

# Women’s Agency through Fashion in North Korea’s Transition

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## Abstract

North Korean women’s fashion has changed in the context of women’s relatively recently assumed role as critical actors in North Korea’s market-dependent economy. Through examination of changes in women’s fashion we learn more about how the way women choose to dress can become an agentic and empowering process. The article argues that the case of North Korean women and their dress practice can inform our understanding of how women, even in the most oppressive of circumstances, develop tactics to manipulate the systems and social order that seek to control them. North Korean women have enacted upon their agency deliberately, getting away with what they can while simultaneously skilfully avoiding the dire consequences of being identified as actors who dare to disrupt the status quo. This type of agency is not always understood or appreciated by Western liberal frames and sensibilities of agency that centralise notions of individualism and freedom. This nuanced appreciation of women’s agency has the potential to expand the “rights, choices and autonomy” Western discourse of women’s agency in ways that are inclusive of women who live, and sometimes manage to thrive, in the face of extreme oppression. This paper is informed by the authors’ field notes from trips to North Korea and by 45 in-depth interviews with North Korean refugees, regular visitors to North Korea and NGO workers.

**Keywords:** North Korea, fashion, clothing culture, agency, women, femininity, status, dress politics, grassroots capitalism

For those who have visited North Korea over time, one of the most observable changes has been changes in women’s fashion. Despite the strict regulations and possibility of punishment, the female population of the country has been experimenting with new styles of bodily practices, including fashion, which were previously seen as signs of decadence and the practice of “non-socialism”. Although there have been numerous studies and media reports indicating that North Koreans have adopted capitalism and accepted market-based values and

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culture (Cha 2012, Tudor / Pearson 2015, Jung et al. 2018), there has thus far been no sign of any significant political change in North Korea. In fact, despite the official rhetoric of upholding socialism, grassroots capitalism has managed to coexist with the political system and shape North Koreans' everyday lives.

Women's fashion trends in the country can be considered as a lens through which we can get a glimpse of the transformation and the contestation taking place between these two systems, particularly from the mid-1990s, the time of the famine known as the Arduous March, to the current Kim Jong-un regime. Reconsidering the Western liberal feminist concept of "agency" and exploring the concept in socialist and post-socialist states, we explore women's tactics of disregarding official socialist sartorial dictums in order to follow capitalist culture and fashion trends. Further, we explore the implications of this testing of fashion boundaries for women and for North Korean society in general.

The paper is informed by non-participant observation made during two visits to North Korea and 45 in-depth interviews with female North Korean refugees. In South Korea, one of the researchers participated in a variety of activities to build rapport with female refugees and gain insight into their lives, which included attending church services for North Korean refugees for an extended period as well as a North/South Korean Women's Choir and other activities. Two four-hour-long semi-structured interviews with participants recruited through snowball sampling were conducted at sites of their choosing. Twenty-three interviewees were in their twenties and thirties at their time of departure, with nine in their forties, five in their fifties, four in their sixties and two in their teens. The majority (twenty-three) of those interviewed left North Korea between 2010 and 2015, sixteen arrived in South Korea between 2001 and 2009 and five between 1994 and 1999, which made it possible to conduct a chronological analysis. Interviews were analysed through NVivo by identifying common themes throughout the interviews. In addition to refugee interviews, the study also utilised secondary sources and the non-participant observation notes taken by Bronwen Dalton during her two seven-day trips to North Korea in 2014 and 2015. Dalton paid particular attention to women's fashion changes during her supervised visits to schools, theatres, hairdressers, restaurants, department stores and other public spaces in Pyongyang, Hyesan and Kaesong.

## **Reconsidering women's agency in socialist or post-socialist states**

Women's agency in socialist states is under-researched. Historically, socialist states have claimed to have eradicated gender inequality. However, most researchers argue that the socialist project of women's emancipation has either failed or is incomplete, given that gendered hierarchies are so deeply engrained

in everyday life (Valoy 2015). Women's liberation in the socialist state was necessarily tied to women's traditional roles, for instance, in raising healthy and harmonious families. Gender roles and relations in post-socialist states have changed dramatically since the Soviet collapse and the opening to the market system of the West. Scholarship on women in post-socialist states is marginalised in feminist studies that have assumed that these states are auxiliary to, and affiliated with, the West and merely suffer from a "lag" in systemic gender enfranchisement and modernisation (Koobak / Marling 2014). Nevertheless, this approach is problematic as it does not adequately explain why inequality remains in this static position that keeps post-socialism locked in the "lag" and in a frame of perpetually "catching up" or "transitioning" within the transnational feminist context (*ibid.*: 335). In this context, women in socialist/post-socialist states are often portrayed as being oppressed and lacking agency (Valoy 2015).

Like many other socialist countries, despite state rhetoric North Korea has failed to achieve gender equality in reality; instead, gender segregation and inequality in the household and society remain prevalent. Despite the radical change brought about after the socialist revolution, North Korea's adherence to the Marxist perspectives that oppose feminism as antithetical to the class struggle, coupled with the tradition of male superiority of Neo-Confucianism firmly entrenched in the society, remain significant hurdles in the attempt to achieve gender equality (Park 2011). The lack of gender equality is also closely related to a very high portion of housewives confined to the family and their role as mothers (Jung / Dalton 2006). There has been a rupture in this situation due to women actively starting to participate in market activities in the aftermath of the severe economic crisis that hit North Korea in the mid-1990s. This market participation was not formally condoned but came to be informally accepted by the state as the only practical option open to women to feed their families.

Research on women in transitional North Korea has produced contradicting views on their status. Several researchers found that there have been apparent positive changes in gender relations and decision-making processes, particularly in the household (Jung / Dalton 2006, Dalton et al. 2018, Jung et al. 2018). Similarly, other research has indicated that economic transformations after the Arduous March in the 1990s had positive implications for family relations, norms surrounding female public behaviour, a reversal of gendered expectations when selecting a spouse and the gendered division of domestic labour (Lankov / Kim 2014: 85). Because of this, "women have become more independent and less willing to tolerate and support abusive or '[economically] incapable' husbands", thus signifying a growing sense of sexual agency and bodily autonomy not previously conceivable to many North Korean women (*ibid.*: 86).

Other researchers argue that women's involvement in market activities has been accompanied by a deterioration in their situation. Since marketisation, women have had to bear a triple burden, with caring and housework compounded by the demands of being the main breadwinner. This has led to an exposure to the risk of violence as the target of state control and punishment as well as to the predation of bribe-seeking officials, not to mention a rise in domestic violence sparked by disrupted gender roles and male under-employment. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland's findings (2013) suggest that despite women's recent entrepreneurial opportunities, coinciding with the collapse of the public distribution system and the rise of informal markets, women have not thrived. Due to the disproportionate shedding of women from state-affiliated employment into "a market environment characterised by weak institutions and corruption", the "increasingly male-dominated state preys on the increasingly female-dominated market" (Haggard / Noland 2013: 51). Kyung-Ae Park (2011) also found that while these new economic roles gave women stronger voices in family decision-making and allowed them to develop, to some degree, a sense of self-consciousness and awareness of their own rights, they also resulted in increased workloads, sexual violence and the stress of family breakdowns.

The literature on North Korean women's agency, though scarce, has depicted the female population, simultaneously, as objects of victimisation – in need of protection – and as economic, social and strategically mobile agents. The dearth of studies into North Korean women's agency is particularly noteworthy given that North Korean mobility and marketisation is gendered – so much so that 70 per cent of border-crossers and market traders are currently women (Kim 2016: 122).

An examination of the existing literature on North Korean women shows the extent to which women's agency, albeit within various socio-cultural, political and economic constraints, is being explored. Some research on North Korean women has challenged the definition of women's agency as based mainly on a liberal feminist view that upholds free, autonomous and rational individuals. For instance, Minjeong Kim (2013: 11) critiques the definition of agency as "the ability or capacity to act in one's best interests" on the reasonable grounds that "for those in subordinate positions within a power structure, including women, the actions may not be readily obvious assertions of their best interests". Thus, a necessarily more capacious definition of the term is "the active and creative way that human beings give meaning to their experience" (*ibid.*). This conceptualisation of agency encompasses a range of responses to injustice at the individual, collective and/or institutional levels, from covert and everyday forms of resistance to more direct (even "extreme") participation in political activism.

However, such flexible models of agency have had unintended and contradictory effects; while some researchers depoliticise feminist theory by merely

recounting women's agency "without challenging gender inequality or patriarchy, others are so congratulatory or euphoric that they obscure the power of subordination" (Kim 2013: 12). Further to this line of argument, scholars have insisted on the interconnectedness of agency and victimisation in order to break down dualisms that position one as extrinsic to the other, and hence, "empowerment and resistance [...] as being mutually exclusive with experiences of victimisation" (ibid.).

Transnational and postcolonial feminists have sought to elucidate this false dichotomy, alongside the subject-author hierarchy, and draw attention to the ways in which the concept of "agency" is itself bound up in Western imperialist logics. Consequently, the specific experiences, geopolitical contexts and historical heterogeneities of third world women must take priority over what Chandra Mohanty has called an "ethnocentric universality" – the process whereby "legal, economic, religious, and familial structures are treated as phenomena to be judged by Western standards" (Mohanty 1984: 351).

Sung Kyung Kim (2012, 2014, 2016) has written several articles on North Korean women who crossed the border and married or cohabited with Chinese men in China, with half of them eventually migrating to South Korea. Kim reveals the complexity of mobility experiences beyond the "human rights victim" discourse and shows how "some women voluntarily and strategically use migration, marriage and gender as arenas of agency through which to improve their lives and empower themselves" (Kim 2014: 553). This is a process that simultaneously requires and utilises the social and cultural circumstances of their subordinated gender position. This means that the same patriarchal system that excludes them from the public sphere and formal economy is a necessary condition for their mobility and survival; "it enables alienated women to become important agents, making a living for the family and bringing the possibility of change to both North Korea and that patriarchal system itself" (ibid.: 557).

Another article by Kim complicates the restrictive stereotypes that frame North Korean women's mobility in relation to victimhood and economic impoverishment, and argues that North Korean mobility becomes possible due to women's rational calculation (Kim 2016: 117). Many North Korean women strategically engineer relationships with Chinese men to ensure their safety as a means of settlement in China.

Similarly, Eunyoung Choi takes a feminist geopolitical approach to "challenge totalising discourses that categorise North Korean women as trafficked, powerless victims in need of rescue by enlightened [Western] nations" (Choi 2014: 273). Choi draws on empirical research conducted in the North Korea-China borderlands to show that "in spite of [...] difficult circumstances, North Korean women are not powerless. They negotiate and choose even with limited options [...] and use their femininity as a tool to cross borders" (ibid.: 277). Indeed, Choi's interview data suggests that her participants understand "commercial

marriage, and potential abuse in that marriage, as a strategy for survival and mobility” (Choi 2014: 277).

In the review of how North Korean women’s agency is being conceptualised across migration, citizenship and mobility studies, it was found that, as a whole, the existing scholarship tends to depict North Korean women in contradictory terms – simultaneously as calculative agents measuring the cost-benefits of their actions and as powerless victims in need of protection. This paper proceeds from the view that dress communicates identity and agentic processes (Huisman / Hondagneu-Sotelo 2005). As Susan Bordo (2013) has argued, women’s appearance and embodiment are shaped by their agency, socialisation and social expectations. In examining the various modes and strategies for resettling in South Korea adopted by North Korean refugees, Hae Yeon Choo finds that they effaced their North Korean markers – including their accent, self-presentation, comportment and morals – and remade themselves into “modern citizen-subjects of South Korea” (Choo 2006: 577) by wearing fancy expensive clothes, in order to conform to South Korea gender ideals. Under the Western liberal discourse, however, those North Korean women who remain in North Korea can be seen as victims and passive voiceless subjects, whose lives are completely constrained by North Korea’s patriarchal society and authoritarian regime. They seem to be “regulated, subordinated and disciplined state subjects” (Zheng 2005: 543). Starting from questions about what enacting agency means to women in North Korea and how they exercise their agency, this paper explores complex ways in which North Korean women exercise their agency through fashion and bodily practice, challenging state-imposed dress codes and feminine ideals.

## **Enacting agency through fashion in opposition to official sartorial discourses**

Women’s fashion has been central in postcolonial nation-building and revolutionary socialist progress in North Korea and the state-imposed femininity and dress codes have served as grounds for monitoring women’s bodily practices. Since 1948, North Korea’s political leaders have sought to control every aspect of people’s lives. As part of such strategies, a series of clothing-related policies were implemented to control ideal styles of clothing and their production and distribution. For women, normative ideas about female bodies influenced the dress practices across North Korea’s elaborate *songbun* (“social status”; Kim 2011: 160). However, North Korean sartorial discourses have shifted over time in line with changes in the social, economic and political environment.

Before the emergence of private markets in the 1990s, North Korea employed a total rationing system, to ensure equal distribution of essential goods, including clothing and fabrics. While certain types of clothing were sold at government-

owned markets, ordinary people wore whatever clothing was provided to them or made their own clothes. North Korean sartorial discourses evolved “through a constant negotiation of socialist and ethnically marked femininity” (Kim 2011: 162). After the liberation from Japan in 1945, North Korea used nationalism and ethnocentric ideals to legitimate state power in the postcolonial national-building process (Kim 2011: 162). The new North Korean state saw Western/modern clothing as representing “remnants of the colonial past” and “cultural traits of the enemy class, the bourgeoisie”, and such clothing came to be viewed by educated upper-class women as “compromising national purity” (ibid.: 163–164). Amidst the post-war rehabilitation period in the 1950s, clothing policy focused on promoting frugality/thriftiness in clothing styles (Kim 2012).

Dressing the population well became an indicator of modernisation, material progress and development, with an effort to expel feudalism, imperialism, patriarchy and capitalism. In the 1960s, in the consolidation of nation-building, North Korean leaders exerted efforts to make fashion a symbol of the new socialist state (Kim 2011: 163). Fashion became “a performative instrument separating the oppressive feudalism of the past” (ibid.) from the liberating socialism of the present. Until the 1960s, North Korea's sartorial discourses entailed both “ethnically marked national femininity” through traditional Korean clothing, *joseonot*, and “state-organised socialist femininity” through state-engineered fashion codes. The *joseonot*, a long black skirt and white *jeogori* (a traditional Korean jacket), became the key dress code for women, embodying working-class ethics and highlighting modest feminine beauty and virtue (Choy 2016, Kim 2011: 166). Under Kim Il-sung's regime, the synthetic fibre *vinalon* (or *vinylon*) was invented and massively produced to solve the clothing problem in the North. Kim Il-sung saw the fibre as a symbol of the country's self-reliance and dubbed it *Juche* (meaning “self-reliance”) fibre. Clothes, work and school uniforms and socks were mostly made of *vinalon* until the mid-1990s (Kim 2011, Dalton et al. 2017).

Women were also encouraged to participate in the nation-building process, in the domestic, industrial, and military sphere. By 1967 women accounted for almost half of the total workforce in North Korea (Kim 2011: 176). Over time there was a gradual transition from the *joseonot* to the military/work uniform or the synchronous co-existence of the two dress codes, in the 1970s and 1980s. The *joseonot* was continuously promoted as the dress of North Korean women as a way of practising North Korea's nationalist socialism, namely, *Juche* ideology (ibid.: 172, Kim 2012). Nevertheless, the clothing style was modified to be more functional and practical, so that the wearer could more easily participate in both domestic and social labour (Kim 2011). In the consolidation of the nation-building period (1961–1980) clothing policy focused on the importance of simple functional clothing to increase workers' productivity. For a short period, Kim Il-sung even encouraged women to wear trousers at work (Choy 2016).



Figure 1: Women still wear a variation of this official uniform (photo by Alek Sigley, 2015)

During the 1980s, policy attention was given to diversification in clothing production and style and Western clothing became more accepted (Kim 2012). In several official speeches, Kim Il-sung encouraged residents in big cities to wear colourful clothing with various patterns (Choy 2016). During the inter-



views, some older women recalled that, as pre-made clothing was very scarce, having only one set of clothes was common even before the Arduous March. They added that, in big cities like Pyongyang, wealthy people/party members and officials had their clothing made by tailors. In an interview, a former dress-maker at a clothes factory in North Korea explained that some wealthy people started to wear tailor-made clothing and the stylebook was mainly from Japan:

Our garment cutter was a repatriate from Japan. When they had arrived in North Korea, they had brought with them a Japanese stylebook. Back then, for us repatriates, clothes were not mass-produced, so people would refer to the stylebook and make their own clothes. (Joo<sup>1</sup>, 65, interviewed in Seoul on 24 September 2014)

From the 1980s, more frequent exchanges with foreign countries and the leader Kim's visit to Eastern Europe enabled North Korea's fashion to shift from almost uniform clothing in muted colours to various clothing styles in vivid colours (Choy 2016). Seeking to impress foreign countries and to promote an image of economic progress, North Korean authorities issued instructions that banned women from wearing trousers and black or khaki-coloured clothes (*ibid.*). The political leaders saw colourful dresses as a signifier of socialist modernisation and prosperity. The official rhetoric inscribed the new styles into a narrative of national economic self-sufficiency, demonstrating that the state served the people's needs.

In 1989, North Korea hosted the largest international event ever held in the country, the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students. This event had a significant impact on women's fashion (Kim / Park 2019). In preparation for this event, North Korean authorities waged campaigns for desirable hairstyles and clothing, and opened an exhibition centre displaying clothes, shoes and stylebooks and patterns for dressmakers. In particular, a student activist, Lim Su-Kyung, the sole representative from South Korea, dubbed the "Flower of Unification" by the North Korean media, had a lasting and somewhat unintended impact on women's fashion in North Korea. Lim walked out into the May Day Stadium at the opening ceremony in a t-shirt, jeans and sneakers. She was pretty, outspoken and charismatic, in contrast to North Korea's image of South Koreans, whom they had been told were living in hunger and poverty, oppressed under the rule of the US imperialists and their South Korean puppet regime. She became something of a fashion icon. "Lim Su-Kyung fashion" and her short bobbed haircut became trendy among the youth, and many emulated her style (Kim / Park 2019).

From the late 1980s, however, in the increasingly malfunctioning centrally planned economy, North Korea began to experience severe economic hardship, which also weakened the distribution system for food and necessities. As the ration system finally collapsed during the early Kim Jong-il era (1994–2011),

1 All names of the interviewees have been anonymised.

people suffered further shortages of (ready-made) clothing. When informal markets sprang up across North Korea during the Arduous March of the 1990s, people had to buy daily necessities, including clothing and shoes, from them. Ironically, a vast range of products were smuggled from China, Japan (mostly second-hand) and South Korea. North Koreans thus became more fashion-conscious and started experimenting with new styles. Official sartorial discourses seemed to present various styles, by publishing the fashion magazine *Otcabrim* (meaning “Attire”) and holding fashion exhibitions. However, state media promoted ideal socialist dress codes for respective gender, age and social groups, and published more articles on hairstyle and makeup (Choy 2016). Some occupations required their female workers to follow strict state dress codes/requirements. One respondent noted this was especially expected for teachers:

The kinds of fashions that were accepted were only suits, only formal wear with leather shoes. Skirts had to reach no shorter than above the knee. It was very old-fashioned. That was especially required of teachers. (Lim, 39, interviewed in Seoul, 1 October 2014)

Under Kim Jong-il, women were strongly encouraged to wear traditional Korean attire, the *joseonot*, particularly on special occasions and celebrations. Government authorities also regulated many aspects of women’s fashion and appearance. Foreign fashion styles/items (short skirts, skinny jeans, earrings and revealing clothes) were criticised as “delinquent capitalist style” and scrutinised in detail. Additionally, women were restricted to having only state-approved haircuts; long hairstyles and hair dye were prohibited. Even attention to feminine beauty was regarded as “anti-socialist” behaviour.

Soon after Kim Jong-un succeeded his father in 2011, he led a pivot from Kim Jong-il’s *Songun* (military first) policies to “economy first” policies, including weakening controls over private markets and some entrepreneurial activities (Smith 2021).

With the spread of markets and in particular the growing trade with China and the strong dominance of Chinese consumer goods, which accounted for up to 85 per cent of goods at markets (Seliger 2020), North Korea soon became flooded with Chinese, South Korean, and Western influence. Hyper-sexualised consumer culture, including fashion, began to cause the regime some concern. In response, government authorities launched crackdowns on anti-socialist fashion nationwide or in big cities (Robinson, 2016). The Youth League, established in 1946 to train young people to enforce *Juche* ideology, was commandeered to serve as a kind of “fashion police” (Branigan 2014).

The obsession of North Korean political leaders with socialist femininity was well reflected in the regulation of women’s right to wear trousers. Working women were supposed to dress in gender-specific clothing to work (e.g., skirts). North Korea treated women and men’s dress as separate national projects (Kim 2011: 160). North Korean socialism formally promoted gender equality, but political leaders proclaimed an essentialist notion of women and encouraged

them to be “more” feminine. Although state socialism constructed women as both producers and reproducers, no equivalent state discourse supported men’s social identities as fathers and workers. Such state policies had negative consequences for gender equity (Frader 2006: 583–84). The patriarchal views on women’s clothing and femininity shaped their military uniforms and work clothes, and resulted in subsequent official sartorial discourse. Women’s uniforms in North Korea were feminised by a pleated skirt and slim waistline, which accentuated ideals of socialist femininity. Similarly, whether women should wear skirts or trousers has been a thorny issue in the North Korean sartorial discourse until recently. As one respondent commented, women’s trousers were not regarded as appropriate even for physical labour, although many young women resisted:

When walking around in the city, authorities would tell you to wear skirts. But wearing skirts is so bothersome. When I was a student, I hated wearing skirts. I’d keep getting stopped by the fashion police, and I just hated that so much. I would wear pants all the time, and if my mother told me to wear a skirt, I’d choose a long one and wear pants underneath. I’d tuck the skirt inside my pants, and when authorities were nearby, I’d let the skirt down. That’s how I got away with it. (Eun, 24, interviewed in Seoul on 14 January 2016)

### From “socialist femininity” to “capitalist hyper-femininity”

As the state promoted the ideal of North Korean women’s dress through its fashion code, it also carefully constructed paragons of female virtue through legendary tales of its leaders’ family members: Kang Bang-sok, Kim Il-sung’s mother, and Kim Jeong-suk, Kim Il-sung’s first wife and Kim Jong-il’s mother (Kim 2011). Fashion, regarded as bourgeois in origin and surplus to authentic human needs, was for many years more or less abolished, which turned North Korea into a country of people dressed in muted colours, like other socialist countries (Chen 2003: 146). By wearing uniforms or state-sanctioned clothes, North Korean women demonstrated their determination to submit to state discipline, to pursue the dual values of domestic and socialist/nationalist femininity (Kim 2011: 177–8). Masses of North Koreans dressed in similar clothes, with subdued colours, not largely differentiated by class, gender or age.

The following interview succinctly explains how femininity and its related value were viewed differently in the past:

When I grew up, I didn’t think that [being pretty] was necessary; I didn’t even know men liked pretty girls. I had absolutely no interest in this kind of thing. So, I never thought I wanted to be prettier. Being beautiful was not about wearing stylish clothes or having good looks but about having proper thoughts and life and being intelligent and having a sense of dignity. These were what I thought you needed to be beautiful. To me, wearing heavy makeup and wearing stylish clothes looked cheap. That was what I understood about being beautiful because I was educated to think that way. (Seol, 47, interviewed in Seoul on 27 September 2014)



Figure 2: Detail of a painting at the Grand Peoples Study House showing Madame Kim Jong Suk with Kim Il Sung fighting the Japanese (photo by Lesley Parker, 2018)

Since Kim Jong-un's assumption of power after his father Kim Jong-il's sudden death in 2012, the further expansion of the market system has led to changes in women's values. As more women worked in markets, they started to build an interest in female beauty and to express themselves with a stronger sense of self and personal identity, through fashion and appearance. Fashion and beauty came to be seen as an expression of individuality, a notion of capitalism gaining an increasing hold in North Korea (Dalton et al. 2018).

The law says that those who like trends have been "stained by capitalism", but we admire those people and think they look nice or elegant. (Ha, 25, interviewed in Seoul on 13 January 2016)

In North Korea, they say that a woman must be born and raised beautifully. But we didn't say this so much when we were hungry, during the Arduous March. But when the rations system stopped absolutely, people changed dramatically. After the currency reform, and as people took part in unofficial markets in Rajin City, people became more enlightened. A long time ago, people were very innocent. People are not like that now. A woman must look beautiful. North Korean families, the wealthy ones, think that looks are most important, whether a girl is pretty or not. They consider looks first. (Joo, 65, interviewed in Seoul on 24 September 2014)

A growing interest in, and enthusiasm for, fashion and beautification emerged as an essential part of the new womanhood in the Kim Jong-un era. A feminine identity was increasingly constructed and represented by fashionable presentation

and appearance. Fashion and similar trends were taken seriously, particularly by younger generations and middle/upper-class women with cash earned through market activities. Rising fashion consciousness led to women, who were not even wealthy, spending money on fashion and cosmetics instead of saving it.

I am making money to buy fancy clothes. Not so much for savings than spending on clothing. There's a lot of competition to show off with clothes. If you purchase trendy clothes such as a padded coat, you're just proud of it. For example, even if your friends can barely eat porridge at home, they feel that they should dress well. We all were very concerned about dressing well. Used clothes are more popular than rice. (Park, 23, interviewed in Seoul on 26 January 2016)

Since the Arduous March in the mid 1990s – also known as the North Korean Famine, one of the historical events in North Korea, which led to hundreds of thousands of deaths – the younger generation, often dubbed the *Jangmadang* (“marketplace”) generation, born during or after that time, has followed the latest international trends as closely as possible, despite government regulations and punishment including a ban on certain items and styles. The disastrous famine disrupted the schooling system, so that many of the *Jangmadang* generation, instead of attending school, grew up trading/shopping in the markets and gained greater insight into capitalism than their predecessors. Trends often led women to wear the same things as everybody else, as if in competition. This also resulted in the rapid and massive production of new clothing items and forced the local markets to engage in a brisk trade in these items:

Stylish clothes come to Sinuju [a city in North Korea facing Dandong, China] through China. Then it doesn't take one week before the imitation comes out, at one-tenth the price. (Hong, 51, interviewed in Seoul on 25 January 2016)

Even though locally produced clothes are much cheaper and foreign styles are denounced in North Korean propaganda, North Korean women prefer the better quality and more stylish clothing smuggled in from China, South Korea and Japan. Second-hand clothes from South Korea and Japan are particularly popular among the well-to-do in Pyongyang, who consider them to be especially trendy (Daily NK 2015). However, tags on clothes originating from these countries are regularly removed before they are transported across the Tumen River.

Even if Kim Jong-un says things like “American scum, American scum”, American brands are still famous in North Korea [...] No matter how much they promote our nation, socialism and those home-grown industries, no one really prefers North Korean products. They don't look pretty and fashionable. In North Korea, people fancy things that look good. While ordinary North Koreans most often use Chinese products, privileged elites and wealthy people prefer South Korean or Japan products. (Eun, 24, interviewed in Seoul on 14 January 2016)

The elite officials all wear something trendy [smuggled] from South Korea or a new brand that came out of China right away, so I'm not wearing the North Korean trend. If we know this item is popular in South Korea, I buy it no matter how expensive it is, like those [elite] officers. (Kang, 30, interviewed in Seoul on 28 May 2015)

In terms of fashion leaders, it has been young women in the urban environment (particularly Pyongyang city) rather than rural people, as well as those who were repatriated from China, that have shaped fashion trends in North Korea. These trendsetters in the big cities make up the majority of the consumers of the latest fashions and other luxury items.

With growing market activities since the Arduous March of the mid-1990s, increasing interest in, and exposure to, Chinese and South Korean media, in particular, has boosted women's interest in beauty and fashion in North Korea. Chinese or South Korean TV dramas often generate new fashion trends in North Korea and circulate images endorsing women with fashionable items, cosmetic surgery or tattoos. A growing number of North Koreans have watched foreign movies and TV shows, smuggled in on DVDs or USBs, which has enabled North Koreans to glimpse the outside world and fashion trends associated with capitalism.

They [the younger generation] are just like South Koreans. They watch [South Korean] TV drama series through USBs in secret. They wear their pants like South Koreans. [Laughter] and they dye their hair yellow like South Koreans. (Gho, 35, interviewed in Seoul on 21 January 2016)

Although one of the critical characteristics of the North Korean socialist dress code lies in its emphasis on functionality, now women increasingly choose a “hyper-feminine” look with high heels and form-fitting sequined outfits. Many women seemed to be obsessed with high heels, which they believed accentuate their femininity, attractiveness and fashion sense. Even traffic police officers and female soldiers regularly wear high heels. High heels seem to be a must item for young women in North Korea nowadays.

I don't know why in North Korea women are obsessed with high heels, probably [because] we, girls, are short. No matter where women live, either the countryside or on the mountain, we prefer these shoes even on the unpaved roads. (Bae, 35, interviewed in Seoul on 23 January 2016)

Some research argues that women can embody “hyper-femininity”, which is defined as the “exaggerated, emphasized and ideal performance of femininity” (Cvajner 2011: 358) in a broad sense, enabling women to gain social worth and respect and “detach themselves from conditions they regard as degrading” (ibid.: 356). Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (2000) argue that in the context of Eastern European post-socialist countries, younger Central European women are more likely than older women to focus on their appearance, as a sexualised feminine body signifies successful modernisation and progress.

Similarly, in North Korea, embodying the hyper-feminine ideal is understood as the key to business, career and even marriage. Many women believe that attractive people are treated more favourably in many areas of society, e.g., when selling goods or dealing with government authorities; women use trendy

fashion, makeup and cosmetic tattoos to enhance their appearance and for such social and economic reasons. Those working in the market use makeup to be more confident and assertive.

The most common form of trade in the markets is food stalls. I would think that people would want to buy food from somebody young and pretty, not dull and bare-faced. Who would want to buy food from someone like that? If you're going to work, you need to put on makeup. (Ahn, 52, interviewed in Seoul on 26 September 2014)

Because people began making money since the Arduous March, they came to care more about clothes and appearance. Even if inspections happened every day while sitting at the markets, people are treated with less abuse if they are dressed prettily. If you look like a beggar, people treat you like trash. (Kyung, 57, interviewed in Seoul on 17 September 2014)

An attractive appearance is also considered a valuable asset for marriage. In addition to dressing well and wearing make-up, many women have opted for cosmetic tattooing (also known as semi-permanent make-up) or even cosmetic surgery, which, although illegal and expensive, is popular among North Korean women, both young and old, especially in urban areas.

### Fashion as a symbol of wealth and means of securing social rewards

While North Korea has never resembled the leadership's self-described egalitarian socialist paradise, the last few decades of marketisation have made society more unequal than ever before. There is now a vast discrepancy between the urban rich and the rural poor in terms of consumption of clothing and household items, and income inequality has assumed dimensions similar to those found in the West, with a top 1 per cent, referred to in North Korea as the *donju*, which loosely translates as "masters of money". This group is made up of the few that had access to state resources and foreign capital in the early stages of marketisation, such as those that managed government-sponsored enterprises aimed at generating foreign currency. This group leveraged their access to goods and capital to engage extensively in the market and enrich themselves. However, for the many still working in state-allocated official jobs, supporting themselves and their family members in a marketised economy with state wages is practically impossible. Instead, the fate of these families' survival has fallen disproportionately on female family members and their capacity to earn money through participation in the market economy.

In this highly stratified society, conspicuous consumption and, due to its public visibility, clothing, has come to represent status. Fashion has become a key symbol of wealth and the means to signal to others one's place in the new social hierarchy, even, as this defector points out, when it is more performative – that is, worn to create the appearance of social success.

When we went to take the test, we put on school uniforms. But the students, the children from the central party officers, were dressed up. They all wore suits. These Pyongyang students cut fine figures: well dressed, and taller and slimmer than us. (Koo, 49, interviewed in Seoul on 26 May 2015)

How one dresses in North Korea has emerged as a critical way of signalling one's social status, economic class and living standard, all of which form one's identity. It is evident that North Korea has been undergoing a transition; status that was once prescribed by the state is now tied to economic success in the market. Being fashionable has become a sign of wealth in an increasingly capitalistic society:

People say clothes are really crucial in North Korea. If I wear my nice and expensive clothes, I won't be ignored wherever I go. That's why I don't buy many things but a few of the most expensive clothes. That's why I don't wear real cheap clothes. (Do, 20, interviewed in Seoul on 20 December 2016)

[Wealthy people] wear more expensive clothes than ordinary people. And their children, too. And they buy expensive clothes for their parents, as well. So we know if someone is wealthy if they wear the trendy, padded winter clothes. We know if someone is rich if their parents, for example, wear furs, which can cost as much as 4 million won. Those furs are imported from China. If their parents wear expensive clothes, we know that that particular family has some money to spare. (Hahm, 42, interviewed in Seoul on 25 September 2014)



Figure 3: Three women in Pyongyang (photo by Alek Sigley, 2016)



A certain degree of acceptance of Western culture by Kim Jong-un was also among the major reasons behind women's increased interest in fashion and beauty. Under Kim Jong-un, the change was often from the top down. When the all-female Moranbong music band, founded by Kim Jong-un, appeared on TV in short hair and mini dresses in 2012, many North Koreans were shocked:

I was in North Korea when the Moranbong band appeared. I think everybody was shocked. They were doing things that they hadn't done before, like dancing and wearing these kinds of short skirts [laughter]. [I thought] what kind of country are we living in? But we liked it. People said, "Yes, this is the way things should be." (Yoo, 24, interviewed in Seoul on 6 January 2015)

The official emergence of the first lady, Ri Sol-ju, led fashion trends throughout the country. Ri appeared in the state media wearing various Western designer clothes: trousers, short skirts trimmed above the knee, a jacket with somewhat deep cleavage, carrying a clutch bag and accessorising her clothes with a brooch instead of the leaders' lapel pin. This was unprecedented in North Korea. Her fashion style has become a target of envy and inspiration for many young women in North Korea (Choy 2016).

[Ri Sol-ju] appeared [on state media] with brown hair once. In North Korea, dyeing hair is not allowed. But I became gutsy, so I dyed my hair. If I get caught by authorities, I am prepared and have things to say. (Paik, 26, interviewed in Seoul on 21 May 2015)

## Tactics of survival: corruption and bribery

Today, North Korea is effectively the site of dual systems, with socialism and proto-capitalism operating synchronously. On the surface, socialism seems to hold sway over the North Korean people through arguably the world's most robust coercive apparatus. But underneath this veneer of the one-party socialist state lies the transformative dynamic of an emerging form of capitalism. To survive, North Koreans have learned through bitter experience that it is not so much loyalty to the party line but entrepreneurial skills that are the key to prosperity. However, men continue to go to work to avoid punishment. Contradicting North Koreans' positive expectations toward a young leader who was educated and has experienced life overseas, Kim Jong-un has strengthened border control and security, and continues to oppress the public with a reign of terror and culture of surveillance, to contain the spread of capitalism and capitalist culture (Smith 2021).

However, the monopoly of state power has been undermined in many ways. North Koreans have learned how to evade the regulations and surveillance by adopting various tactics. Officially, in North Korea, the state traditionally owns all the land and housing by law, which means that the government provides

housing to its citizens without any monetary transactions. After the widespread famine in the 1990s, however, residents acquired the “right to use” housing and began conducting housing transactions based on market prices (Jang 2019). This, in turn, undermines the political principle that only “loyal classes” are allowed to inhabit certain districts, especially Pyongyang. The close control of domestic travel (in principle, citizens only have residence permits for one district, analogous to the old Soviet system, and have to register every trip beyond that) has long since collapsed due to the system of traders and nationwide job-seekers (Seliger 2020).

Key levers of domestic control have been weakened. For example, previously the possession of foreign currencies, especially the Chinese renminbi, was punished but now it is widespread and tolerated. The state’s monopoly on information has also become fragile. More border trade with China has led to a boom in illegal South Korean music, soap operas and films.

One of the significant survival tactics in North Korea is bribery. With bribes, North Koreans can avoid punishment by the authorities for not going to work or for engaging in illegal trade and activities. It is no exaggeration to say that bribery and corruption have become endemic (Fifield 2017) and that they uphold the North Korean economy. Bribery is the primary way people in North Korea either get access to, or in the case of corrupt officials, pay for, food, health-care, shelter and work (UN 2019). The constant threat of arrest and prosecution makes people vulnerable and provides state officials with a powerful means to extort money and other favours from those desperate to avoid detention in inhumane conditions (*ibid.*).

Schools, hospitals, factories and public offices could not operate without bribery and corruption. Illegal activities such as drug dealing, drug-taking, smuggling, watching foreign media, brokering and money exchange have blossomed thanks to bribery and corrupt officials; North Koreans can even risk crossing borders and defecting to South Korea. Through the phone connector and the currency trader, they can talk to their relatives and family members living outside North Korea and receive remittances (*ibid.*). Similarly, despite state-imposed dress codes, women can avoid punishment using bribes. As one respondent told us:

The Youth League demanded some fuel. I told them I don’t have fuel or money but I could buy them cigarettes, the most expensive cigarettes. I bought them a carton of those, and they finally let us go. That’s how they carried out the clothes inspection. (Kyung, 57, interviewed in Seoul on 17 September 2014)

It is questionable whether these developments could lead to political changes. Without a doubt, a shift in fashion and beauty trends represents an implicit transformation within North Korean society. Although North Korean authorities crack down on the fashion and hairstyles of the so-called decadent culture of capitalism, there is a limit to the total control of their citizens’ desires and

needs (Kang / Park 2011). Following a capitalist/consumer culture can lead to dissatisfaction and scepticism regarding the North Korean regime. The emulation of the capitalist style can be seen as cultural resistance or rebellion, with North Koreans no longer living under socialism.

Nevertheless, North Korea is still “a vast surveillance state” (Fifield 2017) via a state security apparatus and a neighbourhood watch system, and most North Koreans have become indifferent to politics and the political system. They are too aware of the tight surveillance in place everywhere and the consequences of criticising the political system and leaders to risk their lives and their families. North Koreans are still subject to ideological education, which includes revolutionary history and the activities of their leaders. Under tight surveillance via neighbourhood associations and a reign of terror, it is impossible for citizens to voice politically dissenting views or organise political gatherings. For example, North Koreans were well aware that Kim Jong-un's uncle, Jang Song-thaek, was convicted of treason and executed in 2013. The authorities criticised Jang for betraying the Kim family, by plotting to overthrow the younger Kim Jong-un, using economic collapse as a pretext to rule the country himself as premier and reformer (Choe 2016). North Koreans are very disillusioned with the political system, but they do not have the freedom or the desire to risk their lives. As Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland argued, “energies are directed toward survival, mass civil disobedience is reactive, and as a group, this population appears to lack the tools or social capital to act collectively to improve their status” (Haggard / Noland 2013: 51). Consequently, it is highly unlikely that in the coming years that there will be any organised dissent or political opposition in North Korea (Fifield 2017).

## Conclusion

In transitional North Korea, women's fashion has become the lens through which we can view the country's transformation. From the 1990s, with the emergence of the private markets necessary at the time for survival, women began to dress better and pay more attention to their fashion and beautification. Women's clothing shifted from state-sanctioned dress codes, with muted colours, to diverse individual choices of style, with more colours and textures. Despite these changes, there has been ongoing contestation between official sartorial discourse and women's daily practice. North Korean political leaders have considered clothing, notably women's clothing, a national project to construct loyal and disciplined citizens. Based on the assumption that women are more susceptible to the lure of Western and capitalist contamination, the political leaders have regulated women's dress codes by frequently issuing sartorial instructions.

Official sartorial discourses are concerned with socialist and nationalist femininity. Until recently, the North Korean state encouraged women to wear traditional clothing, particularly on special occasions, to contain the spread of clothing culture contaminated by Western and capitalist ideologies, and to preserve national purity. Many items that are deemed as Western/capital decadence have been banned and regulated.

North Korean official sartorial discourses are based on the essential notion of femininity. Unlike other socialist countries that promoted the gender-neutral style of military and work uniforms to display and cultivate disciplined desexualised subjects (Chen 2003), North Korean leaders have instructed that the uniforms should accentuate the feminine look. Although women were encouraged to participate in the workforce, to accomplish socialist revolution and progress, and the functionality of women's clothing was taken seriously, women were not, largely, allowed to wear trousers until recently.

Despite state regulations and control, for North Korean women, particularly young women living in big cities, dressing well has become a "must" to express individual identity and desire, and to signal social status. They have learned how to evade regulations and punishment through numerous tactics, particularly bribery. It is no exaggeration to say that corruption and bribes uphold the North Korean economy. Moreover, it is unlikely that women's desire to dress well and thus be "appealing" will weaken in the future. Women's fashion in North Korea is understood as an agentic process that challenges the dominant view that sees North Korean women as vulnerable or lacking agency; instead, it recognises women as agents of social change and questions what women's agency means in different social, political and cultural contexts.

Through the examination of how fashion trends in North Korea have shifted over time, we can better understand how women have adopted various non-socialist tactics to manipulate the system and the social order that have sought to control them. North Korean women have acted upon their agency carefully, getting what they can without risking the consequences of being seen as disrupting the status quo. This type of agency is not always understood by those who subscribe to Western liberal sensibilities of agency that embrace notions of individualism and personal freedom. The experience of North Korean women contributes to our understanding of what women can achieve in the extremely structurally limited circumstance of surviving within a system of oppression.

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