

Changes in Women's Policies of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Images of Women as Reflected in Popular Music

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Abstract

This article historically identifies the significant women's policies implemented by Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) from the inception of its regime to the early 2000s, and introduces popular songs that reflect the characteristics of the policies of each era. After the reorganization of the equal rights laws and system, DPRK's policies for women developed into a basic axis of socializing women's household labor and parenting, and socio-politicizing such aspects in the last phase. In the nascent days of the state, numerous women were found to be active as the agents of socialist reform, and in the 1960s and the 1970s, female laborers could transform themselves into reformers while playing roles equal to those of men under maternity protection policies. However, although beginning from the 1990s, when the economic crisis erupted, women have played the role as the actual heads of households and saw changes in the division of gender roles, popular music has embodied as virtues the sacrifices of women who have internalized the patriarchal order. Historically, DPRK has valued the nuclear family, emphasizing the "Socialist Great Family" (*sahoejuüi taegajöng*) along with the Juche ideology to maintain the DPRK-style socialism. In consequence, the roles of the state and of women as well as family relationships has become defined more than ever according to gender norms.

Keywords: socialist policies for women, popular music, labor reformer, family policies, gender norms

Introduction

Although Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter DPRK) has instituted policies for women similar to those of neighboring socialist countries since the inception of its regime, the nature of the policies has gradually changed independently in the process of overcoming external pressure from imperialist nations to change its political system for over half a century.

Originally, socialist theory espouses that all women should be economically independent and liberated from male domination by fully participating in the path of social production. In addition, women can be freed from their state of domestic enslavement by the socialization of household labor, which has traditionally been regarded as women's responsibility. In other words, women's complete participation in the economic sphere is viewed as a decisive factor in women's liberation. As such, nations that succeeded in the socialist revolution attempted to liberate women by reforming their consciousness to solve the problematics of women's labor, housework, and parenting, as well as mobilizing women's social production, as pointed out by Marx and Engels. From the nascence of the establishment of the socialist state, the Soviet Union, for example, mobilized female laborers within the scheme of a strong centralized plan, and China also promoted women's participation in labor and society from the beginning of its socialist state to eradicate the feudal elements.¹ After liberation from the Japanese colonial rule, DPRK also implemented women's policies similar to those of other socialist countries in accordance with the said socialist theory. In particular, in the early days of the establishment of the regime, DPRK implemented its policies for women in a similar form to those of the Soviet Union: more specifically, in the direction of emphasizing family, along with the restraint of the feudal patriarchal system, under the auspices of the Soviet Union. However, as the nuclear family gradually claimed greater significance in DPRK's policies for women and family, the state's gender norms for women became more defined than ever.

¹ The result of the reformist women's policies in the USSR and China led to the division of labor along the gender binary, yielding a remarkable wage gap problem.

In accordance with the historical context, this article examines the characteristics of DPRK women's policies from the post-liberation period to the early 2000s, and introduces popular music that reflects the characteristics of such policies in each era.²

² The sheet music and lyrics for the songs introduced in this article are currently available on the official Internet site of the DPRK. For the purpose of this article, songs with themes of labor and family were privileged.

Women on the Move: DPRK's Early Women's Policies

DPRK's policies for women developed as a basic axis of equal rights legislation and institutional reform in the first stage, socialization of household labor and parenting in the next stage, and reinforcement of maternity protection and political socialization in the last stage.

An examination of the basic direction of legislation immediately after liberation from the Japanese colonial rule reveals a strong focus on eradicating the colonial and feudal exploitative relations remaining in various sectors of society. The first step was the land reform in 1946. It can be said that the physical foundation for women's economic independence was created by the distribution of the same portion of land to women as men, free of charge.³ This land reform was of great significance in that it elicited a transformation of consciousness regarding equality within society as well as within women themselves. At that time, DPRK, as a newly independent state, found that men's role and driving force alone would not be sufficient for the all-important construction of a socialist state. As such, the role and labor power of women, which had until then been excluded from the public sphere of politics, economy, society, and culture, were essential for such a construction.

³ The Land Reform Act (*t'ojigaehyök-e taehan p'ömyöng*), which was promulgated on March 5, 1946, required the distribution of land in accordance with the principle of the number of families and the number of people with labor capabilities within the family. One point each was distributed to adult men aged 18 to 60 and to adult women aged 18 to 50.

In June of the same year (1946), the Labor Act on North Korean Laborers and Office Clerks (*pukchosön rodongja, samuwön-e taehan rodong p'ömyöng*)⁴ decreed that women and men be given the same labor rights and remuneration, and engendered paid maternity leave before and after childbirth to protect women, which ensured women's socioeconomic activities. In particular, the social mobilization of women was promoted by special regulations on the protection of motherhood.

⁴ The Labor Act on North Korean Laborers and Office Clerks, which was promulgated on June 24, 1946, stipulates a vacation guarantee of 35 days before childbirth and 42 days after childbirth in Article 14, while Article 16 stipulates a system to protect women, such as guaranteeing 30 minutes twice a day for nursing infants under the age of one.

At the time when masses had to work hard to lift themselves out of poverty, the concept of labor itself was associated with something “vulgar.” Therefore, it was necessary to promote changes in the perception of female labor so as to make women enter the public sphere. Indeed, the records of the Socialist Women’s Union of Korea (*chosŏn sahoejuüi nyŏsŏng tongmaeng*) at the time emphasize that women’s labor was not that which had to be merely endured as an inevitable means to make a living, but a sacred act for the construction of a state.

Amid such a milieu, on July 30, 1946, the Act on the Rights to Gender Equality (*pukchosŏn namnyŏ p’yŏngdŭnggwŏn-e taehan pŏmnyŏng*)⁵ was promulgated. Most notably, this Act declared a break from the family laws enacted by the Japanese colonial authority in the past, later serving as the foundation of DPRK family laws.

Subsequently, in August, all women over the age of eighteen were legally permitted to hold the same identification cards as men’s,⁶ establishing a status guarantee for gender equality. Defining an individual’s identity with an identification card signifies that a person has an identity outside the sphere of the family and has become recognized as an individual member of society. Above all, it can be said that this policy enabled women to enjoy life as human beings, not simply as subordinates to their families. Simultaneously, the Family Register System was abolished, leading to the extinction of the Confucian patriarchal system centered on the male household head. Until the socialist system was established after the Korean War, however, a plethora of feudal practices remained in place.⁷

Meanwhile, during the period of post-war reconstruction, women were desperately needed to participate in labor activities for the development of a system that would guarantee social advancement of women. An examination of the *Chosŏn chungang nyŏn’gam* [Korean central yearbook] (1965) shows that the cabinet decision at the time recommended a particular ratio of women among all employees and that the average rate of women’s participation in the education and health sectors was increased by more than 60%. In addition, attempts were made to increase the

⁵ Article 6 of the Act on the Rights to Gender Equality (Decision No. 45 of the Ad Hoc People’s Committee of the DPRK) stipulates that marriageable age is 17 years and above for women and 18 years and above for men to break down the feudal practice of early marriage and ensure a legitimate marriage.

⁶ On August 9, 1946, Decision 57 of the Ad Hoc People’s Committee of the DPRK guaranteed equality regardless of gender, ethnicity, occupation, duration of residence, property, knowledge, party, political opinion, and faith, and thus establishing, notably, gender equality.

⁷ For example, on January 24, 1947, the DPRK tried to establish a sound family system by eradicating feudal remnants related to marriage, such as resolution of concubinage and discrimination against the offspring of concubines, through the Act on the Defeat of Feudal Remnants in the DPRK (*pukchosŏn-üi pongŏn yusŭp chanjae-rül toech’hanün pŏmnyŏng*) (Ad Hoc People’s Committee Decision of North Korea Decision No. 163).

ratio of female students at universities and various training institutions.

Here, I would like to introduce “Ch’önyō-ŭi norae” [The song of the maiden], which was released in 1953. At that time, mechanization projects were carried out in rural areas, and the tractor became the symbol of such projects. This song tells of a woman who aims to acquire a license for driving a tractor.

There’s a good harvest on either side of Namdaech’ŏn Stream.

A bachelor lives over yonder and a maiden lives over here.

Diligent young people have grown attached at work.

Harvesting the rice one day, the bachelor says awkwardly,

‘Since the grain is ready for harvest, let’s hurry and get married.’

Why getting married when being a maiden is the best?

I’m not marrying before I become a tractor driver.

(“The Song of the Maiden,” written and composed by Chŏng Chinok in 1953)

From this song, it can be easily imagined that women played a crucial role in the post-war rural modernization projects and held a firm position as the mobilizer and reproducer of



Figure 1. A North Korean woman’s picture published in the magazine *Korean Women* (November/December, 1972).

technology. In the song, the maiden insists that she will not marry until she becomes a tractor driver, expressing her intention to be her own decision maker in deciding her marriage age rather than leaving that judgment to a man. She also expresses to her suitor her intention to delay her marriage, as she considers singleness is the best season of life. In fact, even the literature and speeches from the congress of the Socialist Women’s Union of Korea

of this era encouraged women to delay their marriage until they would achieve economic participation. Therefore, in the lyrics of numerous songs of the time are an abundance of phrases expressing women's will for delaying marriage, such as "Please don't ask me when I am going to get married." At the time, women played as important a role as men in the agriculture sector, which was one of the two major economic sectors of DPRK.⁸

⁸ Even today, a laborer is usually depicted as a man in propaganda paintings, whereas a farmer is bound to be a woman holding an ear of grain or a hoe. This may be because countless women have long been engaged in agricultural production and played a crucial role in it.

What must be noted here about the background of the era is the promulgation of the "Completion of Socialist Reform" in 1958. In agricultural cooperatives, in particular, the DPRK government involved young people to learn cutting-edge agricultural technologies and establish a new agricultural order. In fact, when one examines the novels of the time, women with equal rights and considerable power to opine are vividly depicted. From this, it can be presumed that women became the agents of reform and complied with the socialist reform more quickly than men.

In November 1963, the rationing system, a symbol of socialism, began to be fully implemented. It can be said that this system effectively reduced male authority while weakening the independent production function of the family. In this way, the family ceased to function as a discrete economic unit following the full implementation of the socialist system. In this milieu, DPRK began to define the family as the "cell unit" of society.

⁹ It is said that the reason the problem of revolutionizing the family was raised as a grave question was because the Party executives and their children did not abide by national rules and caused problems. Since then, even housewives who do not go to work have been transformed into the subjects of revolution, leading to an ideology that renders the family as the basis of a firm revolution.

Revolutionary Women: Socialist Policies to Protect Women

At the National Mothers' Congress held on November 16, 1961, the phrase "Revolutionization of the Family" (*kajöng hyöngmyönghwa*)⁹ was formalized. Accordingly, in DPRK, the "Problem of Succession of Revolution" became normalized as continuous progress by the family.¹⁰

¹⁰ It was the first National Mother's Congress in 1961 that emphasized women's responsibility for the revolutionization of the family. The second and third rounds of the Congress were held in 1998 and 2005, respectively.

Meanwhile, in order to better support the social activities of women, the project to establish daycare centers and kindergartens was continuously promoted. By this time, socialization of household labor was advocated in the direction of "Reinforcement of Maternity Protection," and



Figure 2. Pictures of North Korean women and children published in the October 1967 issue of *Korean Women*.

laundromats, clothing repair shops, rice factories, and side dish factories were constructed.

Here, I would like to introduce representative popular songs of the time when socialization of household labor and parenting as well as reinforcement of maternity protection was promoted.

We set up a food factory on a sunny hill
and set up a rice factory in every

apartment complex.
Socializing rice and side dishes
allows us to carry the revolution forward in the
workplace.
Oh, we women.
We're going to be loyal to our Dear Leader.

I did my laundry with a washing machine and got a
refrigerator.
I'm so excited to cook rice with an electric rice cooker.
With household chores and kitchen work reduced
We revolutionize in the workplace.
Oh, we women.
We're going to be loyal to our Dear Leader.

(“My Heart is Filled with Songs Because I Have
Fewer Household Chores,” written by Son Pömsu and
composed by Han Sihyöng in 1970).

Since the women in this song titled “Kajöngil töröjini norae nömch'indao” [My heart is filled with songs because I have fewer household chores] have been liberated from household labor owing to convenient facilities, they are expressing their gratitude for DPRK’s women’s policies and their willingness to fulfill their role as revolutionaries at work. Repeatedly incorporated in the lyrics of this period are words such as “happiness,” “revolution,” and “loyalty” under the theme of



Figure 3. Pictures of North Korean women published in the May 1971 issue of *Korean Women*.

¹¹ This law stipulates that female workers must have access to daycare centers, kindergartens, children's hospitals, and convenience facilities in order to participate actively in social labor, that women should not be forced to work in heavy labor or other types of labor that may cause them physical harm, and that mothers with infants or pregnant women should not work at night.

female labor; in these songs, one can find numerous revolutionary female laborers who are grateful for having been given the joy of labor.

Meanwhile, in the 1970s, DPRK entered the path of development intensely concentrated on heavy industry and chemicals.

Compared to the previous

period, this was a time when a total mobilization of labor force was more desperately required.

The Socialist Labor Law (*sahoejuŭi nodongbŏp*)¹¹ promulgated on April 18, 1978 stipulated women's social status and rights, healthcare, and social protection. In this way, while supporting the classification of women into the laborer class, the "Women's Education Policy" was introduced to equalize educational opportunities for men and women. The law also expanded job opportunities for women and sought to improve the quality of women's labor force.

The magazine *Chosŏn nyŏsŏng* [Korean women] published during this period carry numerous articles about women working at heavy industrial sites. From labor fields with heavy equipment, such as coal mines, subterranean labor, and heavy industry, to research jobs that serve to develop technology, women were engaged in various labor activities according to their abilities.

Indeed, the songs of this period reflect attempts to supplement the insufficient labor force by engaging women in various sectors of industry.

The labor-themed song "Kŏnsŏljang-ŭi shwŭlch'am-ŭn choa" [I love the respite at the construction site] (1989) features a woman who works as a plasterer.

When at the construction site we start dancing wildly,
Full of cheerful hand gestures,
Ah, taking a break at the construction site is so
enjoyable.

Since we raised another floor up to the sky,
Let's build our strength by dancing and singing.

Hurry up, master tradesmen and
Maidens who do plaster work, let's hold hands.
Resting at the construction site is good.
This charging life, we live because we are young just
once.
At these times, we dance, moving our shoulders up
and down.



Figure 4. Pictures of North Korean women published in the January 1981 issue of *Korean Women*.

Bachelors who are trained
tradesmen and maidens
who do plaster work enjoy
a moment of rest while
bringing out musical
instruments and dancing.
It can be said that by
emphasizing the break time
as an extension of the labor
process, the song depicts
the entirety of labor as
rewarding.

The song “Palchönso könsöljang-e pulkot nalline”
[Fireworks at power plant construction sites] (1980) lyricizes
the importance of youth labor force at the construction site.

Did the Milky Way fall to the Earth?
There's a blizzard of fire at the power plant
construction site.
Hey, pack it firm vigorously.
Let's build up high the structures of our youth
wherever we are along the water.

Technician maidens fly in the clouds.
Vigorous tradesmen bachelors swarm around a steel
tower.
I love the night at the construction site. These
structures of a 10,000-year plan, they will rise up as
monuments, oh, they surely will.

Repeatedly lyricizing maidens who are technicians and tradesmen bachelors, the song depicts young people singing that the power of youth has become synonymous to the overseer, in other words the agent, of large-scale construction. Moreover, the female technicians are portrayed as playing an equally important role as men in power plant construction. In other songs, one can also find women working as technical workers in blast furnaces and housing constructions. As can be seen in these songs, the ideal of a revolutionary female laborer was established by depicting women's active roles in the fields in which men were more in charge; at least in this time period, women are engaged in labor in the same workplace as men.

Sacrifice and Dedication as a Methodology: Crisis in the Socialist System

In DPRK, from the fifth congress of the Socialist Women's Union of Korea in June 1983,¹² women's participation in light industry and agriculture began to be emphasized. Furthermore, from this congress, the Union membership conditions became limited to women who had not joined other organizations,¹³ limiting coverage to women at home and female convalescence workers and care takers who could not engage in activities external to the home. As a result, the activities of the Socialist Women's Union of Korea did not support the party's projects or actively participate in the construction of the state, but rather supported the traditional women's domains and gender roles.

Amid a series of changes in the 1990s, the lives of women in DPRK were completely transformed. From the 1990s to the first decade of this century, when

¹² A woman aged 18 or older could join the Korean Democratic Women's Union, founded on November 18, 1945. Under the government's guidance, the number of members exceeded 600,000 in the first year of its foundation. The Union also actively engaged in land reform and the regulation process of the gender equality law. In January 1951, the Korean Democratic Women's Union (*chosŏn minju nyŏsŏng tongmaeng*) became the Socialist Women's Union of Korea.

¹³ It is reported that the number of members amounted to three million in the previous period when all women aged 18 to 55 were targeted but it dropped sharply to 200,000 in this period.



Figure 5. Pictures of North Korean women published in the June 1984 issue of *Korean Women*.

the economic difficulties became exacerbated, women had to make ends meet and overcome the crisis of the system through personal sacrifices. In addition, due to the economic difficulties, policies to protect socialization of household labor or women's economic activities ceased to be operated, intensifying the burden of dual duty for women. In fact, it was from this period that the slogan "Socialist Great Family"¹⁴ began to prevail in DPRK. Until then, the term "Great Family" was occasionally used in the *Rodong Sinmun*, but its usage increased dramatically in the 1990s. In order to maintain the socialist system, the role of women and family relations were emphasized, and the importance of ideology and morality was brought at the forefront to achieve unity in society.

¹⁴ This slogan suggests to view the whole society as a large family. The political relationship in which the Leader is the father, the Party is the mother, and the masses are family members is expressed as an organic relationship called the "Great Family." According to this slogan, the whole society was supposed to "undergo patriarchal reconstruction. After the 1980s, the Theory of Sociopolitical Life and the Theory of Socialist Great Family were introduced.

At that time, however, women actually supported their families as the *de facto* heads of the household. In the first decade of the 21st century, in fact, sales or side jobs were allowed as part of economic activities of women through economic as well as other reform policies. This change in the environment must have elicited transformations in the roles of men and women in the home as well. As women who were responsible for supporting their families spent more time outside the home, men would naturally have been in charge of more household labor and assisted with parenting. In other words, there would have been a significant change in the structure of traditional gender roles. When one examines novels from this period, for example, one sees innovative works that problematize patriarchal marital relationships of the older generation or depict male characters who are actively involved in housework.

Meanwhile, in popular music, there appear family-themed songs that tell of women's sacrifices and virtues, promoting internalization of the patriarchal order more intensely than before. The most representative song is "Anhae-üi norae" [Song of the wife].

There's no time for your caring eyes to stray,
No time for your wet hands to dry.

Your heart can't live even a moment without love.
My wife, my wife, you are my life's companion.

When we suffer, you are the first to smile.
You want me to forgive you for my own fault.
In your kind words,
I feel your sincerity.
My wife, my wife, you're my life-long companion.

(“Song of the Wife,” written by Chǒng Tongu and composed by Hwang Chinyǒng in 2001)

The lyrics tell of the virtues that a wife must possess. Notably, the song calls for women’s unconditional obedience to men while praising their self-sacrifice. This representation method that revives the positive past in the present also reflects men’s grief over the positions and power relationships in the home that have changed from those in prior times. Although in the previous periods, numerous songs about wives were released, most of them describe wives as heroes’ wives who look after rural areas or the sea on behalf of men after sending their husbands off to war or to labor sites and while waiting for their husbands to come home. However, this is not the case with the songs from the period of this current discussion.

Conclusion

Today, DPRK policies for women and family issues place notable significance on the nuclear family, and the term “Socialist Great Family,” along with the Juche ideology, became established as an important concept for the maintenance of the DPRK-style socialism. It can be said that this trend is orienting the role of the state and women and the family relationship more toward a direction defined by gender norms.

In retrospect, international sanctions against DPRK have continued since the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. DPRK women have borne the burden due to the long-lasting economic blockade and the ensuing political and military pressure on the state, not to mention the national burden to maintain the socialist system. Few countries in the world have been subject to such various and comprehensive economic

sanctions as those DPRK has been undergoing. Therefore, it should be emphasized once again that the material foundation for socializing household labor based on socialist ideology has not yet been in place.

On the other hand, it must be noted that the gender norms of patriarchy in the Chosŏn dynasty have not been wholly denied, and often the ideal of the good wife and mother which the Japanese colonial regime had attempted to implement was incorporated into the DPRK policies for women. A historical assessment would elucidate the difficulty of the development of feminism in such a milieu.

Ultimately, “women’s liberation” at both the institutional and policy levels lies in the transformation of social perception, including that of men.

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