	III. South Korea completed
July 2	IV. China completed
July 16	V. Japan completed
July 30	VI. Comparison and VII. Conclusion completed

My intention is to schedule a formal meeting with my advisors at the end of July to review my thesis. In addition, I will be sending my advisors a current copy of my thesis paper at each two-week deadline for them to review and give their feedback.

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