A Comparative Study on Gender Relations in North and South Korean Romantic Comedy

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Introduction

After in 1948 two separate governments decided to officially divide the Korean peninsula into two, the Democratic People's Republic Korea (DPRK; hereafter North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (ROK; hereafter South Korea), the two countries have come to significantly differ from each other; not just politically but also socially, especially in how the individual is considered in society. A socialist society in the North and a capitalist one in the South, both countries have developed their society under fundamentally different values and ideas about social identity, though traditional values such as a patriarchal hierarchy have remained stable, reshaped by time but present nonetheless. In both North and South Korea film has played an important role in reflecting social issues such as class and gender inequality onto the Korean audiences; in the North in the form of blatant propaganda and in the South clouded by the label of entertainment. South Korean cinema, which has fully embraced the concept of cinematic romance, some film genres often displaying nudity, heavily contrasts its Northern counterpart, where all the on-screen kisses in film history can be counted on one hand. This fact alone suggests how much the two countries' views on romance, or rather the purpose of romantic relationships, differ. Where in the South romantic relationships in film are often used to slyly convey social messages onto the public, in North Korea romance in most cases seems to be portrayed with the function of glorifying and thereby serving the state, as romantic relationships often sprout from or are led back to some understanding or appreciation of the North Korean regime and its Dear Leaders.

With this research I aim to explore gender relations in North and South Korean romantic comedy. Analysing and comparing romantic comedies from North and South Korea by looking at gender relations can teach us about the conception of gender in both countries, which in turn can explain gender inequalities and gender roles assigned to men and women in a patriarchal Korean society. As Cuthbert Omari (1996) puts it, "Gender analysis and evaluation should be able to find

out and make us aware of the customs, traditions or social behaviours that have led women to lag behind for so long. Gender analysis as part of social processes, should be a tool for situating gender issues as part of development. [It] should help to reveal the inequality and disproportionate roles that females and males play and are assigned in our society" (Mbilinyi & Omari, 1996). Considering that film is a mere reflection of reality rather than a depiction of reality itself, the results of my analysis are not representative of the existing North and South Korean society. Romantic comedies do however address societal issues in their narrative, which can then be led back to actual society, whether the films correspond with reality or not — North Korean films, for example, often show an abundance of food in times of famine. Furthermore, films actively explain and interpret the way in which the world is perceived and understood, and representations of the world and society in film often come to be seen as the "natural" or "normal": film is able to convey onto the public an image of society as the maker wants it to be, the ideal society, which the audience then can turn into reality by adopting viewpoints as shown in film. Thus, what films tell us about a given society has to be interpreted in terms of the groups and viewpoints from which they are derived and connected (Standish 1994).

The first chapter of this paper consists of a literature review regarding the concept of gender, notions of gender and patriarchy in North and South Korean society, gender in North and South Korean film, romantic comedy in general, and romantic comedy in North and South Korea. The second chapter comprises my analysis, which is followed by the third and last chapter which discusses and combines the findings as presented in the analysis. I have conducted a contextual analysis of the selected films; an analysis form in which one considers the film's country and culture of origin, as well as the time of production (The Writing Center, University of North Carolina). I choose to focus on gender relations rather than on gender roles, because gender roles in itself are not autonomous: they are formed through the relations with another gender. A woman alone, for example, can be independent, masculine even, but this image would change were she to

be in the presence of a male. To examine how such relations are represented in a rapidly changing Korean society, I will analyse contemporary film, starting in the 1990s, the period in which romantic comedy rose to popularity in both North and South Korea. I will look at romantic comedy specifically, because this genre of film should provide some form of equality that derives from the happy end; the moment the male and female protagonists come together. Thus, romantic comedy can offer the closest view of gender equality in societies that are fundamentally patriarchal, a tradition derived from Confucian hierarchy. It is however very important to keep in mind that the ending of a film is time related: a romantic comedy usually ends at the point of the couple's greatest happiness, and in most cases we never get to see their domestic life after this point (two of the North Korean films I analysed, for example, end right after the protagonists get married). Whichever form of gender equality at the end of a film, *if* present at all, is therefore not necessary lasting. Looking at romantic comedies from both North and South Korea can demonstrate how gender (in)equality but also gender roles and stereotypes are viewed, or at least represented, in both countries, and the extent to which these views diverge — or resemble each other.

Following this line of thought, I will analyse three films each from North and South Korea: one film from each decade starting in the 1990s. To improve the possibility of comparison, I have selected the films on the basis of the publishing year in both countries and each decade. In my analysis I will specifically focus on the scenes in which gender relations take place. I divide this type of scenes into five categories: the domestic sphere, the social sphere, male and female representation, physical interactions, and the ending, to see whether some kind of gender equality is indeed realised. Analysing gender relations in film will likely reveal the gender roles imposed on the characters, as well as the changeability of these roles according to different types of gender relations. Looking at the interaction between different genders will thus give a good image of

gender representations in the film, and of how these gender representations are affected by different types of gender relations. Below is a list of the films I have used for my analysis.

North Korea

1. *Urban Girl Comes to Marry (1993)*
2. *Our Fragrance (2004)*
3. *Comrade Kim Goes Flying (2012)*

South Korea

1. *Marriage Story (1992)*
2. *My Sassy Girl (2001)*
3. *All about My Wife (2012)*

On the basis of the results of my analysis, I argue that gender relations are for a large part very similar in North and South Korean film as a result of the preserved customs of Confucian tradition. The fact that both Korea's societies are still dominated by patriarchy becomes evident in the countries' movie productions, in which patriarchal characteristics and protagonists' deviation from these characteristics cause fractured relationships which can be mended only if the protagonists return to their original traditional positions. Romantic comedies often exaggeratedly reverse gender roles by portraying masculine female characters and feminine male characters, but always compensate the resulting loss of male authority though the reinstatement of traditional gender roles. I therefore further argue that both North as well as South Korean romantic comedies help maintain the Confucianist hierarchal order as an anchor to traditionalism in a constantly changing society. Thus, these films embody a fundamental point of connection between two societies that have come to significantly differ from one another.

To better understand the arguments and information I present in this paper, it is necessary to be aware of the basic developments in the Korean film world, especially those that led many aspects in North and South Korean cinema to diverge so greatly from each other. In the five years following liberation in 1945, the Korean peninsula divided into two separate parts with contrasting political

systems, each developing their own film industries. North Korea, now left without Japanese funds, had to rebuild its film industry from scratch, which they did with Soviet help. Culture became something to be constructed and was approached exactly like industry, with the focus on productive output and bureaucratic control. In 1947, the establishment of the Korean Film Studio marked the start of North Korea's now active film business (Armstrong 2002). A turning point in North Korean cinema was brought about by the alleged kidnap of South Korean director Shin Sang-ok and his actress wife Choi Eun-hee in 1978.[1] Shin brought a lot of "firsts" to North Korean cinema, such as entertainment and romance, which considerably altered the mindset of the North Korean audience, who had been growing tired of the same old propaganda stories force-fed to them for decades. The Shin Sang-ok era gave the North Korean public the ability to judge whether films were good or not by producing films that "were closer to real people's lives" (Schönherr, 2012).

South Korea rebuilt its film industry with the help of the United States, that came to have as much influence on culture in South Korea as the Soviet Union had in the North. American films, music, literature and television programs were integrated into South Korean society (Armstrong 2014). When in 1988 Roh Tae-woo became the president of South Korea, a revised constitution led to, among other things, the establishment of artistic freedom. The Korean New Wave (early to mid 1980s) appropriated the traditions of New Realism by introducing new characters, settings, and problems (Standish 1994). The Korean New Wave was followed by the Korean New Cinema in the 1990s, which distinguished itself from the New Wave through box-office successes of domestic films, an improved availability of production funding and the emergence of the so-called 'Korean blockbusters' (Shin & Stringer 2005). By the end of the 1990s, South Korea's dependence on the U.S. had decreased drastically. Though already having been heavily affected by U.S. influences, the American presence that had loomed over South Korea's culture had started to dissipate as South

[1] There are some doubts about the sudden disappearance of Shin Sang-ok and his wife. According to Shin's friend Tetsuo Nishida, a Japanese film critic, Shin told him that he had gotten an offer from North Korea to make movies freely there, and that he considered going there voluntarily: this would make sense, as Shin was not on good terms with the South Korean government and could not make movies there anymore (Schönherr, 2012).

Korea began exporting its own cultural products, and South Korean domestic films came to take a higher share of box office record than Hollywood films. Though more popular in Asia than in the West, South Korean cinema began to be called "the new Hong Kong" even by American European film critics (Armstrong 2014).

1. Chapter One: Literature Review

1.1. Gender and patriarchy in Korean society and film

> Gender: The different roles, qualities, and responsibilities attributed to men and women in society. Whereas sex denotes biological differences between men and women, gender refers to socially constructed characteristics that produce gender roles based on supposed differences that arise from sexuality and physiology.
>
> (Oxford Dictionary of Human Geography, 2013)

In *Undoing Gender* (2014), Judith Butler describes gender as "a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing. […] It is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint." This "doing" of gender always takes place through a connection to another: one cannot "do" one's gender alone; gender is not something one can author or own. Gender is rather a concept that is constructed within a social context. In this process, certain social norms that limit one's ability to determine one's own sense of gender are created: one can only determine one's own sense of gender to the extent that these social norms allow (Butler, 2014). In other words, gender is not necessarily what one *is*, it is rather a norm that is imposed upon individuals by society, a norm that one has to keep to if one wants to be accepted by society, even

though one has no autonomy regarding that particular imposition. Western societies distinguish only two different genders: *man* and *woman*. Though it seems somewhat shallow to divide the meaning of such a complex term into two simple understandings, it is true that "gender" is most often associated with the feminine and the masculine due to the various gender roles and characterisations that are inseparably linked to the daily lives of men and women. As an institution, gender is the process of creating distinguishable social statuses; as a process, gender creates the social differences between man and woman; and as a structure, gender divides work in the domestic sphere and the labour market (Lorber 1994). The concept of gender is open to constant change and redefinition, as are terms like 'masculine' and 'feminine'. The fact that masculinity, for example, is a position in gender relations that is created through practices such as speech, dress, and behaviour, implies that women as well have the ability to display an amount of masculinity, to a certain extent. Nevertheless, being the most socially acknowledged group in portraying masculinity, this role is dominated by heterosexual men, closely linking masculinity to the male body, as femininity is linked to that of women (Moon, Seung-sook 2002).

1.1.1. Gender in Korean society

"It is bad luck for a shop if the first customer of the day is female," writes Je Son Lee (The Guardian 2015), a North Korean refugee who fled the country in 2011. Despite North Korea's various but feeble attempts toward gender equality, the country seems to have turned back to (or perhaps it never moved away from) traditional Confucian patriarchy: while North Korean men are supposed to go to work every morning, women are left to take care of the household. The only role that men have in the familial sphere is to make sure that their family keeps to the rules of the Party: any contradiction to the party ideology is considered as legitimate grounds for a divorce. Lee

reports that in her hometown, domestic violence occurred on a daily basis in three out of ten households, and less often in others.

In 1946, the Gender Equality Law was enacted in North Korea, which determined equal rights for women regarding inheritance, marriage, divorce, child custody, and support claims. Shortly after, Kim Il Sung openly promised women that technological development would "liberate" them from heavy household chores. However, the last pro-women campaign was held as far back as 1958, when women were encouraged to join the labour market in particular fields "suited for women" such as education and nursing. By the mid-1980s, the government cut the funding that was being used to facilitate women's lives, for example money put in nurseries. Many married women went back to their old role of being housewives, and by 1998 the once vivid cause of making women's lives easier was abandoned altogether (Haggard & Noland 2013). During the short-lived period of women's emancipation, women had been indispensable to the process of rebuilding the country after the Korean War: the promotion of women's rights had merely been a means of mobilising the female population, a phenomenon also known as "Red Feminism" (Lee, Jung Woo 2009). The North Korean women labour force is often described as a "reserve army of labour", to be added to and withdrawn from the labour market when convenient (Park, Kyeong-ae 2013), which is exactly what happened to the North Korean female population: the minute they were no longer needed for the state's political purposes, the feminist cause was dropped.

Kim Il Sung's personality cult brought North Korea back into an era of traditional Confucianist patriarchy, and the image of the ideal woman became that of a mother. Family planning campaigns were active in North Korea during the 1960s and 1970s, aiming to change reproductive behaviour both qualitatively and quantitatively. Though this gendered mobilisation project brought with it many restrictions, mainly for women, it also offered the opportunity of choice, as self-regulated possibilities of contraception and abortion became available (Kim, Yeong-sin 2014). Still, even then women were subjected to identification with regard to her familial status:

"In a Confucian notion of the traditional family, women are defined in relation to male family members as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters." (Kim, Suk-young 2010)

An important factor in the change of gender status in North Korea has been the emergence of an unauthorised market system that has been operative in the country since the mid-1990s alongside the planned economy that was established by the state. This development has mainly influenced women, as they came to partake in market organisations and activities in much larger numbers than men. Work in the state sector, that has been dominated by men ever since the establishment of the DPRK, being unavailable to women has forced them to seek employment elsewhere, and many of them turned to the markets as a means to make money (Haggard & Nolan 2013). In many cases these market activities result in the women making more money than their husbands who often work underpaid, turning the woman into the main family breadwinner. This drastic shift has in effect increased domestic violence as a way for unemployed and underpaid men to channel their frustration due to this "loss of masculinity". Nevertheless, it has also made women realise the gendered division in domestic labour. As a result, women are increasingly demanding help with the housework from their husbands, weakening the existing patriarchal system (Park 2013). Under the structural constraints of the market and state control, women are finding themselves in a position to make their markets a space for their own; a space where they can create new liberation practices: a development that has the potential to change the existing gender order in North Korea (Cho, Yeong-ju 2014).

As is the case in the North, the roots of South Korean gender ideology lie in Confucian tradition which assigned men and women their "appropriate" roles as breadwinner and domestic workers respectively. Though transformed alongside industrialisation, the notion of gender in South Korean society is still heavily based on patriarchal hierarchy. Seung-sook Moon (2002) argues that the current gender inequality in South Korea is not a direct result of Confucian tradition per se, but

rather the recomposition of this old tradition, formed in the process of industrialisation. This restructuring of the gender hierarchy during a time of industrialisation was supported by the notion of hegemonic masculinity, a term Moon defines as “the dominant notions and practices of masculinity that largely are accepted by various social groups as an integral part of the seemingly natural or sensible order of things.” He discusses three components of hegemonic masculinity produced in the particular context of South Korea, these being the role of family provider, mandatory military service, and artificial distance from reproduction. Firstly, the male’s role as family provider, closely connected to (un)employment, justifies his domestic authority and dominance, automatically assigning the role of housewife to the woman. By the 1980s the ideal of the male as main breadwinner had become a firmly established construct. Secondly, military service as a mandatory element for every able-bodied South Korean male since the end of the Korean War has turned the military into a place of male hierarchy, where women have been either excluded from or neglected and undervalued. The military is the place where men can find their true masculinity as “protecters of the country”. Third, the male’s distance from reproductive activities, the upbringing of his children, has been embedded into Korean society since the Chosŏn dynasty during which men were separated from household activities, including childcare. Nevertheless, cases in which the women are unable to perform their household “duties” or cases of divorce, which are increasing in contemporary South Korea, are able to force the male to join in reproductive activities instead of women (Moon 2002).

The female population in South Korea has has undergone various transformations, though any progress made by women’s movements towards gender equality brought with it new forms of subordination: the labour market expanded significantly but was accompanied by heavy sexism; marriage became a choice rather than a must but remained a means of patrilineal descent; domestic chores are becoming more equally divided between couples but childcare and housework are still seen as the woman’s responsibility. The biggest transformations however are what Hae-jeong Cho

(2002) terms the shift from the “grandmother’s generation” to the “mother’s generation,” and that of the latter to the “daughter’s generation”. Women of the grandmother’s generation grew up in the 1930s~1940s. The Japanese colonisation had brought about the shift of family head from men to women, as during this period families were often left without husbands or fathers, who were mass mobilised by the Japanese government for political purposes. In this period, the image of the assertive, aggressive mother was strongly encouraged, and the ideal family of this period is described as a wise, competent grandmother managing a large, extended family, her feminine identity defined by her mothership.

Women from the mother’s generation grew up in the 1940s~1950s under the slogan “Economic growth first by all means!” This period is characterised by mass urbanisation, (Western) media influence and the nuclear family, which emerged as the image of the ideal family. The worldwide phenomenon of “housewifeisation”, the transition from a mother-centred to a wife-centred patriarchy, hit South Korea in the early 1960s, at the beginning of rapid economic development. Women of this generation accepted the gap between the public and domestic domain and ended up distancing their husbands, which resulted in a significant expansion of the drinking and sex industry during these years.

Women from the daughter’s generation grew up in the 1960s~1970s in a militarised South Korea. The daughter’s generation marks the successful and completed shift in women’s status from “mother” to “wife”. In this period two images of the ideal female were promoted: that of the strong, independent woman and that of the sexy, feminine woman. The former came from Korea’s women liberation movement, causing women to strive for independence free from familial relations. This individuality eventually became the wall that separated mother and daughter in this generation, and heterosexual relationships gained importance over homo-social relationships that had been favoured before. Ambitious young women who pursued careers were eventually forced back into the domestic sphere as housewives, though still determined to live free from patriarchal limitations. The

image of the sexy, feminine woman brought about a boom in the plastic surgery industry as young women increasingly underwent surgeries to change their eyes and noses. The "agassi" (young unmarried woman) ideal ruled among housewives, who were now pushed to be attractive. Whereas the "ajumma" image, a middle-aged woman who does not care for her appearance, that had been popular in the previous generations was now greatly discouraged, the male version of "ajumma", "ajussi", was never replaced by the term "chong'gak", the term for unmarried young men. "Modernity, understood as the birth of the individual, is for the male gender, while modernity, expressed in status and materialistic display, is for the female gender […] While many women of the mother's generation in South Korea seemed to be aware of the gender contradictions in their lives, they tried to solve them not by confronting the patriarchal system but by merely climbing up the social ladder." (Cho 2002)

To briefly summarise, North Korea has made attempts towards gender equality, though not with pure intentions: after the successful mobilisation of the female population, women had completed their task and were pushed aside, left to struggle with gender equality without any further support from the state, which changed back to a traditional Confucian patriarchy. Since then, women have found their own way of participating in the social sphere by taking to the markets, where their business activities have turned many of them into the family's main breadwinner, consequently increasing domestic violence due to the male's loss of masculinity and his resulting frustration. As for South Korea, the notion of gender has developed alongside industrialisation, but nevertheless remained close to the form of traditional Confucian patriarchy. South Korean males' masculinity is established through his position as family provider, mandatory military service, and his absence in child rearing. The female population has gone through the shift from the grandmother's generation to mother's generation, and the shift from the latter to the daughter's

generation, ending with the contemporary ideal image of the “sexy feminine”, which is accompanied by women’s desire for individualism and freedom from the familial patriarchy.

1.1.2. Gender in North and South Korean film

In the period after the Korean War, Soviet and Chinese films taught the North Koreans about the ways of socialist society, but they also gave the North Korean female audience a new sense of awareness regarding relations between men and women and gender equality (Lee, Myeong-ja 2011). The de-masculinisation represented by women joining the labour market and their financial independence has instigated an increasing anxiety about the male image and consequently family stability. Films reflect this frustration in the form of nostalgia for past Confucian patriarchal hierarchy where the male stood at the centre of the family, his wife reduced to the role of his helper and domestic worker (Standish 1994). Rather than gender equality, North Korean films seem to convey the oppression of women under a strict patriarchal system. Nevertheless, North Korea being a socialist state that claims gender equality, gender discrimination or women’s oppression is never strongly present in North Korean cinema. Young-ae Lee (2015) argues that ideal types of women have been differentiated according to the background and situation of the movie. When the background focus lies on revolutionary war, the ideal female types are portrayed as traditional women who are strong, independent and heroic. With modern life as the background focus, however, the ideal type is changed to a more feminine, silent and dependent woman. The ideal woman is in North Korean film often portrayed as either a revolutionary or a housewife, which can be sub-divided into anti-imperialist revolutionary fighters, socialist thinkers, hidden heroes (work/ efficiency improvement managers), a successor of ethnic traditions, a loving mother, a submissive wife, and a quiet woman. In 1988, Kim Il Sung shared his ideas of the ideal women with the North Korean people: “Of course women should be encouraged to struggle to achieve liberation and

rights. […] However, women should not solely focus on their liberation, rights, and equality and forget about the traditional feminine beauty and virtue that typically defined the Korean women […] women should be feminine after all." (Kim 2010). To better convey the image of this ideal woman, North Korean films often include a "negative" female image, either to make an example out of the "good" woman, or to display character development in the form of a change from negative to positive, from bad to good. "Negative" female characters can be recognised easily as they are often portrayed as selfish, unwarranted, short-sighted, or mistaken; their appearance a symbol of feminine charm: short dresses, pearl necklaces, heavy makeup, etc. In North Korean film, the ideal female character is portrayed as this negative woman's opposite: as non-sexual beings, such as construction workers, warriors, or mothers, and it is a taboo to objectify private spheres or sexuality (Lee 2015). Women participate in the fight against floods, exploiters, and the development of scientific research, but it seems as variants and not as evolutions: they react to given situations but are not driving forces or creating situations. To borrow Antoine Coppola's words: "they are theoretical ideas more than individualised bodies." Coppola's comparison of North and South Korean films reveals the absence of a female political role in the South in contrast to a symbolic over-politicisation in the North. Furthermore, the North shows much more difficulty in letting go of the traditional image of females in cinema (Coppola 2012).

After the Korean War mostly American films were screened in South Korea, as well as films from various European countries, which introduced the Western lifestyle, culture, and democracy to the South Korean audience. Nevertheless, South Korea developed its own style cinema which came to diverge considerably from classical Hollywood style films. In contrast to classical Hollywood films, in South Korean cinema the relationship between women's work and money and between class and economic value is often emphasised, and relationships between women are portrayed as more significant than the relationship between man and woman, though more often in the past than

present. Furthermore, South Korean films often show women who are more ambitious than their husbands, and economically more inclined. They emphasise and value women's economic skills, labour and employment, diverging from classic Hollywood melodramas in which women's economic activities are often portrayed in the form of emotional and leisure pursuits, or left out altogether. South Korean cinema focuses on personal frustration related to national division, class division and gender inequality (McHugh 2005). Personal frustration felt by males during the 1970s~1980s because of their wives' increasing freedom and independence triggered a type of domestic violence that became a recurrent theme in South Korean literature and film: the act in which a husband rapes his wife. This "wife rape" can be seen as an act of domestic violence which results from a husband's anger regarding intellectual, financial and social inferiority to his wife. Such cases of rape restore the husband's masculine power and reinstate him as patriarchal head of the family. "This very primitive idea, that a wife is one of her husband's possessions and not an independent human being, still exists among highly educated couples in modern Korean society. In short, female sexuality, especially a wife's sexuality, appears as an object to be acquired, possessed, dominated, and conquered" (Lee, So-hee 2002). On the other hand, sexual violence towards women is also used in film to demonstrate women's need for protection and "the injustice of a raped woman as a corollary of the raped nation" (Kim, Jisung Catherine 2013). "Aside from poverty and insanity, prostitution and rape serve as particularly acute metaphors for the country's traumatic experiences of humiliation and helplessness" (Lee, Hyangjin 2000 quoted in Kim 2013). Heterosexual relationships in South Korean film often reflect the social role of women based upon traditional representations of the relationship, for example a women's shame and man's domination; sexual pleasure only sought by the male; and the acceptance of extramarital relations. These kinds of situations are accepted by women as kind of compensation for the male's task of providing for the family: though women complain and threaten their husbands with ending the relationship, they end up accepting the husband's point of view and turn back to comforting him. South Korean cinema

displays a great diversity of situations and feminine conditions, characterised by women increasingly not assuming a traditional role, often in connection to the proletarian milieu (Coppola 2012).

1.2. Romantic comedy

The romantic comedy was born from the genre *screwball comedy* that emerged in the U.S. in the 1930s (Lee, Myeong-ja 2006). Romantic comedy as defined by Deborah Thomas (1998) is "a hybrid which combines two types of fantasy for its viewers: a fantasy of mutual erotic desire (romance) and a fantasy of a 'magical' and sheltering place (comedy), and which keeps at bay the contrasting repressiveness of the melodramatic." Mutually erotic desire can in the end lead to equality among the protagonists, a threat of de-masculinisation often rejected and even fought by the genre of melodrama. The so-called equal relationship that forms between male and female in romantic comedy "contributes to our sense of a romance worth waiting for." (Thomas 1998). Nevertheless, Frank Krutnik (1998) argues, "the ideal of the couple rarely surmounts the established gender hierarchy: although the genre may be expressly committed to an ideal of 'equal partnership,' in most instances it is the woman who has most to learn." In my perception, romantic comedies generally present a narrative in which a male and female protagonist fall in love and experience happiness, then are separated because of one or multiple dramatic events, but eventually find the way back to each other and live happily ever after. Though the most basic requirement of a romantic comedy is that it, like the term implies, provides comic relief, perhaps the most important requirement of the genre is that it must always include a happy end to leave the audience satisfied. Apart from this, romantic comedies, though concealed within thick layers of humour and romance, generally carry a message of critique on certain issues in society that need to be addressed. Thus, romantic comedies commonly "have a rapid rate of narrative progression, and they characterise the

socioeconomic difference in the plot and theme, and they touch the potential sexual and class unconsciousness in society" (Lee 2006). A crucial point to the success of romantic comedies is modernisation; the narratives should correctly reflect present time and current social issues: "they must engage with the shifting priorities and possibilities of intimate culture and with the broader cultural, social and economic spheres that organise its forms and meanings." To keep up with the demands of the masses, romantic comedy has been forced to weaken the previously forged bonds between love and marriage, eroticism and romance, and pleasure and procreation (Krutnik 1998). Along with modernisation comes urbanisation, which, Brian Henderson (1978) argues, has always been the orientation of romantic comedy, assuming the superiority of city over the country; a pattern rooted in American and European culture. Romantic comedy characterises and emphasises industrialism and capitalism, and lower-class ruralism is ridiculed (Henderson 1978). Though this is true for South Korean romantic comedies, this notion cannot be applied to North Korean film: the rural class is praised and glorified, as is the case in *Urban Girl Comes to Marry*, in which a city girl moves to the countryside for the man she loves. To achieve the effect aimed for, Henderson further perceives, romantic comedy must include fast, unexpected dialogue and physical reactions, as if the characters are under constant pressure. Language in romantic comedy plays a crucial part, as it is the only thing in the way of sexual desire, the fundamental aspect of romantic comedy, and its fulfilment (Henderson 1978).

1.2.1. Romantic comedy in North and South Korea

Ever since the beginning of Korean filmmaking until the 1990s, sentimentalism rather than humour was the dominant genre in Korean cinema: it was the genre that the Korean audience, whose country had gone through so much misery, could relate to the most; consequently it was the most appreciated and demanded film genre. In the 1970s, film became an art form used for mass

entertainment, and commercial aspects began to gain importance in the film industry. Throughout the 1980s, however, the main genre remained sentimentalism. This sentimentalism derives from the Korean traditional culture characteristic *Han* (translates to grudge, spite, enmity), a term that emerged in Korean culture as a sign of the Korean people's suffering. The presence of *Han*, as Byung-sup Ahn perceives, determines the level of humour in Korean film: "When han plunges to its depths, it bursts into sentimentalism. When han is brighter and controlled it becomes humour. Here we find a unique characteristic of the humour in Korean cinema." (Ahn, Byung-sup 1987). Starting in the 1990s romantic comedies increasingly gained popularity and by the 2000s romantic comedy had climbed its way up the ladder of popular cinema in North Korea as well as in the South. In South Korea the popularity of romantic comedy started with the 1992 film *Marriage Story*. Though the genre died down a bit in the following decade, it was revived by the film *My Sassy Girl* in 2001, which immediately became a box-office hit, paving the way for romantic comedy as a major genre which it has remained until present day: the movie yearbook published by the Korean Film Promotion Committee shows that romantic comedies have always ranked highest as the favourite genre of South Koreans (Lee 2006). In North Korea, romantic comedy was introduced through the film *The Rumbling of The Mountain* in 1962, then re-emerged in the 1990s when Kim Jong Il decided to make romantic comedy into a major genre, "sensing the propagandist potential of passion on screen" (Gabroussenko, The Guardian 2016). The 1990's North Korean romantic comedies, in contrast to that of the 1960s, focus on the love story between men and women, and emphasise the social significance of laughter: romantic comedies are promoted with the slogan "Even if the road is tough, let's walk it with a smile" (Lee 2006).

Women's portrayal in North Korean film has been divided into two ends of the spectrum, the independent and the feminine, although in more recent films the two are often combined to form the ideal woman. Due to the shift in women's status towards financially independent, economically

skilled females, North Korean films sometimes portray women as more independent than men, using laughter strategies to make these characters appealing to the public (Lee 2006). Though it is necessary for women's emancipation to show such a female image, in patriarchal societies strong independent women are also seen as threats. North Korean romantic comedies solve this problem by ending the film with marriage, thereby putting the woman back into her "proper place" by binding them to a male character after having had the chance to show her independence throughout the rest of the film. Though ending the film through marriage does show the acceptance of independent women into society, at the same time it suggests that marriage is the only way for independent women to be accepted — and, consequently, become dependent after all. Scenarios which include unrequited love, past lovers, love triangles or large age gaps are rejected in North Korean cinema (The Guardian 2016), which leaves marriage —or at least an indication of future marriage— as the only possible outcome for a "correct" happy ending. Nevertheless, despite the stubborn persistence of marriage, women did gain some ground as to what they are allowed to expect or want from a potential husband: in some cases North Korean romantic comedies show that the "ordinary" masculine hero is no longer satisfactory for women, who have come to demand much more from men, including characteristics traditionally seen as "feminine", supporting the humorous aspects in the films. Nevertheless, the desires of women in North Korean film compromise with the demand of the state: "When the public's expectations and limitations on sexuality are reflected in popular films, and conversely, when the audience refracts and maintains a conversational relationship, the identities and relationships of men and women in both Koreas are newly formed." (Lee 2006)

The fundamental difference in North and South Korean films can be found in the characteristics of a capitalist society in the South, whereas in the North a socialist society takes this place. This gap between social values has resulted in differently restructured social class structures

in both countries, in North Korea as a reaction on class policy instigated for the creation of a socialist regime, and in the South alongside industrialisation. Narratives in North Korean films show, despite the country's claim to a "classless society", class divisions by occupation, birthplace (rural/urban) and gender, as do South Korean films, which show a preference for mental labour and class recognition in connection to the traditional Confucian labour system (Lee 2006). In both countries' films, humour is often sought in interactions between people from different classes that lead to misunderstandings.

As a reaction to the dismantling of the family after the financial crisis of the late 1990s, South Korean films of the early 2000s emphasised family ideology to suppress internal conflicts. The 2000s in North Korea are marked by the increasing systematic psychological deviation and physical defection from the North Korean system. The state reacted to this by ignoring, or rather concealing, this setback in film productions, while focusing on heterogeneity that reveals sexual and class conflicts (Lee 2006). Overall, compared to other movie genres, romantic comedies reveal more about the daily lives and desires of the masses by reacting on and reflecting social conflicts by means of humour, which makes the genre popular in both North and South Korea.

2. Chapter Two: Analysis

2.1. The films

For my analysis I will examine three films each from North and South Korea, from the 1990s to present. The 1990s are inseparably linked to the emergence of romantic comedy as a major genre, in the North as well as in the South. South Korean film director Shin Sang-ok and his wife completely turned North Korean cinema —as well as the North Korean audience's views on film—

around, and film-enthusiast Kim Jong Il made sure that romantic comedy gained a permanent place in the North Korean film world. In South Korea, artistic freedom was realised after the succession of Chun Doo-hwan by Roh Tae-woo in 1988. This freedom combined with the heavy decrease in American cultural presence allowed South Korea to start developing its own domestic film market, which proved to be a huge success.

2.1.1. North Korean films

1. Urban Girl Comes to Marry (1993)

A "very lighthearted romance movie for general consumption" (Schönherr, 2012), *Urban Girl Comes to Marry* tells the story of Song-sik, a young duck-breeder from the countryside, and Ri-hyang, a fashion designer at Pyongyang clothing factory, who fall in love when Ri-hyang's factory workers are sent to Song-sik's village to help with rice planting and harvesting. They are forced to separate when planting season is over and Ri-hyang moves back to the city, Song-sik unwilling to leave his hometown. They meet again at a fashion event hold in Song-sik's village, and this time Ri-hyang decides to stay: they marry and Ri-hyang opens her own clothing shop.

2. Our Fragrance (2004)

Our Fragrance concerns the problem of a Westernised North Korean youth and their attitude towards traditional values, showing concern for the future of the nation if the youth continues to develop in non-traditional ways under foreign influences. The film tells the story of Pyong-ho, a Kimchi specialist from a traditional Korean family, who finds himself in a semi-arranged marriage with Sae-byeol, the daughter of a pro-Western family. Various complications make the couple almost lose interest in one another, but in the end Pyong-ho is able to make Sae-

byeol realise the importance of culture and tradition: she and her family decide to de-Westernise their lifestyle and unite the families through marriage.

3. Comrade Kim goes Flying (2012)

This most recent accessible film from North Korea, a unique cooperation between North Korea, England and Belgium, introduces us to Yong-mi, a twenty-eight year old coalminer living in the countryside. She moves to Pyongyang where she starts training to work in the circus as trapeze star. Through many failures and hardships she eventually succeeds with help and support from her family, co-workers and love interest Jang-pil, a fellow trapeze artist. This film is the first of its kind North Korean cinema in that a female does something for herself rather than the good of the state or the leader. *Comrade Kim* is a film that "might seem standard fare in the west but in North Korea is groundbreaking for its feminist individualism. A young woman strives to achieve her goal, and it's for herself rather than the greater glory of the state, and without the mystical beneficence of the Great Leaders" (Koryo Group & Another Dimension of an Idea, 2012-2017).

2.1.2. South Korean films

1. Marriage Story (1992)

Marriage Story is the film that started the genre of romantic comedy in South Korea. The film shows the story of Tae-kyu and Ji-hae, a middle class couple who, after continuously having been warned by their friends, decide to get married. The first couple of months they lead a happily married life, but soon their relationship starts to worsen for no apparent reason. At the end, when all they do is argue and fight, the couple decides to file for divorce, but without each other they realise the perfect partner does not exist and get back together.

2. My Sassy Girl (2001)

My Sassy Girl, the highest grossing Korean comedy of all time, did what *Marriage Story* could not nine years earlier and instantly turned romantic comedy into a main genre in South Korean cinema. The film portrays the relationship between Gyeon-woo and the Sassy Girl (she is never named in the movie). Their abusive (one-sided by Sassy Girl) relationship starts, mainly consisting of Sassy Girl hitting Gyeon-woo and yelling at him. They however grow fond of each other, until Sassy Girl suggests they break up. They do not meet again for three years, but fate brings them together again through a blind date arranged by the mother of Sassy Girl's former (deceased) boyfriend.

3. All About My Wife (2011)

In *All About My Wife*, Doo-hyun is sick and tired of his wife's nagging and complaining, so he hires his neighbour Sung-ki, a professional Casanova, to seduce his wife in the hope she will leave him. Sung-ki accepts the challenge as his career's last job, but he and Jung-in (the wife) start to develop feelings for each other. Doo-hyun grows to regret his plan and tells Sung-ki to call of the plan, but by then Sung-ki has fallen hard for Jung-in. They begin a battle for Jung-in's heart which does not last long when shortly after, Jung-in learns of her husband's plan and decides she wants to get a divorce. After reminiscing the start of their relationship, however, Jung-in and Doo-hyun choose to give their marriage another try.

2.2. Analysis

I will focus my analysis of the North and South Korean films on four aspects that are inseparably linked to gender relations: the domestic sphere, the social sphere, male and female representation, and the ending, which is where the two protagonists are supposed to find some form

of (gender) equality in their mutual acceptance of the other. Before I discuss my findings, I shall briefly elaborate on the concept of gender relations, as to clarify what exactly I will be searching for in the films. A simple understanding of gender relations would be the everyday interactions between males and females in society. These relations can be set at intersexual levels, as well as at societal levels, and can be displayed either in negative —sexism— or positive ways. Gender relations can occur among people of the same or different age, class, income group, blood relations, etcetera (Mbilinyi & Omari, 1996). Questions that can be asked regarding gender relations are, for example, how members of different sexes and genders behave towards each other, what kind of role expectations are connected to which group (sex, age, class), and whether people of the same household are treated the same — if not, on what basis?

2.2.1. Domestic sphere

"The family is the smallest social unit that offers meaningful sociological interpretation of gender relations," as it exists of members of both sexes of different ages. Mbilinyi and Omar (1996) distinguish two groups of people regarding labor relations at the household level, these being the *domestic labour force*, members living in the same house who are not necessarily blood related (married couple), and the *household labour force*, members related by blood (children, family members). The domestic sphere depicted North Korean romantic comedies is generally one where one or both of the non-married young protagonists lives or live together with his or her family, consisting of parents and sometimes grandparents. This frequently used family structure reveals that in North Korea, one does not leave the parental home until marriage, a custom still present — though slowly fading— in South Korea as well. The analysed South Korean films involved either couples already married or a couple too young to marry; therefore the family structure as seen in the North Korean films was not present in either of the South Korean films. It is however interesting to note that the couples who got married at the end of the North Korean films were to live in the

husband's family home, whereas the married couples in the South Korean films had a house for themselves. Interactions by married couples in the domestic sphere varied greatly comparing the North and South Korean films, but mostly because the South Korean films only portray marriages between young couples which deteriorate whereas the marriages portrayed in the North Korean films were between happily married older couples. We do not get to see the domestic sphere of the couples in married life in the North Korean films, as the films end with their marriage. *Comrade Kim* is the only analysed North Korean film in which the couple does not get married, though they are certainly portrayed as in love, after which marriage should automatically follow as unrequited love is never portrayed in North Korean cinema.

Gender relations in the domestic sphere in the North Korean films reveal that it is often women who value tradition more so than men: in *Urban Girl Comes to Marry* it is Song-sik's mother who states that "*the bride must come to the husband's house*," whereas the husband had envisioned his son leaving with his bride to the city and join his clothing factory, and in *Our Fragrance,* it is the grandmother who had always disapproved of her family's Western lifestyle, though she never tried to make them see sense. Scenes set in the domestic sphere furthermore show the authority of the eldest male family member, a patriarchal component particularly visible in the North as well as South Korean films: in *Our Fragrance*, Pyong-ho's grandfather is the one to suggest the marriage between Pyong-ho and Sae-byeol, but also the one to reject Sae-byeols family after the dramatic visit to their Westernised house. At dinnertime, the grandfather gets his own table, while the rest of the family sits together. Similar to Pyong-ho's grandfather's authority is that of Sassy Girl's father in *My Sassy Girl*, who is the one to effectively stop his daughter from seeing Gyeon-woo.

The largest part of the films *Marriage Story* and *All About My Wife* are set in the domestic sphere, both films depicting a marriage gone wrong. Where *Marriage Story* shows the transition from a well-balanced domestic relationship into one of domestic violence, *All About My Wife* shows

a marriage after it has deteriorated. Though both films show the protagonists arguing a lot, the atmosphere in *Marriage Story* is a lot more serious and dramatic, whereas *All About My Wife* is much more like what we understand as a romantic comedy today. Domestic labour in *Marriage Story* is fairly equal divided, as the couple takes turns making dinner and breakfast. However, while Ji-hae is often depicted drying or combing her hair, Tae-kyu can be seen doing the dishes while scolded by his wife for being late. Such situations eventually cause Tae-kyu to call her a "controlling wife". Jung-in in *All About My Wife* used to be a voluntary housewife, simply because she did not want to work; it is not clear how the domestic chores are divided after she gets a job. The analysed North Korean films do not demonstrate much of domestic labour, except one scene in *Our Fragrance*, in which Sae-byeol's family prepares for Pyong-ho's grandfather's visit, and the chores are divided as follows: Sae-byeol will clean the rooms, her mother will do the cooking, and her father will provide the alcohol; tasks which all seem fairly gender-related.

2.2.2. Social sphere

In the social sphere, which I associate with a work(/school) environment and "open", different roles and assignments are given to men and women, imposing upon each a title that refers to these activities and consequently binds itself to an individual. These titles tend to carry gender connotations and are therefore able to reveal the different working conditions and work-related stereotypes based on gender: "who holds which position and why are women or men placed in certain positions?" (Mbilinyi & Omar 1996). Manual labour environments as portrayed in *Urban Girl Comes to Marry* (countryside) and *Comrade Kim (*coal mine and construction site) are idealised situations in which all workers share a happy, equal environment where men and women work alongside each other performing the same tasks. What heightens the impression of equality in manual labour environments in North Korean film is that everyone addresses each other by the title of "comrade" (dongmu): there is no difference in title regarding gender, age, class and rank (with a

few exceptions). In *Urban Girl Comes to Marry* there is a clear gender division between the rural and the urban, of which the former consists mostly of men and the latter is in this case represented by the factory workers who are all women, and though they all work very well together, the rural men have the prejudice towards the factory women that "*city girls would never marry us.*" This statement, instead of showing the urban looking down on the rural, shows the rural looking up at the urban, or perhaps the rural looking down on itself, which makes quite the difference. The urban looking down at the rural is portrayed in *Comrade Kim* when after Yong-mi's first failed audition Jang-pil tells her to "just go back to digging." In *Our Fragrance,* Westernised Sae-byeol looks down at Pyong-ho for being a kimchi specialist, calling him "kimchi boy" and saying she can make kimchi herself. However, at the same time, Pyong-ho looks down at Sae-byeol for her disregard of traditional culture.

A social sphere that can be seen in many South Korean movies but is absent in North Korean ones is the company office. All three analysed South Korean films showed the office as social sphere, playing a large role particularly in *Marriage Story* and *All About My Wife* as the working environment of all protagonists. This kind of social sphere is very different from the manual labour environment seen in North Korean films: in the South Korean office the bosses are portrayed with a lot more authority and workers get scolded or fired if they do not correctly carry out their tasks. Then again; in North Korean films everyone works so hard and diligently and with so much determination that such measures would not be necessary. Though in the office social sphere men and women work besides each other, the environment is under obvious male dominance as well as authority, as the role of "boss" is always portrayed by men.

Finally, there is the social sphere which I term the "open." With gender relations within this sphere I mean all the interactions that are manifested neither at home nor at work. The "open" social sphere proved exceptionally important in the North Korean films as this is the sphere in which the male and female protagonists form their bond. In *Urban Girl Comes to Marry* as well as in *Our*

Fragrance, the main reason for the couple's bonding —or rather, for the female protagonist falling in love with the male hero— is their interpretation of the importance of the socialist cause and their love and appreciation for the Dear Leader and the motherland. Interestingly, in *Comrade Kim* the protagonists bond over their love for athletics rather than love for the state: the film shows hardly any presence of state and leader. The "open" social sphere is furthermore one in which women are supposed to treat their husband with respect, an attitude presented in both North and South Korean films. Though the domestic sphere belongs to the wife entirely, women know not to cripple their husband's authority in the presence of others. Ji-hae in *Marriage Story* diverges from this mindset by stating to a group of men that her husband does not satisfy her. In this scene Tae-kyu actually saves her face by not responding in the presence of the others, and he lets out his anger in the car on the way back, which leads to a big fight.

2.2.3. Male and female representation

Whereas the female protagonists in the North and South Korean films all carried similar qualities and characteristics, the male representation in both countries' films diverged considerably. In the North as well as South Korean films, female representation seems to be based upon the image of a strong, determined, but nevertheless feminine woman — the last quality is sometimes unveiled only at the ending of the film, like in *My Sassy Girl*. Male protagonists, however, in the North Korean films manifested their masculinity through patriotic expressions, while the South Korean films all showed a considerable sense of de-masculinisation through failed marriages in *Marriage Story* and *All About My Wife* and a feminised male protagonist in *My Sassy Girl*. Gender representation in *My Sassy Girl* seems to be switched altogether as the film shows a violent, foul-mouthed female character and a feminine, considerate male character who takes care of and listens to Sassy Girl even though this is not his responsibility. The element of comedy is caused by the audience's fixed gender stereotypes which are completely contradicted in the film, creating a new

gender order by letting the male character be rescued by the female protagonist several times — in real life as well as in Sassy Girl's fictional stories. Nevertheless, after the two protagonists meet again after three years at the ending of the film, Sassy Girl's character has changed considerably as she seems to have lost her bad temper completely, changing her back into the "normal", into what a woman should be like. Similar transitions can be found in *Our Fragrance* in which female protagonist Sae-byeol says goodbye to her Western ways and welcomes traditional Korean values back into her life, as well as in *All About My Wife*, where Jung-in changes from pessimistic frustrated wife into a calm, considerate woman. In *Our Fragrance* the ideal woman is portrayed as someone who understands and values Korean tradition above all else. The ones that instigated Sae-byeol's shift towards traditionalism were Pyong-ho and his grandfather: the girl's wrongs are corrected by men who know better.

Like the female protagonist from *My Sassy Girl*, Yong-mi from *Comrade Kim* is the female character to refute gender stereotypes in North Korean cinema. Yong-mi distinguishes herself from the traditional ideal Korean woman by distancing herself from the familial sphere in search of her own dream. Yong-Mi's character is neither stereotyped not sexualised: she does not achieve her goals because she is a woman, she achieves them through her persistent character and hard work, regardless of her gender. Unlike *Urban Girl Comes to Marry*'s Ri-hyang and *Our Fragrance*'s Sae-byeol she is not influenced by male patriotism or the Dear Leader's wishes in neither her choice of Jang-pil nor her choice to become a circus athlete. Another film about female athletes, *Oh, Youth!* (1994) reveals that an athlete's main goal should be to bring glory to the nation by bringing home gold medals, but this motive for becoming an athlete is not mentioned once by Yong-mi. A South Korean student who watched the film commented that *it* "showed very simple, pure love," in contrast with South Korean romantic films that often "have a lot of complicated relationships between male and female characters" (Strother, PRI 2012), a statement proven by the failed marriages in *Marriage Story* and *All About My Wife* and the violent relationship in *My Sassy Girl*.

In accordance with the faltering patriarchal society in South Korea, inequality is a subject often brought up by men at times they feel overshadowed by their wife. Doo-hyun expresses his frustration by asking his wife: "*How come you can do whatever you want and I can't do a thing?*" Nevertheless, *Marriage Story* and *All About My Wife* both demonstrate the male's heavy dependence on the wife in marriage: during the couple's temporary break-ups, Tae-kyu's house is littered with empty beer cans, he stops shaving and cries over romantic movies, while Doo-hyun is drowned in loneliness the very first day of his wife's absence. When Ji-hae and Tae-kyu discuss the possibility of getting back together, Ji-hae says that "*like other women, I want to be patient and do as you say. But I can't do that.*" The "other women" here is a reference to two of her friends particularly, of which one is a deeply unhappy housewife and the other a victim of domestic violence. Similar to Ji-hae's statement is that of Jung-in in *All About My Wife*, who declares that "*men don't find me appealing. They don't like an outspoken woman.*" Her husband Doo-hyun confirms this opinion by describing how "*she was quiet at first. Shy at times. Such a sweet smile. But that was because she was learning Japanese at the time! I never saw it coming, I'm a victim!*"

2.2.4. Physical interaction

Closely linked to gender relations is physical interaction, another concept inseparable from romantic comedy. North Korean films tend to show much less display of physical interaction compared to films from the South, firstly because in North Korea such scenes would only distract from the main cause, socialism, and secondly because the people's love should be reserved for the Dear Leader alone (Schönherr 2012). Interesting is that both North and South Korea's film from the 1990s contained the most physical interactions; *Marriage Story* (rated a 19+ film) includes a lot of sex scenes (though little nudity) and scenes in which sex or sexuality is suggested. The main protagonists often talk about sex very openly and declare their love for each other multiple times, something one would never encounter while watching North Korean films, which generally include

a single love declaration at the end of the movie, or none at all (*Comrade Kim*). Physical interactions between the protagonists in *Urban Girl Comes to Marry* are manifested through hand-holding, a single embrace, and a near-kiss — which is stopped the moment the couple gets caught, leaving them embarrassed and awkward, as if they were doing something very inappropriate. After the couple is finally married, however, no such interactions take place until the end of the film. The other two North Korean films do not show any form of (romantic) physical interaction. Similar to *Marriage Story*, *All About My Wife* includes many scenes of physical interaction, though less explicit: the only to-be sex scene is interrupted when Jung-in gets a call from work and leaves, revealing the strain on their sexual relationship.

Marriage Story furthermore shows a scene which illustrates the earlier elaborated concept of "wife rape." Though the actual action of rape does not take place, Tae-kyu is shown trying to lift Ji-hae's skirt while violently grabbing and sometimes even choking Ji-hae, who manages to fight him off, after which Tae-ku hits her in the face and leaves her on the floor. A very different type of violence is shown in *My Sassy Girl,* in which Gyeon-woo suffers the continuous physical and verbal violence of Sassy Girl. The only physical contact they share except from Sassy Girl's daily beatings is all very well-behaved, such as occasional arm-linking, a near-kiss and Gyeon-woo's piggy-back rides after Sassy Girl has once again passed out by alcohol. Because the protagonists in *My Sassy Girl* are both still young, it would be inappropriate to show them in explicit scenes, though the film does include some nudity and sexual references.

2.2.5. The ending: gender equality at last?

As mentioned in the introduction, the fact that romantic comedies always include a happy ending does not necessarily mean that the happiness and understandings at the moment of the end will endure. Because North Korean romantic comedies show the developments in the relationship of the main protagonists until right after marriage, we do not know what their domestic life will look

like, though a comparable image is provided by the characters of parents and grandparents. Nevertheless, it is interesting to analyse the endings of films to determine whether some form of gender equality is generally achieved — or not. *Urban Girl Comes to Marry* and *Our Fragrance* both end in the protagonist's marriage, correctly following the North Korean ideal that marriage should always follow a couple's shared romantic feelings. Song-sik and Ri-hyang in *Urban Girl Comes to Marry* come to some form of equality by overcoming prejudices (*"urban girls will never marry us"*) and accepting each other's "faults", in this case perhaps the fact that Song-sik refuses to follow Ri-hyang to the city, though this fault is covered up by his love for his hometown. This "fault" eventually results in their marriage following tradition as it is Ri-hyang who leaves everything behind for the man she loves and moves into his family home.

The ending of *Our Fragrance* and *My Sassy Girl* both present females that have gone to a certain transition to correct their previous behaviour: Sae-byeol makes the shift from "negative" Westernised girl to traditional woman; Sassy Girl that from masculine girl to feminine woman. These transitions takes away what made these female characters "different", Sae-byeol's Western views and Sassy Girl's fiery personality. The ending of *My Sassy Girl* reveals the reason for her impossible behaviour, namely that her previous boyfriend died exactly one year ago at the time she met Gyeon-woo, and she was still processing his death. This explanation makes good for Sassy Girl's violent behaviour as she is placed into the role of feminine woman, the woman she might have been from the start had her boyfriend not died. Lee (2006) argues that "the conservative ending of My Sassy Girl may reveal the increasingly fluid gender relations in South Korea and the increasingly controversial reality of a conservative attempt to restore gender role to its original position. Women are more likely to escape from traditional gender roles and express their strong desire for self-realisation and seek change in gender relations."

At the end of *Our Fragrance,* the protagonists seem to have reached equality through the sharing of the same values and traditions, but it is precisely this common belief in tradition that

makes the couple unequal, as the tradition they come to share is one of Confucianist patriarchy. It has already started oppressing the women in Sae-byeols family, who —though portrayed as very materialistic— found freedom in Western clothing, but are forced back into the traditional Hanbok. Although this choice is portrayed as voluntary, the fact that Pyong-ho's desire to marry Sae-byeol is dependent solely on qualities as a *Korean* woman confirms that women's choices are strictly limited if she is to be considered for marriage. *Our Fragrance* features another couple's ending that is worth discussing. A fairly large part of the film is focused on the married couple that designs clothes for the fashion show. The couple spend almost every scene bickering, and it is always the wife, who happens to occupy a higher position than her husband, who starts and wins the arguments. At the ending however, she acknowledges that *"I am also a Korean woman. But I drove you solely from our success."* The "but" in this statement suggests that driving her husband from success is not something a good Korean wife should do; another message of *Our Fragrance* that expresses the dangers of straying from patriarchy — dangers for the man, naturally.

The ending of *Comrade Kim* in my opinion does display some kind of gender equality: though like Sae-byeol from *Our* Fragrance Yong-mi had to go through a transition to reach her goal, unlike Sae-byeol Yong-mi was never portrayed as a "negative" woman. Yong-mi's transition is furthermore mainly physical, whereas Sae-byeol had to change her whole lifestyle in order to be accepted by her in-laws-to-be. The ending of *Comrade Kim* shows Yong-mi's success as a trapeze artist: the last scene portrays her and Jang-pil sitting in a plane holding a big prize, indicating they are successful even abroad. Yong-mi and Jang-pil seem to have reached gender equality if you compare this scene to the one where they first meet: Jang-pil used to look down on Yong-mi for being a mere coal mine worker, but has come to appreciate her through her perseverance and dedication. Furthermore, the fact that the couple does not marry lets Yong-mi keep her independence for a while longer, though this independence is inseparably bound to the pressure of success.

In both *Marriage Story* and *All About My Wife* married men and women joke about marriage being "suicide" and "a prison", but the message conveyed at the end is the same in both films: marriage is precious. Although it can be hard at times, all problems can be solved —perhaps even prevented— if a couple communicates well. The couples' decision to give their marriage another try provides the happy ending which the audience so desperately desires. This decision, however, restores the husbands' familial authority and takes away the wives' independence gained through the couples' break-up, putting the protagonists back in their expected gender roles.

3. Chapter Three: Discussion

Observing the results presented in chapter two, we can conclude that although North and South Korean films display romance in very different ways, the portrayed gender relations are for a large part very similar. As we have seen throughout this paper, views on and attitudes towards gender in North and South Korea have never diverged much from another, a remnant from the traditional Confucianist patriarchy that used to dominate Korea since long before the division. The customs accompanying Confucianist tradition have developed differently in a divided Korea, under the socialist cause in the North and industrial development in the South, but have nevertheless remained evidently present in both countries' societies. Gender analysis on the gender relations as portrayed in North and South Korean romantic comedy combined with the historical knowledge presented in literature on gender in North and South Korean society and film reveal how the patriarchal customs derived from traditional Confucianism are still apparent in today's Korean society. Such customs are in North and South Korean film embodied by masculine dominance in working environments and the action of the bride moving into the husband's home after marriage. The anxiety surrounding de-masculinisation as a result of women's increasing economical independence is reflected in North and South Korean film in fundamentally different ways: whereas

North Korean films tend to display extreme patriotism as the correct way to restore patriarchy, South Korean films openly display the problem of de-masculinisation followed by the recovery of the male protagonist's masculine authority at the end of the film. Although the North and South Korean films all include a strong, independent female protagonist, the ending always puts them back into the role of traditional woman, even *Comrade Kim*, where Yong-mi, although doing what she loves by her own choice, becomes a woman who brings glory to the fatherland, as all North Korean athletes should.

Though in both North and South Korea women are becoming more ambitious and economically more inclined compared to their husbands, this seems to be conveyed only in South Korean films: North Korean films do not portray such forms of de-masculinisation. In both *Marriage Story* and *All About My Wife* the female protagonists are more involved and concerned with their jobs, seem to like what they do more, and eventually become more successful than their husbands. This success leads to jealousy of the husbands, but admitting this would worsen their de-masculinisation. Thus, the male protagonists out this frustration by linking their wives' happiness to their associating with other men. The idea of the wife as a male's possession is another patriarchal idea depicted only in South Korean films through the action of wife rape and husbands demanding a say in their wives' decisions, because "it is their right."

The analysing of gender relations in North and South Korean films has furthermore revealed the various connotations linked to gender in North and South Korean society, such as gender roles and gender stereotypes, as well as the changeability of gender through the interaction with another gender. I would like to elaborate on this gender changeability by pointing out a scene from *All About My Wife* in which female protagonist Jung-in picks a fight with the newspaper delivery man. This scene portrays her as a masculine, semi-agressive female; an image that changes into the quiet and obedient "traditional wife" the moment her husband steps outside and tells her to come into the house. The presence and authority of her husband outside of the domestic sphere puts Jung-in into

the role of submissive wife until they are back inside the house, which is when Jung-in starts criticising her husband for making her look bad. The same type of changeability can be seen in *Our Fragrance* where Sae-byeol, who complains a lot and is usually quite rude to her family members in the domestic sphere, suddenly becomes a quiet, feminine woman in the scene where Pyong-ho and his grandfather enter Sae-byeols domestic sphere in the visit to her house.

Stereotypical gender connotations which are fixed and continuously reproduced in society create the ability to successfully convey comedy onto the public exactly by evading these stereotypes: reversing our notion of gender and gender relations by portraying women as masculine and men as feminine creates a new world unimaginable in societies dominated by patriarchy, which consequently is seen as funny and amusing. Movies using this kind of elements are however unable to change our notion of gender because the end of the film always restores our familiar gender stereotypes, hereby again confirming our original understanding of gender rather than attempting to change it. Thus, to answer the ambiguity surrounding the supposed achievement of gender equality in the ending of romantic comedy, I would like to argue that although the endings of romantic comedies do carry an illusion of equality, this is conveyed through the element of happiness, which makes us overlook the fact that the ending is exactly what marks the turning point in which the couple is put back in its original patriarchal entity.

Conclusion

The results of this study are limited because they are based on the analysis of only three films per country, which do not necessarily correspond with other films produced during these particular periods, as for example I expect *Comrade Kim* does not. Furthermore, the results of film analysis are based on a re-creation of reality, and therefore offer no trustworthy image of the reality in North and South Korea. Nevertheless, analysing North and South Korean film by looking at gender relations can reveal the countries' perceptions of gender, gender connotations and stereotypes, and the preserved remnants of patriarchal Confucianist Korea. Through this study we have seen that the concept of gender in both Korea's has continuously developed over time, a process which will go on in the future, though the question remains whether a fundamentally patriarchal society can ever fully break out of tradition to reach a society in which gender equality is achieved. Traditions held for over thousands of years are not likely to disappear soon, although the last century alone has seen many improvements in women's rights and possibilities accompanied by an increasingly aware population that has resulted in endless feminist protests and campaigns. Films react to this threat to male authority by portraying strong, independent female characters, only to put them back in their proper place, the role of traditional woman, at the ending of the film. This transition is apparent in romantic comedies especially, in which reversed gender roles tend to be exaggerated for entertainment, resulting in an even larger gap when the ending turns back to our fixed notions of gender. North and South Korean romantic comedies, therefore, are elements used in the process of preserving Korea's original patriarchal hierarchal order, independent of the societal developments in other fields that have led North and South Korea to differ so much from each other.

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