

Ideology and Gender Equality: Women's Policies of North Korea and China

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the neighboring countries of China and North Korea have mutually influenced one another in every aspect of politics and culture, and that exchange of influence has continued even into modern times. A clear example is in the founding of communist governments by both countries. In the 1950's, after the Korean War, both worked to forge a socialist order, and as part of that process they strove to eradicate the Confucianist patriarchal social structure that had been passed down from generation to generation.

One of the biggest challenges North Korea and China faced was liberating women from the long-practiced tradition of subordination to men. To accomplish the task, the two communist parties adopted laws that would, as asserted by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, bring women out of the home and into society to participate in the labor force.

Today, we no longer see such practices as early marriage, polygamy and concubinage (especially for China, foot-binding and bride trade) and now women are an important segment of the labor

force in both countries. Nonetheless, a closer look at the two countries reveals a considerable difference in women's actual status in the household. The purpose of this study is to determine why the current status of women in the two countries are so different, despite the fact that North Korea and China implemented the same policies around the same time.

Scope and Method

Methodologically, this article adopts comparative socialism. By comparing the two countries' policies to change their societies under the same socialistic ideology, we can better understand universalities and peculiarities between the two societies. According to the theory of comparative socialism, similar systems create similar political structures. It is founded on an understanding of comparative politics which maintains that a common culture creates similar political structures. As North Korea and China share similar systems, as well as a common cultural foundation, it would be expected that similar outcomes would be also be very likely.

This article is restricted to three aspects for a clearer comparison. First, it seeks to determine women's status, not in terms of their level of participation in politics, but in terms of their socio-economic status and their status in the household. While the degree of female participation in politics is not low in either country, most hold parliament posts that actually have no real power (around 20 percent in North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly and China's National People's Congress, respectively). However, in the real decision-making apparatus that can influence the status of women, such as the Central Committee and the Alternative Members of Central Committee of the Workers' Party in North Korea and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), there are only 14 women members out of 328 members (4 percent) in 1990 and 25 women among the 319 members (7 percent), respectively.¹⁾

Next, the study of North Korea covers the period up to the 1980s,

in other words, when the socio-economic structure of that country was operating normally. As for China, it deals with the period up to the 1970s, the Mao Ze-dong era, because the CCP has not suggested any special policies for women. Both periods are appropriate for examining correlations between the policies for gender equality and their influence on the status of women.

Lastly, the study restricts its geographical scope to towns and cities, because it is more difficult to separate the workplace from the home in rural areas. Furthermore, in both countries most measures to protect women's rights, such as equal labor and equal wage systems, were mainly limited to urban females working in factories or companies.

IMPLEMENTATION OF WOMEN'S POLICIES

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels maintained that monogamy, which is founded on a private property system, is, in fact, not based on personal love or affection. Instead, they said, it was no more than the alienated exchange of commodities based on an economic contract in which men would obtain domestic labor and offspring from women, while women would secure a livelihood. They believed that only when the private property system was abolished, and men no longer needed to acquire women through monetary or other social means, and only when a woman had no reason, other than true love, not economic powerlessness, to entrust herself to a man, would a true monogamy be established.²⁾ From this view, Engels arrived at the conclusion that the emancipation of women and gender equality

1) Yoon Mi-ryang, *Women's Policy in North Korea* (Seoul: Hanwul Press, 1991), p. 183; China Statistical Bureau, *Women and Men in Chinese Society* (Beijing: China Statistical Bureau, 1999), pp. 76-78; Wang Chun-mei, "Study of Women's Participation in Chinese Society," *Asian Women Studies*, Vol. 34, Center for Asian Women, Sookmyong Women's University (1995), p. 285.

would be impossible as long as women were excluded from social labor and only engaged in personal domestic labor. So it was necessary to diminish the burden of domestic labor to guarantee women's participation in social production.³⁾

Based on Marx and Engel's views on the emancipation of women, North Korea and China adopted laws and implemented policies for women. The policies adopted by the two countries were very similar. First, family and marriage laws allowing free marriage, free divorce, and remarriage were legislated. Second, legal systems in order to mobilize women in the labor force were established and third, measures to protect the rights of working women were introduced to help working mothers cope with housekeeping and childcare.

Family and Marriage Laws

On July 30, 1946, North Korea announced the enactment of the "Statute on Gender Equality." Women's equal rights were first brought up in Clause I, "In all areas of the country's economic, cultural and social political life, women have the same rights as men." Stipulating women's rights to marriage (Clause IV), divorce and child support claims (Clause V), banning polygamy, concubinage, licensed and unlicensed prostitution (Clause VII), and a guaranteed right to inherit estates and land (Clause VIII), the statute laid the legal foundation for women's equal rights.⁴⁾

Meanwhile in China, gender equality was established with Clause VI of the Joint Principles of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, adopted immediately after its government was founded in 1949. Clause VI stipulates, "The People's Republic of China

2) Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), pp. 144-146.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 221.

4) Kim Ae-sil, "North Korean Women's Economic Activities," Sohn Bong-sook, ed., *Lives of Women in North Korea* (Seoul: Nanam, 1991), p. 184.

abolishes feudalism that makes women slaves. Women shall possess rights equal to men in their political, economic, cultural, educational and social lives.” The country’s marriage law enacted on May 1, 1950 guaranteed freedom to marry, divorce and remarry and monogamy. The law was closely related with the Land Reform Act, adopted in the same year, as it set a cornerstone for the marriage law by securing the economic status of wives and children through the distribution of land.⁵⁾

A Foundation that Includes Women in Society and Labor

In addition to stipulating in Clause III the Statute on Gender Equality, “Women shall possess equal rights in labor, social insurance and education as men,” North Korea set the basic foundation to secure women’s equal rights in social labor by guaranteeing equal pay for equal work (Clause VII) in the “Statute on the Labor of Manual and Clerical Workers,” enacted earlier in June 24, 1946.⁶⁾

The turning point in North Korea’s labor policy on women came in 1958. On July 19, 1958, Pyongyang announced Cabinet Decision No. 84 to increase women’s participation in all areas of the people’s economy, which aimed to raise, by 1961, the ratio of women working in the sectors of education and healthcare to an average 60 percent and in other sectors an average 30 percent. They would gradually replace men in sectors where women were best suited, establish more daycare centers, kindergartens and public laundries for working mothers, and expand existing ones, and by degrees increase the ratio of women in universities, professional schools, vocational schools and other training centers.⁷⁾

Likewise, in China, special benefits for female workers were

5) Elisabeth Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China* (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 223-224.

6) Yoon Mi-ryang, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.

7) Kim Ae-sil, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

guaranteed in Clause XXXII of the Joint Principle of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and its Labor Union Act. Because China is so vast, these laws could not be uniformly applied, but in general in rural areas, women were allowed to learn agricultural techniques along with men. Moreover, women who developed expert skills could become managers in Cooperatives, which started appearing in the mid-1950s. In urban areas, women were strongly encouraged to work in the industrial sector and to achieve this goal, many training centers and job schools were opened for women. In addition, in towns and cities, the principle of "equal labor, equal wage" was observed.⁸⁾

Measures to Protect Working Mothers

Various measures were introduced to enable mothers to also join the workforce. Among those were time for breast-feeding during work, maternity leave before and after childbirth, a ban on night work for pregnant women and shorter working hours for mothers. For example, North Korea's "Statute on the Labor of Manual and Clerical Workers" prohibits women from doing heavy labor during pregnancy, while still guaranteeing same wages (Clause XV). It also allows for breast-feeding time (Clause XVI) and stipulates subsidy payment for maternity leave (Clause XVIII). The Labor Act Clause LXVI clearly states, "female workers are entitled to 35 days before and 42 days after childbirth, a total of 77 days of maternity leave, and during this period she shall receive a temporary subsidy or a salary, with the each day on leave counted as a normal working day."⁹⁾

To guarantee better conditions for women, North Korea quickly expanded daycare centers, kindergartens and public laundries. In 1964, 64 percent of daycare-center age children were in state-run

8) Elisabeth Croll, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

9) Kim Ae-sil, *op. cit.*, pp. 203-204.

daycare centers or kindergartens. In 1991, records show 1,660,000 children in some 60,000 daycare centers or kindergartens, with the state offering childcare assistance to most working women.¹⁰⁾

At the 5th plenary session of the Workers' Party, held in November 1970, the issue of "liberating women from their homes" was raised as part of "Three Great Technological Revolutions." Clause LXII of 1972's Socialist Constitution stipulated "the state shall guarantee every possible condition to liberate women from the heavy burdens of household chores to bring them into mainstream society," thus making the initiative to liberate women from household duties part of the constitution. The state pledged to enable women to cook with gas or oil instead of coal, buy the basic spices (i.e., soy sauce, soybean paste, hot pepper paste) produced in food factories and reduce time spent doing housework by producing more washing machines, refrigerators and rice cookers. Unfortunately, many of these goals were not realized due to shortages of goods and electricity.¹¹⁾

China also introduced various measures to enable women to join the workforce. The Labor Insurance Act entitled working mothers to 56 days of maternity leave with full pay. Labor was reduced for pregnant women and mothers with newborn babies, and women working in heavy industries or on night shifts were transferred to light industries or day shifts during these periods.¹²⁾

In China, public facilities for mothers increased rapidly during The Great Leap Forward. *Renmin Ribao* reported that in 1959, 4,980,000 daycare centers and kindergartens appeared and over 3,600,000 public dining halls and sewing centers were established nationwide. In the same year, in the country's capital city of Beijing, the 1,250 daycare centers and kindergartens ballooned to over 18,000 facilities. The 670

10) Yoon Mi-ryang, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

11) Choi Myung-sook, "North Korean Women's Life in the Household since the 1990s," *Research Materials for North Korean Women* (Seoul: Korean Women Institute, Ehwa Women's University, 1999), p. 10.

12) Elisabeth Croll, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

public dining halls exploded to 12,000. Service centers grew from 1,200 to 3,700 while sewing centers mushroomed from 230 to 1,200. During this year, in Chongqing City alone, 12,700 public dining halls and thousands of service centers were opened.¹³⁾

Thus, in the efforts to enact family and marriage laws, promote female employment and introduce measures to protect the rights of working mothers, the degrees and levels of consideration were almost identical in North Korea and China. And in both countries, women were able to come out of their homes and join the social workforce, thanks to these policies. Women's participation in social labor not only elevated their social and economic status, but also established the means for women to gain a stronger voice in household matters.

STATUS CHANGE OF WOMEN

Social Economic Status

Sylvia Walby, citing the example of the United Kingdom, maintained that in the West, the increase in female employment after the Second World War, challenged the very nature of patriarchal relations, and thus improving the status of women.¹⁴⁾ North Korea and China, also under the belief that the improved status of women could challenge the system of patriarchy, encouraged women to participate in social labor. For if the most basic standard of an individual's status in society is whether or not he/she is engaged in economic activities, women's participation in social labor can be seen as an indicator of women's social economic status.

13) *Renmin Ribao*, March 8, 1959, recited from Elisabeth Croll, *op. cit.*, pp. 268-273.

14) Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 237-238.

North Korean Women's Participation in Social Labor

In North Korea, as of 1953, women already contributed 26.3 percent of the workforce and the figure had reached 49 percent in 1988, according to official records. Although the Gender Equality Act was introduced in 1949, it appeared that female employment was not that common until the Korean War. But after the Korean War, the North Korean government began to undertake a radical employment policy, giving women compulsory assignments at specific work sites. By 1958, when collective farming was well established in the countryside, women accounted for 29 percent of the total work force.¹⁵⁾

Since the mid-1950s, along with urbanization and industrialization in North Korea, more and more women entered the factories. To supply labor necessary for rapid industrialization, in 1958, Cabinet Decision No. 84 was announced, causing a steep rise in female employment and increasing the ratio of women in the total work force to 32.4 percent in 1961, 34.9 percent in 1962 and 36.2 percent in 1963. Women's participation in labor continued to increase, reaching 48.0 percent in 1976 and even 49 percent in 1988.¹⁶⁾

According to the testimony of North Koreans who had fled the country, however, in the mid-1980s when female employment was high, 60-70 percent of married women quit their jobs after marriage. They said that most who were in commercial or service sectors or in clerical jobs left once they were wives and mothers. However, most women who graduated from secondary professional colleges or universities and held positions as doctors, teachers or public servants were not allowed to leave their jobs even after they were married. In other words, the majority of those who left were non-professionals with middle school educations at most.¹⁷⁾

15) Kim Ae-sil, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

16) *Rodong Sinmun*, July 30, 1976; *Donga Ilbo*, March 16, 1988, quoted from Kim Ae-sil, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-187.

A married woman who could register as a dependant of her husband, could get 300 grams of rations. But aside from the small number of families that could live on the husband's single income, most women whose spouses were ordinary office workers or laborers, had to work in neighborhood work units to earn a living.¹⁸⁾

A number of factors have prompted married women to give up their jobs, reported according to Pyongyang authorities. First, after the late 1950s, North Korea concentrated on developing its heavy industries; consequently, light industries in the country's economy dwindled. In the meantime, tertiary industries did not develop, leaving many women in urban areas without jobs. Second, managers of enterprises were, and continue to be reluctant to employ married women. Third, tradition still dictates that once married, a woman should stay at home to serve her husband and care of her children,¹⁹⁾ reflecting that discrimination against women still exists in North Korean society.

Chinese Women's Participation in Social Labor

When the Communist Party took power in 1949, the number of female workers was 600,000, comprising 7 percent of the total industrial labor force.²⁰⁾ By 1978, however, with the initiation of reforms and the open-door policy, the figure increased five-fold, to 33 percent.

Once the new government was founded, the CCP adopted a policy of full employment in social labor, including women, in all urban

17) Lim Gum-sook, "Changes in North Korean Women's Participation in Economic Activities Since the 1990s," *Research Materials for North Korean Women* (Seoul: Korean Women Institute, Ehwa Women's University, 1999), p. 21.

18) Yoon Mi-ryang, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

19) Lim Gum-sook, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

20) Tong Xin, "History of Social Changes and Chinese Women's Employment," *Asian Women* (July 1998), p. 67.

areas. State agencies were obligated to provide jobs to everyone in towns and cities. However, as the pace of industrial development could not catch up with the growth in population, in 1958, when the country's first five-year plan was completed, female employment in urban areas remained at a mere 11.68 percent with 2,133,000 workers.

Under these circumstances, neighborhood organizations were promoted to create jobs. Mostly composed of women in their mid-40s to 70s, the organizations were responsible for supervising the local community. In 1980, when Margery Wolf interviewed 120 of the members, 45 of the respondents, all over forty, were responsible for overseeing the cleanliness of gardens and houses, organizing political study groups, resolving family conflicts, supervising local hospitals, finding jobs for recent school graduates, forming local security patrol units, and operating some small or medium-sized enterprises.²¹⁾

Among Wolf's respondents, 74 women under the age of forty were employed in state-run companies that guaranteed social welfare. In 1978, women working in state enterprises and collective enterprises totaled 31,280,000, 32.7 percent of the total work force. More specifically, females employed in state enterprises totaled 28.5 percent, while employment in collective enterprises was 48.9 percent.²²⁾ State-run enterprises normally had canteens and clinics, and larger ones even provided benefits such as daycare centers, 56-day paid maternity leaves, and pensions which amounted to 80 percent (before 1976, 70 percent) of the worker's final salary.²³⁾ Compared to men, women's

21) Phyllis Andors, "Social Revolution and Women's Emancipation: China During the Great Leap Forward," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (July 1975), p. 39. These small enterprises, called neighborhood organizations, are mostly composed of women. The operation of neighborhood organizations, which restricted from asking the government for funds, raw materials, machines or workers from state-run factories, was sustained through the contribution of middle-aged and elderly aged women.

22) Tong Xin, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-72.

23) Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), pp. 57-58.

employment in collective enterprises where social welfare was not guaranteed, was higher than that in state enterprises, nonetheless, a collective enterprise was a better place to work than a neighborhood factory. And with employment in state enterprises steadily rising, it can be said that Chinese women's social economic status gradually improved after the communist government was established.

The rate of female employment was only slightly over 30 percent under the Mao's rule, but considering the rapid growth in population and the slow pace of industrial development, the rise from 7 percent before liberation to 33 percent can be attributed to the CCP's commitment to include women in social labor.

Analysis of Actual Status

As reviewed so far, the concerted efforts of both countries to include women in the workforce increased the ratio of women participating in societal labor. Simply in terms of ratio, North Korea appeared to have a higher rate of participation in the late 1980s, at 49 percent, than China did in the late 1970s, at 33 percent.

However, considering that once married, 60 to 70 percent of North Korean women lose their jobs, it is likely that the 49 percent figure includes married women working in neighborhood work units. In contrast, women's participation of 33 percent in China does not seem to include women working in neighborhood factories, as Wolf's survey in the early 1980s showing that already during the Mao era, neighborhood factories had absorbed all of unemployed women. Therefore, even if it is assumed that women prefer neighborhood work units where they can obtain goods when necessities are scarce in North Korea, neighborhood work units that do not guarantee cash income or pensions are considered to be of lower socio-economic status than regular job positions. Against this backdrop, labor participation in relation to women's social economic status is actually higher in China than North Korea.

Meanwhile, it can be argued that although women's employment

may rise, discrimination against women still exists, since they do low-paid manual work.²⁴⁾ In the early 1970s in North Korea, women's employment was concentrated in light industries (i.e. leather, spinning, textiles, clothing)—70 percent, primary school teachers—80, and secondary school teachers—35, university professors—15, agriculture—60, forestry—30, mining—20, and heavy industries—15.²⁵⁾ In China, some also argue that with the gender division of labor, the increase in women's employment during the Mao era, does not necessarily mean gender equality. A study in the early 1960s of two state-run enterprises shows that in one factory, only seven out of the company's total 25 technical positions were held by women, while the other company defined less than 20 positions out of a total of 106 as suitable for women. And in both companies, regardless of educational background, service and assistant positions such as cleaning, canteen, nursery and machine maintenance were held by female workers.²⁶⁾

Nonetheless, it is debatable whether in a socialist system, gender division of labor is necessarily a disadvantage to women. North Korea authority's efforts to transfer men in light industries to heavy industries in order to provide jobs for women can be viewed as a special consideration to protect women rather than to discriminate against them. Also in China, as labor itself was considered important and the government propagandized that all jobs were equally important in the process of carrying out revolution, gender division of labor itself was not considered discriminatory.

As a matter of fact, gender division of labor does entail real wage differences, when comparing the average monthly salary. In light industries, education, healthcare, clerical jobs and technical positions, they receive on average 60-80 won, while university professors, high-

24) Yoon Mi-ryang, *op. cit.*, p. 200; Wang Zheng, "Gender, Employment and Women's Resistance," in Elisabeth J. Perry and Mark Seldon, eds., *Chinese Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 63-64.

25) Lee Tae-young, *North Korean Women* (Seoul: Silchonmunhaksa, 1988), p. 194.

26) Wang Zheng, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-64.

level cadres and enterprise managers, who were seldom women, receive 180 to 200 won.²⁷⁾ In reviewing women's status, however, the focus should be on whether there was a gradual increase in the number of women in high-paid jobs.²⁸⁾ For a real comparison, it would be more accurate to compare the figures with those of male workers concentrated in heavy labor positions. The average wage of heavy laborers was 92 won, so actually, women's wage was more than 70 percent of men's wage. Even in China in the late 1970s, the average income of women in urban areas was 71.1 percent of male wage-earners. And, compared with the ratios of women's wages to men's in developed countries (58.6 percent in the United States, 66 percent in Canada, and 65 percent in United Kingdom), wage levels are actually better. Furthermore, since the overall wage levels in both countries are considerably low, differences are not significant enough to provoke a feeling of wage discrimination.²⁹⁾

As reviewed, although unemployment among married North Korean women was high, women's labor participation rose significantly after the socialist government was established and after policies for women were adopted. In terms of salary, women earned over 70 percent of the male income level, thus contributing significantly to household earnings. Then, in both countries, how did women's improved social economic status influence the position of

27) Yoon Mi-ryang, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

28) Kim Ae-sil, *op. cit.*, pp. 194-196. A March 6, 1988 report by the Beijing Broadcasting Agency shows that occupations of North Korean women had undergone considerable changes in the 1970s and 1980s. According to the report, while there are 1,310,000 specialists, scholars, and engineers in North Korea, some 463,000 are women, with some 220 with doctorate or semi-doctorate degrees. In 1963, among the country's 294,000 specialists or engineers, only 14.6 percent or 43,000 were women. However by 1989, that ratio had grown to 37 percent out of 1,350,000, representing a significant number of women who had ventured beyond conventional positions in offices, light labor sectors and agriculture to various professional positions, to improve their economic status.

29) Margery Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

women in the household.

Change of Women's Status in the Household

The concept of "household" is distinct from "family." The family is a social unit based on kinship, marriage, while parenthood, and the household is a residential unit based on residing together for such purposes as production, reproduction, consumption, and socialization.³⁰⁾

Whether the status of women in rural households is high or low is difficult to say because of problems in quantification. In this study, women are viewed as household members who make rational choices. Considering that the decisions of the household are made through negotiations among household members, decisions about financial and consumption rights, and housework sharing are taken into account as determining factors of their status in a household. One's position in the house is determined by his/her negotiation power influenced by education, income and the freedom to divorce.³¹⁾

In China, as birth rates fell, women were able to get more education. That education meant better opportunities for employment and higher income, and thus more negotiating power in the household. However, under Mao's rule, the power to negotiate was weakened as women were not able to divorce easily.³²⁾

In North Korea as well, lower birth rates, better education, and economic status have given women more negotiating power in the household, but they too have seldom been allowed to divorce. In fact, divorce by mutual consent has been prohibited since 1956. In rare

30) Caroline O. N. Moser, *Gender Planning and Development Theory, Practice and Training* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 19.

31) William Parish, and Sarah Busse, "Gender and Work," in Wenfang Tang and William Parish, eds., *Chinese Urban Life under Reform* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 232-236.

32) *Ibid.*, pp. 263-266.

cases, it is possible through a trial, but they are only granted when physical evidence shows that a spouse has committed adultery. Moreover, since court fees are quite expensive and courts are reluctant to accept suits, it is extremely difficult to get a divorce.³³⁾

In urban Chinese households, husbands share housework more than in any other country. During the rule of Mao Ze-dong, husbands who had previously taken no part in household duties, began sharing the domestic chores. A 1984 study conducted in Beijing shows women spending an average of 3 hours 55 minutes a day doing housework and men an average of 2 hours 30 minutes. A study in Harbin and Jijihar in Heilongjiang Province, also shows women spending 5.2 hours and men 3.9 hours on housework, with women only working 1 hour more than men.³⁴⁾ In particular, compared to men in the United States (0.6 hours) and socialist European countries (1.2 hours), Chinese men dedicate significantly more time to taking care of household chores.³⁵⁾

Such sharing of household duties stems from two significant factors. First, given the reality that both husband and wife must work to sustain a living, and it is almost impossible for the wife alone to carry out household chores after returning home from work, the husband had to share the load. Second, a service industry is almost non-existent and where it does exist, it is too expensive. Most urban families living on limited incomes cannot afford to pay for laundry services, dining out or hiring a housekeeper.³⁶⁾

Although North Korea is also faced with the same reality, sharing

33) Choi Myung-sook, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

34) Wang Ya-lin, "Study of the urban workers' participation in house chores," *Social Sciences*, The Institute for Social Science, Beijing (1982), p. 178.

35) William Parish, and Sarah Busse, *op. cit.*, pp. 249-252.

36) Martin King Whyte, and William L. Parish, *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 212-16; Wang Yunxian, "Women's Place in Family and Society: Social Transformation and Gender Relations in China," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 2 (1996), p. 145.

or household work is uncommon. North Korean men not only exclude themselves from household chores, they even demand the woman to take care of heavy chores such as full-scale house cleaning.³⁷⁾ A woman is expected to serve her “master,” while single-handedly carrying out household duties and keeping her family in perfect harmony. A North Korean wife will worry that her husband might skip breakfast and leave for work on an empty stomach if she isn’t careful, and she strives to do both her domestic and outside jobs equally well. No matter how busy she may be at work, she feels more comfortable if she can return home during the lunch break to set the table for her husband.³⁸⁾

Along with sharing household chores, another important indicator of status at home is that of decisions on money. A 1991 survey research on 8,000 workers of 100 urban factories in seven provinces shows that a woman’s income strengthens her role in decisions on major purchases such as televisions, refrigerators and other durables. On one survey question, “Who is the main decision-maker for the purchase of expensive items,” the answer, “husband” totaled 20 percent, “wife” totaled 13 percent, and “joint decision” was 62 percent. And this survey shows that women’s role in decision-making grew considerably with a 10 percent rise in the wife’s income, while decision-making by men dropped 1.3 percent.³⁹⁾

According to a 1995 national survey of financial responsibilities, 3.79 percent of the husbands managed household finances, 10.35 percent of the wives did so and 76.25 percent managed finances jointly.⁴⁰⁾

37) Women of Korean Society Institute, *North Korean Women’s Life and Vision* (Seoul: Institute of Society and Culture, 2001), p. 91.

38) Lee On-juk, “North Korean Women’s Life at Home,” in Sohn Bong-sook, ed., *Lives of Women in North Korea* (Seoul: Nanam, 1991), pp. 73-74.

39) William Parish, and Sarah Busse, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

40) Sha Ji-cai, *Research on the Status of Chinese Women* (Beijing: Chinese Population Press, 1998), p. 173.

In a 1999 survey of 332 women who had fled North Korea, on the question about purchases, 46.3 percent answered that the husband was the main decision-maker, 37.2 percent said the wife was, and 16.5 percent said purchases were decided jointly. And the results of the question on household financial responsibilities shows that 46.3 percent of the interviewees felt the husband was the money manager, 57.3 percent answered it was the wife, and 23 percent answered "by joint management".⁴¹⁾

It is very difficult to compare the status of women in the two countries with the results of these figures. However, given that the other surveys showing that women's cash income was higher, sole decisions by the husband shrank and joint agreement rose, it is clear that the status of Chinese women in the household is higher than that of North Korean Women.⁴²⁾

Furthermore, since those North Korean interviewees had either lived in South Korea for a while after fleeing from their country or had been bread-winners involved in trade along the border of China and North Korea, the status of these women must be higher than the other women who lived in the interior of North Korea.

Then, what could be behind the great disparity between the two countries in terms of women's status in the home when both countries have worked to raise the social economic status of women to similar levels by expanding their roles in the labor force?

FACTORS BEHIND THE GAP BETWEEN NORTH KOREA AND CHINA

The difference in women's status in North Korea and China can be

41) Park Mi-suk, and Chang Jin-kyong, "Comparison Study South and North Korea of the Women's Role in the Household," Sookmyong Women's University, Granted by the Korea Research Foundation (1998), pp. 75-76.

42) Sha Ji-cai, *op. cit.*, p.365.

traced back to how each country's top leader defined the role of women, either during his rise to power or during his rule. In the late 1940s when communist controls were established, North Korea founded its government through the alliance of different factions, while in China, which had already gone through the Long March and the Yanan Era, power was held by Mao Ze-dong. North Korea's leader Kim Il-sung, as a means to eliminate opposing parties and to concentrate power on himself, emphasized the mother's role in educating her children. On the other hand, Mao Ze-dong considered women as the "oppressed class," and mobilized them in his revolutionary campaigns in order to maintain his rule.

Differences in Power Structures and Emphasis on Women's Roles

After 1945, when Korea was liberated from Japanese colonization and until the 1960s, encompassing the socialist revolution period and post-war restoration period, North Korea encouraged women to actively break away from traditional roles. After 1961, however, it reversed its policy direction and began promoting women in traditional roles, stressing the importance of women in household chores and childcare. The sudden change in direction is closely related to the nature of the North Korean regime, which had to inculcate a sense of loyalty to Kim Il-sung among the people.

In 1956, with the country's economy at risk, Kim Il-sung faced the biggest challenge to his regime. He decided to "clean house," and by 1959 he had purged the country's top power echelons of the Yanan faction and the Soviet faction, and ousted even low-level party officers and commoners connected to those factions. In doing so, Kim deprived North Korean society of all ability to act freely or to make collective demands, and gained for himself sole power over North

43) Park Hyung-joong, "North Korea's Politics and Power in the 1950s," *Modern North Korean Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1999), p. 105.

Korea.⁴³⁾ In the process, he sought total re-education, subjecting all North Korean citizens to instruction in socialist ideology. Through the *Chollima* Work Unit Drive, socialist ideology education was first conducted in May 1953 in work units, and by November 1961, with the National Mothers' Convention as the momentum, the drive had penetrated homes.⁴⁴⁾ Furthermore, after 1972, known as the "Consolidate and Develop Socialism Period," Marxism and Leninism were replaced with Kim Il-sung's *juche* ideology and in 1980, Kim Jong-il was officially designated as heir to his father's leadership. In the course of building the *juche* ideology and the father-to-son heredity structure, the woman's role as a mother, wife and daughter-in-law were increasingly emphasized.

Unlike North Korea, where the traditional roles of women were stressed as Kim Il-sung gained tighter control, China's policies on women frequently changed depending on the basic direction of the country's economic development. For instance, from 1952 to 1957, during the first "five-year economic development plan," and again from 1961 to 1964, the "economic adjustment period," the line of the CCP was that women were physically weaker, and since they were responsible for household chores, total emancipation would only be possible through mechanization of farming and manufacturing and the total socialization of housekeeping and childcare. In contrast, from 1958 to 1960, the time of the Great Leap Forward, and from 1965 to 1976, during the Cultural Revolution, the party line was that women were no different from men, and if they were properly motivated, they could carry out the same work as men.

Nonetheless, changes in policy regarding women during Mao's rule (1949-1978) were not made without a basic consideration of women's liberation. During the first five-year plan, immediately after the establishment of the state, and during the early stages of industrial development, the government was unable to create enough jobs for

44) Lee Tae-sup, *Study of Kim Il-sung's Leadership* (Seoul: Dulryok, 2001), pp. 210-212.

women in urban areas. Therefore, propaganda was frequently issued that “women could also contribute to building a socialist society by being frugal and industrious at home.”⁴⁵⁾

Meanwhile during the economic adjustment period, the role of women as housewives was stressed for a somewhat different reason: Some 3,000,000 jobs had to be cut after a radical employment policy, introduced during the Great Leap Forward, which had raised the number of working women in urban areas from 3,280,000 in 1957 to 100,080,000 by 1960, an increase of 4,820,000 in 1958 alone.⁴⁶⁾

Therefore, during Mao’s rule, except for the two years following the end of the Great Leap Forward in 1960 until the Socialist Education Movement in 1963, education and cultural programs for women were greatly developed, in line with the full socialization of household work, raising women’s awareness of their civic duty. At this time, Mao needed the newly-awakened oppressed class, i.e. women, to participate in his political campaigns to consolidate power. In 1966, during the Cultural Revolution, aggressive campaigns condemning traditional ideas of the predominance of men over women and preference of sons over daughters were widely launched, enabling women to develop their own ideas on personal and social relations.⁴⁷⁾

Aside from the process of building and maintaining power, the top leaders in the two countries had different views on women which would greatly influence their roles.

Views on Women

By 1960, Kim Il-sung had ousted all political rivals and had

45) *People’s Daily*, September 9, 1957; Lee Kyung-sook, “Women’s Policy and Women’s Participation in Political Decision Making in China,” *Chinese Women’s Studies*, Sookmyong Women’s University (1989), p. 157.

46) Sha Ji-cai, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-168.

47) Tamara Jacka, *Women’s Work in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 29-39.

successfully established a regime of his own. In his address on November 16, 1961 at the National Mothers' Convention, he stressed the role of the mother in children's education including the importance of "revolutionization of the home." The same idea was used by the Women's Union to preach "mothers should raise children to become suicide squads ready to sacrifice their lives for Kim Il-sung and the Party."⁴⁸⁾

This idea of confining women to the home, to be responsible for the education of their children, can be traced back to Kim Il-sung's rigid view on women. From early on, he maintained that a woman's role was to support her husband in his mission to construct the state. She was to raise children and look after domestic affairs,⁴⁹⁾ an idea he stressed in a speech titled "On the Assignment of the Women's Confederation Hereafter," at the first representative committee of Democratic Women's Confederation on May 9, 1946.

This view regarding the role of women was further reinforced in the 1970s when the father-to-son heredity structure was established. In a speech "On Revolutionizing Women and Transforming Women into a Labor Class" at the third representative committee of the Democratic Women's Confederation on October 7, 1971, Kim stressed the importance of revolutionizing the family and forming a labor class, so that all society would follow suit. Thus, transformation was demanded of women not as individuals, but collectively, as wives, mothers, daughter-in-laws and housekeepers who would implement the revolutionization of the home—the nuclear unit of society. A woman was expected to revolutionize as a wife, mother and daughter-in-law and to become a part of the labor class as a worker responsible for her household chores.⁵⁰⁾

48) Lee On-juk, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

49) Kim Il-sung, "On the Assignment of the Women's Confederation Hereafter (May 9, 1946)," *Selected Works of Kim Il-sung*, Vol. II (Pyongyang: Korean Workers' Party Press, 1979).

50) Yoon Mi-ryang, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

Meanwhile, in China, Mao viewed women as the “most oppressed being” capable of leading socialist revolution to victory. Clause V of the “Farmer’s Movement Resolution” at the September 1928 6th Plenary Session, states that the Party must recognize the importance of developing women into active participants of revolution in order to successfully lead the farmer’s movement.⁵¹⁾ Believing women were the key force in revolution, every time he launched a new campaign, Mao Ze-dong concentrated on raising women’s social consciousness and prompted them to participate in the revolution.

As we reviewed, North Korea took various policies to emancipate women. As the foundation for Kim Il-sung dictatorship began to build in the 1960s, however, the woman’s role in the home was once again emphasized, preserving traditional ideas of women’s roles and eventually depriving married women of jobs and degrading their status in the household. In contrast, as Mao Ze-dong maintained his power through a succession of political campaigns, he encouraged women, whom he viewed as an oppressed class, to venture beyond their homes and join revolutionary movements, hence, changing women’s overall social consciousness and elevating their positions in the household.

CONCLUSION

The article has reviewed the policies on women adopted by North Korea and China around the same time, and why the outcomes were so different. Based on the theoretical foundation of Marx and Engels, the focal point of the two countries’ policies on women was to bring them out of their homes and raise their social status.

Both countries introduced family and marriage laws, adopted

51) Kim Yeon-ja, “Study of the Women’s Movement in Communist China,” Doctoral dissertation, Department of History, Seogang University (1982), p. 68.

equal labor, equal wage systems, and supportive measures such as daycare centers, to ease the burden of housekeeping and childcare. The efforts of both countries to promote female participation in the labor force are considered to have been very successful. Official records show women's employment in the late 1970s to be 49 percent in North Korea, and 33 percent in China. However, considering that once they married, 30 percent to 40 percent of North Korean women left their jobs, and the employment rate included women working in neighborhood work units, in reality the employment rate of North Korean women was lower than that of Chinese women. Furthermore, a woman's position at home is dramatically different. Also, Chinese women's participation in labor led more urban husbands to share household chores, while in North Korea domestic affairs remained solely in the hands of women, forcing them to take on double labor duties and creating a social environment that made a wife's absolute obedience to her husband a virtue.

In fact, the difference in the outcome stems from disparities in the top leaders' views on women and in which elements were emphasized. Unlike Mao Ze-dong who considered women as the main force of the revolution and mobilized them in his successive political campaigns to maintain power, Kim Il-sung eradicated his political opposition to concentrate his power, and then fell back on patriarchic sentiment in order to guarantee succession of that power to his son. As a result, the traditional concept of women, supposedly abolished, was once again reemphasized. Despite the successful implementation of the 1958 cabinet decision to integrate women into all sections of the economy and the promotion of the "Three Great Technological Revolutions" campaign of the 1970s to socialize household chores, North Korean women left their jobs after marriage. Moreover, if they did work, they had to take on the double burden of home and outside job.