

# Multiple Realities of North Korean Women

**Kim Sung-Min**  
Editor-in-Chief



The March 2022 issue (Vol. 8, No. 1) of *S/N Korean Humanities* highlights new scholarship on North Korean women, not just through migrant interviews but also based on their self-examination conducted by a diasporic North Korean scholar residing in Japan. In the previous scholarship, the dichotomous lens of the Cold War and prevailing top-down perspectives had cast North Korean women as either emancipated or oppressed; glorified or exploited; agents or pawns in the state's socialist program. However, the lives of North Korean women anywhere, whether at home or abroad, involve contradictions, ambiguities, and complexities that are not fully captured by neither the dichotomous nor top-down perspectives. Given such state of the existing scholarship, the Institute of Humanities for Unification (IHU) is proud to offer a platform for bringing out the multiple realities that North Korean women experience in both Koreas and abroad. Rather than simply dismissing North Korean gender situation as lagging behind that of the “developed West,” the March 2022 issue of *S/N Korean Humanities* sets a new direction for grasping the history and reality of North Korean women from the perspectives of Eun Ah Cho (University of Sydney), Kim Chinmi (Korea University of Japan), and Amanda Wright (Ewha Womans University).

The first article by Eun Ah Cho examines how the North Korean refugees' monetary remittances change the relationship with their family members. In this endeavor, this article particularly focuses on Jero Yun's trilogy about North Korean women—*Mrs. B, A North Korean Woman* (2016), *Beautiful Days* (2018), and *Fighter* (2021). By reading North Korean refugee issues as a part of dispersed families (*isan'gajok*) in the history of a divided Korea, the director delivers a strong message of motherhood through the North Korean women in his films. The women in the films, however, reveal how desperately they want to escape from the conventional image of “Korean mothers” who are supposed to sacrifice and devote themselves to their children. With monetary and emotional remittance to their family members, the North Korean women gradually turn over their hierarchy in the patriarchal family system and transform themselves into tearless mothers who do not apologize for their absence. By establishing their own moral boundary, these

women not only cross the conception of clan-based family but bid farewell to the nation (North Korea), which is a collective of individual families.

The second article by Kim Chinmi explores the changes in North Korean women's policies through popular music. This article historically identifies the significant women's policies implemented by the 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" (*sahoejuŭi taegajŏng*) 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 have become defined more than ever according to gender norms.

The third article by Amanda Wright examines the representation of North Korean defectors in South Korean media by looking into the state of representation and defectors' thoughts on infotainment, *Squid Game*, and discusses how their community can be better portrayed. The article accepts the premises that reality is socially constructed, in large part by traditional media, which has a societal obligation to influence that reality in a responsible manner. Background on the social construction of reality, media representation, and information relevant to the Korean context is provided, followed by the views

of North Korean defectors on said representation, and finally a brief discussion and recommendations. Each issue impacting the majority female NKD population is examined through a gendered lens. Conclusions include the need for greater diversity in the representation of defectors, a reduction of sexualization and victimization as previous authors have discussed, and minimizing the use of the “strong NKD woman” narrative.

The special theme articles are followed by Jean Do’s book review of Pak Yŏng-ja’s *Pukhan nyŏja: t’ansaeng-gwa kulgok-ii 70 nyŏnsa* [North Korean women: 70 years of birth and refraction]. In studies of North Korea’s politics, history, society, and economy, the role of women in regime survival poses complex questions. Their active and prominent role in economic survival has not elevated their social status. While they support the North Korean system economically, simultaneously they account for a majority of North Korean migrants in South Korea, representing the most dramatic cross-section of regime resistance. North Korean women endure extreme labor at home and at work, but internalize loyalty to the supreme leader and maintain an identity based on strong nationalism. How can we understand this complex, seemingly contradictory existence of North Korean women? To obtain answers, students of North Korea will find Pak Yŏng-ja’s research highly illuminating. Pak examines the history of North Korean women’s conformity to as well as deviation from the model of North Korean women’s subjectification, i.e., the “Revolutionary Worker/Mother,” based on detailed theoretical discussions and empirical historical demonstrations. Although there are numerous studies on North Korean women, Pak’s scholarship is especially noteworthy in light of the dearth of full-length monographs that deal with the history and reality of North Korean women.

Finally, the March 2022 issue of *S/N Korean Humanities* revisits the history of South Korean women’s movement in its engagement with North Korean women in the translation of Kim Yun-ok’s recollection “Remembering the Start of Exchanges between North and South Korean Women,” which originally appeared in *Yŏsŏng-gwa p’yŏnghwa* (Women and

Peace) in January 2022 (Vol. 7), a non-periodical publication of the Institute of Korean Women's Peace, an affiliate research institution of Women Making Peace. Kim Yun-ok has dedicated her entire career in the South Korean women's movement to standing up for the rights of Korean sexual slavery victims and pioneered exchanges between the women of South and North Korea. Both the author and the Editor-in-Chief of *Yŏsŏng-gwa p'yŏnghwa*, Dr. Kim Gwi-ok, kindly gave *S/N Korean Humanities* permission to translate the material to make it possible for non-Korean readers to learn about the tireless efforts of South and North Korean women to understand each other better.

On the one hand, militarism, economic recession, and hereditary politics, which are some of the most defining characteristics of North Korea, all place more restrictions and burdens on North Korean women; on the other hand, these women can also be viewed as being dynamically independent of said restrictions and burdens. This shows that the weight of state ideology and policy does not preclude change in popular practice and sentiments, especially since the Arduous March made the state unable to sustain patriarchal domination in its pre-crisis form. Under these circumstances, North Korean women, just as women elsewhere, came to exhibit traditional as well as transitional outlooks regarding their role in society and future aspirations. As scholars looking on from the outside, we can only hope to do at least a modicum of justice to the multitudes of experiences North Korean women have had as socialist Koreans and ordinary human beings. This is what the IHU regards as its mission, to promote a detached understanding of North Korean people, which we believe is the starting point of better communication, healing, and integration of all Koreans, both in South and North Korea as well as Korean diaspora communities. In the future, *S/N Korean Humanities* will continue to highlight cutting-edge research that may illuminate the multiple realities of North Korean women from the perspectives of both South Korea's *han'gukhak* and North Korea's *chosŏnhak*.

Kim Sung-Min  
Editor-in-Chief  
*S/N Korean Humanities*