

Pak Yöng-ja. *Pukhan nyöja: t'ansaeng-gwa kulgok-üi 70 nyönsa* [North Korean Women: 70 Years of Birth and Refraction]. Seoul: Aelp'i, 2017. 639 pages. ISBN: 9791187430124 93340.

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In understanding North Korea's politics, history, society, and economy, women must be situated as a special, complex problematic existence. In North Korea, women have not been readily socially recognized, though they have been responsible for economic survival via informal economic activities (market economy). While they support the North Korean system economically, simultaneously they account for a majority of North Korean defectors, representing the most dramatic cross-section of regime resistance. North Korean women suffer from extreme labor at home and at work, but internalize loyalty and compliance with the highest echelon of the power structure and maintain an identity based on strong nationalism. As part of the process of socialist modernization, North Korean women have become the agents of women's liberation, but are also victims of this North Korean-style socialist modernization, which was significantly influenced by the ideas and logic of discrimination against and oppression of women derived from Confucian cultural traditions. 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.

How can we understand this complex, seemingly contradictory existence of North Korean women? To obtain answers, North Korean scholars will need to refer to Pak Yŏng-ja's *Pukhan nyŏja: t'ansaeng-gwa kulgok-ŭi 70 nyŏnsa* [North Korean Women: 70 Years of Birth and Refraction], a study that deals with 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. In particular, although there are numerous studies on North Korean women, the value of Pak's work can be fully recognized in light of the dearth of monographs that deal with the history and substance of North Korean women as political, economic, and social phenomena.

In her work, the author presents the need for further research while raising the limitations of existing research on

North Korean women. Most of the existing studies are those on the social and legal status of and policies for North Korean women, or on family and women's lives in North Korea. The premise of these existing studies is the recognition, either direct or indirect, of North Korean society as a patriarchal socialist one, based on gender polarity. According to the author, while patriarchal theory, a sociological analysis based on gender polarity (or the binary of male-domination and female-subjugation), can explain a certain aspect of women's reality, it falls short of illuminating the operative mechanisms and transformations of a given society (p. 21). The author points out that existing studies are limited in their understanding of the special circumstances of North Korean women as a methodology of North Korean studies and of women's studies. Existing research on North Korea has the following problems: (1) It does not grasp the historical changes or operational mechanisms of the North Korean system, as it is based on patriarchal theory rooted in the structure of gender polarity; (2) It tends to study fragments such as economic life, politics, participation, legal system, and quotidian life, failing to approach North Korean society on the whole; (3) Without considering production to examine a society's material wealth as well as different forms of production, it focuses on social reproduction, especially family structure or parenting, revealing an imbalance in the research; (4) There is no research that properly historicizes North Koreans' world of everyday life and of labor; (5) It is heavily dependent upon North Korean defectors' testimonies; and (6) No critical reading process has been undertaken to examine North Korea's extensive primary literature (pp. 22–23).

From the perspective of feminist theory, the author argues that radical feminism's perception of patriarchy—that society is maintained as a structure wherein women are dominated by men—has limitations in interpreting the operating principles of socialism at the systemic level (p. 23). In other words, radical feminist theory neglects the very social structure and working mechanisms of power that transform into the praxis of discrimination the biological differences between men and women (p. 28). In order to

understand the characteristics of North Korea's patriarchy, the focus should be on the concept of "hierarchy of authority" vis-à-vis forces that possess or intend to wield physical and institutional power existing in a society, rather than on biological differences between men and women (p. 23).

In such a way, it is impossible to accurately capture the contradictory existence of North Korean women who are at once victimized by the Juche ideology and patriarchy and leading society as agents of marketization after the food crisis in the 1990s. Therefore, the author's key argument is that "only when we understand, from the perspectives of gender and gender equality, how power creates and designates social roles for men and women, in other words gender roles in praxis, and the socialist modernization strategies as well as gender strategies that institutionalize them, thereby revealing the history of women who emerged as active agents of overcoming disasters after the economic crisis, can we begin to properly locate and contextualize the labor and quotidian lives of North Korean women without distortion" (p. 30).

Based on the above awareness of the problem, *North Korean Women: 70 Years of Birth and Refraction* liaises and incorporates political, social, economic, historical, and psychological approaches to analyze North Korea's three major subjects situated in the problematic of gender, namely: power, women, and men, by contextualizing them in material milieu and vis-à-vis conscious behavior/attitude, based on theories of political sociology and political economy. This study, which examines the establishment, rise, and fall of North Korean-style socialism through the lens of North Korean women's policies, is largely divided into four parts: the period of system establishment, the Korean War, the North Korean industrialization in the decades of 1960s–1980s, and the period of market fluctuations after the 1990s economic (food) crisis. From this very perspective of dynamism and totality, the author attempts to identify women as a special problematic existence in North Korea, who are at once victims of a male-first socialist modernization strategy and active agents in quotidian lives and livelihood.

During the period of system establishment in North Korea, socialist modernization developed in the space

between national liberation and women's liberation. At that time, conflicts arose, with pressure for women to adhere to the existing family-community order due to the inveterate patriarchal values. Even after the establishment of the Workers' Party of Korea, there was an organizational backlash against training women (p. 177). Meanwhile, the North Korean Act on the Rights of Gender Equality issued on July 30, 1946, focused on nuclear families and women's individualization for the formation of "socialist modern" disciplinary power, giving women equal rights in the fields of state, economy, society, and political life. During this period, the North Korean regime tried to induce social experience for women as individuals through social labor by propelling women to become socioeconomically independent. The author evaluates that while women's social status did rise in the process of securing the legitimacy of power for the Worker's Party of Korea centered on Kim Il-sung, it did so mostly in formality (p. 145). Nevertheless, this improvement in the status of North Korean women, even if at the formal level, contributed to the achievement of the goal for those with political power, who had to cultivate modern and "revolutionary female workers" for the construction of a socialist state. Since the establishment of its system, the North Korean regime has driven the construction of a socialist modern state by imposing upon women a dual task of "Revolutionary Workers/Mothers."

However, the author believes that in the wake of the Korean War in 1950, gender equality policies were refracted and the spirit of nationalism was internalized (pp. 272–273). In North Korea, the decisive turning point for women to become subjects, not citizens—which also enabled the Suryŏng system to earn wide public consent—is considered to be the Korean War. In addition, the war coincided with the reconstruction of tradition and enforced mores such as "the unique moral appearance of Korean women," prompting North Korean women to "embody loyalty and devotion to the nation that guarantees happiness" and this behavior was promoted as "inheriting women's traditional moral character." In terms of the industrialization strategy, the homeostatic war culture materialized as a focus on the heavy industry for men's labor,

and a “male-absent society” was formed due to men being either directly or indirectly mobilized for defense projects, forcing women into extreme labor in factories, on farms, and in the markets (p. 295).

In particular, the author’s analysis of heavy industry-centeredness, a product of North Korean militarism, with the hierarchical structure of gender roles, and empirical demonstration based on extensive data prove highly useful in grasping the reality of North Korean female workers during the 1960s–1980s and how North Korean women emerged as the unofficial agents of economic life from 1990 onward (chs. 5–6). As the author cogently argues, “structuring the hierarchy of gender roles” in North Korea occurred in conjunction with the hierarchical dominance of the industrial sector following heavy industry-centeredness, militarism in the Cold War and inter-Korean confrontation, and the hierarchical governing order called the *Suryōng* system (p. 304). Amidst the industrialization between the 1960s and the 1980s, North Korea’s heavy industry priority was realized by male labor, relegating women to be active in the lower rungs of the industry hierarchy, namely light industry, local industry, and agriculture, which again heavily informed the hierarchization of gender roles. Ironically, however, this subordinate position became a condition that opened up the opportunity for the praxis of women’s survival capabilities after the economic crisis. This is because local industries, where women’s labor entered in large numbers, had stronger production autonomy and weaker factory discipline than central industries, agriculture allowed accumulation of personal property, and domestic work groups where female workers accounted for the majority enabled easy obtainment of daily necessities that could be sold through the marketplace (p. 307). Within the hierarchical order in North Korea, women’s occupations were relatively flexible and free in discipline and compensation systems, which are closely related to North Korean women’s active economic participation after the great famine, the Arduous March (p. 307). This is not a new argument in itself, but it stands out that the historical cause and current impact of North Korea’s “structuralization of gender role hierarchy” are reconstructed based on a plethora of primary data.

However, despite this high level of social participation, women's status has not improved, first of all because of the North Korean regime's military and security superiority and war experience reproduction policies and second because of the socialization of a male-dominant combat culture (p. 297). The quasi-war situation inevitably strengthens the male-dominant social culture and justifies "hemorrhagic" labor, so that women's labor is not recognized for its value. Factories and businesses in the heavy industry sector received preferential treatment in the placement of supplies and various distributions, but "regeneration through one's own efforts" was relatively emphasized in light industry, local industry, and agriculture. This hierarchy in industry was also reflected in that among workers, despite the high proportion of production activities, female workers ultimately were situated in a lower sociopolitical position than that of male workers (p. 353).

In encompassing the periods of system establishment, the Korean War, post-war restoration, and industrialization, the author provides a perspicacious analysis of data and utilization of theoretical resources, a noteworthy approach in dealing with the origin, development, and results of "gender role hierarchy" in North Korea. Unfortunately, however, the content dealing with market fluctuations after the food crisis in the 1990s has been significantly reduced in volume and methodologically depends on interviewing North Korean defectors. This can be understood in light of the problem of bias in the regional and gender distribution of North Korean defectors, but it seems that the analysis is somewhat lacking compared to that of the contents pertinent to the system establishment period. Moreover, although the author puts forth significant efforts to reveal the identity and dynamism of North Korean women, noting their changed economic status and role after the Arduous March, a more powerful discussion would have been had if it had compared the North's realities such as gender hierarchy based on the notion that women are inferior to men and self-imposed preference for male children, for example, with the realities of other socialist countries. North Korea claims to have abolished the feudal concept that women are inferior to men, based on

the gender equality act launched in 1946, but this concept continued to materialize, as the process of establishing and edifying the socialist system involved the hierarchy surrounding heavy industry-centeredness, the militarism effected by the Cold War and inter-Korean confrontation, and the hierarchical order of control called the Suryŏng system. The notion that women are inferior to men, still well alive in the discourse among North Koreans, is not caused by the unilateral coercion by men or the unilateral sacrifice of women, but by the collective performance of the roles of men and women entrusted to the socialist system and the ensuing positions both social and private. Though of course a view that illuminates the subjectivity and dynamics of North Korean women is needed, even more so are vigorous discussions on how such ideas relate to the socialist conception of women as inferior beings to men. Despite these limitations, *North Korean Women: 70 Years of Birth and Refraction* is an excellent research achievement that allows us to problematize the past and present of North Korean socialism and even think about their implications for the future through examination of the complex circumstances of North Korean women.

