

MEDIA (RE)CONSTRUCTIONS OF KIM JONG-UN'S IDEAL WOMEN: KO YOUNG-HEE AND RI SOL-JU¹

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During the spring and summer of 2012, Kim Jong-un's mother, Ko Young-hee, and wife, Ri Sol-ju, have been used this year to codify his position as leader for the DPRK. More than their true stories, official, partially imagined descriptions of each of these women's relationships give a glimpse into how the regime imagines the role of women in the supposed "women's paradise" that is the DPRK: they are still mothers and wives, ready for (re)construction for the sake of the regime that play into normative family relationships, but that the ideal qualities for figurehead women reflect a challenge to traditional women's roles. Furthermore, by examining official statements and media, international coverage, and eyewitness accounts, this paper argues that the socialist re-imaginings of women in North Korea before the ascension of Kim Jong-un are being challenged by these new Mothers to the Nation.

Introduction

Membership to a society, it can be argued, is gendered.² The socially constructed gender roles are created and upheld in a way that is historically specific, and the constructed Ideal Woman figure can represent so many things for any given society: a grounded family unit, a man stabilized through marriage, even the nation itself.³ Over the spring and summer of 2012, not one but two women have

1 I would like to thank Dr. Adam Cathcart for his comments and Benjamin Young for his accounts from North Korea.

2 Sylvia Walby, "Is Citizenship Gendered?," *Sociology* 28:2 (1994): 379-395.

3 For example, Andre Schmid argues that in early modern Korea, the (mostly male) writers in the enlightenment movement used women as a measure of progress, casting the traditional female's characteristics and relationships as "metaphors of backwardness" of the nation. The new Ideal Woman educated in the Western style represented the status of a nation emerging in the international realm. See *Korea Between Empires 1895-1919* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002):40.

been employed, in official and international media, in efforts to suss out who exactly is Kim Jong-un as a leader, and a social figure, now acting as figurehead for the regime. Based on official statements and media, international coverage and eyewitness accounts, this paper aims to describe the extent to which Kim Jong-un's mother and wife have been used this year to ground him as a leader.

Comparing Ko Young-hee and Ri Sol-ju as contextualized within the DPRK society raises interesting questions about the changing Ideal Woman figure in the nation: to what purpose are these high-level women constructed, and in what ways do their qualities uphold or signal changes in North Korean gendered citizens? This paper argues that to codify his image as the new North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un's mother, Ko Young-hee, and wife, Ri Sol-ju, are used by the regime due to the neo-Confucian cultural legacy that underlies contemporary Korean society which stresses the importance of normative family relationships. Furthermore, by examining domestic and international media coverage of these two women, I argue that the socialist re-imaginings of women in North Korea before the ascension of Kim Jong-un are being challenged by these new Mothers to the Nation.

The Women's Paradise: Contextualizing the Idealized Woman in DPRK

North Korea claims itself to be a "women's paradise" where women have already realized their liberation.⁴ Indeed, as in most socialisms, in North Korea official steps were taken early to ensure women's political and economic equality. Marxist thought holds that the subordination or marginalization of women is a structural problem that cannot be solved within the bounds of capitalism, since under capitalism women are the proletariat class subjugated to their bourgeois husbands seeking to extend estate inheritance through a patrilineal line.⁵ Women can only be liberated after a socialist revolution that brings them out from unpaid domestic labor activity into the social economic arena. Moreover, the family was to be "abolished" under socialist revolution. Written in 1949, American journalist Anna Louise Strong's eye-witness account of the situation corroborated the general equality regarding pay and the social welfare system⁶ at this time, including the Women's Union and its achievements in "getting equality."⁷

4 Kyung Ae Park, "Women and Revolution in North Korea." *Pacific Affairs* 65:4 (1992-1993): 527-545.

5 Hal Draper, "Marx and Engels on Women's Liberation," *International Socialism* (First Series) 44 (July/August 1970): 20-29.

6 Anna Louise Strong, "In North Korea: First Eye-Witness Report," *Soviety Russia Today* (1949).

7 Ibid.

The Great Leader spoke of women's productive and supportive roles for the prosperity of the nation. The Democratic Women's Union was formed in 1946 to accommodate housewives, who by their "joblessness" were unable to be members of the other four organizations including the Korean Worker's Party and Farmer's Union.

Speaking to enlarge the Democratic Women's Union, in May 1946 Kim emphasized the need to:

...wipe out the feudal conventions of binding women to the home and other remnants of the old habits so that all of them will not only help their husbands who are participating in nation-building endeavors, bring up their children well and run their homes thriftily, but also directly contribute to the nation-building work by their own labor efforts.⁸

The organization strived to project an image of a "culturally enlightening group" tasked with "educating and indoctrinating women on Communist ideology."⁹ Kim Il-sung saw compulsory social training as important for not just the regime but ostensibly for the sake of gender equality. As he claimed in a September 1946 speech on the founding of the *Korean Woman (Chosŏn Yŏsŏng)*, "the women...can achieve emancipation only if they strive with no less devotion and awareness than men to solve the problems arising on the productive fronts of the factories and countryside."¹⁰

After the establishment of public child care centers and "take out" food distribution centers in the early part of the 1960s, the supposed household duties tasked to women was to be realized through a greater project for three revolutions: ideological, technological, cultural. In a speech to the Fifth Congress of the Korean Workers' Party in 1972, Kim claimed that women would be "liberated" from heavy household chores, not through cultural or social norms but through technological revolution.¹¹ Thus, the social standard that situated the woman within the home was not threatened because of any ideological change, but rather structurally lessened due to technological advancement.

The rhetoric and reality of the eldest Kim's intention may not have been the

8 Kim Il Sung, *Works*, vol. 2, 1979.

9 Park Kyung Ae, "Women and Revolution in North Korea." In *Pacific Affairs*. 65, no. 4 (1992-1993): 527-545.

10 Kim Il Sung, *Works*, vol. 2, 1979.

11 Kyungja Jung and Bronwen Dalton, "Rhetoric versus Reality for the Women of North Korea," *Asian Survey* 46:5 (2006): 741-760.

same. Jung and Dalton cite inconsistency between his supposedly progressive interpretations of gender equality with his view of women's primary role as mothers to instruct their children.¹²

Cultural differences, though, have significantly undermined official policies of gender equality outside the home. Comparing the cultural changes in North Korea with those going on in the radical Chinese Cultural Revolution, the limits of policy against culture are apparent. The Chinese revolution attempted to "revolutionize" the role of the women in this economy, but in North Korea, despite the legal actions, the reality of the situation was that the social undercurrent that centered on patriarchy and the family unit undermined any progress related to domestic life of women. Indeed, Sonia Ryang notes that the "abolition of the patrilineal registration system has not automatically led to women's emancipation, while the collectivization of the economy effectively forced women to bear the double burden of producer and reproducer." In this way, a gender-segregating culture and its reproduction remain.¹³

Furthermore, writes K.A. Park, "In the authoritarian culture so prevalent in North Korea, the concept of equality was alien to both men and women."¹⁴ In North Korea the family unit as basis for economic activity was not broken up, and therefore the Neo-Confucian focus on family as central left elements of gender role prescriptions despite official proclamations to the contrary. Similar to traditional (and modern, and post-modern) Korean imaginings of woman relationally, as daughter, wife and mother,¹⁵ the North Korean woman was idealized as the "revolutionized mother," certainly epitomized by Kang Ban Sok, mother of Kim Il-Sung and leader of the Democratic Women's Union who devoted herself to caring for her son, as mother to "Il-Sung" the individual Korean offspring and as mother to the leader of the nation, elevated in state-produced media as mother of the nation. It would seem that North Korea continues to turn the women linked to the Kim dynasty into ideal figures to represent feminine citizenship ideals¹⁶ by glorifying Kim Jong-un's mother, Ko Young-hee, and wife, Ri Sol-ju, as part of the "great mother" narrative.

Logistically speaking, it was a military-led effort back in 2002 that posi-

12 Ibid.

13 Sonia Ryang, "Gender in Oblivion: Women in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 35 (July 2000): 323-349.

14 Kyung Ae Park, "Economic crisis, women's changing economic roles, and their implications for women's status in North Korea," *The Pacific Review* 24:2 (2011): 159-177.

15 Andre Schmid, *Korean Between Empires, 1895-1919* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

16 Dong-A Ilbo, "N. Korea glorifying late mother of leader Kim Jong Un," <http://english.donga.com/srv/service.php3?bicode=060000&biid=2012061159958> (accessed July 4, 2012).

tioned Ko Young-hee as “respected mother” that led to her sons’ being positioned for succession over other Kim Jong-il heirs.¹⁷ So, while lineage drawn through his father and grandfather is undoubtedly his most important family relation, Kim Jong-un’s current persona is also being grounded by two *female* figures: now we see Jong-un is not only a son of the noble Comrade Ko Young-hee, but also the husband of Comrade Ri Sol-ju. The next question is: is the revelation of these two women merely a political move, showing the new leader as a “family man” for the North Koreans, or does it say something more about the woman figure, the social Feminine Ideal, in the DPRK?

Joseon’s Nameless, Newly Canonized Mother: Ko Young-hee, Mother of Kim Jong-un

As the *Rodong Sinmun* recently asserted, one’s family is the ultimate defense.¹⁸ Presumably part of the effort to defend the supreme leader against questions about his leadership,¹⁹ Kim Jong-un’s own hereditary pedigree is being bolstered through a recently released cinematic narrative²⁰ of his mother, Ko Young-hee, third wife of Kim Jong-il. A copy of a 2011 documentary about Yong-hee was screened for party cadres back in May, subsequently procured by RENK, a Japanese NGO, and had ultimately been released to the general public via the online newspaper DailyNK. The word of the film and its eventual release has led to new international attention²¹ on the personality propaganda related to Kim clan lineage. The film’s photographic footage comes from the 1990s, focusing on her relationships with the Kims Jong-il and Jong-un, including her support and dedication during the March of Tribulation.

Titled “The Beloved Mother of the Great Songun Korea” (widaehan seon-gun joseon-ui eomeonim) the film omits any mention of her life as a dancer and her birth in Osaka. This film was the first official recognition of her as mother of Kim Jong-un, though there were attempts to elevate her status through a different film in the late 1990s in order to canonize Jong-un’s position in the Kim

17 Jae-chon Lim, “North Korea’s Hereditary Succession: Comparing Two Key Transitions in the DPRK,” *Asian Survey* 52: 3 (May/June 2012): 550-570.

18 *Rodong Sinmun*, “Patriotism Stems from One’s Courtyard,” July 13, 2012, http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterEn/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2012-07-13-0006 (accessed July 25, 2012).

19 Yonhap News Agency, “Questions linger on N. Korean leader Kim Jong-un’s power,” <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2012/06/29/76/0401000000AEN20120629005200315F.HTML> (accessed July 4, 2012).

20 The film is available to view on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NN1pLhbFTh4>.

21 DailyNK, “‘Great Mother’ Revealed to the World,” <http://dailynk.com/english/read.php?num=9441&catId=nk00100> (accessed July 1, 2012).

family tree. Those efforts dissolved upon her death in 2004. The film describes her as “dear comrade” to Kim Jong-il and “mother” to Kim Jong-un. In the film she’s given the name Lee Un-sil but is mostly referred to as “Our Respected Mother.” It is significant both politically for the Kim regime and theoretically for women’s roles in North Korea that the film makes no mention of the name “Ko Young-hee” or her historical life, since her birth in Osaka and family background in the lowest levels of the *songbun* system make her a threat to the “pure” bloodline of Jong-un.

Ko’s father Kim Tae-mun, born in Jeju Island in 1920 while Korea was under Japanese colonial rule, moved to join his father in Japan in the 1930s to the Tsuruhashi district in Osaka, notable for its concentration of ethnic Koreans. There he learned judo and became one of the most famous and skilled Korean judo athletes. In 1952, Ko Young-hee (née Ko Hui-hoon, Japanese name Takada Hime) was born in Osaka. Because of his prowess in judo, Kim Tae-mun and his family were moved in 1961 to Pyongyang as part of Kim Il-sung’s program initiated in December 1959 to repatriate ethnic Koreans living in Japan to the DPRK. He became so famous in Pyongyang that even today he is known as the “father of North Korean judo.”²²

Because of her father’s increased influence and promotion in *songbun* levels, the pretty and graceful Young-hee was able to join the Mansudae Art Troupe around the year 1970. Kokita Kiyohito, writer at the *Asahi Shimbun*, likens her story to that of Cinderella,²³ rising from lowly Osaka beginnings to become consort to the Great Leader. This sort of story may make for dramatic fodder popular in Korean broadcasts, but for the purity of their newly appointed leader is threatens his legitimacy as a pure son of the DPRK. However, even this aspect could work depending on the right spin. A former high-ranking Chongryon official said a legend about Kim Jong-un could be constructed as follows:

Ko Tae Mun carried on the will of Jeju islanders who fought bravely under the guidance of Kim Il Sung. After fleeing to Japan, he returned to North Korea to be embraced by the greatness of Kim. Ko gave up his life to serve as a soldier for Kim. Kim Jong Un would be an individual who carried on the great revolutionary bloodline from Jeju.²⁴

22 Kokita Kiyohito. “Osaka Black Mark in Kim’s Life?,” *Japan Focus*, <http://japanfocus.org/-Kiyohito-Kokita/3465> (accessed July 1, 2012).

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

This isn't the first time the purity of the Kim blood has been contested. As Ko Young-ki of the *DailyNK* points out:

This [covering up of her birthplace] is all the more ironic since Koh is also a long way short of being the first "returnee" to make the highest grade in North Korea. For what is Kim Il Sung, if not a returnee himself? The North Korean founder left North Korea with his father Kim Hyung Jik when he was 14 and moved to Jilin Province, China. It was only later that he would "return" under the wing of the Soviet Union.²⁵

Though much focus is paid in the film to the idea of "pure bloodlines" and concurrent legitimacy in the DPRK context, the film's attention to Ko contains a much stronger ideological implication: Constructed narratives of the Great Leader(s)'s mother speaks also to the figure of "mother" in North Korean sociopolitical constructs. Generally speaking, the mother writ large has long been a metaphor for the nation, and so the Great Mother plays a special role. Indeed, B.R. Myers has argued that rather than being cast as a "stern Confucian patriarch," Kim Il-Sung used her as a motherly figure to the nation. Diction used to describe the nation speaks not of the father but of the mother; indeed, the word used for the homeland in Korean, though translated as "fatherland" in English, is "motherland" in Korean (*cho-guk*). As Myers points out, the *Rodong Sinmun* explained the link between mother, mother figures and male leaders in 2003:

The Great Rule Comrade Kim Jong Il has remarked, 'Building the party into a mother party means that just as a mother deeply loves her children and cares warmly for them, so must the party take responsibility for the fate of the people, looking after them even in the smallest matters, and become a true guide and protector of the masses.'²⁶

On the local and theoretical level, individual mothers in the DPRK are to be pure citizens who literally and figuratively produce and reproduce the nation. Instead of looking at liberating women as the marker for women's status in social revolution, S. Kim invokes Foucault's theory of discipline and govern-

25 Young Ki Ko, "Happy Birthday, Koh Young Hee," *DailyNK*, <http://dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk00400&num=9418> (accessed July 1, 2012)

26 BR Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville House, 2010), 79.

mentality²⁷ by focusing instead on how “subjectivities are created and shaped rather than assuming that there is an authentic subject to be liberated at all.”²⁸ According to “In the context of North Korean social revolution,” mothers were imagined as the “most sacrificial model citizen” and motherhood was the model for “construct[ing] not only women’s revolutionary subjectivity but all North Koreans,”²⁹ In this way, canonizing Ko Young-hee is a way to reify model citizenship for all North Koreans. Here is a woman who lovingly waits for her son’s return from school or dutifully knits a sweater for her husband as a gift. Like Kim Jong-suk and the guerilla women of North Korean myth, she is good with handguns, which she provides to her son as a “songun mother.” She is praised for her place in this leading family, and thus as a social woman provides a model for citizens as members of the national family.

As a biological woman, the mother role embodies symbolic roles of women for the nation. S. Kim further argues that it was women’s *reproductive roles* that made them eligible for national citizenship, fusing duties of the household to the nation-state.³⁰ In the case of Ko, it is neither her membership to the Party nor her skill as a dancer (which was, after all, her occupational contribution to the nation) that warrants her value. Rather, it is her ability to reproduce Kim Jong-il in the form of Kim Jong-un (a form that extends from Kim Il-sung) that makes her an esteemed citizen worthy of praise and “canonization.”

Modern, Feminine and Bright: Ri Sol-ju, Kim Jong-un’s First Lady

The new woman figure in the form of Ri Sol-ju contrasts greatly to that of the previous Mother of the Nation. Sparked by a photo released by the KCNA on July 9, 2012, from a performance of a Moran Band performance in Pyongyang, the international media circuit scrambled to guess the identity the mysterious woman sitting next to the DPRK leader, along with their relationship. One week later, in a KCTV television report covering Kim Jong-un’s visit to a new amusement park, the Rungna People’s Pleasure Ground, the announcer identified the woman, whose identity and relationship were previously only the subject of speculation, as Ri Sol-ju.³¹ If we are to follow a report released by the ROK

27 *Governmentality* is used here to mean how a state produces its citizens in service to realizing its goals as a society and nation.

28 Suzy Kim, “Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52:4 (October 2010).

29 *Ibid.*, 745.

30 *Ibid.*, 748.

31 Korean Central Television. “Kim Jong Un Visits Rungna People’s Pleasure Ground,” <http://www.you->

National Intelligence Service, Ri was born in 1989 in a “normal home” and married Jong-un in 2009.

In the South Korean media, speculation about Ri was characteristically rampant. Many tried to connect Ri to a different singer from the Unhasu Orchestra, also named Ri Sol-ju pointing to their similar appearance (from the “round face” to “the same snaggletooth”).³² One South Korean news outlet even consulted plastic surgeons as experts on facial comparison to link photographs and videos of a various North Korean girls to official photos of the DPRK First Lady.³³ Others denied that the singer Ri and Kim’s wife are the same person. Before North Korean official confirmation, Cheong Seong-chang, a senior fellow at the Sejong Institute in Seoul, early on claimed that the Ri Sol-ju who is the wife of Kim Jong-un is actually a graduate of Kim Il-sung University and majored in the natural sciences.³⁴ Yonhap News pointed out though the two may share the same name in Korean, they use different Chinese characters to write their name which signals they could be different people.³⁵ The suspicious nature of Ri’s identity has led to international conjecture that she, like Ko Young-hee before her, has been propagandistically finagled into a suitable figure as First Lady to the DPRK. Just as is the case with any North Korean public figure, it is likely her official story differs from the factual historical one.

Ri Sol-ju as a New Feminine Ideal

To begin with, Comrade Ri *looks* different. This fact hasn’t gone unnoticed by American media outlets, from the Huffington Post’s comment about her “cute peep-toe pumps” in “New First Lady Remains a Style Mystery”³⁶ to one Washington Post blogger’s facetious suggestion that the “international woman of mystery” may be prime editorial content for fashion magazines “New Bride Ready for the Vogue Treatment.”³⁷

tube.com/watch?v=g0ZbzSkoYQI (accessed July 28, 2012).

- 32 Jin-hee Kim, “Iseolju dong-yeongsang boni, gwiyeounde mogsoli ‘uioe’,” *Joongang Ilbo*, <http://joongang.joinsmsn.com/article/431/8873431.html?ctg=1000&cloc=joongang%7Chome%7Ctop> (accessed July 26, 2012).
- 33 Woo-young Kim, “Seonghyeong jeonmun-ui, bae liseolju sajin bodeoni,” *Herald Business*, <http://view.heraldm.com/view.php?ud=20120727000387> (accessed July 27, 2012).
- 34 Song-hee Seo, “Kim Jong-un bu-in liseolju, gasu liseoljuwa daleunsalam,” *Money Today*, <http://news.mt.co.kr/mtview.php?no=2012072611598277345> (accessed July 26, 2012).
- 35 “Kim Jong-un bu-in liseolju hanja pyogineun,” *Yonhap News*, July 26, 2012, <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/politics/2012/07/26/0505000000AKR20120726109700083.HTML> (accessed July 26, 2012).
- 36 Eric Cheung, “Ri Sol-Ju, North Korea’s New First Lady, Remains A Style Mystery,” *Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/25/ri-sol-ju-kim-jong-un-wife-marriage_n_1703210.html (accessed July 26, 2012).
- 37 Emily Heil, “Kim Jong Eun’s new bride ready for the Vogue treatment,” *Washington Post*, <http://>

But her differences may be more substantive than just her following cosmopolitan footwear trends when taken in context. In media photographs and videos, Ri is seen walking with her husband arm-in-arm visiting sites around the nation. Being accompanied by relatives very rarely happened under Kim Jong-il, whose family was shrouded in mystery and indeed hidden. This is a complement to Kim Jong-un's presence as well, as he is portrayed in a much friendlier, more public manner than his father was.

Furthermore, in terms of women's appearance and fashion norms, North Korea is a conservative nation where women were banned from riding bicycles or wearing hair in anything other than the "socialist style" until very recently.³⁸ According to reports from recent visitors to the DPRK, among the general public outside Pyongyang there is little Western fashion influence on clothing there and preferred styles tend to be drab communist suits. On the other hand, this official First Lady has chicly trimmed hair and wears fitted Western-style clothing with above-the-knee hemlines. Ri's smart, brightly colored outfits are a big departure from the norm, actual and official. She is neither walking around in *hanbok*³⁹ nor drab conservative socialist outfits, which she could have been ordered to wear.

Kim Jong-un has publicly confirmed his commitment to the military first policy (songun) preferred by his predecessors. Some may scoff at the suggestion that this glimpse of his family life may reflect a "Westernization" or potential opening of North Korea. Accounts from inside the nation during summer 2012 reported Kim Jong-un's cultural departures, including a policy lifting bans on women wearing pants, his penchant for foreign foods such as pizza, and watching an unlicensed Mickey Mouse on a Pyongyang stage. These changes may only be cosmetic, and any conclusion based on Ri's short hairstyle, fitted dresses, or high-heeled shoes seem a bit premature. But in a sea of stoic male faces in military garb, the unquestionably Western and modern Ri is a significant symbolic presence of what modern femininity may come to mean in North Korea.

As a point of comparison, South Korea, which shared the traditional gender-segregating culture and conservative approach to dress until its economic

www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/in-the-loop/post/kim-jong-euns-new-bride-ready-for-the-vogue-treatment/2012/07/25/gJQAwxfU9W_blog.html (accessed July 26, 2012).

38 Eun Ju Park and Min-jung Kim, "bukhan-yeoseong-ui heeoseutail-e gwanhan yeongu: 2000nyeon ihuleul jungsim-eulo" [A Study on the Hair Style Design in North Korea], *hanguk-inchemiyong-yesul-haghoeji [Journal of Korean Social Beauty and Art]* 11:4 (2010): 5-19.

39 *Hanbok* is the traditional Korean clothing. The female version consists of a short, wrapped blouse and long, wide skirt that makes mobility difficult.

development from the 1970s, saw immense changes in gendered roles when it emerged as a sophisticated consumer culture in the 1990s. Many of the aesthetic changes pertaining to appearance and fashion are linked to the way men and women approach their individual economic values. Permitting such departures from traditional dress could actually have deeper effects. North Korean women who defect to South Korea, for example, find dress as a way to present themselves as subjectively entering a society in which they are able to be feminine, talented and independent. Their dress is not a costume thrust upon them, but rather a sartorial signifier of their newfound agency. Rooted in a certain brand of third-wave feminism, Huisman and Hondagneu-Sotelo argue that hyper-feminine forms of dress—such as female defectors living in South Korea or perhaps even Ri Sol-ju—are “fluid, ambiguous, and often empowering.” For a female figure in such a visible position to take such departures from traditional and modern socialist-style norms of dress may suggest change in the way individual North Korean women view their own subjectivities within the national society and economy.

Discussion and Conclusion: A New Kind of DPRK Woman?

Interest in both Ri and Ko are derived not of their qualities as a Comrade but through their relationship to the leader. Both figure prominently, however, in “stabilizing” the 20-something leader, portraying him as a family man when his young age has been cited as a potential handicap in the DPRK public eye.

In the cases of Ko and Ri, it is neither their membership to the Party nor their individual skills as a dancer and a singer (which was, after all, supposedly their occupational contributions to the nation) that warrants the value of each woman. Rather, it is Ko’s ability to reproduce Kim Jong-il in the form of Kim Jong-un (a form that extends from Kim Il-sung), and Ri’s ability to stabilize the otherwise ostensibly rough Jong-un as a real man—a wedded man⁴⁰—that makes each an esteemed citizen worthy of praise and “canonization.”

Canonizing Ko Young-hee and introducing Ri Sol-ju are ways to reify model citizenship and more specifically the Ideal North Korean Woman for all North Koreans. With partially true, heavily-edited hagiographies and idealized accounts of their behavior and qualities, the consorts to the Kim clan are and continue to be a tool in upholding leadership. Furthermore, more than their

40 In Korean society, the wedding is seen as having a transformative ability, which can settle, strengthen, and stabilize an otherwise aimless, individualistic, or unproductive man. Laurell Kendall traces the deeply rooted historical context from the pre-modern era on the peninsula in the ethnography *Getting Married in Korea: Of Gender, Morality, and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

true stories, official, partially imagined descriptions of each of these women's relationships give a glimpse into how the regime imagines the role of women in the supposed "women's paradise" that is the DPRK: they are still mothers and wives, ready for (re)construction for the sake of the regime that play into normative family relationships, but that the ideal qualities for figurehead women reflect a challenge to traditional women's roles. **YJIS**