FRS note
N°13/2026

Youngshil KIM | Visiting Fellow, FRS

www.frstrategie.org | May 5, 2026

South Korea's soft power influence on North Korea

Introduction	1
1. South-North Korean relations during the Kim Dae-jung Administration (1998–2003)	2
2. Inter-Korean relations during the Roh Moo-hyun Administration (2003-2008)	6
3. Moon Jae-in Administration (2017-2022)	8
Conclusion	10

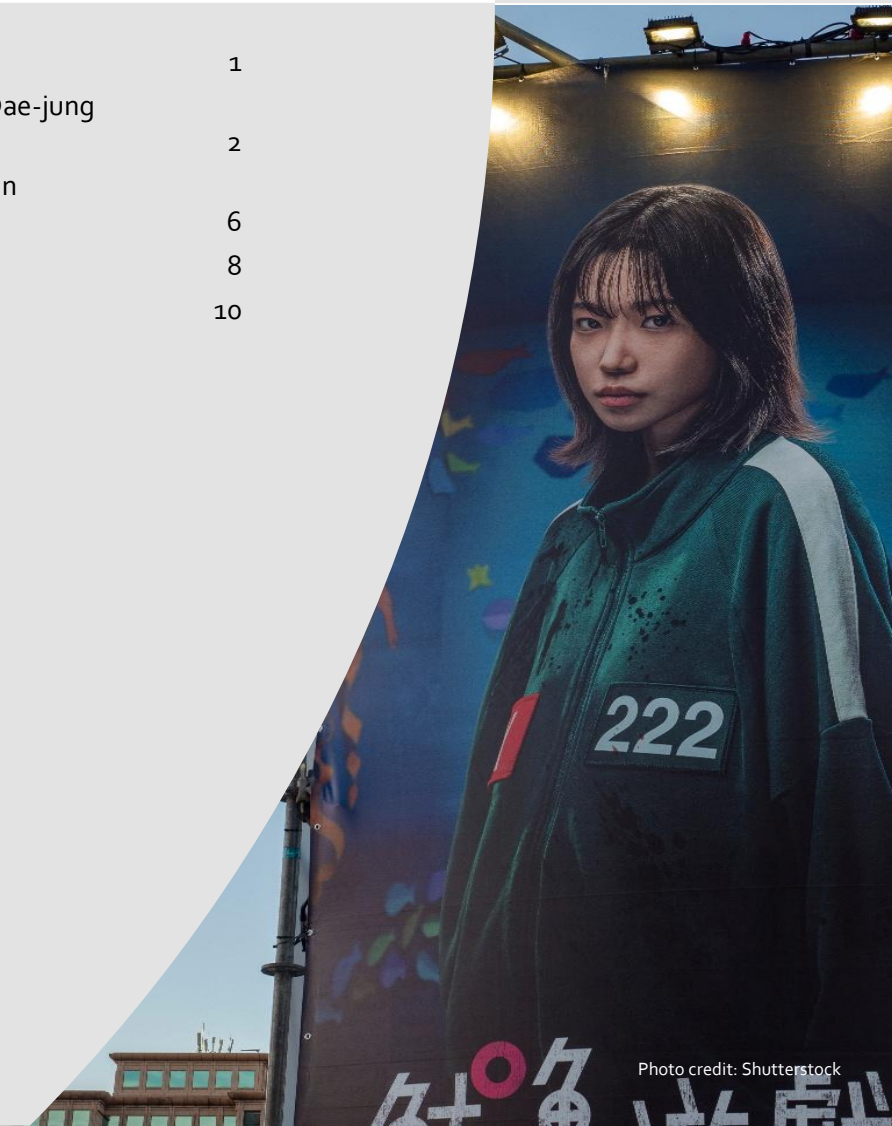


Photo credit: Shutterstock

Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (FRS)
55 rue Raspail 92300 Levallois-Perret
Fondation reconnue d'utilité publique par décret du 26 février 1993
Directeur de la publication : Bruno Racine
ISSN : 2273 - 4644
© FRS 2026 — tous droits réservés

Le Code de la propriété intellectuelle n'autorisant, aux termes des alinéas 2 et 3 de l'article L.122-5, d'une part, que les « copies ou reproductions strictement réservées à l'usage privé du copiste et non destinées à une utilisation collective » et, d'autre part, que les analyses et les courtes citations dans un but d'exemple et d'illustration sous réserve de préciser le nom et la qualité de l'auteur et la source de la citation, « toute représentation ou reproduction intégrale, ou partielle, faite sans le consentement de l'auteur ou de ses ayants droit ou ayants cause, est illicite » (alinéa 1er de l'article L. 122-4). Cette représentation ou reproduction, par quelque procédé que ce soit constituerait donc une contrefaçon sanctionnée par les articles L.335-2 et suivants du Code de la propriété intellectuelle.

Introduction

This study investigates the evolving cultural appeal of South Korea and its growing influence on audiences in North Korea. North Korea can be considered one of the most tightly controlled societies in the world. Compared to other socialist or authoritarian states, the inflow of external information is blocked to an unparalleled degree, and only thoroughly censored information is provided internally. Despite North Korea's intention to control all information in order to maintain its regime, the reality is that it cannot completely block all external information entering through borders or online channels. This situation can be understood through the testimonies of many North Korean defectors who have settled in South Korea. The North Korean regime is especially sensitive to information coming from South Korea.[1] If the influx of such external information leads to inconsistencies with the narratives spread by the North Korean ruling class, it can pose a serious threat to the stability of the North Korean regime.

South Korea's cultural industries began to flourish after the country's democratization in the late 1980s and expanded rapidly through the late 1990s and early 2000s. When the United States pressed South Korea to reduce the mandatory screen quota for domestic films in the early 2000s, the Korean film industry mobilized fierce opposition. Paradoxically, this crisis accelerated efforts to strengthen the global competitiveness of Korean cinema.[2] With the rise of global digital platforms such as YouTube and Netflix, South Korean cultural products gained unprecedented exposure *via* these transnational distribution networks, further intensifying the globalization of Korean popular culture. More recently, social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, alongside messaging apps such as KakaoTalk, have diversified distribution, allowing cultural content to circulate rapidly among Korean, diasporic, and global audiences.

A key sociopolitical factor behind this cultural expansion was the trajectory of South Korea's democratization movement. Many former pro-democracy activists – unable to obtain stable positions in the public sector or large conglomerates due to their anti-governmental backgrounds – entered media, publishing, and cultural production.[3] Because the democratization movement was ideologically intertwined with the nationalist aspiration for peaceful reunification, these socially and politically conscious creators produced numerous works addressing inter-Korean reconciliation and the human consequences of national division.

Shiri (1999) and *Joint Security Area* (2000) marked the first major cinematic expressions of this trend.[4] Their exploration of the inter-Korean relationship resonated widely, drawing vivid attention. Subsequent films such as *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War* (2004) and *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2005) achieved both critical acclaim and commercial success, further normalizing depictions of North Koreans as multidimensional subjects rather than ideological caricatures. During the Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022), South Korea's cultural engagement with North Korea reached a new global milestone. The drama *Crash Landing on You* (2020), released worldwide on Netflix, broke international viewership records with its portrayal of a cross-border romance between a South Korean businesswoman and a North Korean soldier. Unlike state-driven public diplomacy, this

[1] "Reconstructing the Enemy", *Harvard Political Review*, 9 February 2015.

[2] Jimmyn Parc, Patrick A. Messerlin, *The Untold Story of the Korean Film Industry. A Global Business and Economic Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 55.

[3] "인터넷.문화계도 '운동권 성공시대'" [Internet and cultural sectors also see "era of activists success"], *The JoongAng Ilbo*, 23 February 2003.

[4] "박찬욱 "감옥 갈 각오로 만들었다…"JSA" 퀴어영화 될 뻔한 사연" [Park Chan-wook: 'I made it prepared to go to prison' – The story of how *JSA* almost became a queer film], *The JoongAng Daily News*, 2 May 2025.

form of soft power bypasses symmetrical dialogue with the regime in Pyongyang and resonates emotionally with ordinary North Koreans.

When South Korean filmmakers first began dealing with these kinds of subjects, they had to worry about whether they might be violating the National Security Law in South Korea, and some even said they made films at the risk of going to prison.[5] This imaginary space, which tested the limits of imagination and tolerance, went on to influence both ordinary audiences and the government, eventually allowing for a more open discourse about North Korea within South Korea.

For North Korean authorities whose primary objective is to preserve regime stability and prevent ideological contamination, this shift poses a heightened threat. According to witnesses of North Korean refugees, South Korean pop culture is infiltrating everyday life in North Korea and weakening the regime's monopoly over information despite severe penalties.[6]

Historically, cultural content addressing North Korea tends to flourish under South Korea's progressive administrations. This phenomenon has been arguably more destabilizing to the North Korean regime than the confrontational policies preferred by conservative governments. Thus, it remains unclear whether such content actually contributes to the progressive goal of fostering inter-Korean reconciliation. Instead, cultural soft power may provoke countermeasures, such as intensified censorship or ideological campaigns in North Korea. However, in the long term, it will help break down the information barrier by informing ordinary North Koreans about the realities of the North Korean regime and the outside world.

This study compares the North Korea policies of progressive South Korean administrations with the cultural productions that gained prominence during those periods. By analyzing South Korean cultural messaging and North Korea's corresponding reactions, including reinforced censorship measures such as the 2020 Anti-Reactionary Thought and Culture Law, the research aims to clarify the role of popular culture as a form of soft power.

1. South-North Korean relations during the Kim Dae-jung Administration (1998–2003)

The Kim Dae-jung government (1998–2003), which marked the first peaceful transfer of presidential power to an opposition party in South Korea's history, introduced the *Sunshine Policy*, a North Korea engagement strategy fundamentally distinct from the anti-communist, security-centered approaches that had characterized earlier authoritarian governments. The *Sunshine Policy* rested on three core principles: the renunciation of military force as a means of resolving inter-Korean issues, the pursuit of peaceful coexistence rather than the collapse or absorption of North Korea, and the promotion of mutual trust through expanded inter-Korean exchange and cooperation.[7]

Implementation of this policy led to several watershed developments. Most notably, the first inter-Korean summit was held in Pyongyang on June 15, 2000, yielding the historic

[5] "'Sad reality' of why Joint Security Area, Korean hit film, strikes a chord 25 years on", *South China Morning Post*, 21 February 2025.

[6] *2024 Report on North Korean Human Rights*, cited *in* "North Korea executed man for distributing K-pop, report from defectors shows", *The Guardian*, 28 June 2024.

[7] Announcement of the Berlin Declaration, National Archives of Korea, 20 February 2014.

Joint Declaration. Multiple rounds of separated family reunions were subsequently organized, and economic cooperation advanced through projects such as the Kaesong Industrial Complex, the Mount Kumgang tourism program, and the modernization of inter-Korean communication and transportation links. These achievements transformed inter-Korean relations and contributed to Kim Dae-jung becoming the first Korean recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000.

Kim's administration also played a pivotal role in liberalizing South Korea's long-standing restrictions on Japanese popular culture, which had remained in place since the country's liberation in 1945.[8] This cultural opening laid an important foundation for the global expansion and competitiveness of Korean popular culture in the following decades.

North Korea, for its part, viewed Seoul's policy shift as an opportunity to expand inter-Korean engagement but responded in a calculated manner aimed at ensuring regime stability. Although Kim Jong-il had succeeded in maintaining his regime following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, North Korea was experiencing severe economic distress. Under these conditions, South Korean assistance, particularly in the form of food, fertilizer, and economic cooperation, became highly valuable. Inter-Korean dialogue also offered Pyongyang a potential avenue for alleviating its international isolation, prompting the regime to engage strategically with the South's initiatives.[9]

Despite the general atmosphere of reconciliation, military tensions persisted. Naval clashes in the Yellow Sea and emerging nuclear issues underscored the limits of inter-Korean rapprochement. Domestically, North Korea framed the *Sunshine Policy* as evidence of the superiority of its socialist national identity and promoted the narrative that the South's conciliatory approach reflected the success of the "By Our Nation Itself" ideology.[10]

The period nevertheless witnessed a substantial expansion in people-to-people exchanges. The Mount Kumgang tourism program enabled ordinary South Koreans to visit North Korea for the first time on a sustained basis, and various forms of civil society interaction – academic conferences, NGO initiatives, religious exchanges, and artistic and cultural collaborations – gained momentum.

At the same time, the number of North Korean defectors arriving in the South increased sharply. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Unification,[11] whereas defections had remained in the hundreds annually through the mid-to-late 1990s, the figure rose dramatically to between 1,000 and 2,000 per year during the Kim Dae-jung administration. The proliferation of local markets (*jangmadang*) further weakened state control and accelerated social transformations within North Korea.[12] The famine loosened the regime's grip on the populace in a way no other event had before. Required for their survival to become traders and individual strivers, many had found a certain freedom.[13] North Koreans started to have access to radio programs and broadcasts from South Korea and music cassette tapes brought in from the ethnic Korean region of Yanbian in China.[14]

---

[8] Opening of Japanese Popular Culture, National Archives of Korea, 1 December 2006.

[9] Koh Yu-Hwan, "김대중 정부의 대북전략과 정책과제" [The Kim Dae-jung administration's North Korea strategy and policy challenges], *Unification Economy*, December 2000.

[10] "How We Saw the Sunshine Policy in North Korea", *Daily NK*, 10 April 2005.

[11] "Current Status of North Korean Defectors", Ministry of Unification.

[12] *North Korea Knowledge Dictionary*, Ministry of Unification, 2021.

[13] Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader-North Korea and the Kim Dynasty*, Thomas Dune Books, 2006, p. 591.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 432.

1.1 *Shiri* (1999)

During the Kim Dae-jung government, the releases of *Shiri* (1999) and *Joint Security Area* (2000) marked a watershed moment in South Korean cinema. These two blockbuster productions inaugurated a new phase in the nation's film history – one distinguished by unprecedented thematic ambition, commercial scale, and cultural influence.[15] *Shiri* was released just after South Korean cinema broke free from the censorship. Only in 1996 did the South Korean Constitutional Court finally make its ruling that the existing film pre-deliberation system was unconstitutional.[16]

Shiri offered a groundbreaking narrative that centered on a tragic confrontation between a South Korean intelligence operative and a North Korean elite commando who, unbeknownst to each other, are romantically involved. Their intimate relationship unfolds against the backdrop of a North Korean plot to sabotage an inter-Korean peace event, setting the stage for a dramatic struggle to prevent the outbreak of war.

At the heart of the film lies an exploration of how the structural conflict between the two Koreas devastates the lives of individuals enmeshed within it. Although love develops between agents duty-bound to kill one another, their relationship disintegrates the moment their true identities are revealed. This collapse functions as a symbolic representation of the tragic conditions produced by national division. The film further articulates the duality that characterizes inter-Korean relations: a peace ceremony overshadowed by latent terror, a romantic relationship predicated on concealed identities, and a broader political landscape in which overt gestures of reconciliation coexist uneasily with underlying tensions. In this respect, *Shiri* captures the paradoxical atmosphere of the late 1990s and early 2000s, when optimism surrounding the *Sunshine Policy* coexisted with persistent security anxieties.

The impact of the film on South Korean audiences was particularly significant. For decades, anti-communist state ideology had fostered a form of internalized censorship, discouraging citizens from articulating or even imagining nuanced perspectives on North Korea or its people. By portraying a North Korean operative as a complex human being torn between personal affection and national duty, *Shiri* encouraged viewers to adopt a more universal, humanistic perspective toward North Koreans – an approach rarely seen in popular media up to that time.

Ultimately, *Shiri* demonstrated that inter-Korean dynamics could serve as compelling material for commercial entertainment, thereby opening the door for subsequent films dealing with South-North relations to gain widespread domestic and international recognition. The film thus occupies a pivotal place in the evolution of South Korean cinema, marking a transition toward narratives that engage simultaneously with national history, political ideology, and global cinematic trends.[17]

1.2 *Joint Security Area* (2000)

The photograph of President Kim Dae-jung and Chairman Kim Jong-il shaking hands in Pyongyang looked almost surreal. *Joint Security Area (JSA)*, which was released shortly afterwards, had an even greater impact because its cinematic language suggested that a

[15] Moon Byeon-gon, "정부 '대북기조' 영화에 드러난다?...'쉬리'부터 '강철비'까지" [Is the Government's North Korean policy revealed in movies? From *Shiri* to *Steel Rain*], Hyundae News, 7 May 2007.

[16] "Reconstructing the Enemy", *op. cit.*

[17] "정부 '대북기조' 영화에 드러난다?...'쉬리'부터 '강철비'까지" [Is the Government's North Korean policy revealed in movies? From *Shiri* to *Steel Rain*), *op. cit.*

new kind of relationship with North Korea was possible, and that the long-held ideologies, ways of thinking, and assumptions of South Koreans could, in fact, change.

JSA unfolds through the structure of an investigation conducted by a Swiss officer from the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission into a shooting incident at the Joint Security Area in Panmunjom, in which two North Korean soldiers were killed. The surviving South Korean and North Korean soldiers at the scene claim that the South Korean soldiers accidentally crossed into the northern side during a standoff and ended up killing the two North Korean soldiers. Yet their testimonies do not align perfectly, and the full truth gradually comes to light.

In reality, the bond between the soldiers began when two North Korean soldiers rescued the South Korean soldier after he stepped on a land mine. Their friendship grew bolder over time as they crossed the border to visit one another's guard posts, sharing food, talking, and playing games – just like ordinary friends. One day, while the two South Korean soldiers were at the North Korean post, a North Korean superior unexpectedly entered, and at that moment, their friendship had no place to exist within the rigid structure of inter-Korean confrontation, leading to the tragic shooting incident.

Although their friendship ends in tragedy, the film demonstrates that genuine *camaraderie* between South and North Korean soldiers is possible even under conditions of military tension. As a result, it fostered an emotional shift among viewers in South Korea. Released shortly after the 2000 inter-Korean summit, the film also played a role in reinforcing public discourse around peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula.

Official information on the impact of *Shiri* and *JSA* on North Korean spectators is extremely limited, thus we can only infer its effects. It was widely rumored at that time that Kim Jong-il, known as an avid lover of films and the arts, collected information about South Korean movies and had a special interest in the Korean actress who played the female lead in *JSA*.[18] However, North Korea strictly controls the inflow of foreign films, making it unlikely that anyone other than high-level officials responsible for censorship would have accessed the movie through official channels. Nevertheless, South Korean films and dramas have consistently entered the country through unofficial routes. It is therefore difficult to rule out the possibility that some North Korean residents may have encountered the films. However, since the films depict stories entirely different from the regime's propaganda, and deals with themes that the North Korean authorities are highly sensitive to, it is possible that the regime classified them as "ideologically harmful content" and enforced even stricter crackdowns on their circulation. For ordinary citizens, simply accessing foreign publications, films, or music is considered a dangerous act that could lead to being sent to a political prison camp, imprisoned, or even executed. Yet, according to the memoirs of a South Korean actress and a film director who were abducted by Kim Jong-il, the supreme leader himself had a particular fondness for South Korean films, keeping around 300 of them in his personal film archive – an undeniable contradiction.[19]

---

[18] "영화 '공동경비구역 JSA', 김정일도 "인민들에게 보여주고 싶은 영화" 극찬했다?" [Did Kim Jong-Il also highly praised the movie "JSA" as "A movie I want to show the people"?], *Joongboo Daily*, 26 January 2019.

[19] Lee Soo-kyung, "[김씨 왕조의 실체] 김정일의 남한 문화 사랑, 자유아시아방송" [The reality of the Kim dynasty, Kim Jong-il's love for South Korean Culture], RFA, 3 May 2010.

2. Inter-Korean relations during the Roh Moo-hyun Administration (2003-2008)

President Roh Moo-hyun pursued a North Korea policy that built upon and further developed President Kim Dae-jung's *Sunshine Policy*. His approach emphasized peace settlement, trust-building, expanded economic cooperation, and shared prosperity on the Korean Peninsula as the core principles of inter-Korean relations.[20] As a result, tangible achievements were realized, including the full-scale operation of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, the expansion of tourism to Mount Kumgang, and the 2007 inter-Korean summit. The image of President Roh walking across the Military Demarcation Line on foot remains a vivid and symbolic representation of this period.

On the other hand, challenges persisted. The situation with the North Korean nuclear issue worsened; in addition, on the South Korean domestic stage, there was an ongoing controversy over the so-called "generosity policy" that was perceived as benefiting only North Korea.[21] Due to challenges including the nuclear issue, international pressure, and domestic economic conditions, it was difficult for North Korea to fully embrace South Korea's reconciliation policy, and overall, Kim Jong-il maintained a cooperative attitude within the framework of strategic calculation.

Under the Roh Moo-hyun government, *Taegukgi: Brotherhood of War* (2004) and *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2005) became two representative films dealing with inter-Korean themes. In *Taegukgi*, the North Korean soldier is not portrayed as a faceless, hostile enemy but as an ordinary young man who once worked as a shoe shiner under a South Korean soldier and was later conscripted in his North Korean hometown, eventually captured as a prisoner of war. *Welcome to Dongmakgol* goes further, presenting a lively, even lighthearted and fantastical atmosphere in which soldiers from North Korea, South Korea, and the United States band together to protect an innocent village untouched by the scars of the Korean War. Both films, by focusing on the tragic human consequences of war rather than inter-Korean hostility, contributed to fostering an anti-war and pro-peace sentiment.

2.1 *Taegukgi: Brotherhood of War* (2004)

The two main characters in *Taegukgi* are brothers who serve as soldiers in the South Korean Army. The older brother supports their intelligent but physically frail younger brother and their mother by working as a shoe shiner. When the younger brother is drafted into the Korean War, the elder brother enlists as well to protect him. After being told by his superior that earning a medal would allow his younger brother to be sent home, the elder brother recklessly throws himself into dangerous battles to gain military merit. As the fighting intensifies, he gradually transforms into a ruthless soldier who prioritizes annihilating the enemy over the lives of those around him. Seeing his brother descend into the madness of war, the younger brother tries to stop him, but the elder grows even harsher, ultimately pushing his brother away.

Although the elder brother eventually earns a medal and pleads with his superior to send his younger brother home, his request is rejected. Believing that his brother has been killed in action, he turns into a rage-driven killing machine. He is then mistaken for a North

[20] Cho Min, "노무현 정부의 평화번영정책: 전망 및 과제" [Peace and prosperity policy of the Roh Moo-hyun Government: prospects and challenges], Korea Institute of National Unification, 2015.

[21] Jeong Yong-in, "대북지원 70 억 달러 논란의 진실" [The truth behind the $7 billion aid to North Korea], *Weeky Kyunghyang*, 2 May 2017.

Korean "partisan leader" and ends up facing off against South Korean forces, ultimately meeting a tragic death at the hands of advancing Chinese and North Korean troops.

The film depicts the identities of South and North Korean soldiers not as fixed categories but as fluid positions that can shift at any moment. It emphasizes the dangerous and chaotic atmosphere in which people can easily be branded as enemies during internal denunciations or purges of so-called reactionaries. Amid this turmoil, the elder brother's *fiancée* – wrongly accused of being a communist – is killed, which vividly embodies the tragedy of families and comradeship being torn apart.

2.2 *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2005)

Welcome to Dongmakgol (2005) powerfully conveys anti-war and peace messages that maximize the atmosphere of inter-Korean peace and reconciliation. Dongmakgol is portrayed as a utopian village untouched by both news of the Korean War and its horrors. North and South Korean soldiers and an American pilot inadvertently arrive there, but even these soldiers become overwhelmed by the villagers' innocence and the peaceful atmosphere. Through their shared experience of defeating the village's enemy – a wild boar –, they abandon their ideological confrontation and grow into cooperative companions.

However, the scars of war soon reach the village, and the film concludes with the soldiers sacrificing themselves and launching a decoy operation to protect the village, which has become a military target. A noteworthy point is that even scenes involving grenade explosions or U.S. airstrikes are portrayed in a bright, buoyant way – popcorn flying and fireworks bursting –, turning what would normally be brutal scenes into something visually whimsical.

Compared to the films examined earlier, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* portrays North Korean soldiers in a more positive, humane way, and by highlighting human tragedy within the horrific circumstances created not by ideology but by war itself, the film expands the space for discourse on reconciliation and potential reunification between North and South Korea.

While senior South Korean military officials expressed concern about the potential negative effects of the so-called "Welcome to Dongmakgol syndrome" on younger soldiers,[22] the film also includes scenes that the North Korean leader would find hard-hitting or difficult to swallow. In response to a question from a North Korean People's Army officer, the village chief in the film remarks that leadership can be easily secured simply by feeding people well. It also depicts a North Korean officer openly acknowledging North Korea's responsibility for the outbreak of the Korean War. For these reasons, it can be assumed that the film was likewise classified as a "ideologically harmful content" in North Korea and subjected to even stricter controls. It is therefore difficult to find any records of North Korean residents' reactions to the film. Despite the regime's blockade efforts, however, video tapes of South Korean soap operas were for sale in North Korean markets[23] and cellular phones were in wide use in Pyongyang. News spread very quickly *via* the grapevine.[24]

[22] "웰컴투 동막골"의 정치사회학" [The political sociology of "Welcome to Dongmakgol"], KyungHyang Dailynews, 7 September 2005.

[23] Bradley Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 666.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 432.

3. Moon Jae-in Administration (2017-2022)

After a decade of conservative rule, the Moon Jae-in government took office in 2017 and devoted significant effort to restore inter-Korean relations, which had largely stalled under previous conservative governments. Even as the North Korean nuclear crisis intensified, the administration refused to let go of the inter-Korean channel and worked to build trust and dialogue, aiming to establish a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula and to formulate a long-term roadmap toward unification.[25]

As a result, at the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in February 2018, the North and South Korean delegations marched together under the Korean Unification Flag, and a joint inter-Korean women's ice hockey team was formed. Riding this momentum, in April 2018, the leaders of the two Koreas met at Panmunjom, crossed the Military Demarcation Line together, and adopted the Panmunjom Declaration. In September 2018, President Moon officially visited Pyongyang and signed the Pyongyang Joint Declaration, pushing inter-Korean relations rapidly toward reconciliation and cooperation.

Meanwhile, U.S. President Donald Trump initially maintained a hardline "maximum pressure" stance toward North Korea, but in response to Kim Jong-un's conciliatory gestures, he went on to hold U.S.-North Korea summits in Singapore, Hanoi, and Panmunjom. These meetings and declarations continue to influence the second Trump administration, as well as South Korea's present progressive government under President Lee Jae-myung.

In examining cultural content produced during the Moon government, *Ashfall* (2019) and *Crash Landing on You* (2020) both stand out as key reference points. The films released during this period, following a decade of severed inter-Korean relations under conservative governments, are generally regarded as having approached North Korea-related subjects with a lighter tone and greater flexibility.[26]

3.1 *Ashfall* (2019)

The film *Ashfall* is a large-scale disaster movie in which North and South Korean agents join forces to prevent an even greater eruption that could blanket the entire Korean Peninsula after Mount Baekdu violently explodes. By setting an unprecedented catastrophe against Mount Baekdu – a place revered by both South and North Koreans – the film presents an unquestionable premise: in order to prevent a greater disaster, the two Koreas must collaborate. At the outset of life-or-death situations, mutual suspicion, distrust, and even acts of betrayal emerge. However, cooperation becomes the only way to prevent mutual destruction, and thus the agents ultimately join forces, stop the massive eruption, and become national heroes who save the Korean peninsula. Faced with a natural disaster threatening the peninsula they share, cooperation between the two Koreas is accepted as a completely natural necessity. Combined with the inter-Korean atmosphere of reconciliation at that time, the film became a commercial success. Alongside other works depicting inter-Korean relations – such as *Confidential Assignment* (2017, 2022) and the *Steel Rain* (2017, 2020) series – *Ashfall* helps solidify narratives about North Korea as a familiar and well-established genre within mainstream cinema.[27]

---

[25] Kim Jusam, "북한의 비핵화와 한국정부의 대북정책" [Denuclearization of North Korea and the South Korean Government's North Korea Policy], *The Journal of the Border Area and Reunification Studies*, Summer 2022, pp.97~98.

[26] "정부 '대북기조' 영화에 드러난다?...'쉬리'부터 '강철비'까지" [Is the Government's North Korean policy revealed in movies? From *Shiri* to *Steel Rain*], *op. cit.*

[27] *Ibid.*

3.2 *Crash Landing on You* (2020)

Crash Landing on You makes a new attempt at depicting everyday life in a North Korean village – rather than focusing on the extraordinary settings of Panmunjom or espionage activities. To achieve this, a North Korean defector-writer participated directly in the scriptwriting,[28] enabling the drama to portray, with realism, elements such as North Korea's black market, chronic power shortages, and North Korean residents' reactions to South Korean products and people. The series delivers a powerful message that empathy and even love between individuals can transcend the divide between South and North.

Moreover, because the drama was distributed globally on Netflix during the COVID-19 pandemic, its impact became international, marking a new milestone in drawing worldwide attention to inter-Korean relations. Although the series has been criticized for excessively romanticizing and beautifying North Korean life and its people, [29] it nevertheless leaves a strong impression that North Koreans – living quietly under a dictatorship – are ordinary people no different from residents of any other region, with the same daily routines, emotions, and human experiences.

Despite the North Korean regime's efforts, it has not been able to completely shut out the rest of the world. When food and clothes came in over the Chinese border, so, too, did information.[30] Traders smuggled flash drives and micro-storage SD cards into North Korea to sell secretly in the markets. DVD players with USB drives have become hot-ticket items. Activists in South Korea put USB drives loaded with movies and soap operas in balloons that they float across the border. They are gobbled up by North Koreans hungry for information. [31] Newer South Korean content was reaching North Korea faster than in previous decades. Everyone knows everyone watches, including those who do the crackdowns.[32]

Aware that outside media has crossed his country's borders, Kim Jung-un has given new powers to the special unit of security services charged with enforcing the ban on illegal foreign media. [33] People in North Korea, including schoolchildren, are being publicly executed, sent to labor camps or subjected to brutal public humiliation for watching South Korean television shows or listening to K-pop.[34]

After the release of *Crash Landing on You*, North Korea took the unusual step of issuing a statement. North Korean state media slammed South Korean movies and dramas for engaging in "anti-republic" propaganda with fakes and fabrication about the communist state,[35] warning of consequences for those involved.[36] North Korea does not distinguish between the actions of the South Korean government and those of ordinary citizens, and its strong reaction to South Korean cultural content can be interpreted as an indication that such cultural penetration is perceived as a significant threat to the North Korean regime.

---

[28] "Crash Landing on You: The defector who brought North-South Korean romance to life", BBC, 22 February 2020.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Anna Fifield, *The Great Successor-The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jung Un*, Public Affairs, 2019, p. 117.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 118.

[32] "North Korea: teenagers 'executed for watching Squid Game' as regime wages war on K-Drama and K-Pop", Amnesty International, 4 February 2026.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 123.

[34] Amnesty International, *op. cit.*

[35] "North Korea blasts South's 'insulting' dramas and films", BBC, 4 March 2020.

[36] "North Korean media accuses South Korean movies, dramas", *The Korea Times*, 4 March 2020.

Conclusion

At the end of 2024, the conservative President Yoon Suk-yeol, citing the need to counter the threat posed by North Korea, declared martial law. However, the attempt collapsed within a few hours after facing strong resistance in the National Assembly, ultimately resulting in Yoon's impeachment. The progressive Lee Jae-myung administration took office in 2025 and proposed 'END' (Exchange, Normalization, and Denuclearization) as its North Korea policy. The South Korean Government's Fifth Basic Plan for the Development of Inter-Korean Relations, announced in March 2026, sets out a vision of "peaceful coexistence between the two states on the Korean Peninsula". It presents three core principles: respect for the North Korean system, no pursuit of absorption-based unification, and no engagement in hostile acts.[37]

Meanwhile, North Korea, in response to the leaflets sent from South Korea,[38] blew up the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong in 2020 – a symbol of inter-Korean reconciliation. It also amended the Anti-Reactionary Thought and Culture Law to prevent the spread of content not approved by government censors. The law defines South Korean content as "*rotten ideology that paralyzes the people's revolutionary sense*", and mandates between five and fifteen years of forced labor for watching or possessing South Korean dramas, films or music. The law also prescribes heavy sentences, including the death penalty, for distributing "*large amounts*" of content or organizing group viewings.[39] Furthermore, Article 41 of the Law on Ensuring Youth Education, passed in 2021, forbids young people from speaking or writing "*in odd speech patterns that are not our own*". While North Korea has legally banned youth from using "non-socialist" language, South Korean speech patterns are quietly spreading among young people regardless.[40] People commonly watched South Korean TV knowing the risks, but the punishment depended heavily on money.[41]In 2024, North Korea declared that peaceful reunification with the South was no longer possible and designated South Korea as a hostile state. At the 9th Party Congress held in February 2026, Kim Jong-un again declared that South Korea would be permanently excluded from the category of a fraternal nation.[42] Following the declaration, North Korea has ordered a sweeping ideological campaign to erase South Korea from the minds of young people, directing youth organizations to conduct weekly sessions aimed at purging South Korean cultural influence from those under 30.[43]

If there is to be any change in the *status quo* of inter-Korean relations, this process will be increasingly shaped by the messages sent by South Korean cultural creators and the way those messages are perceived by the North Korean people, rather than policy shifts by the authorities of the two Koreas. North Korean refugees believe that the regime will not collapse without outside influence, such as the flow of foreign culture.[44] The crucial question will be then how effectively and until when the North Korean regime can block external information from reaching its population.

---

[37] "「2026 년 제 1 차 남북관계발전위원회」 개최, 「제 5 차 남북관계발전기본계획」 심의" [Meeting of the 1st Inter-Korean Relations Development Committee of 2026 Convened and review of the 5th Basic Plan for the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Reviewed], *Ministry of Unification News Briefing*, 19 March 2026.

[38] North Korean defectors and human rights activists sent large amounts of information across the border beyond Panmunjom using balloons and drones. President Lee Jae-myung suspended loudspeaker broadcasts toward the North and imposed strict penalties on the distribution of anti–North Korea leaflets as a trust-building gesture toward North Korea shortly after his inauguration.

[39] Amnesty International, *op. cit.*

[40] Lee Chae-eun, "North Korean youth risk arrest for speaking like South Koreans", *Daily NK*, 24 July 2025.

[41] Amnesty International, *op. cit.*

[42] Gu Yu-na, "북한 9 차 당대회 7 일 만에 종료…주목할 점은?" [North Korea 9th Party Congress Concludes after 7 days, what to expect?], BBC Korea, 26 February 2026.

[43] "North Korea orders campaign to erase South Korea from youth consciousness", *Daily NK*, 2 April 2026.

[44] Bradley K. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 433

North Korea is moving to expand its exchanges with China and Russia, including the resumption of cross-border train services with China for the first time in six years since the COVID-19 pandemic[45] and the construction of a new road bridge between Russia and North Korea.[46] As border openings expand and border regions become more active, the influx of outside information and the risk of defections – which pose a threat to the regime – also increase. North Korea's consecutive enactment of strict social control laws, such as the Anti-Reactionary Thought and Culture Law and the Law on Ensuring Youth Education, is interpreted as a measure to preemptively block external information that could spread, particularly in border areas. How effective these measures will be remains to be seen.

In a world highly connected through integrated internet networks and porous borders, how long the North Korean regime can maintain its monopoly over information will be a key factor shaping future developments on the Korean peninsula. Citing North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, an article in state-run newspaper Rodong Sinmun said: "*Struggle in the field of ideology and culture is a war without gunfire*".[47]. Without specifically naming South Korea, it added that losing the culture war would "*bring many times more serious consequences than on the battlefield*"[48]. His remarks demonstrate how threatening the infiltration of South Korean cultural content appears to the North Korean regime. Indeed, war should be fought with information rather than weapons.

[45] "북한-중국 간 국제열차 6 년 만에 운행 재개" [International Train Service between North Korea and China resumes after six years], National Strategy Portal of National Assembly Library of Korea, 10 March 2010.

[46] "[클로즈업 북한] 여객열차 운행에 화물도 늘어…북중 접경지역 '들썩" [Increased Cargo Volume from Passenger Trains… North Korea-China Border Region 'Buzzing'], KBS, 21 March 2026.

[47] "Why North Korea is so afraid of K-pop?", CNN, 23 July 2021.

[48] *Ibid.*