Marriage, family, and sexuality in North Korea

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On a visit to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (hereafter, North Korea) in 1977, two overseas visitors were told that sex before marriage ‘does not exist in our country’ (Halliday 1985: 50). This was in a meeting with the representatives of the Korean Democratic Women’s Union – the official women’s organization in North Korea – about the status of women and relations between the sexes. Other responses seemed just as implausible. The visitors were told that ‘[a]ll women in our country want children’ (Halliday 1985: 50) and ‘[t]here is nobody in the family who refuses to do something that should be done’ (Halliday 1985: 53). When asked about the availability of contraceptives and abortion, the representatives denied the existence of policies on birth control, rejecting that there could be instances of rape that might require an abortion. Such answers are difficult to take at face value, but they are significant, nonetheless, for what they reveal about North Korea’s official conceptualization of sexuality. Family is regarded as the building block of a deeply collective society, and marriage and sexuality are understood strictly within the confines of the heterosexual nuclear family. How can we make sense of such conservative policies and attitudes, especially in a country claiming to be one of the last bastions of existing socialism, a philosophy which traditionally attacked the family as an oppressive institution? The answer goes back to the years immediately after Korea’s liberation from colonial rule (1910–1945), when North Korea instituted the major reforms that were to shape its modern history.

Japan was defeated at the end of the Pacific War on 15 August 1945, terminating its 35-year rule over Korea. Despite the jubilation of liberation, Korea was compelled to take two divergent paths. The United States proposed (and the Soviet Union conceded) to divide the Korean peninsula at the 38th parallel into two separate occupation zones – the United States in the south and the Soviet Union in the north – to disarm the Japanese troops while preparing a provisional government in Korea. However, negotiations between Moscow and Washington toward a unified Korean government failed as the Cold War loomed. The American occupiers saw most Korean political movements as too radical and suppressed them in the south, while unprecedented social reforms were carried out swiftly in the north, aided by the Soviets (Cumings 1981). The two separate states were not officially founded until 1948, but both sides competed for legitimacy from the beginning, claiming to represent the entire country. Toward that end, a thorough land reform was instituted in the north in March 1946, confiscating the land from...
landlords without compensation and distributing it to the peasants who actually tilled the fields. Major industries, which in many cases had been owned by the Japanese, were nationalized in August 1946. Amidst these reforms, North Korea passed the Law of Equal Rights for Men and Women (Namnyŏ p’yŏngdangwŏn pŏnmyŏng; hereafter, the Gender Equality Law) on 30 July 1946. It was a sweeping measure for its time, raising the ire of conservative patriarchs in both the North and the South, and became the basis for gender relations and the role of sexuality in post-liberation North Korea.

**Marriage**

Throughout the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1910), Confucian ideology had defined marriage as a relationship forged between two families. In other words, a commitment of marriage signified an alliance between two families, whether as a strategy to expand influence in the region or to smooth relations between rival factions. Individuals were defined by their position in the family as fathers, sons, mothers, and daughters within the wider network of extended kinship relations. Individual preferences or romance had little relevance in this patriarchal system whether for women or men. The impact on women, however, was more severe because of patrilocal practices, which required a woman to move into her husband’s household after marriage in order to serve his extended family. As a new member of the household, she was placed at the bottom of the family hierarchy to spend ‘three years as if blind, three years as if deaf, and three years as if dumb’ (Ch’oe et al. 2001: 50). Only with the birth of a son who would continue the patrilineal line could she secure a solid position within the family. While the colonial period had introduced modern concepts of ‘love marriage’ based on freedom of choice in marriage and divorce, unwritten customary rules often trumped what was already a selective application of the civil code imposed by Japan (Yang 1998: 41).

It was not until the systematic introduction and enforcement of new legislation after liberation in North Korea that there was a large-scale transformation in marriage practices. The Gender Equality Law of 1946 declared equal rights between men and women, including the freedom of marriage and divorce (Kim Y.-D. 1947). The full text of the law reads:

**Article 1:** Women have equal rights to men economically, culturally, socially, and politically in all areas of life of the nation.

**Article 2:** Women have the same rights as men to vote and be elected in the regional as well as the highest national organs.

**Article 3:** Women have the same rights as men to worker rights, equal wages, social insurance, and education.

**Article 4:** Women, like men, have the right to free marriage. Unfree and forced marriage without the consent of those marrying is prohibited.

**Article 5:** When it becomes difficult to continue the married relationship, women have the same rights as men to free divorce. The right to litigation to demand child support payments from the ex-husband is acknowledged, and such cases shall be processed at the People’s Court.

**Article 6:** The legal marriageable age shall begin at seventeen for women and eighteen for men.

**Article 7:** Polygamy is a feudal practice from the Middle Ages and sales of women as wives or concubines are hereby prohibited as evil practices that violate women’s rights. Licensed prostitution, private prostitution, and the kisaeng [female entertainer] system—kisaeng licenses and schools—are prohibited.
Article 8: Women have the same rights as men to inherit property and land, and women have the right to be given their share of property and land in case of divorce.

Article 9: All Japanese imperial laws and regulations pertaining to Korean women’s rights are null and void as of the promulgation of this law. This law takes effect as of the day of promulgation.

Almost half of the entire legislation dealt with marriage and divorce in articles 4 to 8. It was the first indication that the family would continue to play a central role in North Korean society.

More telling than the Gender Equality Law were the Regulations on the Implementation of the Gender Equality Law issued six weeks later, on 14 September 1946, stipulating that all marriages and divorces be registered with local authorities. Despite the principle of free marriage and divorce embodied in the Gender Equality Law, marriages had to be registered, and non-registered marriages, including common law marriages, were not recognized. This was in stark contrast to other socialist revolutions in Russia and China, which initially liberalized marriage by doing away with the distinction between registered and non-registered marriages, while making divorce as simple as a unilateral declaration by the one seeking divorce without the consent of the spouse. By contrast, in North Korea, articles 10 to 22 of the Regulations contained detailed procedures for divorce (Pak 1989: 422). In cases of consent by both parties, divorce papers could be filed with the local people’s committee, but if either party disagreed the couple had to file for legal divorce proceedings with the appropriate People’s Court. Divorce would only be granted if the court concluded that continued married life was impossible due to adultery, health or political reasons. In addition, there was a hefty fine for those filing for divorce more than twice, acting as a disincentive to repeat divorces, although this could be waived at the court’s discretion. By March 1956, divorce required legal proceedings even in cases of mutual consent (Yun 1991: 75). Due to such legislative obstacles, as well as societal pressure, divorce had been relatively rare. Recent anecdotal evidence, however, indicates that divorce regulations have been liberalized since the late 1980s, allowing couples to divorce without court proceedings (Pak 2003: 305). As a result, the rate of divorce has reportedly been on the rise since the late 1990s. In 2002, the average number of divorces per year stood at 2,000, still a minuscule number for a population of 24 million (CEDAW 2002: 35).

North Korea has held the family to be the basic unit of society and people were mobilized specifically around the idea of the nation as an extension of the family. Instead of regarding the family as something to be overthrown, certain ‘feudal’ marriage practices were targeted as ‘backward’ and in need of reform. On 24 January 1947, the Law to Eradicate Remnants of Feudal Practices was announced, consisting of four articles which all dealt with so-called ‘feudal’ marriage practices (Pak 1989: 425). Article 1 outlawed practices of dowry exchange, stipulating up to a year of forced labour or a substantial fine for exchanging money, animals, labour, or other valuables. Article 2 guaranteed freedom in marriage by providing up to two years in prison for those who forced a woman into marriage or into maintaining a marriage, as well as anyone who deceived a woman into marriage. Article 3 banned child marriage by imposing forced labour on anyone who married a person not yet of legal marriageable age: 17 for women and 18 for men. Finally, Article 4 prohibited polygamy by stipulating a fine or forced labour for up to a year for anyone who practiced polygamy. As a result, these practices were quickly eradicated within the first years of North Korea’s founding, and marriage customs were drastically simplified.

While matchmaking through relatives, friends, and co-workers continued to be popular among the older generation with the added step of verifying individual consent, the younger generation has increasingly veered toward romantic relationships, finding their marriage partners on their
own by dating since at least the 1980s (Pak 2003: 293). Recent reports estimate that about 70 per cent of marriages are ‘love’ marriages as opposed to arranged marriages (Jung 2006: 754). Instead of dowry exchange, the groom is responsible for providing housing while the bride prepares household items. Since housing is generally provided through the workplace under the socialist system, the bride’s family may have a greater financial burden in this regard (Pak 2003: 297). Traditional practices of elaborate wedding rituals involving gift exchange and multiple days of festivities have been replaced by simplified ceremonies. Twenty to fifty guests may gather at one of the families’ homes or a public hall to participate in a simple ceremony. The groom wears a suit or military uniform and the bride dresses in the traditional chosŏn (or hanbok in South Korean terminology) – a long skirt and a high-waisted top (M.W. Lee 1976: 76; Halliday 1985: 54). With the simplified ceremony, weddings are no longer occasions to show off family wealth, a moot point in a supposedly classless society.

While the legal minimum age of marriage was set at 18 for males and 17 for females, official policy has encouraged people to marry after they have finished their studies and military service, fulfilling their responsibilities to society. This was codified into law in article 9 of the Family Law promulgated in 1990 (Ch’oe 2010: 227). As a result, the majority of men reportedly marry in their late twenties to early thirties while women marry in their mid- to late twenties (Pak 2003: 301). The difference in the minimum marriage age has been noted by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as a possible breach of gender equality. North Korea – a state party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) since 2001 – does not, however, consider the age difference to be a form of discrimination, citing the trend of late marriages, women’s earlier ‘physiological maturity’, and most women ‘choosing’ to marry older men (CEDAW 2005a: 3; 2005b: 4). During the examination of its first report to the Committee in 2005, North Korea was reportedly reviewing the possibility of amending its laws to bring it in line with the Committee’s recommendations to equalize the marriage age. North Korea has not, however, engaged with the Committee since then.

Although North Korea’s social revolution was meant to establish a classless society, family background continues to be one of the most important factors in selecting a spouse, as there is one class that is discriminated against: the descendants of former landlords, pro-Japanese collaborators during colonial rule, pro-American collaborators during the Korean War (1950–1953), and people with relatives who have fled to South Korea (M.W. Lee 1976: 73). Marriage with anyone associated with this ‘impure’ class is avoided, and most people marry those from similar family backgrounds (Pak 2003: 326). More recently, there are indications that economic capability has overtaken family background as the most important quality in a partner since the devastating famine of the mid-1990s, which killed an estimated one to two million people (Pak 2003: 295). Otherwise, the selection of marriage partners is much like elsewhere, involving a combination of factors including physical attraction, social standing, education, and compatibility – with an added emphasis on public service. Couples seek their parents’ blessing, although this is not required by law, and approval by the local party official is a must if they hope to climb the social ladder. Love and marriage continue to be communal affairs rather than private ones.

While hierarchical relations between husband and wife seem to be particularly acute in the relatively conservative countryside, as often reflected in the testimony of refugees and defectors, working women with professional careers (who tend to be under-represented among these populations) seem to have relationships of equality and camaraderie with their spouses. Indeed, an ethnographic study of North Korea in the 1970s went so far as to conclude that the ‘relationship between husband and wife appears to be so greatly changed that it is no longer a relationship of clear cut authority and submission. Love and mutual understanding were now greatly
emphasized as desirable between husband and wife’ (M.W. Lee 1976: 82). Lee went on to state that ‘cooperation and solidarity between husband and wife are stronger than ever, and marital life based upon genuine “comradeship” is highly valued’ (1976: 83).

Under the law, freedom of marriage and divorce were instituted early on in North Korea, but there are social pressures to marry and stay married, especially when there are children in the family. Consequently, there are few options for those who wish to be free from marriage by choosing not to marry at all. Likewise, there are no options for non-heterosexual unions as article 8 of the Family Law stipulates that ‘marriage shall be undertaken between a single male and a single female’ (CEDAW 2002: 34). As I discuss below, the heterosexual family has been the basic unit of North Korean society and those that reject this family are regarded as antisocial and abnormal.

Family

In addition to the legislation pertaining to marriage, divorce, and gender equality, the Labour Law, promulgated on 24 June 1946, was also premised on the importance of protecting the integrity of the family. This law includes special stipulations for the protection of children and mothers, prohibiting them from ‘toilsome or harmful labour’, in addition to the basic clauses for an eight-hour workday, paid vacations, and equal pay for equal work. The clauses specific to women provide paid maternity leave for 35 days before and 42 days after delivery, extended to 60 days before and 90 days after delivery in 1986 (Jung 2006: 750); lighter work for expectant mothers beginning in the sixth month of pregnancy; and nursing breaks for thirty minutes twice a day for women with children under a year old (Pak 1989: 416–418). The law also prohibits pregnant and nursing women from working overtime at night. Maternity was carefully protected and indeed fostered since women were expected to work while also embracing motherhood. For instance, the government grants ‘special favours’ to families with twins, triplets, and quadruplets, supplying them with free clothes, blankets, milk goods, and other necessities until the children reach school age (CEDAW 2002: 26).

While a number of studies have conflated North Korea’s authoritarian politics with patriarchy, a closer look at family dynamics in contemporary North Korean society challenges any easy equation between familism (that is, family-centrism) and patriarchy, no matter how hierarchical relations are between family members. Patriarchy can be defined as men’s domination over women and the older generations’ domination over the younger generations in a hierarchy of age and gender for the purposes of maintaining family lineage through the male line of descent. North Korea, however, does not entirely fit this model, despite its hierarchical organization of society. Extended family and kinship networks do not play a significant social role; the head of household need not be male; and gender roles are not as rigid since women have come to occupy positions that were traditionally reserved for men, even in the military. In fact, a high proportion of households were headed by women in the aftermath of the Korean War, as many of them were widowed (M.W. Lee 1976: 79).

Much of the changes in North Korean family structure and marriage practices can be attributed to the incorporation of socialist principles, which in many instances directly challenged the core principles of patriarchy as shown in the following table.

Certainly, reality on the ground is far from the ideal principles embodied by socialism. Multi-generational households still make up 20 per cent of North Korean society (Pak 2003: 62). In the predominant conceptualization of the family, the male head of household is still seen as the ‘master’ of the family, whom wives obey as they perform fixed gender roles – taking on most, if not all, childcare and household chores (Pak 2003: 122). Despite the principle of freedom of
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Table 19.1 Comparison of features in patriarchal family and socialist family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patriarchal family</th>
<th>Socialist family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchy</td>
<td>Equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended family</td>
<td>Nuclear family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familism</td>
<td>Collectivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage as union of two families; thus, no divorce</td>
<td>Individual freedom of marriage and divorce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family as unit of production</td>
<td>Family as unit of consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male domination over women</td>
<td>Gender equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father-son relations</td>
<td>Spousal relations</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Adapted from Pak, Hyŏn-soŏn (2003)

divorce, it is prohibitively difficult. Moreover, the expectation that the eldest son will take care of his parents in old age reportedly continues to some degree since men generally earn more than women. The practice of performing ancestral rites also seems to have been maintained, although in simpler fashion.

Despite the continuities in some aspects of the patriarchal family, the turn toward nuclear families freed women from serving multiple generations in one family as they were encouraged to work outside the home in service of the nation rather than the extended family. Acute labour shortages after the devastation of the Korean War prompted the government to decree greater female participation in the workforce. The unemployed were given only 300 grams of food a day through the public distribution system as opposed to the 700 grams for the fully employed, and large investments went into public childcare facilities to incentivize women to work (Yun 1991: 104–105). The hojŏk (household registry system), which required a male head of household, was eliminated with the introduction of the citizen registration card on 9 August 1946, thereby breaking down patriarchal kinship ties (Yun 1991: 76). South Korea did not abolish the household-head system until 2005.

While the roles of mother and wife were still considered important, these roles were not meant to be limited to individual domestic concerns but expanded to take care of society in the spirit of collectivism (S. Kim 2010). Although filial piety was still lauded as a ‘beautiful custom’ to be preserved as part of a distinctly Korean cultural heritage, socialist youths were urged to stop blindly obeying their elders. The generational hierarchies that once existed in traditional patriarchal households, especially manifested in the conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, were replaced by an emphasis on the importance of a harmonious collective life, fostered through pressure exerted by groups such as the Women’s Union. Mothers-in-law in multi-generational families were often reported to be helpful with household chores and childcare while their daughters-in-law worked outside the home (M.W. Lee 1976: 83). Furthermore, families tended to have closer relationships with the maternal side than the paternal side of the family (Pak 2003: 259). While relations with the paternal side often involved material and practical support when they were in close proximity, relations with the maternal side of the family involved both material and emotional support, regardless of geographical distance, thus challenging the patriarchal emphasis on father-son relations (Pak 2003: 259).

Most importantly, the national collective took precedence over the family, and familism was frowned upon as selfish. The kind of familism that was pervasive in traditional patriarchal families was made obsolete with the elimination of property inheritance, which had formed the economic basis for maintaining large extended families. The strong kinship networks sustained
by members of the landholding yangban (scholar-official) élite were dispersed early on since such families were tainted as former landlords. Many of them fled to the South shortly after the land reform in 1946 or were relocated to other villages to sever them from their power base. The peasants who took up leadership positions, replacing the former landlords and local élites, lacked the yangban custom of maintaining detailed genealogical records or holding elaborate ancestor-worship rituals. As a result, immediate family relations may be close and simple ancestral rites for parents or grandparents may be performed, but traditional patriarchy involving extended family clans has been superseded in North Korea.

Nonetheless, no legislation or political campaign in North Korea ever denounced tradition or Confucianism per se, as in other socialist revolutions where the traditional family was branded as the source of women’s oppression and condemned as counter-revolutionary (as in China’s Cultural Revolution). Rather than the family being held responsible for women’s subjugation, the family came to symbolize the Korean nation. As postcolonial studies have shown in other contexts, women in colonial societies were often seen to embody the nation, with special weight placed on family and gender roles in the construction of a national identity (Chatterjee 1993). North Korea’s Marxist-influenced official discourse targeted ‘feudal and colonial remnants’, and ‘feudal relations’ between men and women, but not tradition. The Gender Equality Law, for example, outlawed concubinage, early marriage, and prostitution as feudal and colonial practices, but nowhere was there any reference to Confucian tradition or the family as a source of social ills.

The state maintained and built on the importance of the family as the building block of North Korean communism (Armstrong 2003: 94–98). Article 23 of the first North Korean Constitution of 1948 stipulated that ‘marriage and the family are under the protection of the state’. Almost a quarter of a century later, the revised 1972 Socialist Constitution again reiterated the importance of the family by stating that ‘the state pays great attention to consolidating the family, the cell (sep’o) of society’ (Yun 1991: 81). In lieu of the patriarchal family, the nuclear family became the basic ‘cell’ of North Korean society, and the leader’s family was exalted as the model family. The founding leader of North Korea, Kim Il Sung (1912–1994), and his nuclear family, consisting of Kim Jong Suk (1917–1949), his wife and comrade-in-arms during the anticolonial struggle of the 1930s, and their son Kim Jong Il (1941–2011), are often referred to as the ‘Three Generals of Mount Paektu’ in reference to the highest mountain on the Korean Peninsula bordering China. Long considered a sacred mountain by Koreans as the place of their ancestral origins, North Korea today venerates Mount Paektu as the heroic site of Kim Il Sung’s anticolonial guerrilla struggle and Kim Jong Il’s birthplace. The dynastic succession of the leader from Kim Il Sung to his son, Kim Jong Il, and most recently to the grandson, Kim Jong Un (1983–), presents a markedly patrilineal model of politics. In this regard, practices which jeopardized the family unit, including the open expression of sexuality or divorce, were thus strictly limited as a threat to the nation itself.

Sexuality

Given the significance of marriage and family in North Korean society, it is easy to see why sexuality has become so austere – at least in official discourse. Not only are other concerns, such as national security and food insecurity, major preoccupations for a politically-isolated country with an ailing economy, but the normative value placed on the nuclear family as the basic unit of society officially limits the expression of sexuality to the reproduction of future generations within the confines of heterosexual marriage. Reproduction for the purposes of population growth has been particularly important because North Korea’s population has stood at less than half of
South Korea’s since 1945, an imbalance that was further exacerbated by the Korean War, which killed 12 to 15 per cent of North Korea’s population (Halliday 1985: 47). Like other industrialized societies, however, there has been a steady decline in the fertility rate despite policies promoting population growth – the average number of children per woman decreased from 6.5 in 1966 to 2.5 in 1988 (Jung 2006: 754).

The official promotion of reproduction notwithstanding, one must therefore assume that there is much that goes on behind closed doors whether in non-reproductive sexual practices or methods of birth control. Officially, family planning, including contraceptives and abortions, are available with a doctor’s prescription through the public health system, but the extent to which they are readily accessible remains unclear. According to one survey, more than 60 per cent of North Korean women used contraceptives, mainly the intrauterine device (CEDAW 2005b: 8). However, by North Korea’s own admission, abortion is restricted, only available in cases of medical complications (‘disease’ or ‘deformity’) or unwed ‘illegal’ pregnancies (CEDAW 2002: 27). There are reportedly no restrictions to women’s access to family planning services to decide on the number and spacing of children, but the language presumes the use of contraceptives within a family for the purposes of family planning (CEDAW 2002: 28). Similarly, a form of sex education is provided in secondary schools, as students are taught human anatomy, but the burden is on girls to attend additional lectures between the third and sixth grades on ‘female physiology’ and ‘common knowledge of female menstruation and nursing of children’ (CEDAW 2005a: 16). Family planning and reproductive health policies therefore target women in order to prevent ‘illegal abortion and premature pregnancy’, limiting sexual practices to the confines of marriage (CEDAW 2005a: 17).

Although little is known about North Korean sexual practices, some information can be gleaned from North Korean refugees and defectors with the caveat that they represent a self-selected group of those who chose to leave North Korea, overwhelmingly from the border regions of North Hamḡyŏng Province. They are often paid for their interviews, which leads to incentives to embellish their stories. On the surface, the stories gathered in the twenty-first century are surprisingly similar to the statements offered in the 1970s, leading one journalist to conclude, for example, that ‘the country doesn’t have a dating culture. Many marriages are still arranged . . . Couples are not supposed to make any public displays of affection. . . [and] there is no premarital sex’ (Demick 2009: 80). However, the reportage betrays hidden realities between the lines. For example, out of the six main personalities featured in Barbara Demick’s book on North Korea, three of them either have family members who divorced or had divorced themselves. One of the more rebellious sons had lived out of wedlock with an older woman (Demick 2009: 144) and the book itself revolves around the blossoming love affair between a young couple who manage to find time to date in the cover of night with the blackouts that became a regular feature of everyday life during the period of famine and economic collapse referred to as the ‘Arduous March’ (officially 1996–1997, but in reality 1994–1998). The famine and the subsequent disintegration of the family apparently weakened strict sexual norms with increases in extramarital relations, unwed pregnancies, abortions, and divorces (Jung 2006: 756).

Moreover, in a rare survey of North Korean refugees about their sex lives, husbands on average were shown to be satisfied with their sex life, while wives generally answered that they had no thoughts on the matter or did not know (Pak 2003: 332). The only woman to express overt dissatisfaction was a woman in her mid-thirties with a college degree in a professional occupation. While most were embarrassed to speak about sex, the fact that an educated, professional woman was the only one to speak up suggests the extent to which much of the data coming from refugee testimony is skewed. Predictably, the vast majority of refugees tend to come from the border regions, having lived their lives in the periphery as low-level workers.
Their views and experiences are coloured by their lack of access to the relatively more cosmopolitan surroundings of places like Pyongyang, whose residents might have seen love affairs displayed on the silver screen or read about them in translated works such as *Gone with the Wind* (Demick 2009: 190). While the vast majority of films and literature are didactic in nature, some incorporate popular genres of entertainment such as science fiction and romance, including films such as *Pulgasari* (Shin 1985) about a creature resembling Godzilla, and *Love, Love, My Love* (Shin 1984). Based on the popular folktale of a beautiful courtesan of the Chosŏn Dynasty named Ch’unhyang, *Love, Love, My Love* featured heretofore unprecedented themes of romance and sexuality (H. Lee 2000: 89). Since 1987, the Pyongyang Film Festival has provided its residents with the opportunity to watch foreign films, and the state-run television stations also show films from the former Soviet bloc at least once a week (Schönherr 2011).

Without a focused study on North Korean sexual practices and experiences, however, it is difficult to make any conclusive assessments about sexuality in North Korea. What is clear is that sexuality is no more difficult to discipline than other facets of life. Young people are encouraged to marry later in life, while public displays of affection are restrained. There are no acknowledgments of or provisions for homosexual relationships or transgendered identities. There seems to be very little awareness at all of any diversity in sexual orientation or identity, as one North Korean refugee claimed that he did not understand why he felt no desire for his wife for the nine years he was married until, after settling in South Korea, he saw a photograph of two men kissing, which ‘sent thrills throughout [his] body’ and he finally recognized his homosexuality (Chu 2004). Despite the limited forms of sexuality, there is little evidence of social issues that arise in other parts of the world, such as escalating rates of sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancies, unwed mothers, or illegal abortions. No doubt such instances do exist (as intimated by more recent problems of prostitution and trafficking discussed below), but widespread occurrences would be difficult to hide, especially with the increases in the volume of visitors to the country in the form of aid workers and tourists. Rather than the ‘repression’ of sexuality, I have therefore inquired into the origins and mechanisms of the kind of puritan sexuality that has come to dominate North Korean society.

A lasting factor has been the history of colonisation. Postcolonial societies in both the North and South have been plagued by the legacies of Japanese imperialism which simultaneously combined discriminatory policies targeting colonized women to serve as sexual slaves (so-called comfort women) for the Japanese Imperial Army while propounding the equality of all imperial subjects through a form of pan-Asianism in the call for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The result in North Korea has been an obsession with purity and a homogeneous national identity to expel the traumatic memory of discrimination and sexualized violence. In so far as Japanese domination of Korea – whether in the loss of sovereignty or the systematic rape of ‘comfort women’ – was thought to be the direct result of the lack of a strong state that could protect its independence and its people’s physical integrity, the state is now presented as the protector and guardian of sexuality and national identity. As noted above, the Gender Equality Law voided all Japanese imperial laws and regulations pertaining to Korean women, proceeding to define how marriage, family, and sexuality would be construed in a new Korea.

Many communist states have attempted to solve the ‘woman question’ by enabling women to work outside the home and claim independence from male breadwinners. Sex would no longer be a commodity to be sold by destitute women nor would it be a form of servitude by women in wealthy families for the reproduction of heirs to pass on the inheritance. Guaranteed a basic minimum standard of living, women (and men) would now be able to choose their partners according to their true sentiments rather than for survival. North Korea was no different, as women were encouraged to join the workforce. By 1965, approximately 55 per cent of the
workforce was made up of women (Jung 2006: 750). Social services and maternity benefits for women were accordingly expanded. Children were provided eleven years of free mandatory education; there were free childcare centres for infants between thirty days and three years old, and kindergartens for children of ages four to five; and women were provided five months of paid maternity leave (Pak 2003: 151–152). Even among disaffected North Koreans who have chosen to leave the country, free education and medical care have been regarded favourably as the greatest achievements of state socialism in North Korea.

Still, the family was maintained as a social unit in which women were the main caretakers. Despite major strides enabling women to be economically independent and politically active, it remained largely women’s duty to take care of children and housework. North Korean women have the double burden of working outside the home while being in charge of domestic chores. Even with the socialization of childcare, the sexual division of labour has been difficult to overturn because gender roles within the family were reproduced in public institutions. Public canteens, laundries, orphanages and childcare centres were run by women who were often referred to as ‘mothers’ (S.-Y. Kim 1947: 55).

Moreover, gender segregation in labour sidestepped the principle of equal pay for equal work, since women usually worked in occupations with lower pay: the service sector, light industries, primary school teaching, and nursing. Men dominated the higher-paid occupations in mining and heavy industries, taking the jobs with the highest status as managers, university professors, and doctors (Yun 1991: 203). In the 1970s, 70 per cent of women’s employment was concentrated in the light industries (Jung 2006: 751), and women continue to make up 70 per cent of workers in the light industries, 86 per cent of school teachers, and 100 per cent of nurses (K.A. Park 2011: 163). North Korea claims to have put in place a quota of over 30 per cent for the proportion of women among public officials, but women only make up 10 per cent of judges, 10 per cent of top officials in government ministries, and 20 per cent of representatives to the people’s assemblies at all levels (CEDAW 2005a: 6, 9). Despite the claim to gender equality, North Korean discourse emphasizes different ‘constitution and ability’ for different types of jobs (CEDAW 2005a: 12) with some work that deals with ‘poisonous matters’ or ‘harmful rays’ or excessive heat, cold, humidity, noise, or vibration deemed ‘harmful’ for women (CEDAW 2002: 24).

However, in the aftermath of the crises of the 1990s, which dismantled the public distribution of food and most social services, women became the main income earners through private trading activities that ranged from peddling food and household items to providing services such as hair-cutting and needlework (K.A. Park 2011: 165). As already noted, strict sexual norms weakened, but gender roles were also undermined as women earned income through black markets with their relatively greater free time since housewives were not always expected to work outside the home. Unlike other socialist countries, an unusually high percentage of married women have chosen to be housewives. In the mid-1980s, 60 to 70 per cent of married women began quitting their jobs after marriage, although they often continued to work in neighborhood work units without remuneration (Jung 2006: 752). In contrast to other mass organizations such as the Socialist Youth League, open to all youths between the ages of 15 and 26, or the Occupational League for all workers, the Women’s Union – predominantly made up of housewives – was reportedly less strict about holding its members accountable for regularly attending its meetings since the organization was not tied to career advancement (Pak 2003: 280). As a result, housewives were able to take advantage of market activities, and some women began to question the sexual division of labour at home, demanding that their husbands share in domestic chores, while others opted out of marriage altogether (K.A. Park 2011: 171).
Subsequently, the revised 1998 Constitution deleted the clause that the state shall ‘liberate women from the heavy family chores’, which had been included in the 1972 Constitution (K.A. Park 2011: 167). The state’s withdrawal from its commitment to the protection of women’s rights came at the worst time as sexual trafficking has arguably become the single most pressing problem facing North Korean women in the border regions. As women look for opportunities to provide for their families, they are often kidnapped or lured, and sold as farmhands, restaurant workers, family servants, brides, or sex workers into China (Jung 2006: 757). The women’s illegal status exposes them to sexual violence, rape, and confinement without any recourse (Good Friends 2005: 8).

Officially, North Korea disavows instances of trafficking in women or prostitution in the country, claiming that ‘there is no informal sector in the DPRK’ (CEDAW 2005a: 8, 12). However, independent research by humanitarian organizations confirms the existence of prostitution within the country, which spiked dramatically after the onset of food shortages beginning in the mid-1990s. Women sold sex as a form of bribe to security personnel or in exchange for food (Good Friends 2005: 7). While the state has more often been viewed as an obstacle to sexual freedom, especially in places like North Korea, state intervention may be the only remedy to address the rising problem of trafficking and sexual violence against women. It is a sobering reminder of the potentially protective role of the state, rather than simply its intrusiveness, in the realm of sexuality.

Note

* I have used the McCune-Reischauer system for the transliteration of Korean names and terms. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. This chapter is a revised version of a chapter included in the Routledge Handbook of Sexuality Studies in East Asia edited by Vera Mackie and Mark McLelland (2014).

References
