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Dressing Socialism: *Joseonot and Revolutionary Womanhood in North Korea, 1955–1960*

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Abstract

The present analysis illuminates the impact of tradition in the constitution of North Korean revolutionary womanhood based on the regime's idealizing narratives of Joseonot *(traditional Korean dress). After the Korean War, the cultivation of socialist personalities for the working Joseon* nyeoseong *(North Korean women) became increasingly wedded to traditional models of sacrifice, both in and outside the home. To avoid the reductionism of explanations centered on patriarchy or the gendered nature of the North Korean state, this study argues that the pronounced weight of tradition in constructing revolutionary womanhood after the Korean War should be attributed to the pressing urgency of anti-revisionism during the political crisis of legitimacy in the mid-1950s. Faced with mounting dissent in the wake of de-Stalinization, Kim Il-sung claimed exclusive political legitimacy and superior nationalism based on his self-proclaimed mandate to dictate* Juche *(self-reliance). Accordingly, the aesthetical and ideological attention given to women's* Joseonot *represents a facet of socialist indoctrination unique to 1955–1960, rather than a gendered dress code rooted in patriarchy. The formulation of* Joseonot *as the socialist Korean women's dress epitomized the interplay between revolutionary and national essence central to Pyongyang's postcolonial socialist modernity and claim to nation-wide leadership. Throughout the process of regime consolidation, the question of how socialist* Joseon nyeoseong *is became inseparable from how genuinely Korean she is.*

Keywords: socialism, revolution, North Korean women, *Joseonot*, anti-revisionism, *Juche*

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Introduction

The division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945 produced two rivaling regimes bent on disproving each other's claim to independence and nationwide representation. Starting in 1946, the North Korean regime implemented a set of drastic "anti-imperialist, anti-feudal, democratic" reforms (Armstrong 2003; Buzo 1999; Cumings 1981; S. Kim 2013; Scalapino and Lee 1972; Seo 2005) which were designed to validate Pyongyang's self-proclaimed lead in achieving superior independence and modernity. In this transformation, the Gender Equality Law of 1946 is presented in North Korean official history as one of the most illustrious hallmarks of Kim Il-sung's initiative to dissolve colonial-era socioeconomic and cultural foundations.[1] This created *Joseon nyeoseong* (North Korean women) as the newly emerging identity of Korean women liberated by full submission to the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) and expected to develop the values, tastes, and lifestyles appropriate for socialism.[2]

As the inter-Korean race for regime consolidation intensified after the Korean War, the expansion of women's social labor became a key imperative in an economy fueled by overproduction campaigns. The popularization of the working *Joseon nyeoseong* in factories, offices, schools, and collective farms further distinguished them from the women of South Korea, where the ideology of domesticity inherent in the term *hyeonmo yangcheo* (wise

1. The more literal translation of *Namnyeo pyeongdeunggwon beomnyeong* is "Law on the Equal Rights of Men and Women." For the sake of brevity, Gender Equality Law will be used throughout this article, as it is in other English-language publications on the subject.
2. From North Korea's perspective, *Joseon nyeoseong* as the product of anti-imperialist, anti-feudal, democratic reforms represent a key measure of socialism's promise to achieve gender equality. This was juxtaposed with the situation of women in South Korea who still lived under feudalistic oppression.

mother, good wife) remained pervasive.[3]

In the cultivation of socialist personalities, the weight of Korean tradition (Armstrong 2003, 71; S. Kim 2010, 745) became increasingly more pronounced throughout the course of regime consolidation after the Korean War. This came from the pressing urgency of *Juche* to rationalize the anti-revisionist campaign in the wake of mounting political dissent following de-Stalinization from the mid-1950s (Lankov 2002; Szalontai 2006). The present study examines how the reformulation of tradition as revolution shaped the regime's discourse on revolutionary womanhood (S. Kim 2013, 188) by focusing on the idealizing narratives of *Joseonot* (traditional Korean dress). Women's *Joseonot* had a peculiar ideological meaning specific to the political, cultural, and economic conditions of *Joseon nyeoseong* in

3. In this paper, we use *hyeonmo yangcheo* to refer to the widely held ideology of domesticity in postliberation South Korea, which confined women's primary roles to fulltime housewives and mothers. Although motherhood was critical to revolutionary womanhood in North Korea as well, it was *Joseon nyeoseong* rather than *hyeonmo yangcheo* which was the common term used in postliberation North Korea to refer to the model North Korean woman. For more details on the usage of these terms in the present article, see pages 9–10. Previous works (E. Kim 2007; Hong 2010; Yun 2005) have discussed the historical origins and conceptual evolution of *hyeonmo yangcheo* as a product of modern Korean nationalism, Japanese colonialism (including its similarities and differences with Meiji Japan's ryōsai kenbo), and American missionary discourse (H. Choi 2009). These are important discussions but the modern/colonial origins of *hyeonmo yangcheo* are not directly relevant to the present research as the term matters only as a reference point for the construction of *Joseon nyeoseong* in North Korea as a new identity.

the period 1955–1960.[4] From the mid-1950s, the cultivation of socialist personalities for the working *Joseon nyeoseong* became increasingly wedded to traditional models of sacrifice both in and outside the home. Focusing on the exigency anti-revisionism from the political crisis of legitimacy specific to the mid-1950s, the present study argues that the aesthetical and ideological attention given to women's *Joseonot* represents a particular facet of socialist indoctrination rather than a gendered dress code rooted in patriarchy. The formulation of *Joseonot* as the socialist Korean women's dress epitomized the interplay between revolutionary and national essence central to Pyongyang's postcolonial socialist modernity and claim to nation-wide leadership. Throughout the process of regime consolidation, the question of how socialist *Joseon nyeoseong* is became inseparable from how genuinely Korean she is.

To clarify the relationship between the ascent of the socialist *Joseon nyeoseong* and the continued idealization of *Joseonot*, this study situates

4. Since the postliberation democratic reforms, revolutionary women were first and foremost Korean (S. Kim 2013, 188). The reality for North Korean women changed considerably after the Korean War due to their increasing participation in the work force. The present analysis does not go beyond 1960 because the discourse on women takes on a new form after the 1961 National Mothers' Conference (Jeonguk eomeoni daehoe) in November following the KWP Fourth Congress brought motherhood back to the core of the revolutionary indoctrination of women (Oh 2019, 331; H. Park 1988, 80). The KWP Fourth Congress is also a turning point in the consolidation of Kim Il-sung's unitary leadership after he emerged even stronger from the political crisis of legitimacy in 1956 (Lankov 2002; Seo 2005; Szalontai 2006). Previous studies have emphasized that the 1960s represents a new phase in the emphasis on revolutionary motherhood. According to Park Hyun-sun (1988, 80), North Korea foregrounded women's participation in the labor force to support postliberation nation building and socialist construction prior to the inaugural National Mothers' Conference. After this time, the mother's role in the struggle against old ideology was considered more important than her employment in the labor force. Park Youngja argued that the Korean War and the militarized industrialization of the 1960 reversed the postliberation reforms for gender equality (2017, 272). A more recent study characterized the 1961 National Mothers' Conference as a transition towards a "post-socialist" gender perspective, resulting in the establishment of a "state patriarchy" with Kim Il-sung as the absolute patriarch (Oh 2019, 331). Some argue, however, that North Korea, "which seemingly came across radical transitions in the postliberation period, actually never challenged the exiting patriarchal order" (Choi 2018, 5).

the discourse on women's *Joseonot* within the historical evolution of *Joseon nyeoseong* and anti-revisionism in North Korean regime consolidation after the Korean War in the 1950s. The questions defining the aim of the present analysis are: (1) What does the official discourse on *Joseonot* indicate about the process by which socialist identity becomes intertwined with Korean identity?; (2) How did the imperative of anti-revisionism during the political crisis of legitimacy in the 1950s affect the North Korean regime's definition of revolutionary womanhood?

The present study addresses these questions by complementing previous studies in three ways. First, the analysis incorporates a thematic focus centered on *Joseonot* as a facet of North Korean socialism and a periodic focus from 1955–1960 in order to highlight the ideological and cultural impact of anti-revisionism on North Korean revolutionary womanhood. Previous scholarship on North Korean women's vestimentary culture lacks attention to *Joseonot* in the first place. The limited references available (Dalton et al. 2017; Jo 2001; S. Kim 2011; Lee 2019; Sin 2016) consider *Joseonot* as dress practice without a periodically specific and thematically focused set of questions and objectives as outlined in the above.

Second, more importantly, this research seeks to avoid the reductionism and dichotomy arising from singling out patriarchy or male domination in the study of North Korean women. Patriarchy as an analytic tool has been questioned by students of feminism. For example, Butler repudiated the notion of universal patriarchy or male domination for "its failure to account for the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists" (1990, 5). In this vein, previous studies of North Korean women have also cautioned against an exclusive focus on patriarchy or male domination in order to avoid generalizing women as passive victims (Y. Park 2017, 23).[5] Instead, a peculiar intersection of international and domestic factors—the Cold War, inter-Korean regime contest, military

5. Likewise, the association with Confucianism may exhibit a similar reductionist fallacy. Suzy Kim argues that North Korean family metaphors should be "located within larger trends of socialist practice that call for a radical selflessness in the interest of the collective" rather than as an extension of Confucianism. In this formulation, the "ideology of motherhood does not contradict socialism but instead reinforces it" (2014, 258).

build-up, and absolute authority (S. Choi 2018, 21)—constituted the specific context within which *socialist patriarchy* or *patriarchal socialism* could take root and sustain a highly gendered state in North Korea. In other words, socialist patriarchy, patriarchy itself, and the persistence of asymmetrical gender relations are not unique to North Korea.[6] These conditions existed throughout the entire course of North Korean nation building and regime consolidation both before and after the Korean War, and the militarized industrialization of the 1960s. Therefore, they are insufficient in accounting for the more proximate causes of certain facets of regime consolidation and cultivation of socialist identity at a given time.

Moreover, the possibility that North Koreans—men *and* women alike—might understand these concepts somewhat differently from *standard* notions further obfuscates the analytic utility of patriarchy. For example, in the authors' personal encounter with scholars from North Korea's Academy of Sciences in 2019 at a conference held in China, we found that they completely rejected any association of 1950s North Korea with references to patriarchy.[7] By the 1950s, they emphasized, North Korea was successfully undergoing socialist construction with a view to eradicating the feudalism of the past and obstructive legacies for socialism inherited from Japanese colonial rule. Such comments should not be dismissed as mere propaganda because they likely resulted in an understanding and meaning of "gender equality," "women's emancipation," or "patriarchy" which are unique to North Korea's specific political, economic, and sociocultural circumstances.

Third, the present study situates the official discourse on *Joseonot* within

6. In a related vein, it might be useful to consider Heidi Hartmann's observations about how most Marxist experiments have attempted to solve the women question without dealing with the feminist one (cited in S. Kim [2013, 179]). Therefore, women's participation in the social, economic, and political arenas was fostered without fundamentally questioning the social differentiation between women and men, and as Suzy Kim pointed out, this is not unique to North Korea.
7. It is inevitable for South and North Koreans to differ on how they interpret reality. Nonetheless, this experience led the authors to realize the need for creating a basis of academic discourse and vocabulary from which South and North Koreans scholars can agree to disagree and led the authors to reconsider the relevance of patriarchy in the study of North Korean women.

the larger discussion on socialist fashion (Bartlett 2010; Grownow and Zhuravlev 2015; Stitziel 2005) which examined the contradictory aims of fulfilling "basic needs" and "higher needs" in socialist consumer culture. At once a tool of socialist education and yardstick by which to judge socialism's material promise, fashion highlighted the conflict between the principle of collectivism and popular desires for individual distinction (Stitziel 2005, 4). In Eastern Europe, Western goods held a multifaceted allure for socialist consumers, due to their diversity, fashionability, and superior production in comparison with the poor quality and functionalist aesthetics of socialist fashion items (Bartlett 2010, 266). More problematically, East Germany, for example, shared with the West a vision of modernity and modernization that largely predated World War II and proved unable to invent a new, desirable aesthetic and system of values that could decisively overcome the legacies of capitalist society (Stitziel 2005, 4). As a result, by the end of the 1950s, officials sought to encourage the production of expensive, highly fashionable apparel. In December 1955, the Institute for the Culture of Dress (IBK) in East Germany began to publish a new magazine, called *Sibylle*, which presented world fashion from Prague, Florence, Warsaw, Vienna, Moscow, New York, Beijing, London and Paris (Bartlett 2010, 142). These examples demonstrate a guarded acceptance of Western fashion within the institution of socialism. By comparison, it is instructive that North Korea during this same time relied more heavily on tradition to pre-empt external cultural influence and accordingly defined *Juche* as the basis of competition for postcolonial modernity with South Korea. Based on the idealizing narrative of *Joseonot*, the following sections will show how urgency of anti-revisionism based on *Juche* during the political crisis of legitimacy in the mid-1950s situated tradition at the core of the regime's ideological education and cultural management of revolutionary *Joseon nyeoseong*.

The Socialist *Joseon nyeoseong* after the Korean War

Postcolonial reform in North Korea was aimed at dismantling and eradicating the legacies of Japanese colonialism. In this process, Korea's

social ills at the time of liberation, such as the exploitation and alienation of women, were thought to be the consequences of feudalism and Japanese colonialism.[8] Decision No. 34 of the North Korean Interim People's Committee proclaimed the Gender Equality Law on June 30, 1946. The purpose of the new set of laws on gender equality was to "eradicate the remnants of Japanese colonial policy and reform the old feudal relations between men and women so as to enable women to fully participate in cultural, social, and political life" (S. Kim 2010, 744; see also K. Park 1992, 160).

In the standard historical narrative, it was only after the communist takeover of the Northern half of Korea and due to Kim Il-sung's decisive leadership that women's emancipation was achieved once and for all. The theoretical requirements of Marxism, the reality of women's exploitation, the political appeal of women's liberation as a propaganda victory, and the heightening personality cult of Kim Il-sung together remolded Korean women as the liberated *Joseon nyeoseong*. Women's emancipation, along with the land reform of 1946, was regarded as one of the most celebrated achievements of Kim Il-sung's postcolonial nationalist leadership and the basis, therefore, of North Korea's claim to an early lead in superior nationalism and modernity vis-à-vis South Korea under Syngman Rhee.

To gauge the extent of its novelty as a new Korean female identity, *Joseon nyeoseong*'s differences from *hyeonmo yangcheo* must be considered. In 1945, *hyeonmo yangcheo* was the point of departure from which both the North and South Korean regimes sought to create a new, independent/modern Korean female identity. Originating from the era of modern state formation for the education and mobilization of women (S. Kim 2010, 180), pre-liberation *hyeonmo yangcheo* resulted from the interplay of Japanese colonial gender ideology, import of Western domesticity and modernity, and American Christian missionary discourse (Choi 2009, 3). *Hyeonmo*

8. North Korea's leaders attributed the difficulty of indoctrinating collectivism to Japanese colonial rule, under which people had individualistic and selfish lifestyles. According to Kim Il-sung, "Progress in our [ideological] work is obstructed by the bad thoughts and habits left behind from the insidious effects of Japanese colonial rule which are still deeply rooted in our lives" (cited in Han [2012, 39]).

yangcheo in colonial Korea constituted a part of the competing discourses on modernity with shifting meanings and therefore was not a unitary concept (Hong 2010, 333). Compared to Meiji Japan's *ryōsai kenbo*, *hyeonmo yangcheo* during the period of modern Korean state formation assigned more significance to motherhood than the role of the wife (Yun 2005, 93–114). Unlike the Japanese wife in *ryōsai kenbo*, who always had to be in a supporting position, the Korean wife conceived in *hyeonmo yangcheo* could guide the husband to moral/ethical righteousness (Yun 2005, 93–114). Whereas *hyeonmo yangcheo* prior to the 1930s symbolized the civilized and enlightened women, it subsequently was reformulated as an ideal rooted in Korea's "past" and likened to the "traditional women" (Hong 2010, 333).

Its multitude of meanings aside, at the core of the *hyeonmo yangcheo* construct was the ideology of domesticity which rendered women fulltime housewives, precluding public/social roles extended to the female population on a mass scale. In postliberation South Korea, *hyeonmo yangcheo* as the fulltime housewife remained the standard, even as women's political, legal, and social rights improved under the American Military Government (E. Kim 2007, 140). *Hyeonmo yangcheo* was still the norm well into the 1960s and beyond in South Korea. According to the research and recollections of Dr. Yiyi Hyojae, a pioneer in feminist activism and scholarship in South Korea, even highly educated women such as her students at Ewha Womans University embraced the fulltime housewife model of *hyeonmo yangcheo* and references to daycare centers for working mothers were considered "revolutionary" in the 1950s–1960s (Bak 2019, 56).

Although women's roles as mothers and wives were critical to female revolutionary consciousness, what gained currency to describe the new emancipated woman was the term *Joseon nyeoseong* rather than *hyeonmo yangcheo*. North Korea's "anti-feudal, anti-imperialist democratic" reforms formalized by the 1946 Gender Equality Law transformed the preliberation *hyeonmo yangcheo* into *Joseon nyeoseong* as the newly emancipated women. The Gender Equality Law finally resolved the "exploitation and poverty of women" and eradicated the "shame, social disdain, ignorance, and lack of civilization that had characterized women's lives for centuries" (*Rodong sinmun* 1959a).

After the Korean War, the emergence of the working *Joseon nyeoseong* on a mass scale further advanced the cause of women's emancipation. Gender equality in North Korea came to stand for women's equal ability and right to participation in the work force as men.[9] Although women's employment in the production race had begun immediately after liberation, the shortage of male labor after the Korean War made it more urgently necessary from the mid-1950s (Y. Park 2017, 283). According to North Korea's official perspective, the race towards socialist construction in the postwar period, which enhanced the material base for women's liberation, dismantled the traditional order of women's subordination.

After the Korean War, the ascent of the working *Joseon nyeoseong* became the most palpable example of enhanced gender equality. During this time, the education of women harshly chastised the backward thinking among them for continuing to rely on their husbands. Reproached as "women buried in the home" (*gajeong-e pamuchineun yeoseong*), such uncultivated women of old ideology typically refused to look for employment, questioning, "Why should I have to look for work outside when my husband's income is sufficient to manage the household?" (*Rodong sinmun* 1955).

Prior to socialism, economic independence had never even occurred to the women who had been reliant on their husbands and confined to the domestic sphere (*Rodong sinmun* 1957). Only the "legitimate policy and wise leadership of the KWP Central Committee headed by Marshal (*wonsu*) Kim Il-sung" transformed such old-fashioned women into the heroic working *Joseon nyeoseong* propelling the nation's socialist construction (*Rodong sinmun* 1959a). According to statistics released by the KWP in 1956, the share of women's labor in the light industrial sector amounted to 41.9 percent of the total labor force; around 35,000 women held leadership

9. According to Kim Shin-jo, one of two survivors of the 31-person team of North Korean commandos sent to assassinate Park Chung-hee in what is known as the Blue House Raid, "equality between men and women in North Korea means men and women work equally, and this is strictly observed" (*Chosun Ilbo*, 1968). Kim made this comment at a press conference during which fifty South Korean female journalists were present to hear about the lives of North Korean women.

positions in the KWP, government, and social organizations, including 6,000 in leadership positions and sixty-nine delegates in the Supreme People's Assembly; 26,500 women were granted national honors and medals, including sixteen heroines (*Rodong sinmun* 1956a; 1956b). Moreover, as many as 30,000 women occupied the male-dominated heavy industrial sector (*Rodong sinmun* 1956a). To highlight women's contribution to agricultural collectivization, Bak Jeongae (Chair of the Central Committee of the North Korean Democratic Women's League) emphasized their remarkable transition from providing "auxiliary labor to basic production labor" (*Rodong sinmun* 1957). In 1959, 130 women worked as leaders in the management of agricultural cooperatives (*Rodong sinmun* 1959c). Between 1956 and 1960, it was officially claimed that the number of nursery schools and kindergartens had increased 31 fold (Ryang 2000, 332).

Enhanced gender equality in the labor structure had corresponding psychological and ideological consequences. Bak Jeongae applauded the able and empowered woman who strove tirelessly for independence (*Rodong sinmun* 1957). No longer counting on their husbands, *Joseon nyeoseong* understood that "their hard work as builders of socialism entitled them to increasing material advances in the home and contributed to the revolution" (*Rodong sinmun* 1957). As women were "comprehensively incorporated in agricultural collectivization, they gradually overcame the malaise of *namjon nyeobi* [superior men, inferior women] and flawed perspective of labor" (*Rodong sinmun* 1957). By adopting a socialist view of labor and distribution, *Joseon nyeoseong* became aware that they could be as strong as men (*Rodong sinmun* 1957).

The stories of their transformation from a powerless, exploited colonial subject to the independent socialist Korean women showed how *Joseon nyeoseong* in widely different and new domains were working as exemplars of industry, creativity, and loyalty in socialist construction for the ultimate achievement of "peaceful unification." Four working socialist Korean women featured in *Rodong sinmun* to mark International Women's Day in 1956 illustrated this unprecedented change. Han Gwangok, manager of the Gwangmyeong Agricultural Cooperative in Gaecheon county, Pyeongannam-do province, boasted that more than half of the cooperative's

138 members were women who were working as hard as men. Having grown up with the education of the KWP, she emphasized the dramatic extent of Korean women's transformation under party leadership by comparing herself to older generations of women who lived under colonial rule: "I am not the rightless countryside woman of the pre-liberation era" (*Rodong sinmun* 1956a). Won Sisuk, a shoemaker at a rubber factory in Hamheung, was grateful for the opportunity to "elevate her technological, cultural level and commit herself to creative labor" (*Rodong sinmun* 1956a). Won Sisuk also spoke of the great postliberation feat of the party and the government to finally start treating women humanely, providing women with the chance for self-improvement and a rewarding life, and enabling women to be deeply *respected socially* as honorable warriors in the construction of the fatherland (*Rodong sinmun* 1956a, emphasis added). Ri Jeongja, born to a poor shepherd during the colonial period but now an expert in cobalt refining, graduated from Heungnam College of Technology in 1953 following national liberation thanks to the KWP and the government (*Rodong sinmun* 1956a). Ryu Eunbo, a primary school teacher in Pyongyang, also underscored that she was able to achieve self-improvement by following the correct policy of the KPW and the government. In doing so, she acknowledged that her work as a teacher had been flawed due to formalism and dogmatism (*Rodong sinmun* 1956a).

In the official North Korean narrative, the independence and empowerment of the working *Joseon nyeoseong* after the Korean War starkly contrasted with South Korean women who continued to be victimized by feudalism and *namjon nyeobi*. The "Rhee Syngman clique" was denounced for passing the Civil Law in December 1957 that "legalized the vice of *namjon nyeobi*," including male privileges in household registration, succession of property, and kinship relations (*Rodong sinmun* 1959b). Due to this injustice, South Korean women were stripped of any rights to inheritance, management of family assets, divorce, and custody of children. Furthermore, South Korean women were mortified by "capitalistic, feudalistic customs" and the extremely corrupt "American-style way of life" (*Rodong sinmun* 1959b).

How Socialist/Korean Is She? Tradition as Revolution in Women's *Joseonot*

By contrast, the lifestyle and consciousness of the newly empowered *Joseon nyeoseong* were to be both socialist and Korean. In the following description, the model *Joseon nyeoseong* is conceptualized as a successor to Korean tradition; her revolutionary and traditional consciousness blended seamlessly. In socialist Korean women's ideological and aesthetic correctness, being Korean and being revolutionary were inseparable.

> Some women are wasteful, dress and behave in an untidy manner, and although limited to an extreme small number, imitate the corrupt and degenerate lifestyles of Western European Yankee culture which are intolerable. **Having inherited a very splendid legacy from our national culture**, our people, especially women, find this shameful and completely incompatible with the spirit of the *Chollima* era. The Women's Union must wage an adamant struggle against these phenomena and **cultivate a refined and sound communist moral character and daily habits**. At the same time, we must **further develop the beautiful and fine customs of our ancestors** in our **speech**, **behavior**, **and dress** to keep them neat, respect the elders, and help our neighbors. In particular, we must strengthen the moral and ideological cultivation of women in order to further cultivate the rich emotions and unique character of our frugal and meticulous women. (*Joseon nyeoseong* 1960a, 10; emphasis added)

As the party control at the vanguard of women's emancipation increasingly relied on *Juche* (self-reliance) from 1955 and sought to manage *Joseon nyeoseong* within the cultural parameters of tradition, the correct socialist example became indistinguishable from the correct example of Koreanness. From the mid-1950s that the magazine *Joseon nyeoseong* published articles on *Joseonot* which emphasized its "national" value for the preservation of Korean tradition and promoted it as part of a "civilized" (*munhwajeogin*) style of women's dress (Lee 2019, 387). With *Joseonot*, North Korea clothed socialist Korean women simultaneously with revolutionary and national essence.

Joseonot embodied the inseparability of revolutionary and national essence unique to North Korea's socialist modernity. In his speech to KWP propaganda and agitation workers in December 1955 ('On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing *Juche* in Ideological Work: Speech to Party Propaganda and Agitation Workers'), Kim Il-sung's first public emphasis on Juche dictated socialism with North Korean characteristics: "In both revolutionary struggle and construction, we should firmly adhere to Marxist–Leninist principles, applying them in a creative way to suit the specific conditions and national characteristics of our country" (Kim Il-sung 1982, 404).[10] The very same speech relied on the metaphor of the Korean traditional dress to drive home Kim Il-sung's point on *Juche*. He posed the central question, "Some advocate the Soviet way and others the Chinese, but is it not high time to work out our own?" (Kim Il-sung 1982, 403) To answer his own question, he stressed the role of *Joseonot* in the cultivation of aesthetic principles and taste based correctly on *Juche* as Korea's own revolutionary method.

> In learning from the experience of the Soviet Union there is a marked tendency merely to model ourselves on the external form. If Pravda puts out a headline "A Day in Our Country," our *Rodong sinmun* carries the same title: "A Day in Our Country." What is the point of copying this sort of thing? The same thing is true of clothing. When there are very **graceful Korean costumes for our women**, what is the point of discarding them and putting on clothes which are unbecoming? There is no need to do this. I suggested to the Women's Union functionaries that our **women dress in Korean costumes** as far as possible. (Kim Il-sung 1982, 404; emphasis added)

As revolutionary Korean women in the era of *our own* socialism, the qualities expected of *Joseon nyeoseong* resonated with the history and

10. The emphasis on *Juche* was intended to weaken core elite members who had been viewed as agents of Soviet and Chinese influence in North Korean domestic politics, rather than an open challenge to Soviet or Chinese policy *per se* (Lankov 2002; Shen and Xia 2018; Szalontai 2006).

symbolism of traditional Korean women's sacrifice and patriotism. In the factories, enterprises, construction sites, operation of transportation, and fields of education, sciences, and the arts, *Joseon nyeoseong* stood at the forefront of socialism. In these capacities, *Joseon nyeoseong* were to apply themselves in the manner reminiscent of the sacrificial and patriotic mothers and wives of past generations of Korean women: "Historically, our *Joseon nyeoseong* have the illustrious tradition of loving their own country, being industrious at the labor, and loving their lives. *Joseon nyeoseong* of the past have risked their own lives to fight for their beloved country and as true mothers raised their children to become respectable people. This proud national patriotic tradition has carried on for thousands of years and passed down to us" (*Rodong sinmun* 1956a). The examples of the ideal sacrificial, patriotic women of the past included anti-Japanese independence activists or women who had raised revolutionary warriors in the anti-colonial struggle; women who had participated in colonial-era labor activism; the popular tale of Han Seokbong and his mother (*Rodong sinmun* 1956a), etc. The following passage shows the spirit and values of *Joseon nyeoseong* and her dress grounded in the national past.

> In ancient times, the women of our Joseon were very dexterous and richly emotional. Using these attributes, they enjoyed embroidery and sewing with all their hearts. Not only did they use their skills to make their own clothes, thy also tried their best to make clothes for their parents, husbands, and children. They memorized not only their measurements but also the measurements of everyone in the entire family and made clothes that were specifically tailored to each member. Our *Joseonot* has a very good tradition of not only displaying good basic lines and structure but making the entire look neat and beautiful. **However, certain sartorial practices today are destroying such tradition rather than preserving it**. (*Joseon nyeoseong* 1960b, 39; emphasis added)

The reference to the compromised tradition in women's dress and definition of *Joseonot* as a sartorial example must be considered as a reaction to the growth of the working socialist Korean women who crossed the boundary of domesticity. The dress of the new working *Joseon nyeoseong* began to

diversify in the mid-1950s to include Western-style skirts, jackets, and blouses (Lee 2019; Sin 2016). Dress variegation among the new *Joseon nyeoseong* was a visible development. For example, three (shoemaker in the rubber factory, metal engineer, primary school teacher) out of the four female workers featured in *Rodong sinmun* on International Women's Day in 1956 where photographed in Western-style jackets and blouses (*Rodong sinmun* 1956a). Only the manager of the agricultural cooperative wore *Joseonot*. This suggests that *Joseonot* was by no means considered the only ideal women's dress (Lee 2019, 389), although labor heroines and other model female workers often appeared in *Joseonot*. Bak Jeongae's reports published in the *Rodong sinmun* featured the top leader of the Women's League donning both Western suits and *Joseonot* at different times during the mid-1950s.

Figure 1. Four women featured in the *Rodong sinmun* on International Women's Day (March 8, 1956)
Source: Rodong sinmun (1956a).

Since many continued to wear *Joseonot*, no thorough reform was required to promote this dress type (S. Kim 2011, 166). In this light, the continued references to *Joseonot* should be considered not as a matter of sartorial control but an ideological and cultural concern specific to the prevailing political, economic, and social circumstances of the mid-1950s. More specifically, the influence of tradition in the management of women's

revolutionary consciousness must be considered within the broader internal and external crisis of legitimacy to which Kim Il-sung responded by privileging *Juche* from 1955.

In the mid-1950s, the lack of material welfare beleaguering socialist countries fueled anti-Soviet protests in key places such as East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia (Borhi 1999; Coleman 2000). In response, Nikita Khrushchev proclaimed de-Stalinization and peaceful coexistence during the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956 to reduce military tensions and re-allocate resources from heavy industrialization to the consumer goods industry. These Khrushchevian reforms emphasized peaceful means, rather than military means, to achieve the ultimate victory of socialism (Zubok and Pleshakov 1996; Zubok 2007).

North Korea faced a similar crisis of legitimacy after the Korean War, but retained the priority assigned to heavy industrialization while simultaneously declaring "peaceful unification" as the stated objective. The primary allocation of resources to heavy industrialization during the Postwar Reconstruction Plan (1954–1956) and the Five-Year Plan (1957–1961) caused popular living standards to remain stagnated. In the wake of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization, dissidents in the pro-Chinese and Soviet groups openly criticized Kim Il-sung's economic policies and personality cult during the 1956 August Incident (Lankov 2002; Person 2006; Szalontai 2006). Led by members of the pro-China Yan'an group, the dissenters who openly criticized these policies at the Central Committee plenum on August 30–31 were expelled from the KWP, but reinstated after the joint intervention of Moscow and Beijing (Shen and Xia 2018). Ultimately, however, the political influence of the Yan'an and Soviet groups never recovered after this affair and Kim Il-sung managed to emerge from it as a "true Korean," opposing denationalized cadres of the Yan'an and Soviet factions (Lankov 2002, 92).

North Korea in the 1950s was uniquely positioned to simultaneously rely on both Moscow and Beijing and yet accomplish an appearance of independence. After the complete withdrawal of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPVA) from North Korea by 1958, it became possible

for Kim Il-sung to claim the exclusive credibility of its *independence* and superiority of its South–North Confederation proposal as a transitional measure for peaceful unification based on the absence of foreign (i.e., Chinese) troops and elimination of foreign influence. Moreover, Moscow and Beijing were disinclined to interfere with North Korean domestic affairs because they were anxious about maintaining stability in the bilateral alliance with North Korea in light of the anti-Soviet protests in Eastern Europe after de-Stalinization (Lankov 2002; Shen and Xia 2018; Szalontai 2006). In addition, the Soviet Union and China recognized that clothing North Korea with the coat of *independence* could be an ideological asset in the inter-Korean regime contest for national legitimacy. Under these circumstances, North Korea could claim to be more nationalist than South Korea not only because it was anti-American, but also because it had the ability to preserve Juche in its relations with its allies.

North Korea insisted on its own identity through *Joseonot* because of the political crisis of legitimacy in 1956. North Korean women's *Joseonot* stood as a measure of socialism's superior political and ideological legitimacy. This was different from the situation in South Korea, where American culture was imported partly in order to replace colonial-era Japanese culture (S. Kim 2007, 51). The education and indoctrination of *Joseon nyeoseong* emphasized the lifestyle of *Juche* and repudiated the capitalist, corrupt, decadent lifestyle of South Korea under American dominance.

That said, the reality of socialist Korean women on the ground did not necessarily conform to the model *Joseon nyeoseong*. "Feudal customs" and "old ways of thinking" remained in the "negative tendencies" and "cultural backwardness" of some women. These included: (1) reluctance to participate in the labor force, belittling such labor instead of considering it as honorable; (2) not taking the initiative in the production race; (3) clinging on to superstition and non-scientific customs; (4) lack of humility and elegance among the educated intellectual women and their failure to serve as a model for the people; (5) tendency among women in commerce and enterprises to continue to be dominated by capitalist management, engaging in petit-bourgeois, selfish, speculative behavior (*Rodong sinmun* 1957). The following excerpts from a speech made by a top-ranking figure in the

Women's League (Gim Oksun, vice-chair of the Central Committee) echoes the reality of *Joseon nyeoseong*.

> Women take up a very important position in our struggle for frugality. This is because women's far-reaching roles encompasses the home, dining halls, stores, and light industries. Some women, however, are displaying inadequate interest in frugality and budget-conscious homemaking. Instead, many women live an extravagant life and waste income lavishly on unnecessary items…The members of the Women's League must wage a **principled ideological war in opposition to all manifestations of individualism and egoism among women**….We must strengthen our ideological struggle to overcome outdated habits and practices among women and oppose the **penetration of reactionary bourgeois ideology**...We must strengthen our propaganda for scientific atheism and opposition to religion and patiently organize our work to eradicate old feudal capitalistic practices. (*Joseon nyeoseong* 1960a, 9; emphasis added)

Conclusion

Socialist Korean women, for all their strength, courage, and perseverance, could not be revolutionized by themselves nor for themselves. They were liberated by the party, and for the revolutionary objective of the party and the state (J. Kim 2015, 427). This is not in itself unique to women's emancipation in North Korean socialism. The central contradiction of socialism anywhere was that the announced objective of the full liberation of society and individual could be achieved by subsuming that society and individual under full party control (Yurchak 2013, 11).

What is unique about the formation of North Korea is its "singular example of socialist modernity that was inflected like no other by tradition" (S. Kim 2013, 176) and how the weight of tradition informed the idealization of *Joseon nyeoseong* as the "successor of the moral character of traditional Korean women" (Y. Park 2017, 273), even as they were toiling in socialist construction. But since both traditional and revolutionary Korean women were united in their sacrifice and service for the state, it could not

be considered contradictory to situate *Joseon nyeoseong* at the core of the idealizing narratives of tradition. Similarly, there was no inconsistency between the ascent of the *Joseon nyeoseong* and the ideological/cultural education involving *Joseonot*. The reconceptualization of *Joseonot* as the means by which to revolutionize and regulate *Joseon nyeoseong* demonstrated the inseparability of revolutionary and national essence unique to North Korea's postcolonial socialist modernity.

Focusing on the political crisis of legitimacy in the mid-1950s to examine the interplay between tradition and revolution raises further questions the notion of women's liberation in North Korea. The purpose of emancipating women from the shackles of feudalism was essentially tied to the political legitimacy of the new regime and success of socialist economic construction. As mentioned in the above, gender equality in the common sense of the term meant women and men labor equally in the workplace. Therefore, North Korean women were liberated, but this does not mean that they were uniform in their negative relationship with patriarchy. Some women may have questioned asymmetrical gender relations. By contrast, some liberated *Joseon nyeoseong* may have seen their success in patriarchy as a measure of their personal triumph or revolutionary/national contribution. Some women may have been victims of patriarchy; still others may have viewed themselves as successors of a proud national tradition.

This, however, is not because patriarchal oppression has rendered them powerless to challenge male domination. Rather, women's emancipation in socialism anywhere was achieved by full submission to the vanguard party, which, in the context of North Korea's hyper-militarization and regime contest with the South, implemented policies that ended up extending male privileges at home and work. The state for which *Joseon nyeoseong* was liberated promoted militarization and heavy industrialization that resulted in the "structural hierarchy of gender roles" (Y. Park 2017, 273). The question, then, is not the self-evident gap between the rhetoric and reality of gender equality, but whether there should be a conceptualization of women's liberation or patriarchy *specific to North Korean circumstances*. To address this reoriented line of inquiry, it will be necessary to conduct a thematically focused and periodically specific analysis of the prevailing factors at a given

time rather than relying on reductionist explanations based on patriarchy or Confucianism. Furthermore, sustained efforts should be made to learn about North Korean history and lives from the various perspectives of people who live there, in addition to the valuable insights offered by North Korean defectors.

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