

Femininity in North Korea

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Important changes are taking place inside North Korea. The collapse of the command economy, and the emergence of capitalism in its place, is ongoing. A burgeoning moneyed elite and increasing exposure to foreign pop culture are transforming how North Korean femininity is conceived. These changes are reaching far beyond Pyongyang to affect many, if not most, women in the country.



Officially, North Korea's founding *juche* (self-reliance) ideology supports gender equality. In practice the leadership cult that was entrenched under Kim Il-sung, who led the country from 1948 to 1994, gave patriarchal relations a significant boost. Under Kim Il-sung, the nation was recast in line with traditional, largely Confucian, male-dominated family structures — a considerable backslide from the progressive gender norms promoted by the early Korean socialist movement. Despite its rhetoric, Kim Il-sung's *juche* ideology [directly perpetuated gender subordination](#) ^[1].

To this end, North Korea's leaders were active in controlling women's behaviour and appearance to ensure alignment with state prescribed ideals of femininity. For decades the embodiment of the feminine ideal was Kim Il-sung's mother, Kang Ban-sok. Kang, who is eulogised as a passionate revolutionary fighter and leader of the Korean women's liberation movement, is referred to as 'the Great Mother of Korea'.

Unlike other socialist regimes that embraced masculine clothing as a symbol of revolutionised women, Kang Ban-sok consistently appears in state iconography in native Korean dress and with a traditional hairstyle. This depiction served to reinforce femininity as tied to a traditional, subservient, 'purely Korean' selfless mother. Sonia Ryang, Director of the Chao Center for

Asian Studies at Rice University, [argues](#) ^[2] that this interpretation of women was so dominant that while ‘the category “mother” exists in North Korea, the category “women” is hardly recognised, thereby effacing the notion of gender altogether from the surface of the [state politics](#) ^[3]’.

Under Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il authorities sought to reinforce this ideal by controlling women. Policing women’s dress and suppressing the wearing of trousers, blue jeans and earrings, for example, were part of a range of official attempts to eradicate western culture that could potentially corrupt the purity of North Korean women.

The famine of the mid-1990s, during which hundreds of thousands — and perhaps as many as — two million North Koreans died, challenged this status quo. Largely in an effort to ensure that they and their families survived, North Korean women took a leading role in [establishing an emerging market economy](#) ^[4].

Ongoing female participation in the market and, in particular, their new role as family breadwinners, afforded North Korean women many new opportunities, including a modicum of economic power. This relation is reflected in the common usage of expressions such as ‘a man’s only use is to be a lock to secure the house’, or to be ‘a guard dog that stays at home all day’, or ‘a light bulb during the day’.

There is some evidence that a preference for sons has diminished, with parents seeing women as more likely to reap benefits in the emerging economy. But recent developments in the social construction of femininity suggest that the relationship between market participation and female empowerment is complex. Perhaps ironically, the North Korean form of capitalism that women have helped to create is likely to frustrate any substantial change in gender relations.

[North Korean capitalism has continued apace](#) ^[5] under the benign neglect — and tacit encouragement — of Kim Jong-un. Now North Korea is undergoing a transition from a society where status is prescribed by the state to one where social status is tied to success in the market.

In this increasingly materialistic and consumerist society, Kim Jong-un’s wife, Ri Sol-ju, has become a visible and influential trendsetter. North Korea’s state news agency has featured Ri at various public events wearing high heels and form-fitting, stylish clothes. She has even been spotted sporting a variety of designer brooches in place of the ‘dual portrait’ lapel pin, which carries the images of former leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. Other North Korean fashion icons include the women in the country’s most popular girl band, Moranbong. Their short skirts, high heels and sequined outfits have inspired or reinforced the trend among women to wear brighter, better-cut clothing.

Today, many North Korean women prefer logo-emblazoned goods, as well as anything that can incorporate sequins or diamantes — tops, hairpins and even high heels. [The latter](#) ^[6], especially, have become *de rigueur*.

In Pyongyang the wives, daughters and mistresses of the new rich, or *dongju* (‘masters of

money'), are immaculately turned out. Unlike other symbols of wealth, such as fridges or air conditioners, being accompanied by a fashionable female is a conspicuous way of displaying wealth.

This 'capitalist' hyper-femininity is evident in all of North Korea's major cities. There are [reports](#) ^[7] of tailors across North Korea producing a huge range of counterfeit designer clothing. Cosmetic surgery is performed throughout the country and local markets do a brisk trade in earrings, handbags, clothing and make-up from China and South Korea.

But market participation and fashionable clothing do not indicate a more liberal order or any substantial empowerment of women. North Korea remains a heavily state-controlled and patriarchal country.

Despite running most of the stalls at local markets, North Korean women have nowhere near the same opportunities as men in terms of careers and money-making. In this context, dressing extravagantly could be seen as a normalised, tactical approach for women aspiring to secure a good career, marriage or even a boyfriend. Women may prefer conspicuous consumption that signals status to others.

Under *juche* ideology, women's bodies were regulated and controlled by North Korean authorities. The aim was to meet a set of ideals closely aligned to the traditional role of the woman as producer, reproducer and child rearer. Now social status is becoming more closely connected to financial success. Women increasingly embody the markers of status and wealth through the conspicuous consumption of material goods, thus playing a key role in modern status reproduction. As North Korea has changed, a new femininity has begun to emerge.

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[1] directly perpetuated gender subordination: <http://as.ucpress.edu/content/46/5/741>

[2] argues:

<http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/10.1163/156852100512275>

[3] state politics:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/06/19/women-and-politics-in-east-asia/>

[4] establishing an emerging market economy:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/12/16/slow-progress-for-north-koreas-cautious-reforms/>

[5] North Korean capitalism has continued apace:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/12/12/will-north-korea-embrace-market-reform/>

[6] The latter: <http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/high-heels-are-all-the-rage-in-north-korea/>

[7] reports: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/fashion-08272013160737.html>

[8] Bronwen Dalton: <https://www.uts.edu.au/staff/bronwen.dalton>

[9] Kyungja Jung: <http://www.uts.edu.au/staff/kyungja.jung>

[10] East Asia Forum Quarterly: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/quarterly/>