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Divorce and Family Preservation in North Korean Reality: *Reassessing the Public/Private Divide in Our Style Socialism*

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Abstract

Based on focus group interviews with North Korean refugees in South Korea, we examine divorce in North Korea to reassess prevalent assumptions about state-society opposition. We focus on the role of tradition to analyze what the values and practices attached to family preservation reveal about everyday behavior under Our Style (urisik) *socialism. State restrictions on divorce have been viewed as a feature of repressive social control. However, interview results show that the lived experience of socialism as Korean tradition produced a state-society symbiosis in key aspects of daily life such as family preservation. According to refugees, (1) family values are strongly tied to traditional conceptions reformulated as revolutionary obligations; and (2) family preservation as correct socialist ethics is reinforced by the conditions of post-crisis economic survival, which have made economically empowered women working in* jangmadang *(markets) ironically more vulnerable to marital instability, while leaving male domination embedded in Our Style socialism uncontested. The infusion of tradition into the indoctrination of family preservation has stabilized the prevailing gender order known as* namjon nyeobi *(superior men, inferior women), and the political system itself.*

Keywords: North Korea, Arduous March, market, divorce, family, socialism, tradition

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Introduction[1]

In North Korea, the unprecedented economic crisis of the mid-1990s known as the Arduous March pushed the regime to endorse marketization by July 2002 (hereafter the '2002 July 1 Measures'). Since then, scholars have analyzed that marketization's wide-ranging sociocultural impact to access the development of private space and individual agency within the confines of Our Style (*urisik*) socialism. Within this discussion, the rise of divorce has been considered as a phenomenon that reveals a great deal about the extent of change in state-society relations (Dukalskis and Lee 2020; E. Jeong 2010; P. Kim 2018; Lankov and Kim 2008; Lankov 2013), gender culture (J. Cho et al. 2020; Y. Cho 2014; Seok-Hyang Kim 2005; Lankov and Kim 2014; Oh 2001; K. Park 2012; Y. Park 2017) and family life (Jung et al. 2018; C. Y. Kang 2020; Lim 2006; H. Park 2003; Park and Do 2020) set in motion by the Arduous March.

Previous studies on North Korean divorce define family preservation as the regime's ideological imperative, imposed top-down to maintain and regulate the Socialist Grand Family (*sahoejuui daegajeong*). The near infeasibility of divorce is mainly attributed to the state's repressive legislation (C. Kim 1973; Y. Kim 2020; MOJ 2015; J. Park 2005). Sociocultural analyses on family disintegration primarily rely on readings of novels about divorce as an anti-socialist phenomenon, the most well-known of which is Paek Namryong's *Beot* (Friend) (Immanuel Kim 2011; J. G. Kim 2021; Shin 2012). The underlying assumption in the state-centric, top-down approaches to North Korean society is that the people submitted to autocratic control are mere recipients of ideological indoctrination; that they are stereotypical victims of coercive social control; and that they are increasingly likely to harbor political dissent in the aftermath of the Arduous March (C. Choi 2013; P. Kim 2018; Kim and Yang 2015; Lim and Yoon 2011; Suh 1998). The rise of social phenomena, including divorce, that appear to bypass state control under rapid marketization since the Arduous March have sparked scholarly

1. The Revised Romanization system was used throughout the article, with exceptions for widely recognized historical figures, some North Korean locations, and author preferences in the references.

discussions about political subversion (Dukalskis and Joo 2021; Jung et al. 2018, 24; C. Y. Kang 2020; Immanuel Kim 2011; Lankov and Kim 2014).

The assumptions about a natural opposition in state-society relations, which result from focusing on North Korea's illiberal political context or hereditary succession, obfuscates a more complex social reality in which state ideology is both imposed and internalized in daily life, particularly concerning family values. The people's perspectives on divorce, while undergoing change since the Arduous March, do not necessarily contradict state policy overall; this, however, is not solely because of coercion but also compliance that comes from popular understanding and practice of their own socialism as having strong links to Korean tradition (Armstrong 2003, 71; Han 2012; J. W. Kang 2018, 90; Suzy Kim 2010, 745; H. Park 2003; Y. Park 2017; Seo 2005). No doubt, the North Korean party-state exercised pervasive intervention in the private sphere to uphold the Principle of Family Consolidation (*gajeong gonggohwaui wonchik*) (Jo 1958; Ri 2013). At the same time, their family values, including marital stability, are colored by the lens of socialism, which is heavily infused with tradition (H. Park 2003, 23–25; Y. Park 2017, 221–228).

To complement the limitations of top-down state-centric perspectives, the present study analyzes the near infeasibility of divorce in North Korea based on the actual experiences of men and women on the ground. Our focus group interviews (FGI) with twenty-five North Korean refugees resettled in South Korea show that the lived experience of socialism as Korean tradition produced a state-society symbiosis in key aspects of daily life such as family preservation. According to the refugees, (1) popular family values are strongly tied to traditional conceptions redefined by the state as revolutionary obligations; and (2) family preservation as correct socialist ethics is reinforced by the conditions of post-crisis survival which have made economically empowered women working in markets (*jangmadang*) ironically more vulnerable to marital instability while leaving male domination embedded in Our Style socialism uncontested. The infusion of tradition in the indoctrination and internalization of family preservation stabilized the prevailing gender order known as *namjon nyeobi* (superior men, inferior women) and the political system itself.

Analytic Framework and Focus Group Interview (FGI)

To establish what the values and practices attached to divorce can show about conformity, opposition, and everyday behavior under North Korean socialism, we focus on the significance of tradition as a factor that attenuated the public/private divide. We elaborate on this historical feature of North Korea by revisiting the promotion of ideological independence in its renegotiation of relations with the Soviet Union after the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) in 1956, known to be the beginning of de-Stalinization launched by Nikita Khrushchev (Zubok 2009). To counter dissidents in the pro-Chinese and Soviet factions, Kim Il-sung began to make public references to the need for Juche (self-reliance) on North Korea's road to socialism (Lankov 2002; Seo 2005; Szalontai 2006). Kim Il-sung managed to emerge from his conflict with the detractors of his economic policy and cult of personality in August 1956 as a "true Korean," opposing the denationalized cadres of the Yan'an and Soviet factions (Lankov 2002, 92).

Since then, the cultivation of socialist subjects during regime consolidation rested increasingly on the reformulation of tradition as revolutionary obligations (Han 2012; J. W. Kang 2012, 2014; Suzy Kim 2010, 745; H. Park 2003; Y. Park 2017). These circumstances made North Korea a "singular example of socialist modernity that was inflected like no other by tradition" (Suzy Kim 2013, 176). Since de-Stalinization from the mid-1950s, tradition became firmly embedded on the North Korean road to socialism and strengthened its moral and political legitimacy (Lankov 2002; Seo 2005; Szalontai 2006). There was no process of overturning or denouncing the communist leader's legacies and contributions to revolution on account of his relations to Joseph Stalin or the Soviet Union. That is, socialist revolution in North Korea was established as Kim Il-sung's nationalist achievement both before, and *even more explicitly* after, de-Stalinization.

As a result, reforms such as gender equality were enshrined as Kim Il-sung's illustrious revolutionary accomplishment rather than an imposition

of alien/foreign concepts.[2] The Gender Equality Law of 1946 is presented in North Korean public history as one of the most significant hallmarks of Kim Il-sung's initiative to dissolve colonial-era socioeconomic and cultural foundations. In direct connection to the present analysis, tradition as the foundation of communist education in North Korea translated to traditional family values reformulated as revolutionary obligations to be the foundation of modern marriage (Do et al. 2023; Suzy Kim 2010; H. Park 2003; Y. Park 2017). Therefore, standard ideas about family preservation could not be significantly altered or opposed.

The significance of such paramount priority assigned to tradition becomes more apparent by drawing parallels with circumstances prevailing in the Eastern Bloc after de-Stalinization. Faced with the crisis of legitimacy, the communist leadership tried to pacify popular discontent by scaling down intervention in the private sphere (Chernyshova 2013; Fidelis 2010; Field 1998; Port 2011; Ross 2004; Tarifa 1997). Therefore, even though state socialist countries in principle sought to stabilize the family and introduce legal changes equalizing the status of women within marriage (Molyneux 1985, 53), their effect on the regulation of marital stability was not uniform. Despite a return to a pro-family policy and/or a public celebration of motherhood, higher court judges in the Soviet Union, for example, became less and less likely to insist that couples stay together despite their problems, and they granted divorces with increasing frequency (Field 1998, 606–608). After the replacement of Stalinism in Hungary with Kadarism, which stood out for its relaxation of sociopolitical control, experts were more understanding when it came to divorce and, if dissolving one's marriage helped to reestablish personal autonomy, even endorsed it (Lišková and Szegedi 2021, 84). Czechoslovakia, particularly after the Prague Spring of 1968, sustained a high rate of divorce. While there were approximately 10,000 divorces a year in the early 1950s, in 1969 the absolute number of divorces for the first time exceeded 20,000 per year (Lišková 2016, 226). In East

2. This situation contrasts with that of Poland, for example, where female wage work was considered a Stalinist imposition and reversed in the wake of de-Stalinization in favor of traditional motherhood (Fidelis 2010, 203; Jarska 2019).

Germany, even if its top leadership remained "deeply socially conservative," the Socialist Unity Party (SED) may have grudgingly embraced this trend in its attempt to present East Germany as a "modern, progressive state," and as a result, become less likely to intervene in matters of the heart (Port 2011, 497).

Focus Group Interviews (FGI)

To examine the people's values and attitudes toward family preservation, we conducted focus group interviews (Park and Do 2020) throughout 2021 in Seoul with twenty-five North Koreans now resettled in South Korea. To obtain as much firsthand experience as possible, we looked for interviewees who had gone through divorce in North Korea through personal networks and assistance groups supporting their resettlement. For an even-handed coverage of the multiple realities of divorce, the interviewees included male and female divorcees of varying age groups, jobs, and educational backgrounds. They were asked about: (a) factors facilitating or impeding divorce; (b) impact of divorce on men; (c) impact of divorce on women; (d) points of comparison with South Korea; and (e) conditions for possible contestation of state policy.

Interviewing North Korean refugees raises concerns regarding confidentiality and sample bias (Y. Cho 2004; B. Choi 2003, 312–321; E. Jeong 2005; J. W. Kang 2015). To address the first issue and ensure maximum reliability of interview data, the entire interview process observed the Bioethics and Safety Act which requires researchers to inform the interviewees about the specific terms of confidentiality in a letter of consent subject under the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the first author's employer institution. The letter of consent explicitly states that the video recordings and transcripts of the interviews are saved in encrypted USB or external hard drives and accessible only to the participants of the present research. The letter of consent also makes it clear that the interview results are not disclosed to anyone else outside the present research team, and that no personal information about the interviewees is disclosed upon the publication of the interview results in peer-reviewed journals.

The second issue regarding sample bias is further complicated due to

the regional imbalance of the North Korean defector who mostly come from the two provinces closest to the border with China, namely North Hamgyong and Ryanggang (Y. Cho 2004; E. Jeong 2005; Lankov and Kim 2014, 71). These two provinces account for only around twelve percent of the North Korean population, and the rural-urban gap is much wider in North Korea than in developed countries (Song and Denney 2019, 453). Furthermore, they do not "constitute a representative sample of North Korean society because they have chosen to leave, meaning that their opinions about politics are systematically biased" (Dukalskis and Lee 2020, 1055). The over-representation of the two northern provinces reflects the regional imbalance of the defector community, as in other studies on North Korean defectors (Lankov and Kim 2014, 71).

To mitigate concerns regarding sample bias as well as regional and gender imbalances, not to mention the fact that the testimonies might be impacted by a sense of self-censorship (Park and Do 2019), the authors adopted the focus group interview (FGI) method rather than interviewing North Korean refugees individually (Park and Do 2020). The FGI is a form of group interview in which: there are several participations (in addition to the moderator); there is an emphasis on a particularly tightly defined topic (such as divorce in the present analysis); and the accent is upon interaction within the group and their joint construction of meaning (Bryman 2008, 502). A major rationale for adopting the FGI method is that it is possible to study the processes whereby meaning is collectively constructed within each session (Bryman 2008, 504). In the present case, the free discussions and interaction among the group participants were conducive to reducing the ill effects of self-censorship and prevent arbitrary interpretation on the part of the researchers (Park and Do 2019, 22). The mix of male and female divorcees in each of the six interview sessions allowed the researchers to gain a balanced view of the changes in the practice and perception of divorce in post-crisis North Korea.

Additionally, the authors tried to address concerns arising from sample bias and regional imbalance by selecting some interviewees who had lived or worked in provinces other than the two northern ones; focusing on "behaviors and processes that can be externally validated rather than on

Table 1. Profile of Interviewees

	Code	Age	Sex	Province/city of residence	Job in NK	Leave NK	Enter SK	Marital status in NK
Session 1	1	47	M	Ryanggang	Laborer	2016	2016	Divorced
	2	54	M	North Hamgyong	Laborer	2016	2016	Divorced
	3	54	F	Ryanggang	Laborer	2007	2008	Divorced
	4	45	F	Ryanggang	Housewife	2008	2010	Divorced
Session 2	5	63	M	Pyongyang	Public official	2009	2009	Divorced
	6	57	M	Pyongyang	Public official	2009	2009	Divorced
	7	54	F	North Hamgyong	Housewife	2013	2017	Divorced
	8	54	M	North Hamgyong	Public official	2018	2019	Divorced
Session 3	9	54	M	Pyongyang	Laborer	2011	2011	Divorced
	10	54	M	North Hamgyong	Laborer	2002	2006	Divorced
	11	50	F	North Hamgyong	Housewife	2018	2019	Divorced
	12	37	F	North Hamgyong	Laborer	2015	2017	Divorced
Session 4	13	53	F	Ryanggang	Housewife	2017	2018	Divorced
	14	50	F	North Hamgyong	Housewife	2007	2016	Divorced
	15	25	F	North Hamgyong	College student	2012	2013	Single
	16	30	F	North Hamgyong	Laborer	2008	2009	Divorced
Session 5	17	67	M	North Hamgyong	Laborer	1999	2000	Divorced
	18	44	M	South Pyongan	Solider	2005	2006	Divorced
	19	46	M	North Hamgyong	Laborer	2005	2007	Divorced
	20	62	M	North Hamgyong	Laborer	2008	2009	Divorced
	21	33	M	North Hamgyong	Laborer	2000	2008	Divorced
Session 6	22	38	M	North Hamgyong	College student	2010	2012	Single
	23	53	F	Ryanggang	Housewife	2013	2017	Divorced
	24	42	M	North Hamgyong	Laborer	2005	2006	Divorced
	25	40	F	Ryanggang	Housewife	2007	2009	Divorced

Source: Authors.

political opinions" (Dukalskis and Lee 2020, 1055; Suh 1998); and cross-referencing the interview results against other published analyses of migrant interviews (B. Choi 2003, 330). The interview questions focused on the daily lives and popular sentiments of ordinary people to minimize the impact of political prejudice (Y. Cho 2004, 72). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Some information about their background is summarized in the Table below. To protect the identities of the refugees, we referred to them by code number paired with sex identification (M or F).

Interview Results and Analysis

Family Preservation as Socialist Korean Ethics

Despite the repressive qualities in the divorce regulations and gender inequality embedded in Our Style socialism, the people do not seem to consider the ideological rigidity or social control to be grounds for contestation. As many witnesses acknowledged, it is only after they came to South Korea that they realized the problems of the system; back home, they had little or no point of reference from which to realize that their free will, privacy, or individuality were being suppressed in the first place (M2; F3; F4; M5; M6; F7; M9; F11; F14; M18; M21; F23; F25). Given this situation, what are the factors that make the regime's social controls tolerable, standard, or even reasonable? What prevents the North Korean people from questioning the Principle of Family Consolidation or the "structural hierarchy of gender roles" (Y. Park 2017, 273)? What factors should be considered in assessing the specificity of North Korean private space and their subversive potential?

To answer these questions, we start by avoiding from framing the problem as a balance sheet of losses and gains for women or in relation to the prescriptive capacities/ambitions of the state regarding gender relations. Instead, we look back at the specificities emanating from the assertion of Juche (self-reliance) along the North Korean road to socialism as a historical background to the mix of coercion and consent around family preservation to reveal a symbiosis whereby the public and private spheres are intersected

rather than oppositional. This allows us to capture the multitudes of popular responses to state policy, including restriction of divorce freedom, that fall between the extremes of revolutionary ideal and the reactionary dissent.

For our analysis, the importance of tradition in the attenuation of the public/private divide can be seen through how it reduced the contradiction between gender equality and family consolidation. Making sense of this dynamic takes us back to two developments which occurred concurrently in the mid-1950s and reinforced each other: (1) the acceleration of Kim Il-sung's personality cult, which glorified female revolutionaries who assisted his anti-Japanese armed struggle in their supporting roles as mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law; and (2) the repeal of uncontested divorce (divorce by administrative procedure) in 1956 (Jo 1958, 14–15; H. Park 2003, 52–53). These developments established the family as the site of women's revolutionization rather than oppression.

As the North Korean leadership navigated the crisis of legitimacy by accentuating its nationalist credentials, *women's emancipation* indigenized parallel to the communist education in Juche, which centered on Kim Il-sung's anti-Japanese armed struggle. In his speech to Korean Worker's Party (KWP) propaganda and agitation workers in December 1955, Kim Il-sung's first public emphasis on Juche dictated socialism with Korean characteristics: "In both revolutionary struggle and construction, we should firmly adhere to Marxist-Leninist principles, *applying them in a creative way to suit the specific conditions and national characteristics of our country*" (Il-sung Kim 1982, 404; emphasis added). Correspondingly, women who supported his anti-colonial nationalism in traditional roles began to dominate the public depiction of female socialist Korean revolutionaries.

The militarized communist mother celebrated in the emerging public narratives centered on Kim Il-sung's anti-Japanese armed struggle were thought to be instrumental for the revolution for their *auxiliary* roles as mothers and wives of male activists. As Hyun Ok Park (1998) pointed out, "women were to be brought into the social struggle by family members, especially sons and husbands" (240). Therefore, the education of communist women proceeded in such a way that serving the revolution and serving the family were inseparable from each other. Women were to be educated

to revolutionize themselves within the parameters inherited from tradition, which "no legislation, or political campaign ever denounced" because "the family and the home came to symbolize the Korean nation in the North Korean revolution" (Suzy Kim 2010, 745). In North Korea, carrying a feminine demeanor and fulfilling her duties as a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law were key aspects of a woman's revolutionization.[3]

Against this backdrop, the abrogation of uncontested divorce in 1956 by Cabinet decision No. 24, "On Partially Revising Divorce Registration Procedure" (Jo 1958, 14–15), was not conceived as a roll-back of gender equality, but a reinforcement of family stability as correct socialist ethics. Ruling out uncontested divorce made "divorce by court trial" the only option to "prevent hasty divorce and protect minors' interests" (Ri 2013, 119). The abrogation of uncontested divorce strengthened state intervention for family preservation. Since feudal practices such as forced marriage or marriage trade, outlawed by the 1946 Gender Equality Law, were thought to have been eradicated by this time, the "struggle against the wrongful tendency to abuse the freedom of divorce became more urgent than the struggle against suppressing the freedom of divorce" (MOJ 2015, 213; Ri 2013, 120). That is, uncontested divorce was no longer necessary as the development of socialism modernized marriage, resulting in a relationship based on the free and voluntary will of the parties concerned without outside coercion or intervention (Jo 1958, 14–15).

Building from this historical background, the enforcement of family preservation as correct socialist ethics further intensified with the adoption of the Family Law on October 24, 1990 (MOJ 2015, 200). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing economic stagnation, compounded by diplomatic isolation, raised the urgency of popular control. In this context, Article 20, Paragraph 2 of North Korea's Family Law regulated that divorce must be resolved only through trial procedures (MOJ 2015, 200–208),

3. This is different from China, where women were encouraged to use Mao Zedong's work to criticize domineering family members, such as parents, in-laws, or husbands (Salaff and Merkle 1970, 188), and femininity was subordinated to masculinity so that women were pressured to dress like men and act like men, but not vice versa (Yang and Yan 2017, 67).

reconfirming the prohibition of uncontested divorce which came into effect in 1956. This was necessary to prevent frivolous and groundless divorces and strengthen the family, making the whole society a harmonious Socialist Grand Family (Ri 2013, 120). Divorce was now defined as a symptom of capitalist societies in which the government "intervenes in marriages not with the interest of marital stability but in association with taxation, conscription, or protection of private property in order to maintain and strengthen the capitalist state" (Ri 2013, 216).

Specific details related to divorce litigation and trial follow the 1999 Divorce Litigation Regulations. Divorce lawsuits must be filed with the People's Court (*inmin jaepanso*) that has jurisdiction over the defendant's address (MOJ 2015, 199). However, those who intend to divorce more than twice fall under the jurisdiction of the Provincial Court (MOJ 2015, 202). Even after a divorce lawsuit is filed, the trial procedure can begin only after one year, during which the People's Court must try to persuade both parties to withdraw (MOJ 2015, 199). After then, the party filing a divorce suit must consult a lawyer for divorce litigation. The trial hearing is conducted by a court composed of a presiding judge and two jurors (MOJ 2015, 203). For the divorce ruling to go into effect, it must be registered within three months of the judgement (MOJ 2015, 217).

Family Preservation in Practice

The weight of such ideological indoctrination is felt heavily in popular perspectives and practice regarding divorce. People's values, social convention, or outlooks still align with the state's restrictive policies. The intersection of state prohibition of divorce and the popular inclination towards family preservation is mediated by the experience/understanding of socialism as Korean tradition (J. W. Kang 2018, 90; H. Park 2003, 63; Y. Park 2017, 498). In North Korea, *socialist customs and morality* (M2; F3; M5; M6; F7; M9; F11; F12; M18; M20; F25) make people think thoroughly and seriously about divorce. Within socialist customs and morality, marriage is "viewed as a matter concerning the entire families of both parties" (M5); the North Korean people have little conception of marriage as an individual

decision (M6); one's "free will cannot be reflected" (M9); since everyone belongs to some form of organizational life, whether it be the KWP, the Socialist Women's Union, or the General Federation of Trade Union, divorce is a public matter which concerns the "violation of socialist ethics and customs" (M5).

It is true that since the Arduous March, North Korean judges have become more flexible in their deliberation. Now, the "*manneung*" (omnipotence) and "*jibae*" (dominance) of money means that those who are financially capable can easily circumvent legal prohibition by bribing the judge (M2; F3; M5; F7; M9; F11; F12; M18; M20; F25). As one interviewee stated categorically, "there is absolutely no way divorce can be approved without bribery" (M9). However, the meaning of increasing divorce rates should not be overstated (i.e., taken as evidence of the rising individual) since they result from the "judges' needs for extra income to make ends meet" (F3; F4; M5; M6; M9, F11; F15; M18) or "fulfill a designated quota for the number of divorces one cannot exceed" (M6). These statements raise the need for caution in taking the increasing divorce rate itself as indicator of social change.

Given the foregoing legal restrictions and ideological education in the peculiar political context of North Korea, defending one's private decision to divorce is a huge challenge and risk for people across gender, class, and regional variations. Since the mid-1990s, the economic factor has basically determined the outcome of divorce trials. Divorce is unaffordable for most ordinary people (F4; M6; F7; M9; F11; F12; F14; M18). Since divorce accrues various costs, such as transportation costs, bribery, time away from work, etc., it cannot be initiated by those who cannot afford them. The prohibitive cost of divorce predisposes people of lower economic status to give up divorce in the first place (M6; F7; M9). One female interviewee stated that she had to leave the area of her residence and temporarily relocate to a place near the location of the courthouse for two months during which time the divorce trial was being finalized (F7). The social cost of divorce is higher for senior-level party cadres/government officials and military soldiers (M6; M9; F12); farming families in rural areas where relatives live close together and work in cooperation find divorce socially inconvenient not to mention disruptive to their work (M5; M6; F7; M24); divorce is hard to obtain in

urban centers in which state-run enterprises are located (F4).

Since most people perceive marital stability as correct socialist Korean ethics, they attributed the rising divorce rate to foreign cultural penetration from South Korea and China (F4; F7; M10; F13; F14; F15; F16; M18; M24). They were especially critical of South Koreans for being too hasty and not taking the institution of marriage seriously enough (M2; F4; M5; M6; M9; M18; M20; M24). "South Koreans divorce after only a few months of being married, treating marriage like a joke" (M5). Divorce seems to be a general feature of South Korea's "highly competitive capitalist society" where "individualism" prevails even between a husband and wife (M10). South Korean couples tend to think of themselves more than their children (F11).

In their critique of South Korean divorce culture, the interviewees exhibited ambivalence in what they understood to be the difference between a capitalist and socialist society. On the one hand, references to a "communist dictatorship" or "feudal dynasty" were frequently made (M2; F4; M5; M6; F7; M9; F14; M18; M20; M24), as opposed to the association of such positive qualities as "freedom" and "development" with South Korea; on the other, certain aspects of North Korean values and social conventions—in this case, family preservation—were thought to be more acceptable (M5; F7; M9; M10; F11), if not preferable. As one interviewee remarked, "Even though capitalism and socialism are different, the matter of marriage and divorce must be dealt with much more carefully" (M5).

Impact of Divorce on Men and Women

Although both men and women interviewees acknowledged their reservations about divorce, the lived experience of socialism as inseparable from Korean tradition made women more vulnerable to marital instability despite their stronger economic independence since the Arduous March. Essentially, this is not due to male domination or Confucianism *per se* (Suzy Kim 2014, 258; H. Park 2003, 23–25; Y. Park 2017, 23), but because the "logic of socialism penetrates into the logic of the North Korean family" (H. Park 2003, 23–25). That is, in the context of North Korea's hyper-militarization and regime contest with the South, the state implemented policies that

ended up extending male privileges at home and work, resulting in the "structural hierarchy of gender roles" (Y. Park 2017, 273).

As a result, North Korea's conventional gender hierarchy, described as *namjon nyeobi* (Oh 2001, 92; H. Park 2003, 57–64; Lankov and Kim 2014, 87; C. Y. Kang 2020, 23; O et al. 2021, 733; Do et al. 2023) by the refugees themselves with marked frequency in their recollections of lives back home (M2; F3; F4; F11; M9; M10; M17; M20; M21) remained uncontested as a function of communist education in which traditional virtues and revolutionary obligations were inseparable. In official narratives, *namjon nyeobi* refers exclusively to the nation's feudal past, which was fully rectified and eradicated during socialist regime consolidation under Kim Il-sung's leadership. However, many interviewees continue to perceive their gender culture back home as heavily immersed in "feudal Confucianism" (*bonggeon yugyo*) and continue to regard *namjon nyeobi* as a standard sociocultural feature of Juche socialism (M2; F3; F4; M5; M9; M10; F11; F14; F15; M17; M18; M20; M21; F25) rather than a problem to be contested. The witnesses understood the "state" as upholding *namjon nyeobi* because socialism in North Korea cannot operate politically, economically, or militarily without it (F4; M5; M9; M18; M20; M22; M24; F25).

Thus, old assumptions about the "proper" male and female behavior and in-family gender roles have not collapsed despite the near reversal of economic gender roles (Lankov and Kim 2014, 87; O et al. 733). Although husbands are becoming more open to the idea of performing house chores to assist their breadwinning wives, the inclination toward family preservation has not been conductive to altering the basic gender hierarchy described as "*namjon nyeobi*." Therefore, as the standing gender hierarchy remains basically uncontested, the site of women's economic empowerment in the *jangmadang* ironically makes them more vulnerable to marital instability.

The conditions on the ground are such that men's lack of financial competence is understood by women as *inevitable* since state policy prohibits men from engaging in the unofficial economy—men are instead required to take part in "organized life" (*jojik saenghwal*) and serve their state-designated jobs (or enlist in the army), even if it pays little or not at all (M2; F3; F4; M5; M6; M9; F11; F13; F14; F15; M18; M22; F23). The Arduous

March produced "no significant elevation of women's social status nor a downgrade of men's social status" (M10). North Korea remains a "male-dominant patriarchy" in which "women are responsible for 80 to 90 percent of the economic burden" (F4). Under such circumstances, it is the women's inability to earn a decent living, rather than that of men, that can serve as a major source of marital strain (F3; F4; M6; F7; M9; F11; M19; F23; F25).

Both female and male interviewees largely agreed that women are more vulnerable to marital instability despite their growing financial independence (M2; F3; F4; M5; M6; F7; M10; F11; M20; M21). It was extremely rare for women to be the first to start divorce proceedings (M6; M9; M20), regardless of the severity of the multi-layered burdens (F4; F7; M9; F11; F13; F14; F23; F25), domestic violence (M2; F4; M5; M6; F7; F23; F25), or infidelity (M6; F11; F23; F25). Women faced "much harsher social prejudice than men" in matters of divorce" (M2; F4; F7; M9; F11; F14; F16; M18; M20). "Divorce was considered only as the last resort by women; women were rarely the first to even broach the possibility of divorce and initiate the legal proceedings" (F3; F4; M6; M9; M19; M20). Women usually did not seek divorce on account of the husband's inability to make a living since state policy permitted only women to conduct business in *jangmadang*. If she leaves the marriage, "it is more likely because she met someone else while working in *jangmadang*, usually a business partner" (M6). Since men do not make money, there is "no such thing as child support or alimony" to be expected from the husband (F4; F7; F11). The following comments generally sum up the consensus on women's vulnerability to divorce.

> Because North Korea is still a patriarchy, people uphold the notion that the family, once established, must be preserved. People do not have the notion of divorce within the range of possible action. This is *especially* true for our women. The society itself does not have the notion of divorce. Even if a woman has an affair or makes a good living, it is very difficult for her to think of getting a divorce first. Even such women try their utmost to preserve their families. Whereas it was very hard for the woman to end her marriage if her husband did not want it, the wife could rarely dissuade the husband if the was firmly set on terminating the marriage. (M9)

Although many acknowledged that women stood at a disadvantage in the matter of divorce, some interviewees noted the negative impact divorce has on men as well. How he fared after divorce depended on his pre-divorce economic status; if he had previously made a good living on his own, then he could still have a stable life; if he had previously depended on his wife financially, he would likely suffer in her absence (F12). Another interviewee noted that the impact of divorce on a man's reputation varied depending on his social status; for men in the hierarchies of power, not having a wife did not affect his appearance or his reputation (F7). But for men in low social standing, people would make comments about how shabby he looks without a wife looking after him or how pitiful it is that he is alone after cheating on his wife (F7), etc. High-ranking people usually did not want to divorce because they would be discharged from work (F7; F11). In cases where women are financially more capable (and men are in low social standing), divorce is economically damaging for the husband, who then turns to drinking or other vices to relieve stress (F11). For those women who make a living in *jangmadang*, economic difficulties arising after divorce are manageable; however, divorce poses a huge psychological and economic blow for those men who have neither a salary nor benefit from public distribution (F11).

The alignment of state and popular views on family preservation is most dramatically shown in how state intervention can be invited for the sake of marital stability. In the following recollection, one interviewee told a story about a wife who tried to force her husband to withdraw the case by threatening to inform the authorities about his unlawful behavior during their marriage.

> To dissuade the husband from filing for divorce, the wife might ask his work superiors or party authorities to persuade him to give up. In this situation, sometimes she might even inform them about the husband's criticism of the Kim family (words spoken to each other while they were on good terms as a married couple) or crimes that he committed such as buying drugs, bribery, etc., and threaten to have him sent to jail on account of such acts. Aside from high-ranking party officials, the wife might also

> reach out to the prosecution to tell the husband that he might be put way in jail if he insists on pursuing divorce. Under pressure from the authorities, the husband is forced to give up filing for divorce and reluctantly reunites with the wife. Therefore, North Korean parents tell their children to never discuss politics with their spouses or be totally honest with them about everything. For many men, filing for divorce ended up resulting in their expulsion from the party or a prison sentence. (M6)

Without a clear conception of marriage or divorce as a personal matter, the people take extreme precaution to ensure that their spouses do not notice anything that might be a target of later accusations as being a political or social error (M5). Yet, what the foregoing case shows is that socialist Korean morality can sometimes be invoked rather than resisted for the sake of one's personal interest.

Conclusion

The foregoing refugee accounts about divorce and family preservation demonstrated the ambiguity involved in the imposition and internalization of Juche socialism. Understanding this dynamic is important in assessing the current and prospective state of state-society relations. While socialism as a political ideology or economic system may have been discredited, it is also a set of values and lifestyles that are rooted in what North Koreans understand as tradition, which are inseparable from revolution in the education the people have been subjected to for nearly eighty years. The restriction of divorce freedom is not only imposed but uncontested in the daily lives of men and women who are required to fulfill the dictates of Our Style socialism.

In the illiberal and impoverished context prevailing since the Arduous March, North Korean people have become even more keen to preserve their family. Most recently in the Kim Jong-un era, divorce cannot be finalized without the approval of the Provincial Court in addition to that of the People's Court (F11). Throughout the crisis and afterwards, women's

determination to preserve the family strengthened; male vulnerability to divorce increased for those whose pre-divorce economic status depended on their wives' informal earnings in *jangmadang*. Even as North Koreans gain further information about the outside world since the 2002 July 1 Measures, it is not yet clear whether such change can lead the people to discard the values and sentiments wedded to their experience of socialism as being Korean.

This is not so much because they have confidence in the functional efficiency of socialism to advance material welfare—the Arduous March has discredited socialism's economic promise (F4; M6; F7; M9; F11; F14; F16; M18; M20; F23) and forced them to rely on self-reliant measures for daily survival. Moreover, in North Korea's illiberal political context, or what refugees describe as a "feudal dynasty" (F4; M5; M6; F7; M9; M21; F25), people have no knowledge of such notions as legal protection of individual rights or civil law (M2; F3; F4; M6; F7; M9; M21; F23); there is no such concept as *equality* in state-society relations (M2; F3; F4; M6; F7; M9; F11; F14; F16; M18; M20); and waging a struggle to oppose state policy cannot occur to the average North Korean as being within a possible range of action (M2; F3; M6; M9; F14; M21; F25).

Yet, popular notions of socialism as a set of true/superior Korean values still matter. As the witness accounts demonstrated, state restriction of divorce freedom and emphasis on family preservation were not necessarily viewed negatively; they were intertwined with proper socialist/Korean morality (M2; F3; M5; M6; F7; M9; F11; F12; M18; M20; F25). Moreover, as economic crisis prolongs into the Kim Jong-un era, the people are becoming more attached to the family as the key site of crisis resolution than as a sphere of political resistance. Since the Arduous March, the people have been focused more on adjustment than autonomy, and ultimately, survival rather than politics (M2; F3; F4; M6; F7; M9; F11; F14; F16; M18; M20; F23; F25).

These conditions all contributed to the coercion and compliance around family preservation. Therefore, it is premature to conclude that the North Korean private sphere is evolving into a terrain of political resistance à la the Eastern Bloc on account of marketization. Rather than

mere victims or necessary detractors of Our Style socialism, most ordinary North Koreans are first and foremost survivors, whose livelihood depend on adapting to—rather than opposing—new economic realities since the Arduous March. Thus, family preservation is not just an ideological directive but also a popular daily necessity, especially for women who need to rely on male partners/patrons to conduct their operations in *jangmadang*. For now, indoctrination and internalization of family preservation has a stabilizing effect on the prevailing gender order as well as the political system itself.

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