



Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures
Polish Academy of Sciences



ACTA ASIATICA
VARSOVIENSIA
No. 32

Warsaw 2019

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*Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia no. 32 was granted a financial support of the
Ministry of Science and Higher Education, grant no. 709/P-DUN/2019*

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PL ISSN 0860–6102

eISSN 2449–8653

ISBN 978–83–7452–091–1

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Discourse on motherhood and childrearing: the role of women in North Korea

Abstract

The implementation of socialism in North Korea required the large-scale involvement of women in economic relations. In order to align the rights of women and men in social life, the government pursued a policy of gender equality, conducting extensive advocacy among the female population aimed at a transformation of the understanding of women's social roles and the nature of femininity. In the original context of women being encouraged to be workers and passionate contributors to the construction of the socialist state, the traditional stance on women as caring mothers and wives was supplemented with internationalist rhetoric on womanhood. However, with the transition to the Juche-oriented socialism, the discourse on women was modified, increasing the emphasis on motherhood and childrearing and reducing internationalism. Based on an analysis of the women's magazine *The Korean Woman* (*Joseon Nyeoseong*), the present study analyses discourses on motherhood and childrearing in 21st century North Korea. The preliminary results of the research show that, while motherhood remains an essential component of the discourse on women, it is formulated in terms of building a powerful socialist state.

Keywords: childrearing, discourse, Juche, motherhood, North Korea parenting, socialism.

Introduction

Since the early stage of state building, the development of women's rights has been one of the urgent tasks of domestic North Korean policymaking. Soon after the liberation from Japanese colonisation, the North Korean leadership began to implement social-democratic reforms under the influence of the Soviet Union aimed at the elimination of Korea's postcolonial heritage and semi-feudal economic structure. In 1946, two laws were adopted that significantly affected the social status of Korean women, contributing to the formation of a new discourse on women that contrasted sharply from the previous views on femininity. The Law on Labour (24 June 1946) and the Law on Equal Rights for Men and Women (30 July 1946) specifically promoted women's involvement in the unfolding process of nation building. Regarding the emergence of a new gender discourse, these laws facilitated the construction of a new image of

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Korean women as socially active and equal subjects of social relations. The new image of women was imposed on the mass consciousness both through the enactment of actual policies and media propaganda. Since gender equality was an essential component of the labour policy, it was largely through an alignment of women and men in labour relations that the government could make its policies on gender equality more effective. No less important here was transforming people's minds to ensure they embraced the new values such as gender (social) equality and civic activism.

The Labour Law established uniform labour standards, wages and social benefits irrespective of gender. In particular, it introduced an 8-hour working day, a minimum working age of 14 years and compulsory annual 2-week leave, as well as various social benefits (e.g. due to temporary loss of the ability to work, illness, loss of a breadwinner, pregnancy, etc.). Moreover, for the first time in Korean history, the Labour Law introduced compulsory maternity leave, which was initially set at 77 days – 35 days before full term and 42 days after. During this time, the woman was paid an allowance, which was equivalent to the average salary for the last 6 months (Art. 14-15). Working women with children under the age of one year were also given the legal right to leave twice a day for 30 minutes to feed their baby.

The Law on Equal Rights for Men and Women gave Korean women equal rights to men in all areas of economic and political life, including to work and rest, to receive equal pay for equal work, to receive social benefits and education. The Law also prohibited polygamy, prostitution, concubinage, as well as the buying and selling of women generally. Korean women were granted the same rights as men in respect of marriage, divorce, the selection of a spouse, assignment of alimony rights and inheritance. The long-standing Korean practice of forced marriage was strictly forbidden.² According to the Law, the emancipation of women was interpreted in terms of class liberation or liberation from class exploitation. Thus, the social liberation of women was seen as a necessary basis for the implementation of the socialist stage of the Korean revolution.³ At the same time, Korean women were deprived of privacy and coerced into public positions. In this way, women began to be considered as an integral part of the Korean proletariat and, as such, could be mobilised for any tasks of the governing Labour Party of Korea.

Along with the adoption of new legislation ensuring the implementation of gender equality policy, a new discourse on women started to develop. In this study, we will consider “discourse” to comprise “a particular way of

2 Kim Il-sung 1980: 334–336.

3 Kim Il-sung 1980: 210.

talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)”⁴ The analysis of the discourse on women presented here, which is based on a social constructivist approach⁵, theoretically implies that there is a link between knowledge and social process and between knowledge and social action. In private, since the main domain of forming the discourse consists in texts that can take many forms (written documents, terminology, verbal statements, signs, gestures, etc.)⁶, the discourse on women is constructed not only through governmental policies on women, but also through propaganda disseminated via the media. Discursive practices produce meanings of social actions and identities. As discussed by Mark Hearn and Grant Michelson, “these constructive processes help to further reveal and illuminate underlying power relations in social structures as dominant meanings associated with particular discourse emerge by way of contestation. The dominant meaning occurs as alternative discourses are marginalised or subverted”⁷.

In this study, the main source for the analysis of the discourse on women in North Korea consists of a women’s magazine *The Korean Woman*. I examine how motherhood and childrearing are presented in the narrative of the magazine and what this might mean from the point of understanding the social reality of North Korea in the 21st century. The study aims to demonstrate the basic discursive practices on motherhood and childrearing that are continuously reproduced on the pages of *The Korean Woman* through specific language and images. By comparing the latest editions of *The Korean Woman* with issues published during the 1960s, I show what new elements have been introduced in the discourse on women despite relative similarities between the discursive practices of the 1960s and the 2000s.

The Korean Woman as a political instrument of the Socialist Women’s Union of Korea and the Labour Party of Korea

In November 1945, the Democratic Women’s Union of Korea (*Joseon Minjujuui Yeoseong Dongmaeng*⁸) was established in North Korea.⁹ Since 1946, it has published a monthly magazine *The Korean Woman* (*Joseon Nyeoseong*) aimed at educating and informing Korean women about different

4 Jorgensen, Philips 2002: 1.

5 Fairclough 1992; Burr 1995.

6 Hearn, Michelson 2006.

7 Hearn, Michelson 2006: 9.

8 With the exception of the personal names of the three North Korean leaders – Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, Revised Romanisation of Korean is used for transcribing Korean words throughout the article.

9 In 2016, at the VI Congress of the Women’s Union, it was renamed into the Socialist Women’s Union of Korea (*Joseon Sahoejuui Nyeoseong Dongmaeng*).

aspects of life (political, economic, psychological, family etc.). The magazine is distributed among the members of the Women's Union for free but is also available for other women – i.e. non-members – to read. It focuses mainly on the political consciousness of women and their moral image as citizens and labourers of the socialist state. *The Korean Woman* is the only monthly magazine published by the Women's Union.

When carrying out this study, I analysed available editions of *The Korean Woman* published during 2018 and the first half of 2019. For a better understanding of the evolution of the discourse on women, I compared the latest editions of the magazine with its issues from the 1940 to the 1970s.¹⁰ The number and titles of sections in the magazine varied from time to time. In the issues for 2018-2019, the following regular sections appear: Eternal Sun of Juche (*Jucheui Yeongwonhan Taeyang*), Eternal Sun of Songun (*Yeongwonhan Seongun Taeyang*), The Extraordinary Hero (*Huiseui Cheonchur Wiin*), Woman General of Paektusan (*Baekdusanui Nyeojanggun*), Comments on Principles of Juche (*Juche Sasang Wollli Haeseol*), History Reports (*Ryeoksaneun Gobalhanda*), Socialist Morale and Life (*Sahoejuuidodeok-gwa Saenghwal*), Everlasting History and Folk Customs (*Yuguhan Ryeoksa-wa Minsok*), Common Sense (*Sangsik*), Information Industry and Building the Powerful Technological State (*Jeongbosaneop-gwa Gwahak Gisul Gangguk Geonseol*). As can be seen from the titles of sections, they focus mainly on political aspects of female life, especially ideology and morale. Articles are written by members of the Women's Union, the magazine's correspondents and the editorial team. With the exception of a few articles (on humour, Korean food, sayings) most of them begin by quoting Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un's speeches. Although all the articles are addressed to North Korean women, motherhood and child-rearing issues are primarily discussed in the History Reports and Common Sense sections.

The magazine, which is predominantly printed in black and white, has a 4-page colour tab. The cover, which has not been changed in over 20 years, is printed in red and white and features the image of three Korean women, behind whom are represented the Tower of Juche and the flying Korean flag. In the foreground stands a woman in traditional *hanbok* Korean dress holding a book (the image of a scientist). On her left stands a woman who is visually representative of the image of a mother and a worker. On the right stands a woman resembling a sportswoman.

10 This study is based on analysis of the following issues of *The Korean Woman*: 2018 – № 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7; 2019 – № 4, 5, 6; 1947 – № 2, 3; 1953 – № 3, 7, 8, 9; 1965 – № 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10; 1976 – № 1, 5-6, 7, 10, 11-12.

Considering the content and external appearance of *The Korean Woman*, it clearly does not conform to the image of the women's magazine that is familiar to the European reader. However, in order to analyse the discourse comprising the magazine's content, it is necessary to go beyond one's ideological and cultural prejudices to better understand the essence of Korean women's life which is significantly influenced by mass propaganda. In this study, the task of explaining practical aspects of maternity or childrearing in North Korea is not attempted since it is difficult to objectively verify the governmental policies towards these matters. Rather, I set out to examine the discourses on women, which are still cultivated by the state through various instruments (mass media, public campaigns, education). *The Korean Woman* was selected for this purpose since it is one of the instruments used to continuously generate and disseminate a discourse on women in North Korea with the definite aim of standardising women's consciousness and mode of life.

Childrearing issues in the discourse on women

The Korean Woman raises issues connected with the psychological (moral, emotional), intellectual and physical development of children. Although a mother is considered the first pedagogue for her children¹¹, in the narrative on childrearing gender roles are often not divided and the editorial addresses itself to both parents, i.e. mother and father. In any case, it is assumed that the responsibility of the mother for a child's education is higher than that of the father. In 1998, as a means of increasing the responsibility and strengthening the role of women in childrearing, a Day of the Child's Education (*Janyeo Gyoyang-ui Nal*) was established, which continues to be celebrated on 14th October. On this day, members of the Union of Socialist Women distribute materials on exemplary methods for motherhood and education, as well as arranging seminars and meetings on child's education. Through the organisation of public movements of the exemplary kindergartens and nurseries, the North Korean leadership aims to increase women's awareness of the childhood education methods and reinforce the strong belief that parenting is the main duty of women.¹² *The Korean Woman* often publishes articles with headlines such as "Strengthening the Role of Mothers in Children's Education", "Strengthening the Role of Members of the Union of Socialist Women in Children's Education and Upbringing", "Strengthening the Role and Responsibility of Mothers" which focus on women's obligations as mothers and children's primary educators.

11 The editorial addresses to Kim Il-sung's words "A talented mother stands behind a talented child, and an outstanding teacher stands behind a talented mother". *The Korean Woman*, 2019 (6): 5.

12 *The Korean Woman* 2018 (6): 14.

In an article entitled “A Child’s Smile”, it is asserted that mothers should consider the emotional state of a child during childrearing. According to this article, from the second month onwards, a child begins to react to and imitate the emotions of adults. Therefore, during childrearing, a mother should show positive emotions towards a child in order to raise him or her in an atmosphere of love and joy. A smile expresses the different emotional states of the person – joy, satisfaction, love. If a mother rarely caresses and smiles to a child, then when he grows up he will rarely smile too. The article concludes with the idea that cultivating positive emotions in a child from the first days of his life is one of the key tasks of childrearing.¹³

From the point of view of the emotional development of the child, it seems worth mentioning the article *Patriotism Begins with the Family* that refers to the words of Kim Jong-il about the necessity of celebrating children’s birthdays. It is stated that, through celebrating a birthday, receiving toys and eating delicious food, a child experiences positive emotions and absorbs parental love, with this love then being transformed into devotion to the motherland. The authors cite the Korean proverb “Only if the water is clean from above it is clear below”, which means that if children love their parents, they will love their country too. Thus, love for the motherland is to be gradually instilled in children by parents from early childhood¹⁴ and one of the ways to implement this task is by arranging birthday parties for children. Some other ways for raising a psychologically healthy child are described as giving moderate praise¹⁵ and keeping promises that were given to children by their parents.¹⁶

In the state-approved North Korean discourse, psychological health implies instilling such character traits in the child that will help him to become a socially active, goal-oriented, credible person with solid moral principles. One of the articles raises the question “What should we do to instil a love for comrades in a child?”. Here it is stated that parents have an obligation to encourage sympathy for others in their children. Thus, a child should not be allowed to focus solely on his or her needs but should also express concern for others. Parents should permit children to spend time at the playground so that they can communicate with their peers; moreover, they should not concern themselves too much with conflicts and tensions that arise between children. Rather, parents should demonstrate by their own examples to children how to behave decently.¹⁷

13 The Korean Woman 2018 (1): 31.

14 The Korean Woman 2018 (1):10.

15 The Korean Woman 2019 (4): 53.

16 The Korean Woman 2018 (7): 37.

17 The Korean Woman 2018 (1): 54.

For a child's mental development, it is important to place him or her in complicated life situations so that they are able to make decisions, express their own points of view, taking the attitudes of others into account. An article entitled "What should we do to teach children to think?" stresses that parents should read poems, help to solve puzzles and talk about scientific topics with their children at home. In stimulating a child's craving for knowledge, parents should teach them to clearly express their point of view.¹⁸ *The Korean Woman's* editorial emphasises that experience-based education (*gyeongheom gyoyug*) facilitates the development of a better understanding of the corresponding situation, while invention-based education (*changsang gyoyug*) teaches people how to produce new knowledge.¹⁹

While a great deal of attention is paid to psychological health (emotional, moral), *The Korean Woman* also raises the issue of physical growth and the role of parents in raising tall children. It states that since parents know their children's character and psychological and physical state better than anyone else, they should take more responsibility for their children's growth. Recently, North Koreans have not hesitated to consult specialists (it is not specified what kind of specialists) on how to achieve physical growth.²⁰ The editorial describes some methods that are thought to stimulate physical growth. The first of these consists of doing sports that include running, since it is believed that running causes immediate muscle contraction that stimulates the growth of bones. Through repeating these physical exercises, the cells responsible for the growth of bones are invigorated, thus accelerating the growth of bones and joints.²¹ The editorial advises doing sports in the evening two hours after dinner and to wipe ones' feet and body with a damp towel moistened with cold water after finishing physical exercises.²²

The articles related to the physical health of children provide recommendations for women about what to do if a child has a cold (it is advised to give an antipyretic, to avoid bathing babies and to maintain a room temperature of 20 °C) or a runny nose.²³ The parents should carefully administer medicine to children following a doctor's recommendations. According to the articles, one should not be reckless when giving an antipyretic to a sick child. In addition, it is forbidden to give aspirin to children. Although paracetamol is a good antipyretic, it can cause some complications, so it should only be used

18 *The Korean Woman* 2019 (5): 53.

19 *The Korean Woman* 2019 (4): 55.

20 *The Korean Woman* 2019 (5): 53.

21 *The Korean Woman* 2019 (5): 52.

22 *The Korean Woman* 2019 (6): 49.

23 *The Korean Woman* 2018 (4): 43.

temporarily. It is also advised not to be reckless by giving a cold medicine because it may not be clear for what reasons a child has a cough, whether this is because of a cold or asthma. In such cases, it is recommended to follow doctor's instructions.²⁴

Thus, it can be seen that the narrative on childrearing is structured around the mother's moral obligations as the first pedagogue for her children and in carrying out other parental duties. It is clearly believed that how a person has been educated in childhood significantly affects his or her behaviour in adulthood. Since the moral image of a woman is of utmost importance for the successful construction of a powerful socialist state, the psychological education of children, including their moral, emotional upbringing, also becomes of key importance.

Of course, the recommendations for raising physically healthy children may sound a bit naïve and primitive from the point of view of 21st century medicine. It could be concluded that North Koreans are still using medicines sent from the Soviet Union in a previous era. Since *The Korean Woman* does not mention any new approaches that could be applied by parents in rearing their children, its overall narrative would appear to retain a conservative, old-fashioned stance on childrearing.

Exemplary motherhood under Juche-oriented socialism

From the end of the 1960s, the cult of Kim Il-sung's mother Kang Pan-sok and his first wife Kim Jong-suk began to develop in North Korea. These two women were presented as exemplary mothers, daughters-in-law and wives. Without exaggeration, it can be said that they form a collective image of an ideal woman, who is both a mother and a wife, as well as a passionate contributor to the Korean revolution. Besides Kang Pan-sok and Kim Jong-suk, who still remain at the apogee of the ideal Korean womanhood, the official propaganda also counts as outstanding women former members of the women's unit operating within the guerrillas led by Kim Il-Sung in 1930s (Choi Hui-sung, An Sun-hwa, Han Ju-ae), as well as many ordinary women held up as heroines of labour who were able to succeed professionally at the same time as bringing up talented children.

As a rule, foreigners are rarely mentioned as exemplary women. Analysing the early editions of *The Korean Woman* from the end of the 1940s–early 1950s I found a mention of Nadezhda Krupskaya, one of the Bolshevik leaders and wife of Lenin²⁵; also, a female representative of the Stakhanov's movement

²⁴ *The Korean Woman* 2019 (4): 37.

²⁵ *The Korean Woman* 1947 (3): 55.

in Romania²⁶; and of Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, a Soviet partisan and one of the most revered heroines of the Soviet Union. Although *The Korean Woman* narrated a history of women's movements in socialist countries (in Czechoslovakia, the USSR), and even the development of women's rights in the West²⁷, these were relatively random publications aimed at enabling Korean women to act in solidarity with the international women's movement. Through these texts, Korean women were gradually taught to perceive themselves as an integral part of the working class without national borders and to go beyond their local, traditional views on female behavior and occupational roles. Initially, celebrating motherhood as a trait of femininity seemed less significant for the young North Korean leadership than developing women's professional skills and political consciousness. The magazine depicted an idealised Korean woman as a strong, passionate and socially active person. This may help to explain why the editors appealed to the images of famous females of the socialist world who were known more as outstanding citizens of the respective socialist states than as mere mothers, or might not even be mothers at all. The awakening and internalisation of the political consciousness of Korean women was an essential part of gender politics throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.²⁸ However, the adoption of Juche as a state ideology at the end of the 1960s significantly influenced the political discourse, along with the editions of *The Korean Woman*, which became more nationalistic in their approach to portraying women's social duties and roles. The initial portrayals of the idealised woman began to include notions such as caring, moral virtue and modesty, which referred to the traditional image of "the wise mother and good wife" (*hyeong-mo-yang-cho*).²⁹ However, this should not be seen in

26 *The Korean Woman* 1953 (9): 62.

27 *The Korean Woman* 1947 (2): 21; 1953 (7): 17.

28 Charles Armstrong, Adam Cathcart and Charles Kraus extensively wrote on internationalism in the cultural policies of the DPRK in the end of 1940s–1950s. Armstrong Charles K., 'The Cultural Cold War in Korea, 1945–1950', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 2003, 62 (1), pp. 71–99; Adam Cathcart and Charles Kraus, 'Internationalist Culture in North Korea, 1945–1950', *The Review of Korean Studies*, 2008, 11, pp. 123–148.

29 In one of her articles on motherhood in North Korea, Suzy Kim argued that motherhood as a concept should take on a very broad interpretation soon after the liberation of Korea from Japanese imperialism. This reconfiguration of women's duties occurred at the early stage of the state-building in North Korea. Suzy Kim, 'Revolutionary mothers: women in the North Korean revolution, 1945–1950', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2010, 52 (4), p. 760. I agree with her, but with some reservations. While Kim examines only the first five years of North Korean statehood, in my research I analyse the discourse on women in its development from the end of 1940s. Although for all this time the discourse was politicised and aimed to form an image of woman who sacrifices for everyone, not only for her family but also for society as a whole, there are some nuances in representation of women's image and in the narrative on women that could not be discovered by Kim due to the limited chronological scope of her study.

terms of a straightforward return to the traditional image of the ideal woman, whose role was primarily that of a housekeeper rearing children and caring for her parents-in-law and husband, since the traditional image was supplemented with a new vision of a woman's role under Juche-oriented socialism. Whereas previously it had been a behaviour-based model focused on the socioeconomic and political behaviour of Korean women, the primary model for a woman from the 1970s onward became the image of a revolutionary mother dedicated to the Party and its leader. The state encouraged women to be feminine superheroes, who excel in all areas of life both social and personal. Motherhood has become significantly important for a woman as a citizen of the DPRK.

The large-scale implementation of the Juche ideology resulted in the virtual elimination of internationalist rhetoric from gender discourse since the early 1970s. Analysing the latest editions of *The Korean Woman* for 2018 and the first half of 2019 I found only one mention of a foreign woman: the famous Polish (and naturalised French) physicist and chemist Marie Skłodowska-Curie (1867-1934). The article entitled "The Role of Home and Parents in Children's Education" is about the family Marie Skłodowska-Curie grew up in and how her parents influenced her life choices. The father of Marie taught mathematics and physics in middle school. Marie's mother was also an educated woman. "Being surrounded by such people, from early childhood Marie loved to learn and read a lot of books in spare time".³⁰ The article emphasises that Marie and her husband Pierre raised their children in love for learning so that later the eldest daughter Helen was also awarded the Nobel Prize (jointly with her husband Frédéric Joliot-Curie, in 1935). The second daughter "was brought up in the spirit of self-reliance and with the idea that it was important not to earn money but to improve oneself".³¹ In conclusion, the editorial opined that it is through outstanding family education, such as experienced in Marie Skłodowska-Curie's family, that parents determine the life goals of their children, influence their life choices and thereby form the basis for their further achievements. "Parents have to bring up creditable children, who can contribute to the revolution and the socialist state. Moreover, they have to create a healthy environment for children at home, which is capable of showing them the shortest way to success".³²

The editions of *The Korean Woman* are full of images of ordinary Korean women who raise children in the name of the greatest future of the socialist state. In this regard, the discourse on women retains most of the ideas that were initially expressed in the 1950-60s, such as revolutionary consciousness, loyalty to the party and its leadership, exemplary motherhood and exemplary

30 The Korean Woman 2018 (1): 54.

31 The Korean Woman 2018 (1): 54.

32 The Korean Woman 2018 (1): 54.

citizenship. It is evident that the ideas of total devotion to building socialism still dominate the discourse on women. This is demonstrated by numerous articles calling on women-members and non-members of the Union of Socialist Women to display patriotism, which is necessary for building a powerful socialist state (*sahoejuui ganggug geonseol*). In principle, this translates to the continued importance for the North Korean leadership of the political consciousness, civic activism and patriotism displayed by women retaining significant traits of an essentially feminine character and idealised womanhood, including motherhood.

However, there are some nuances that make the current discourse on women different from that of the mid-1960s. For example, by contrast with the latest issues of *The Korean Woman*, the editions published during the mid-1960s contained more visual images of fashionable Korean women, hairstyles and clothes design. Perhaps what is most surprising is that none of the older editions referred to Kim Il-sung's speeches on feminine beauty. Unlike the current discourse on women, which contains many references to Kim Il-sung's speeches concerning the correlation between women's appearance and the successful construction of a socialist state, the discourse of the mid-1960s did not mention women's appearance as a premise for the successful implementation of socialism in Korea. In this regard, the narrative on women's fashion (clothes and hair) has been de-ideologised. In the mid-1960s, although the discourse on women's fashion reflected the practical aspects of wearing clothes as it does today, it was more expressive in terms of production of stylish and colourful women's clothes. This is evidenced by the colour tabs in the magazine, on which the models demonstrate summer clothes: dresses of traditional and European style, skirts (no trousers), blouses, etc.³³ Moreover, in the magazine's section "Love, Marriage and Family" (*Sarang, Gyeolhon, Gajeong*), the gender discourse was more intimate and emotive than it is today. It may seem hard to imagine that 50 years ago *The Korean Woman* openly discussed issues of infertility, feminine attractiveness, excessive weight, as well as complications in relationships between mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law and daughters-in-law. Nevertheless, a woman's happiness was seen in terms of being at the same time a mother, a wife and a worker, who could greatly contribute to the public production so that not only her family would be proud of her, but society as a whole. As Gim Seonok, the head of the production department of a winery in Ganggye, recounted – having worked in the factory for six years, she understood that even as a mother and a wife, if a woman cannot contribute to society she is conducting an empty life and cannot be completely happy.³⁴

33 *The Korean Woman* 1965 (6): 129–130; 1965 (2): 122.

34 *The Korean Woman* 1965 (2): 34.

The notion of “happiness”, however, is no longer directly referred to in the discourse on women. Reading the articles of *The Korean Woman* of 2018-2019, the reader is left to indirectly infer what could make a woman happy from descriptions of what one should do to in order to be an ideal woman. By comparing the narrative on women’s happiness of the mid-1960s with the contemporary one, it can be seen that they use similar notions such as “contribute” (*ibajida*), “revolution” (*hyeongmyeong*), “wife” and “mother” (*anhae, eomeoni*) but instead of a narrative developed in terms of “active contributing to a building of the powerful socialist state” as it sounds today, they spoke about “making one’s contribution to society”. This means that the concept of “the powerful socialist state” was not so massively imposed on North Koreans in the 1960s. Moreover, an appeal to Kim Il-sung’s views on women’s beauty was not deemed necessary to explain why Korean women should concern themselves about their appearance. In both cases, the source of women’s happiness was considered to not only be found in private life, but collective social life too.

The latest magazine’s issues focus substantially on the moral education of women and children, since the mother is thought to be the first pedagogue for a child. The fourth issue of *The Korean Woman* in 2019 opens with excerpts of Kim Jong-un’s speech on the moral spirit (*dodeog gipung*). “We have to make great efforts for educating socialist morale”. “The members of the Union of the Socialist Women must play a pioneering role in establishing a socialist spirit of life and morale in the whole society”. “Weakening of morale leads to spiritual illness and the impossibility of defending the socialist ideology, system and tradition”. “We must install moral rectitude in the women – not only members of the Union of the Socialist Women, but all other women. If we cannot do this, then they and their families and children can easily get sick. The members of the Union and women have to hold moral obligations and responsibility in front of society and family as wives and daughters-in-law, they have to respect neighbours and teachers, as well as to revere the revolutionary elders”.³⁵ Although Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il also emphasised the significance of moral discipline for building a powerful socialist state, *The Korean Woman* typically refers to the words of the current leader of the DPRK in the aspect of moral education.

The magazine encourages Korean women to have many children. In the article by Baek Mihwa, it is said that “women open up great prospects for the nation, ensure the prosperity of the state and make it stronger by delivering many children and raising them commendably”.³⁶ Baek Mihwa says that

35 *The Korean Woman* 2019 (4): 3.

36 *The Korean Woman* 2019 (6): 50.

today there are many women who believe that delivering many children and raising them is the true duty of women. She quotes the words of Kim Jong-il who once said that “By giving birth to many sons and daughters, women implement a patriotic affair that ensures the future of the motherland”.³⁷ Baek Mi-hwa points out that “Our Mother-Party and motherland award with a title of mother-heroine those women who give birth to many children and excellently raise them, thus they highly evaluate these women as patriots and make their lives inestimable”.³⁸ In conclusion, she encourages Korean women to bear more children and raise them decently following the patterns of those women who patriotically committed their lives to the prosperity of the country and nation. As if arguing with Baek Mihwa, however, Jo Jeongae, a member of the Mangyeongdae district unit of the Union of Socialist Women, says that a woman who raises one child deserves the same degree of trust and respect as a woman who raised 10 children if she devotes all her energy to child rearing. To support this position, she tells her own story of life in which she, a mother of two children – a son and a daughter – has often felt boundless pride and confidence for herself and family since both her children joined the army. Jo Jeongae concludes her story by appealing to Korean women: “The future of the motherland is a future of our children. If we cherish the future of our children, let us take up our responsibilities and fulfil our duties as mothers by caring for our precious families through generations”.³⁹

The labour legislation of the DPRK protects the interests and rights of working mothers of many children (more than three). Moreover, the legislation provides measures that stimulate women’s working activities and delivering children. In 1969, in order to encourage continuity of employment of mothers with three and more children, the government reduced their working hours from eight hours per day to six. The Law on Socialist Labour adopted in 1978, in accordance with the principle of socialist distribution, provided equal payment for men and women for equal work and annual paid leave from seven to 21 days, in addition to 14 days off on public holidays. In 1986, maternity leave was increased from 77 days to 150 days: 60 days before the child’s delivery and 90 after. Since 2015, maternity leave in the DPRK has been increased to 240 days: 60 before childbirth and 180 days after.⁴⁰

37 The Korean Woman 2019 (6): 50.

38 The Korean Woman 2019 (6): 50.

39 The Korean Woman 2019 (6): 52.

40 Jo Jeonghun 2016.

North Korean sayings on childrearing and parenthood

North Korean sayings on motherhood and childrearing reflect a modern approach of the state to the family as a social institute. Motherhood is analysed in terms of a nuclear family. *The Korean Woman* never mentions single mothers rearing children. Mothers are always presented as a part of the nuclear family, which consists of a husband, wife and children (as well as grandparents or parents-in-law). As I mentioned above, mothers having more than three children are the object of special honour and respect from the state and society. However, the issue of a large family rearing many children is not raised in North Korean sayings, at least not in *The Korean Woman*. This once again confirms that motherhood is understood as a universal phenomenon, which does not depend on the number of children and living conditions. No matter how many children a woman has and under what conditions she lives, she is obliged to be an exemplary mother for her children according to the Juche-style socialist value system.

The sayings describe behaviour patterns that women and children should follow in social life. As a rule, the editorial explains in detail the meaning of each saying. In some cases, they are accompanied by short instructive stories, which clarify the meaning and explain the origins. The proverb “Reverent parents bring up reverent sons” (*bu-hyo-ja-hyo*) means that if parents themselves are reverent sons and daughters, then their children will also become reverent sons and daughters.⁴¹ The magazine refers to the origins of the saying thus: Once upon a time in one family lived a daughter-in-law who was very disrespectful towards her mother-in-law. She blamed the mother-in-law for not working and eating all day long, so she put food for her on the smallest plate. One day, a grandson who looked at disrespectful behaviour of his mother every day deliberately broke the grandmother’s plate but did not tell about this to his mother. When his mother asked him whether he knew where the plate was he lied to her answering: “I have hidden the plate to put food into it for you when I get married.” The son’s words made his mother, the daughter-in-law, realise that she, too, would soon have to experience what her mother-in-law was facing up to now. Thus, the story tells how the daughter-in-law conceived her misbehaviour and from the next day began to treat her mother-in-law respectfully in order to become an example for her children.

Although this story teaches North Koreans, both men and women, to revere their parents, nevertheless, as we see, in the centre of the narrative is not a man, but a woman, a daughter-in-law who disrespects her mother-in-

41 The Korean Woman 2018 (2): 43.

law. Traditionally, Korean women after marriage had to treat their parents-in-law with special honour and loyalty because disrespectful behaviour towards them was a major sin and a reason for divorce. Since a divorced woman was doomed to loneliness and social isolation until her death, she unquestioningly obeyed her parents-in-law. The liberation of Korea from Japanese colonialism and further ideological changes that occurred in North Korean society after 1945 did not much affect the patriarchal structure of family relations. Socialist ideology did not eradicate the Confucian heritage but instead reinterpreted existing rules of family relationships under the new theoretical framework. The current official discourse on motherhood and childrearing in North Korea does not refer to Confucianism at all. Rather, it states that caring for parents (parents-in-law) is a moral imperative in socialist ethics. If a person does not care for his/her parents it means that he/she does not care for the state. In North Korean ideology, familial relations are similar to relations within the whole state. For this reason, the party is compared with the mother and the great leader Kim Il-sung, i.e. with the father of the nation.⁴² In other words, reverence as a category of Confucian ethics is explained in the framework of the socialist ideology as a concern for the collective, a state which cannot be prosperous if the younger ones do not respect the older ones.

There is a Korean saying “Treasure is not the wife who has a lot of money, but one whose heart is full of love” (*don manh-eun an-hae-bo-da jeong manh-eun an-hae-ga bo-mul-i-da*).⁴³ In traditional Korean society, women were taught to be modest, kind and humble. In the current discourse on women in North Korea, kindness and modesty as fundamental traits of women’s character are not mentioned. Instead, the discourse reference such a notion as *jeong*, which means devotion, love, affection and sincerity.

There are many proverbs related to rearing children according to moral principles and rules. The proverb “Do not think about how to save money, but rather teach your children to read and write” (*don mo-a-jul saeng-gag-mal-go ja-sig-e-ge geul-eul ga-leu-chi-la*) instructs Koreans not to think about saving money, rather educate their children in good faith, because it is not money that makes one succeed in life, but knowledge and skills. The proverbs “The good child is the pride of a family and the bad child is its misery” (*joh-eun ja-sig-eun jib-an-ui ja-lang-i-go ag-han ja-sig-eun jib-an-ui bul-haeng-i-da*), “If you did

42 The article “Parental Love for Workers” (*Lo-dong-ja-leul wi-ha-si-neun eo-beo-i-sa-lang*) tells how the great leader Kim Il-sung took care about ordinary workers like their father. In Korean, it is used a term “eobeoi” which literally means parents, that is, the father and mother together. The image of a caring father was subsequently applied to all leaders of the DPRK – Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un. *The Korean Woman*, 2018 (5): 7; 2018 (3): 11.

43 *The Korean Woman* 2018 (2): 43.

not farm well, then you will lose a year; if you have not properly raised your children you will suffer for all your life” (*nong-sa-leul jal jis-ji mos-ha-myeon han-hae-leul mang-chi-go ja-sig-eul jal ga-leu-chi-ji mos-ha-myeon il-saeng hae-leul ib-neun-da*) emphasises how it is important to raise children properly in order to avoid problems in the future and succeed in life.⁴⁴ In this regard, it seems that in the 21st century North Korea retains the basic Confucian idea of the Joseon era (1392-1910), in which the child’s social success was one of the main criteria for assessing a woman’s personal success. If a child or a husband succeeded in social life it meant that he had been excellently brought up by his mother or remarkably cared by his wife so that a woman could be awarded a title of *yeolbu* (virtuous / chaste wife).

All arguments about the welfare of the family in North Korea are associated with children. The saying “Children fill the house with happiness” (*a-i-deul-i iss-neun jib-e haeng-bog-i gis-deun-da*) stresses that children make a family happy. Those families who do not have children cannot be truly happy. “Children’s bravery makes their mother younger” (*a-i-deul-ui yong-gam-seong-eun eo-meo-ni-leul jeolm-ge han-da*) states that those children who strive for their goals transfer this energy to parents, making them younger.⁴⁵ Children are the core of the family. It is obvious that, within the current approach to the definition of a happy family in North Korea, marriage implies having children, while in the West child-free marriages are becoming popular.⁴⁶ In South Korea, the number of newlyweds preferring not to have children is also growing.⁴⁷ However, in North Korea, the child-free concept as a socio-cultural phenomenon is not discussed in the discourse on women since it is officially assumed that married women must have children. If a woman does not have her own children she can look after orphans as if they were her own children. Korean women are encouraged to enjoy any form of maternity and, by this means, to express their femininity.

44 The Korean Woman 2018 (4): 41.

45 The Korean Woman 2018 (4): 41.

46 For example, in the US a percentage of childless American women (ages 15-44) increased from 35% in 1976 to 47 % in 2010 // Matthew D. Johnson. Want to Save Your Marriage? Don’t Have Kids: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/24/marriage-kids-children-relationship-suffers-research> (accessed 20.07.2019).

47 According to the Korea Statistics, in 2017 37,5% of newlyweds did not bear a child, and this number has increased up to 1.2% since 2016. [sikkeurikkeul] honja salgido beogeounde.. teai wae eomnyagoyo? (It’s tough to live alone...why don’t have children?): <http://news.zum.com/articles/52694927> (accessed 20.07.2019).

Concluding remarks

In the current discourse on women in North Korea, femininity implies both the traits that are traditionally cited as feminine such as kindness, modesty, empathy and caring, as well as those traits that relate to civic activism – patriotism, devotion to the party and its leadership, as well as economic and political participation. Femininity and motherhood are interchangeable or complementary concepts. Whenever we speak about femininity regarding North Korean women, we imply maternity so that semantically these notions seem to be inseparable in the dominant (official) discourse. In most articles of *The Korean Women*, women are encouraged to dedicate themselves with their whole hearts to the party's instructions and the directions of the great leaders. Motherhood does not release a woman from these social obligations. The revolutionary duty extends to mothers, thus increasing their burden of daily chores. "Today among our women there are many of those who do not only kindly care for parents, actively help their husbands and brothers in work and raise children excellently, but also look after orphans and the old men who have nobody to take care of them as if these children and old men were their own children and parents. Thus, they take the path of the glorious soldiers and cause the flower of revolution to blossom forever. All women have to become possessors of the remarkable socialist morale and behave as gracefully as those who are publicly honoured. All women have to carry out their duties at family, hometown and working place vigorously and passionately, as well as to take initiative in turning society from a large socialist family into a harmonious and united large family".⁴⁸ This politicised narrative on female social commitments has not changed for decades in the publications of *The Korean Woman*. For half a century, the editorial has been reproducing the same ideas on the socio-political commitments of Korean women using the above-mentioned nuances.

The most surprising aspect of this is that it occurs against the backdrop of a changing economic reality, in particular, the strengthening of market elements in the North Korean economy and the growing role of women in supporting the family since the beginning of the 2000s.⁴⁹ This means that the discourse on women in *The Korean Woman* expresses in a concentrated form what is only partially affirmed by the socio-economic reality of modern North Korea. Officially, the DPRK remains a socialist economy based on state, cooperative and individual forms of property. However, this completely coincides with a structure of political power, which is based on the dominance of males and clan affiliation. This causes us to rethink the correlation between gender

48 The Korean Woman 2018 (7): 34.

49 Branigan 2012.

and power – especially, between gender and political power. As a working hypothesis, it can be suggested that as long as it supports a Juche-oriented socialistic regime⁵⁰ with all its peculiarities, whose details are beyond the scope of this research, the discourse on women will keep on reproducing a conservative stance on femininity in North Korea.

50 In her study on North Korean women's gender awareness, Lee Mi-kyung called the political regime of the DPRK the "patriarchal socialism" [Lee Mi-kyung 2002: 155–178], while in a collective study of South Korean scholars on North Korean women's policy under Kim Jong-un's rule the regime was called the "state patriarchy" (*gukga gabujangje*) [Kim Kyunghee, Kang Eun-Ae, Son Myung-Ah 2006: 131–164].

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