RESEARCH ARTICLE

Revisiting the case of ‘blood-brothers’: A constructivist approach in North Korea-China relations [version 2; peer review: 2 approved with reservations]

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Abstract
North Korea and China’s relations have, from time to time, been addressed by the international media as ‘symbolic brothers’, and often come into the academic discussion in the context of the ‘Korean War’ (1950-1953). It is captured in the larger debate, with North Korea as a by-product or satellite state of China, but the socio-political view of a created society has not been addressed much. The major development that took place during the time was the symbolic production of terminology such as ‘blood-brothers’ or as close as ‘lips and teeth relations’ which has reciprocal leverage in each-other’s politics. In this case, social constructivism asserts that knowledge undergoes construction through human activity and individuals create meaning through their interactions. The paper takes a constructivist approach as a socio-political view on the Korean War, emphasizing the role of social factors such as identity in the construction of interest and action. It argues that it was the social construction of intersubjective belief and shared understanding that shaped North Korea-China relations.

Keywords
North Korea, China, ‘blood-brothers’, ‘lips and teeth relations’, Korean War
Introduction
Why North Korea and China are considered ‘blood brothers’ in the past? The answer to this question lies in the socially constructed norms as addressed by this paper. North Korea lies as a buffer zone in Northeast Asia, with an area of only 120,540 sq km, smaller than the Jilin Province of China, which shares most of its border with the estuary of the Yalu River. It is important to understand the North Korean culture which is distinctive in its history and its strong connection to China when it comes to the ‘Korean War’ (1950–53), rather than how realists perceive material factors, using a ‘balance of power’ or ‘threat’ assumption. Observing these North Korea-China relations through material factors leads to incomplete understanding because it ignores the social and cultural connection that persists between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or North Korea (DPRK) and the People’s Republic of China or China (PRC) which may be attributable to longstanding historical and symbolic connections. About two million ethnic Koreans are living in and around the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture of China (Kim, 2003: 103). North Korea and China have common symbolic understanding such as ‘blood-brothers’ since the 1950s (Yoon & Lee, 2013: 19). The denomination of ‘blood-brother’ originates from their military alliance during the Korean War. Officially the relationship between these two states also symbolizes ‘lips and teeth relations’, addressing North Korea and China’s deep bonding (Xinhua News, 2015).

The Korean War started with the North Korean forces at four a.m. on Sunday marching toward South Korea from the Uijongbu Corridor on June 25, 1950, in an attempt to reunite Korea (Thomas & Abbott, 1986: 3). The South Korean army, on the other hand, was successful in pushing back North Korean soldiers. Not on their own, but with the help of the US. This led China to be active on its borders, aiming to sweep out any kinds of foreign hegemony in Northeast Asia. During the night of October 19, 1950, more than 360,000 Chinese People Volunteers crossed the Yalu River to rescue their symbolic North Korean brothers. Lee Kwon-mu reports in the newspaper Rodong Sinmun, with the title ‘Invincible Ties between the Korean and Chinese Peoples Cemented with Blood’, highlighting the friendship and solidarity during the patriotic liberation war of the Korean people (FBIS Daily Report, 1955). Many analysts, however, fail to elaborate on explaining North Korea-China relations as an alliance or assume from the realist model of ‘balance of power’ and ‘balance of threats’. The realist further views that the state is self-interested and motivated by the desire for survival and security (Slaughter, 2011: 1–2). The existing literature has extensive work on North Korea-China relations as an “Asymmetric Alliance” or “Comradeship” or “Special Relationship” (Cho, 2021; Dwivedi, 2012; Hoshino & Hiraiwa, 2020). This literature has focused on the ‘problem of economics’ or ‘problem of war’ or ‘problem of communism versus capitalism’, which leads the state to group up in their support. All these issues also contribute to the understanding of North Korea-China’s symbolic relations, but they fall short of explaining the stronger ties that are the product of social construction. The stable relationship of alliance cannot be merely built upon by shared strategic interest in the international politics but has to be nurtured by identical political, economic and ideological commonalities (Ji, 2001: 388). Ignoring social differences has led to a lack of understanding at many levels: social categorization, ethnic violence, migration problems, and most importantly, cultural-based politics, etc.

According to Jonathan Corrado (2021) Western (particularly the United States of America (US)) policymakers failed to predict China’s interest in the Korean War and North Korea’s socio-cultural connection with China (Corrado, 2021: 1). Asmovlov (2020) asserts that the Chinese government recalls the Korean War as China nobly defending North Korea from external invasion. Moreover, the Korean War was perceived as a war against China itself, which was assisted by the West in terms of escalation of war against the entire communist of the world. He argues that China’s entry into the Korean War was thus reflected not as a conflict but as a preventive measure toward World War III (Asmovlov, 2020). It was perceived as a defensive measure that gradually constructed the idea of comradeship.

I argue that the constructivist explanation can be suitable to explain the dynamics of North Korea and China relations because they look at both the history and social dynamics within states for its outcome. Social constructivists view “anarchy as what States make of it” (Wendt, 1992) and it is the normative factors that lead the State to demonstrate their actions. The constant social interactions between North Korean and Chinese leaders throughout the Chinese Civil War (1927–49) and Korean War (1950–53) pushed them to gain a deeper understanding of assimilation with each other’s culture, ideas, and ideology, than compared to a less interacted world. Mutual trust and cooperation through the exchange of ideas and interests amongst states further developed to pursue peace. The constructivist explanation can better explain the dynamism of North Korea and China relations by looking at both the history and social dynamics within the state.

Conceptual framework of constructivism
The constructivist approach to international relations differs from the realist and liberal approaches in its assertion that it rejects the material foundation of social interaction. It instead claims that social interactions themselves create a shared understanding and shape material reality. In the larger spectrum, Social Constructivism in International Relations explains;
epistemological claim as knowledge is socially constructed, ontological claim as social reality as constructed, and reflexive claim as knowledge and reality as mutually constitutive (Jung, 2019: 2). According to Alexander Wendt (1999), international relations is a socially constructed reality based on two basic constructivist tenets: 1) human association is determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces; and 2) an actor’s identities and interests are constructed by shared ideas rather than pre-given nature (Wendt, 1999: 1).

Constructivist theories look onto the social science, viewing how ‘reality’, including the ‘interests’ that partly define the actor’s identity, is socially constructed (Katzenstein et al., 1998: 646). Robin O. Andreasen (2000) in his study highlights race (Korean race, Yellow race etc.) as socially constructed (Andreasen, 2000: 654). Social interactions create a shared understanding of the material reality or structures of daily life. In turn, those structures help reinforce or weaken new shared understanding. Wendt’s (1992) article ‘anarchy is what States make of it’ suggests that anarchy in the international system is not a constructivist given but inherited by the system itself. Similarly, a state’s existence is founded not on material foundations but on shared understanding and belief that gives meaning to those foundations. For example, the US maintains a nuclear stockpile of about 7,500 warheads and Russia has a similar number, France has about 300 warheads, China about 250 warheads, the UK about 200 warheads, India 100 warheads, Pakistan 100 warheads, Israel 80 warheads, and North Korea has approximately eight warheads. Each of these nuclear warheads could cause immense damage, easily destroying a city like New York or San Francisco. But why is it that we view North Korea’s eight nuclear warheads as an existential crisis to the security of the US but express no concern over the UK’s 200? Why is it that the US is so preoccupied with the threat posed by Iran’s potential development of nuclear weapons but not with Israel’s actual possession of them? Wendt offers possible explanation: state act differently towards enemies than they do towards friends because enemies are threatening and friends are not. Each country’s foreign policy can be seen in part at least as a reflection of the nation’s history and shared understanding of it.

A constructivist argues that these ideas and interests matter in international relations. They reject realist assertions about the nature of the international system being a given and the self-help and survival requirements that flow from that claim. They are also critical of liberal assertions about the inherent possibility of cooperation and the overriding concern with protecting human rights and establishing a liberal international order. Indeed, constructivists argue that ideas and identities shape national identities, foreign policy goals, and all international relations. Political culture, the nature of government, history, and domestic politics can all shape national identities, which can be unique to specific countries. State has identities and nation states are not all alike. The identities of North Korea and China look very different from the identities of South Korea and the US. And as a result, the state behaves in ways that are different. In the past China actually controlled parts of Korea in the 17th Century before its unified Korean state and during the Korean War the comradeship strengthen their relationship who were facing common enemies (Shen, 2012: 429).

Constructivism also gives us a way to think about the role of norms in global politics. Norms are standards of appropriate behaviour for specific actors in international relations, which lead to how actors ought to behave. Norms are not necessarily codified in international law, and norms serve as a guide for the behaviour of a state. Norms emerge with individual actors promoting ideas about how the international system should function and what ought to be. Through the power of persuasion, they are able to convince other actors, eventually states and international organizations, of the importance of those norms. The norms become operationalized through practice and norms of ‘lips and teeth relations’ or ‘blood brother’ encouraged both North Korea and China to support each other during the Korean War.

Thus, it is collective meaning that constitutes the structures around which we organize our actions. Such shared understanding plays out at the domestic level as well, affecting foreign policy and decision-making. The following are the take-away in terms of social constructivism: 1) First, identity matters, and beliefs about the international system shape its function and structure, as well as its reality. 2) The interests of actors should not be taken as a given but should be viewed as reflections of their identities and should be based on perceptions that can change over time. 3) Interest is not there to be discovered; it is constructed through social interaction. 3) Norms are important; shared understanding that is, norms of expected behaviour can shape or constrain the behaviour of actors in the international system. This paper will use the constructivist approach and focuses on the following basic assumptions in North Korea-China relations: i) North Korea and Chinese interaction is not shaped by material factors, but primarily by ideational ones; ii) the most significant ideational factors in this context are the inter-subjective belief of ‘blood brothers’ or ‘lips and teeth relations’; iii) and these beliefs construct the actor’s identities and interest.

Figure 1 illustrates the ideational factors in the transition of North Korea and China relations. A constructivist has no such single design or method in the interpretation of inter-subjective discourse. They choose the method and analytical tools best suited in the research question with the help of process tracing, interviews, participation observation, content analysis, etc. to capture intersubjective meanings (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). Conventional constructivism traditionally focused on historical junctures, where new structural arrangements develop, as well as interactions between existing structures and agents. For example, Iain Johnston developed a constructivist argument to explain China’s consistent militant security strategy (Katzenstein et al., 1998: 676). Conventional constructivist follows methodological tasks of nationalist or utilitarian camps gathering evidence, asserting it with an explanation. The paper will explain the North Korean and Chinese relations...
highlighting social and cultural meanings through the lens of conventional constructivism (Startt & Sloan, 2003). To collect the data and follow the pattern, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) reports and the Pyongyang Times newspaper (weekly newspaper) are contextually studied. It helps us to link why North Korea and China were considered the ‘blood-brother’ or ‘lips and teeth relations’ from the social constructivism approach.

**North Korea as a socially constructed state**

To understand North Korea as a social construct, we need to understand how States are socially constructed. The material factor of a State primarily is its territory, population, economy, etc., but States are also created by ideas (communism), culture (secular, ethnic), and norms (rule of law). What makes the North Korea – the North Korea? Is it the infrastructure? Or is it the military? Or is it the system of government? Constructivists argue, no, it’s the shared sense of identity claimed by North Koreans. And it is a shared belief that comes from North Korean existence. In the international system, a state could not exist without its territory or territory without the state, but when the international system changes, state borders are also changed and people inside it adopt or find new identities and cultures based on its norms. This can be reflected from the translation biography of Kim Il Sung published from Pyongyang as it shows that, he attended his secondary school in Jilin (Northeast China) which was known as the ‘Second Shanghai’ where Korean revolutionaries gathered. He gradually learned conduct and organized the peasant’s union in Xinantun, Jiangdong village, Kalun and Dahuanggou etc. (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2008). Gradually, North Korean society officially adopted communist ideology after gaining its independence from Japanese rule, but before the revolutionary society was introduced in the 1920s. The communist ideology was adopted by a majority of Koreans having a background of peasants and freedom movement, who had mostly encountered the Russian and Chinese communist groups. For example, the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia (former USSR) in October 1917. The ‘Bolshevik Revolution’ gave the first impression of re-constructing identity through revolution, upon the Korean peasants that were under ‘Japanese rule’ (1910–1945). Gradually, the new politically communist identity was seen as the identity of Korean society. Two communist parties amongst Korean groups were formed in the same year. In January 1918, the Korean Bolshevik Party (KBP) was formed, in Irkutsk, Western Siberia, and in June 1918, the Korean Socialist Party (KSP) was formed in Khabarovsk, located in Eastern Siberia. Both Parties aimed at national liberation from the Japanese imperialist rule and searching for the construction of their own identity. The latter group moved to Shanghai in 1919, joining hands with other Korean nationals, and in 1925, the Korean Communist Party was formed (KCP) in Seoul (Kwon, 2010: 286–287). In 1927, the KCP formed a united front of nationalists, and in the year 1930, communist ideology amongst Koreans spread throughout the countryside, mobilizing the peasant and labour groups with the same interests of freedom and class struggle. In this event, Kim Il Sung (first President of North Korea), was fighting against the Japanese ‘imperialist’ power under the direction of the Chinese Communist Party. Throughout the years of the late 1930s and early 1940s, a group of Korean Communists comrades, other than Kim, including Il Yu, who would later become North Korea’s Deputy Prime Minister, travelled to Yan-an (the ‘Red Capital’ of the Chinese Communist Party), to join Chinese ‘War of Resistance’ (China’s freedom movement, 1937–1945) against imperialist Japan (ibid.).

The existence of North Korea, in other words, rests not on any of the material foundations but instead on shared understanding and belief that gives those material foundations meaning. After the freedom struggle movement against Japanese rule, the northern part of Korea was under Soviet occupation from

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**Figure 1. ‘Ideational’ factors towards North Korea-China relations.**
period, both countries had traditional agricultural societies and were in need to modernizing their semi-feudal societies. In both countries, revolutionary movements were led by the rural and peasant base and the communist ideology was introduced by intellectuals. Ideology and norms emerge in a context of mutually constituted understanding. Norms emerge with individual actors promoting ideas (ideology) about how the international system should function what ought to be. Constructivists argue that North Korea and China eventually believed that they were communist. Or more importantly, they started acting as if communism was a struggle for them to achieve their goal. Freed from the structural constraints, individuals chose to identify as communists, and it was the power of identity and ideas for constructivists that led to the formation of the ‘blood brother’ metaphor in each other’s relations.

One of the important criteria of cultural aspect is ‘ideology’, which drives States to choose their friends and enemies. Ideology is manufactured by a person or group to function and make decisions (Freeden, 2006: 20). Social constructivism reflects that the ideology plays a pivotal role in a leader’s perception of threat and shaping its interests (Jung, 2019: 6). It is remarked that Kim Il Sung and Mao Zedong’s friendship was based on the ideology of ‘Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism’ (GDR Embassy, 1975). To this, Kim Il Sung calls it a ‘fighting alliance between class brothers’ (ibid). When neither the UN nor Chinese forces were willing to leave Korean soil, Zhou Enlai reiterated that ‘China now prepares itself for the Third World War’ (Far East Survey, 1950). Daily Intelligence Summary (DIS) showed 116,000 Chinese troops were present in Manchuria, followed by 217,000 to 246,000 in late September with a possible strength of increasing 450,000 men that were ready to fight as a rapid reaction force if needed (Cohen, 1950). During the Korean War, the NKDP declassified documents, showing China was also offering tactical instruction from September to October 1950 to Kim Il Sung, to win a ‘protracted war’. This period resulted in a series of exchanges between Zhou and Ambassador Ni Zhihliang, who was also responsible for conveying Zhou’s remarks to Kim Il Sung. Zhou then sent a Chinese military observer to Korea and invited the North Korean leader, Pak Il-u, to China, to get a detailed report from the ground (Kraus, 2012). On February 11, 1950, Mao Zedong also to supported Kim’s army with additional equipment, such as aircraft and engines, aviation tools, ammunition, and models for making aircraft wheels. For the student’s involvement in the fighting, the requisition paper signed by Mao Zedong on February 15, 1950, included 42 aircraft (20 IA 18, 10 R9, and 12 T2), 24 engines, 200 parachutes, and 10,000 rounds of ammunition, which General Liu Yalou ordered from General Shitemenko (Yang & Stiffler, 2008).

Figure 2 shows there were a total of 167 official visits, between 1953 and 2019, among North Korean and Chinese delegates (Beyond Parallel, Apr. 3, 2017). A series of North Korea-China highest level political visits have been witnessed after the Korean War: five visits in 1950s; two visits in 1960s; six visits in 1970s; and 18 visits in 1980s were recorded.

Social construction of ‘blood brothers’

In a systemic approach itself, a State allows cooperation in the ‘Prisoner’s Dilemma’ context to avoid conflicts. If these actors believe that cooperation is not only possible but beneficial, then they will act accordingly to protect their interests (Binding, 2017: 19). These views have been taken by social constructivists as constitutive of the conflicts and peace or choosing friends throughout history with focus on cultural aspects. For constructivists, such explanations may help to understand the pressure for political reform or even for radical political change, but they do not explain why North Korea and China were actually closely connected to each other during the Korean War. Timothy Hildebrandt (2003) in his report on ‘Uneasy Allies’ says that the ‘closer than lips and teeth’ proverb was once used in propaganda to propagate stronger North Korea-China relations. For example, there are many similarities between the development of the Korean and Chinese communist movements. Korean communist movement development was seen in pre-1945, while the Chinese communist movement was seen before the emergence of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Communist activities in both countries began between the late 1910s and early 1920s, when Korea was under Japanese colonial rule and China under semi-colonial rule. During that...
Kondapalli, 2006: 3). These contacts indicated 11 ‘friendly visits’ (six from China); 20 ‘official visits’ (with official friendly visits); five ‘unofficial visits’ were made (North Korea making three visits) including Kim Il Sung in a 1982 ‘state visit’ and so on (ibid, 4). The *Pyongyang Times* (Sep. 4, 2010) headline ‘Kim Jong Il pays unofficial visit to China’ highlighted the visit of Kim to China accompanied by Vice Chairman of North Korea Kim Yong Chun, Kim Ki Nam, Thae Jong Su, Kang Sok Ju, Jang Song Thaek, Hong Sok Hyong, Kim Yok Il, Kim Yang Gon, Choe Ryong Hae, Kim Phyong Hae and Pak to Chun. On the Chinese side were Hu Jintao accompanied by Ling Juhua, Dai Bingguo, Wang Jiarui, Yang Jiechi, Zhang Ping, Chen Deming, Liu Jieyi, and Liu Hongcai. The news reported that Kim Jong Il focused on the North Korea-China friendship during this visit where he highlighted the unchanged ties despite the passage of time and generation. The *Pyongyang Times* reflect Hu Jintao’s friendly relation towards North Korea. This period opened many doors for trade and commerce, education, exchanges of ideas, and culture between the two states.

Figure 3. highlights the delegations between of DPRK and PRC during the time of Kim Il Sung and Mao Zedong. There were a total of 35 visits to China and 44 visits to North Korea,

![Official visits since 1953](image1.png)

**Figure 2.** Total numbers of a visit by North Korean and Chinese high-level delegates (*Beyond Parallel, 2017*).

![Delegates from DPRK and PRC during the time of Kim and Mao](image2.png)

**Figure 3.** Interactions during the Kim Il Sung and Mao Zedong era (*Beyond Parallel, 2017*).
out of which six key visits were accompanied by Kim Il Sung. To this, social constructivists claimed it as inter-subjectivity where a shared understanding is developed among individuals whose interaction is based on common interests that form their communication. This inter-subjectivity not only provides the platform for communication but also supports each other to extend their understanding of new information and activities. Thus, knowledge of ‘friendship’, ‘partners’, or ‘brotherhood’ is derived from interactions within cultures. This construction of knowledge is influenced by inter-subjectivity formed by cultural and historical factors of the community.

The Korean War came to an end with the signing of an armistice on July 27, 1953, between the US, China, North Korea, and South Korea. But it also marked a victory to the ‘blood-brothers’ giving meaning to their social bonding. Kim Il Sung, in his New Year message, addressed ‘all men and officers of the Chinese volunteer units’ as ‘blood brothers’. His New Year message was widely broadcasted from January 1–9, 1951 (Far East Survey, 1951a). Likewise, the International Women’s Day message was addressed to leaders such as Stalin, Mao, and Kim Il Sung, with heartfelt gratitude for the support and pledge that culminated in the final victory (Far East Survey, 1951b). Thus, leader’s images were portrayed as heroic symbols with its connection to each other cultures in the forms of ‘Beijing Operas’ (yangbanxi) in the PRC and ‘revolutionary operas’ (hukmyung kageuk) in the case of the DPRK (Kim, 2005: 2–3). Mustapha Fersi (1983) in his work published from Pyongyang (capital of North Korea) highlights the excerpt of Kim Il Sung’s interview to the Xinhua News Agency on April 23, 1981. Kim in his own words says, “North Korea and China are neighbours linked by same mountain and river. For ages peoples have been close to comrades in arms and class brothers whose destinies are bound to each other in socialist revolution and construction of example as a proletarian internationalism” (Fersi, 1983: 207) He further says, “No force on earth can destroy the great friendship between the North Korea and Chinese people which is sealed in blood in the flames of arduous revolutionary struggle” (ibid, 208). When the state councillor and minister of Public Security of China Meng Jianzhu’s visited North Korea on February 2011, he wrote in the visitors’ book, “Kim Il Sung will live on the hearts of the Chinese people” (The Pyongyang Times, Feb. 19, 2011)

**North Korea and China in the present context**

Even in the present context, DPRK leader Kim Jong Un and PRC President Xi Jinping vowed to strengthen cooperation on the anniversary of their treaty of friendship which was signed on July 11, 1961. This friendship treaty was earlier signed due to South Korea’s installation of a military government in May 1961, which was speculated by North Korea as South Korea’s stronger ties with the US (Hoshino & Hiriwa, 2020: 20). According to the Seoul-based Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KORTA), bilateral trade increased between 2000 and 2015, where 2014 was at 6.86 billion USD (Albert, 2019). However, the nuclear tests carried out by Pyongyang in 2006 and 2009 apparently shocked China along with the world (Shen, 2012: 428). On April 5, 2009 the North Korea formally decided to quit the talks in reaction to the United Nations Security Council’s decision to adopt a Security Council Resolution 1874.

The above Figure 4 shows that trade between North Korea-China is not steady after the United Nations (UN) sanctions. However, a significant portion of North Korea’s trade with third

![China-DPRK Trade Volume](https://www.northkoreaintheworld.org/china-dprk/total-trade)
countries is hugely routed through China which makes them rely on each other. Hoshino & Hiriwa (2020) further write that Beijing and Pyongyang have become more dependent on each other. They categorize the dependency from four factors such as national security, socialist ideology, traditional ties, and economic relations. On June 20, 2019, Xi Jinping visited Pyongyang marking his first trip to North Korea. During his visit, he promised to build the new Yalu River Bridge which was earlier promised by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in 2009 and stopped after only completing a three-kilometre span in 2015 at the cost of 350 million USD to China (Wertz, 2019).

Despite North Korea getting economic benefits, the Pyongyang nuclear test in October 2006 moved Beijing to back the UN Security Council’s decision on Resolution 1718 sanctions (ibid, 2019). With China’s equal closer moves towards South Korea, continuous Pyongyang nuclear testing, etc., some have even predicted that North Korea and China no longer have ‘lips and teeth’ relations (Wen & Shepherd, 2017). Since the 2016 North Korea nuclear testing, South Korea became proactive in receiving terminal high altitude area defence (THAAD) (American anti-ballistic missile defence system) and worked in receiving terminal high altitude area defence (THAAD) in South Korea, which was seen as a threat to the Korean peninsula (Hoshino & Hiriwa, 2020: 26). This assisted further in continuation of historical legacy of ties in the geopolitical scenario.

**Analysis of social construction of ‘blood brothers’ during and after Korean War**

The Korean War is not just a part of political history; many war historians are still interested in socio-cultural factors and remember it as psychological warfare which further constructed the ideas of cultural relations (Hong, 2018: 244–245). Approximately 2.5 million propaganda leaflets or flyers were circulated by both North and South Korea during the Korean War reflecting the views of cultural-historical connections, but this is also another part of ‘ideational’ studies. Hong (2018) asserts that it was the first time for the US army to meet Communist propaganda that leads multidisciplinary scholars to investigate the Korean War history and DPRK and PRC ties (ibid). Furthermore, earlier research, including governmental reports, has provided significant information about psychological warfare, though most of it is from Western perspectives, primarily the United States (Kim & Haley, 2018: 938). Others who studied from a cultural perspective understood that the communist propaganda was far better than the UN propaganda. Chung (2004) divided the information offered in the Korean War propaganda into two broad categories: i) personal interests and ii) politics and ideologies. This earlier research provides some insight into Korean War propaganda in terms of its themes. Schneider and Ingram (1993) assert that the social constructions influence the policy agenda, policy tools, as well as the rationale that legitimizes policy choices. They claim that communists tried to focus more on building their soldiers’ faith and to stay focused, while the UN propaganda tended to centre more on presenting information of their superiority, based on their advanced weapons (ibid).

Reading from the *Pyongyang Times* through the lens of constructivism, the relations between North Korea and China are seen as socially constructed. Social constructivism illustrates the social reality as those 350 Chinese nuclear weapons are less threatening to North Korea than five American THAAD acquired by South Korea. These reflect that it is not about the nuclear weapon or ballistic missile (material power) but rather by giving meaning to the material structure (ideational structure). In this view, the social relationship between North Korea and China and the US and South Korea is perceived in the shared understanding (inter-subjectivity) which is based on their interactions. Thus, it shows that nuclear weapons or missiles do not have meaning unless we understand them through social context, and it changes over time depending upon the ideas and beliefs of an actor.

This agency and structure are mutually constructed, which implies structure influencing agency and agency influencing structure. From the lens of constructivism, the social reality of ‘lips and teeth relations’ or ‘blood brothers’ between North Korea and China represents the inter-subjective structure (shared ideas and beliefs of both states), where North Korea and China are the actors who can change the existing structure or social relationship of friendship. This change depends upon the beliefs and ideas of States. This belief system is however constructed constantly though the cultural industry. For example, the *Pyongyang Times* (Aug 28, 2010) reports the Chinese businessman Zhang Joangrong who was working in North Korea noticed three Korean girls drifting near the seashore of Rason city (Kwanbuk region of North Korea). He and his friend Yuan Xinwang rushed to rescue the girls but unfortunately lost their own lives. This incident marked Zhang a heroic figure in North Korea and praised the legacy of North Korea and China friendship from generation to generation. In North Korea, this content of friendship is referred to as *jojung ch’inson* (Korean-Chinese friendship), and in China; this relationship is referred to as the ‘youyi or qinshan’ (PRC-DPRK ties). The role of ideas is crucial in constructing social life and it is centrally concerned with the social rather than the material (Cho, 2009: 79). The history of the Chinese soldier in the Korean War is continuously remembered through postal stamps issued in North Korea. The State Stamp Bureau issued official stamps marking the 60th anniversary of Chinese people’s volunteers in Korean War to keep alive the history of two sides (*The Pyongyang Times*, Sept. 18, 2010a). The construction of the Sino-North Korean Friendship Bridge at the Yalu River between North Korea and China sets another symbolic example of a constructed image of friendship. This place bustles with the fast-growing traffic of goods and raw materials moving between the two countries. This bridge connects the city of Dandong (former Andong), China’s border town in Liaoning Province, and Sinuiju, one of North Korea’s northernmost towns. Others like the ‘Friendship Tower’ (U’rintap) in Pyongyang commemorate symbolic points. Its primary function is to keep it as a war memorial, dedicated to the Chinese martyrs who fought
in the Korean War. Inside this 30-meter-high granite tower, the memorial has kept the records of 22,700 fallen Chinese soldiers. Social constructivism asserts that ‘war’ is a social construct phenomenon. This means that actors can manoeuvre warfare by influencing the agent structure system (Binding, 2017: 19). This view differs from the realist which argues that anarchical structure determines the behaviour of States. Constructivists, to this, argue that ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ and it depends on the meaning that actors assign to it.

Identities and interests of an actor are other central factors to North Korea and China relations. Constructivism argues that identities are created through social interaction with other actors and these identities constitute interests and actions. The identity of a small state implies a set of interests that are different from the identity of a larger state. If the small state’s focus is on survival, the larger state is concerned with influence over it in political, economic, and military affairs (Theys, 2018: 2). During the ‘Chinese civil war’ (1927–1949), between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Nationalists, 100,000 ethnic Korean residents were persuaded to join the Chinese Communist forces, where they served as a strategic supporting base to the CCP in Manchuria. The 156th, 164th, and 166th divisions of the best combat units of China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) were mainly composed of these ethnic Korean soldiers who engaged in the battle. Thus, identities are also constructed with the engagement of various actors based on their interests and interaction.

Others like the social norm are equally important to social constructivism. Social norm plays an important part in shaping identities. In other words, State identities and interests are shaped by norms that imply preferences and consequent actions (Hopf, 1998: 175). State identity must comply with the norms that social constructivists call ‘logic of appropriateness’ believing that their behaviours are appropriate. According to social constructivism, these norms must be adopted by relevant states and internalized in their practices. For example, the Korean Central News Agency is a state-run media of North Korea established on December 5, 1946, which continually played an important role in supporting its regime. Similarly, Chinese news, such as Xinhua Agency, People’s Daily Online, etc. are run by the military government and at the same time are known for being highly paid for their works. Even the official newspapers of North Korea, such as the ‘Workers Party Newspaper’ (Minju Choson) are run by the state (Oh & Hasling, 2000: 4–12). Closely examining through content analysis, the Pyonyang Times (from June 2010 to June 2011), shows 16 headlines dedicated to Kim Il Sung and 25 headlines praising the relations of North Korea and China during the Korean war. The artists in the fine arts and photo exhibition have reported the most creative practices in their dedication to their leaders, Mao and Kim. This newspaper is thought-provoking when it comes to foreign relations objectives, as the state continually articulates the idea of ‘superiority’ or ‘allies’ as propaganda to safeguard its interests. It indicates that the propaganda construct ideas and becomes reality when it is accepted by society. In international politics, propaganda is usually directed to target audiences of opinion leaders (Newman, 1951: 60). The word ‘propaganda’ (xuanguan) itself does not necessarily carry the same negative connotation in Chinese culture but is seen as an authored-centred approach (West, 1992: 386). Thus, the interflows of ideas shaped by the state media environment and through this representation into everyday interaction simultaneously construct the social reality. The case of North Korea-China devoted relations has thus been successful and survived in the history of world politics.

Conclusion

The ideational factors between North Korea and China played an important role in state identity creation and cooperation throughout the Korean War. The ‘ideational factors’ (culture and identity), which are opposed to the ‘materialist’ (power and technology), stress the role of ideas and identity in giving meaning to the material structures. The social constructivist sees shared knowledge and national identity in North Korea-China relations as distinct in nature due to their shared ideas rather than material factors. The cultural values rooted in Confucius’ ideas; common ‘interest’ to stand against imperialism; the adoption of communist ideology by both Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung; and the perceived image of ‘blood-brothers’ throughout the Korean War shaped the two countries’ friendship to an extraordinary level. Some would say despite the deteriorating relationship is seen sometime; the PRC has been since 1949 the DPRK’s strongest and only supporter (Swanstrom & Weissmann, 2004: 220).

It is not only the distribution of power and wealth and geographical conditions that explain state behaviour but also ideas, identities, and norms. Anarchy and the distribution of power are insufficient to tell us which is which. For example, China’s military power had a different structural significance for North Korea than for South Korea despite their structural positions, just as North Korea’s missiles had a different significance for China than for the US. The distribution of power may have an impact on state calculations, but how it does so is determined by the inter-subjective understanding and expectation on the distribution of knowledge that comprised their conception of self and others. Assuming if North Korea and South Korea decide that they are the real blood-brothers, the Korean War is over. It is the collective meanings that constitute the structure around which we organise our actions. Such shared understanding plays out at the domestic level as well, affecting foreign policy and decision-making.

Since the end of the cold war, North Korea stands as a buffer state for China, and it is the only country in Northeast Asia to be known as more than a partner. This buffer state lies in the middle of China and the US alliances with South Korea and Japan. Constructivism distinguishes between the actual international situation and what important actors knew at the time. The behaviour of multiple states can be different at one time, or the behaviour of one state can be different at different times. The North Korean issue looks different from Beijing’s eyes than it does from Washington’s. China, along with the US, does not prefer a nuclear North Korea, but Chinese strategic interests are different from the United States’ objectives.
Instead of the US hegemony in Northeast Asia, China is more concerned about the regime’s survival, which is run by the family legacy of Kim’s dynasty in North Korea after the Kim Il Sung era. As reality is subjective, the state-controlled media in both North Korea and China will continue to create camaraderie through cultural industries, which reenergizes the ideas, interests, and ideology of their citizens from generation to generation.

However, social constructivism stresses that symbolic ‘blood brothers’ or ‘lips and teeth’ relations between North Korea and China are not fixed but ‘subject to change’. In practice, China has also shown far more interest in cultivating important economic relations with South Korea than in rejuvenating its ideological partnership with North Korea. China also stood against North Korea during its nuclear tests since 2006 and approved the UNSC Resolution sanctions, which marked the decline in the relationship until Kim Jong Un’s visit to Beijing. Tipping point exist between each stage. Some norms failed to gain any traction at all and another never make it out of the emergent stage. Other begins to cascade but lose momentum and are never operationalized. North Korea and China remembers brotherhood in October 2019, which led both countries to again celebrate the 70th year of invincible friendship.

Thus, the norm life cycle continues with their growth and influence. The norms emerge with individual actors promoting ideas about how the international system should function and what ought to be. Through the power of persuasion, they are able to continue other actors’ eventually states of the importance of those norms, such as ‘eternal friendship’. This leads to the cascade, which is when more and more actors adopt the norm and behave as though it’s true. The region is that they seek to enhance their own legitimacy, or a state leader may desire to be seen as acting on a topic of importance on the international stage, or the internal or external pressure on stage to confirm it. North Korea and China behave according to the principles outlined in the norms. As China has always been a supporter of North Korea in economic aid, and North Korea has always backed China in terms of sovereignty and territorial issues. China aspires to be the next superpower, while North Korea has fallen behind and is constantly fighting for survival. However, as long as the norms continues, North Korea and China’s ‘blood-brother’ relations will remain manufactured within the construct of knowledge, which is still unique in the socio-political history of the 21st century.

Data availability
No data are associated with this article.

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Robert Winstanley-Chesters
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'Revisiting the case of 'blood-brothers': A constructivist approach in North Korea-China relations' is an interesting contrast to the large variety of realist and neo-realist analyses of North Korean-Chinese and other East Asian regional and geopolitical relationships. However this reviewer felt the paper suffers a little, or could be developed further, away from slightly anachronistic approaches at both ends of its analysis. While the social constructivist approach to IR and power relationships between nations, those nations themselves are social and cultural constructions themselves - this is particularly the case of North Korea, which was not a nation imagined by anyone prior to its creation, and was certainly not imagined by those around Kim Il Sung who fought for its foundation in the 1930s and around the collapse of Japanese power in 1945. As a nation, North Korea was very much a place of social construction, and its citizens had to both engage in and be engaged in the process of their own social and ideological construction and reconstruction - it might be better if you could include more work to that end, to underpin the approach of the paper vis a vis social constructivism. In particular the analysis of Heonik Kwon and Byung-ho Chung on the use of political charisma, narrative, mythology and emotion in the creation and reconfiguration of the ideology and political practice which made the North Korea that acts in its constructed approach to international relations - there are many other writers who see and analyse these constructions and imaginings of North Korean politics and form, and the paper and author would do well to update its reading of this aspect of North Korea state formation and action, to be more holistically constructivist.

Secondly while China and North Korea may describe their relationship on occasion as being as close as lips and teeth in the Maoist sense, in the present this is almost as strained and threadbare a concept as US/UK articulating their "special relationship" - While relations were close at various times, and forged in blood during the "Korean War"/"Victorious Fatherland Liberation War"/"War to aid Korea and Resist American Aggression" 抗美援朝战争/조국해방전쟁 - in the present or near
present relations have been very strained by North Korean nuclear adventurism and development, as well as other aspects of North Korean policy - and although of course North Korea is a useful buffer for PRC China, as well as for the US, their relationship is much more complicated and contested than in the past, and this paper and the author could do with updating and reconfiguring their approach to more holistically take these troubles into account.

There are other things about this paper which could be contested and might need development - such as notions of North Korean cultural production, which don't reflect its inherent politicisation, and the work of scholars such as Koen De Ceuster who explore whether North Korean cultural products can even be considered art or culture because of this - as well as work on the generation and maintenance of media and reporting institutions and narratives from state media (there is no other media).

Essentially, nothing is really intrinsic or to be taken as entirely "authentic" or at face value in North Korea, everything is constructed or reconstructed (which is also of course true elsewhere and everywhere), but this fact is considerably more overt in North Korea and this should be brought out when it comes to considering its IR and whether that is socially constructed as well.

**Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?**
Partly

**Is the study design appropriate and does the work have academic merit?**
Partly

**Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?**
Yes

**Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?**
Yes

**If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?**
Not applicable

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?**
Partly

*Competing Interests*: No competing interests were disclosed.

*Reviewer Expertise*: North Korean studies, North Korean politics and human geography

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 11 Jul 2023

Anmol Mukhia
Dear Reviewer 2,

Thank you very much for your valuable time spent reviewing my paper. I have marked all the changes as highlighted by you. I have modified the research question and made it suitable for the literature or research article to address. I have also added Chinese sources and found it suitable to highlight the North Korea-China relations of the past and present. I have also added the nuclear adventure in brief and link it with the section: North Korea and China in the present context. Also, I have added some lines to the conclusion justifying that Social Constructivism theory best explains the North Korea and China relations of the past.

**Competing Interests:** No competing Interest

Reviewer Report 19 June 2023

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Yun Zhang

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This manuscript is a potentially helpful intellectual attempt to explain the nature of Sino-North Korean relations. The author tries to employ a constructivist perspective to investigate the nature of this important relationship. However, several serious problems must be addressed.

First, the central research question is not clearly set. The author uses the blood-brothers as a keyword in the title. Does he/she intend to explain the ideational foundation of this blood-brothers relationship? However, we have witnessed many ups and downs in the relationship. The diplomatic discourse of the blood-brothers might not be able to a consistent nature of the relationship. I think that the author needs to clarify the central research question clearly, so then the readers could follow the ensuing explanations.

Second, the section on the social construction of blood brothers emphasizes a similar ideology for shared identity formation, but the empirical analysis by merely using mutual visits and official rhetoric is not sufficient to support the argument. No doubt, ideology has played an important role in China-North Korea relations and there is a lot of literature on that. The author needs to provide a thorough literature review on the role of ideology in this relationship. Then, the author needs to provide his/her originality and added value to address the academic insufficiency in the existing literature.
Third, the lack of Chinese sources is a big shortcoming of this article. There is numerous research in Chinese or English literature written by Chinese scholars.

Fourth, the conclusion part emphasizes the ideational factors to conclude that the relationship between China and North Korea will continue their blood brothers relations. However, what is the definition of this blood brothers relations? As mentioned above, many scholars have also mentioned the role of ideology in the relationship. So what are the author's new materials or evidence that could further support conventional wisdom?

I think that this article needs a major revision.

**Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?**
Partly

**Is the study design appropriate and does the work have academic merit?**
Partly

**Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?**
Partly

**Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?**
Partly

**If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?**
I cannot comment. A qualified statistician is required.

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?**
Partly

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** International Relations, US-China-Japan Relations, International Relations in the Asia-Pacific, Asian Regionalism, IR theories perception and misperception

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

**Author Response 11 Jul 2023**

**Anmol Mukhia**

Dear Reviewer 1,

Thank you very much for your valuable time spent reviewing my paper. I have marked all the changes as highlighted by you. I have modified the research question and made it suitable for the literature or research article to address. I have also added Chinese sources.
and found it suitable to highlight the North Korea-China relations of the past and present. Also, I have added some lines to the conclusion. I preferred to continue my article with the Social Constructivism approach in the case of North Korea and China relations during the Korean War. This is because, in the International Relations discipline, the case of North Korea-China has only been more focused from the traditional security views and hard-core theories of IR have dominated the literature. My attempt was to focus on the constructivist approach in understanding the case of North Korea-China relations.

**Competing Interests:** No competing interest