



# The Image of North Korean Women Constructed in China in the Early 1960s

Xianyu SHEN and Changshan JIN

## Abstract

*In the early 1960s, North Korean women, particularly figures like Yi Sinja, were frequently depicted in Chinese media as ideal socialist role models, serving as exemplars for the Chinese people to follow. This article explores the portrayal of North Korean women in China during this period, using sources such as the People's Daily and Huang Gang's reportage, Young Lady Yi Sinja. Within the framework of Chinese state discourse, these media and literary works highlighted the labor and socialist principal role of North Korean women, offering them as models for integration into the socialist order and as state subjects. This analysis reveals two key sociocultural dynamics. First, labor was of paramount importance in 1950s and 1960s socialist China. Second, following the Great Leap Forward, China faced economic adjustments and labor shortages, prompting authorities to reduce gender disparities in labor and emphasize women's contributions. Under these conditions, Chinese media and writers focused on the female role in advancing socialist construction, portraying North Korean women as dedicated members of the Korean Workers' Party. This approach underscored the importance of women's labor in national development and its positive impact on the formation of women's identity.*

**Key words:** Early 1960s, *People's Daily*, North Korean women, Huang Gang, *Young Lady Yi Sinja*, socialist role models, labor images

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## Introduction: From Negative Examples to Role Models

Since the early 1900s, Korean women have been prominently portrayed by the Chinese media as steadfast social figures within the broader historical narratives of national salvation, the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1931–1945), the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea (1950–1953), and the construction of a socialist China.

Before the 1919 Korean Independence Movement, the Chinese press depicted Korean women as negative examples within the enlightenment discourse and transformation of national character (Lee 2011, 280). However, during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, they were praised as virtuous citizens who contributed to national salvation and liberation, demonstrating strong patriotism and political awareness (Yu 2011).

During the Korean War (1950–1953), or what in China is called the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea, North Korean women were portrayed as paragons of aspiration for a better life, working tirelessly to support the front lines. Articles such as “Spring in Korea” by Yang Shuo (Yang 1951) and “I Must Eulogize Them” by Bai Lang (1952) highlighted their efforts. Reviewing articles on North Korean women appearing in magazines of the All-China Women’s Federation from 1949 to 1954, Chang Sooji noted that North Korean women of that period were seen as heroines who challenged male-centric ideas, exercised political rights, formed social organizations, and fought for victory in war and revolution (S. Chang 2023).

From that period onward, the Chinese media focused exclusively on North Korean women, excluding those from South Korea. Most of their stories were narrated by Chinese men involved in the Korean War. This trend continued in Chinese reportage of the 1950s and 1960s, where North Korean women were depicted as resilient figures who overcame the pain of war and life’s hardships.<sup>1</sup>

After the Korean War, the Chinese media began to emphasize the common socialist ideals of China and North Korea, giving extensive

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1. For the images of North Korean women portrayed in Chinese reportage in 1950–1960, refer to B. Chang (2016, 70–96).

coverage to North Korean women, who were portrayed as hard-working and held in high regard. In the early 1960s, figures like Yi Sinja were highlighted as socialist role models for the Chinese to emulate.

However, in China, with the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, women's work was forced to a halt. The All-China Women's Federation ceased operating for as long as 11 years, and Chinese media rarely paid attention to women in neighboring countries. Later, the reform and opening-up in 1978 and the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992 led to a strong rise in Western discourse and South Korean discourse in China, resulting in Chinese media paying less attention to North Korean women than they had in the early 1960s. Therefore, examining how China shaped North Korean women in the early 1960s will prove important for the diachronic study of the evolution of the image of Korean women in China in the first half of the 20th century. The Chinese view of Korean women evolved from seeing them as negative to respected role models, and the North Korean woman came to be viewed as a typical socialist figure in China. This article will elaborate on these developments.

To this end, this study will examine how images of North Korean women were reshaped in China during the early 1960s. First, it will review reports and commentary on North Korean women by Chinese official media, including the *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*). Second, it will analyze *The Young Lady Yi Sinja*, a reportage by Huang Gang,<sup>2</sup> to illustrate how North Korean women were portrayed as socialist principal roles and how their characteristics were depicted. Finally, based on the previous discussion, it will explore the reasons behind these portrayals and address future

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2. Huang Gang (1917–1993) was a famous Chinese political commentator, journalist, playwright, and former secretary of the China Film Association. Mr. Huang visited North Korea during the Korean War as a journalist and then in the 1960s as member of a Chinese cultural delegation. Based on his practical experience, Huang wrote articles on North Korea and published them in various Chinese media. The collection of his works was titled *Young Lady Yi Sinja* (*Li xinzi guniang*), published by the Writers Publishing House in 1963. For further discussion of Huang Gang and his collection *Young Lady Yi Sinja*, refer to Shen (2023).

challenges. Through a literature review, this paper will examine the representation of North Korean women by Chinese media and writers within the context of contemporaneous Chinese society and culture.

This study will not only illuminate the correlation between the national discourse and the formation of women's principal status in socialist countries, but also provide insights into the diachronic evolution of the images of Korean women in 20th-century China. At the same time, the authors also expect this study to enrich the repository of research on women's movements in North Korea, such as *Among Women Across Worlds: North Korea in the Global Cold War* (S. Kim 2023).

### **The Image of Hard-working North Korean Women in China's National Discourse**

In the early 1960s, Chinese state media, including the *People's Daily* and *Guangming Daily*, reported extensively on the success of the Chollima Movement in North Korea. These reports were authored by Chinese journalists, many of them appointed by the Chinese government, who had visited North Korea. The clear objective of these articles was to impart the "valuable experiences of our North Korean comrades" (J. Wang 1963) and to share these insights with the Chinese public. These "valuable experiences" referred to the "successful-practices in North Korea's first Five-Year Plan (1957–1961) for socialist development," also known as the Chollima Movement (Shi 1961). At that time, Zhang Zhizhong highlighted the "advanced experiences of North Korea" that the Chinese people should emulate.

- (1) We should adopt several innovative and advanced experiences from North Korea, such as establishing vinylon factories, expanding duck farms, increasing crop yields by using cold-frame seeding, training armed militia groups, and emphasizing culture and art, particularly through the development of amateur troupes.
- (2) We should learn from the good living habits of the North Korean people, such as maintaining tidiness and

cleanliness. (3) We should emulate their publicity efforts to foster enthusiasm and courtesy among the populace. (Zhang 1962)

In the early 1960s, China regarded North Korea as a model of “creative” advancements in agriculture, industry, military, literature, and art. North Korea’s emphasis on neat lifestyles and effective “publicity work to encourage the people’s enthusiasm and courtesy” positioned it as a leading socialist example for China, demonstrating the coordinated development of superstructure and infrastructure. Zhang Zhizhong highlighted the successful reforms of North Korea, which had improved the relationship between officials and the people, as a key lesson for China. This perspective influenced Chinese writers, such as Huang Gang, who reported on figures like Yi Sinja (Li Xinzi in Chinese).

From Zhang Zhizhong’s article, “Miscellaneous Notes on My Visit to North Korea,” it is evident that China’s perception of the Korean Peninsula was undergoing a significant transformation during this period. Prior to the founding of the PRC in 1949, Korea had been viewed as a weak nation-state within the broader context of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. However, post-1949, North Korea was redefined as an advanced socialist nation, aligning with new state-building theories. This shift reflects a transition from traditional Sino-foreign relations to a mindset focused on learning *creative, advanced practices* from North Korea. This change not only highlights the evolving relationship between China and North Korea during the early stages of socialist development but also illustrates China’s intention to reshape the world order under new state theories. This is evidenced by a series of reports in Chinese state media, led by the *People’s Daily*, such as “Glory of Cheongsan-ri Spirit” (Shi 1961), “Miscellaneous Notes on My Visit to North Korea” (Zhang 1962), and “Resounding Success of the North Korean Chollima Task Group Movement” (J. Wang 1963).

During this period, the successes of North Korea’s first Five-Year Plan for socialist development were prominently featured in Chinese state media, like the *People’s Daily*, which held unquestionable authority and legitimacy. As mouthpieces of the government, these media outlets operated under strict press censorship, ensuring that all published opinions aligned with the

official stance and supported China's socialist theory-building. Consequently, such success stories were selectively promoted to serve national interests. Notably, North Korean women were prominently featured in these reports, indicating a particular interest in them on the part of Chinese state media. Just as the dance achievements of Choe Seunghui (Choi Seung-hee) during the colonial period were discussed as part of the North Korean national discourse (H. C. Kim 2024, 225), North Korean women were discussed in the Chinese media in the early 1960s within the framework of the national discourse. This raises the question: What traits in North Korean women appealed to the Chinese press at that time?

To gain a deeper understanding of North Korean women who captured the attention of Chinese media in the early 1960s, we should examine several notable figures.<sup>3</sup> These include Kil Hwaksil, director of the Pyongyang Silk Factory, who reached out to coworkers with outdated mindsets and addressed their challenges to provide essential support in life and thought; Mun Jeongsuk, head of a work group, who earned the first honorary Chollima title on North Korea's agricultural front; Kim Subok, a dedicated teacher at Changjeon Middle School, who focused on education; Jeong Seonghui, an ophthalmologist at Pyongyang Medical University, who devoted herself to treating cataract patients; Kim Jeongsun, a member of the Heungsanggun Pogu Agricultural Cooperative, who heroically saved seven lives; Kim Myeongsuk, director of the Changseong Foodstuff Factory, and other women from textile factories, along with women from the Hwanghaenam-do Monggeumpo Fishery Farm, who sailed for 270 days and fished for 230 days, also stand out. Additionally, Choe Sunok and Kim Eunsuk, staff members at the Pyongyang First Department Store, won the DPRK's first Chollima honorary title. Yi Sinja, a publicity agent, played a crucial role in transforming Rihyeon-ri into an ideal socialist village, helping to reform the mindsets of backward individuals.

These women, who were reported on under their real names, were pivotal in various sectors of socialist development during North Korea's first

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3. These were mainly reported on in the newspaper articles listed in the references of this article.

Five-Year Plan. They advanced the nation's progress in their respective roles. By sharing their true stories, the Chinese press emphasized that women were no longer just confined to household duties. Instead, they were encouraged to enter the public sphere to serve as social models in their respective professions. This portrayal marked a shift from earlier depictions during the Anti-Japanese Aggression War and the Korean War, where the focus was on their feminine, maternal, and patriotic traits. Now, the spotlight was on hard-working women who demonstrated a strong awareness of and confidence in national development through their tangible contributions.

Such coverage of North Korean women by Chinese media was closely related to the discourse of *model female workers* emphasized in China's socialist construction at that time. At the national level, the selection and commendation of "March 8th Red Flag Bearers" and "March 8th Red Flag Collectives" commenced in the 1960s, which further endowed the image of the "New China women" of the People's Republic of China, symbolized by model female workers with more explicit gender attributes. The criteria for selecting national March 8th Red Flag Bearers and March 8th Red Flag Collectives were as follows: "First, they must be ideologically sound and full of energy. Second, in industrial and agricultural production, in collective life welfare and social service undertakings, and on all fronts of socialist construction, they must vigorously promote technological innovation and revolution and continuously improve labor productivity and work efficiency. Third, they should strive to improve their cultural level, study hard and delve into science. Fourth, they must be good at uniting the masses and give full play to the communist spirit of cooperation."<sup>4</sup> These standards emphasize labor production and technological innovation. Here the model female model is labeled as ideologically sound, manifesting the communist spirit of cooperation, studious, and enhancing productivity. The term *model worker*

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4. "Notice of the All-China Women's Federation on Commending 'March 8th Red Flag Bearers' and 'March 8th Red Flag Collectives' to Women's Federations of Provinces, Municipalities and Autonomous Regions on the 50th Anniversary of March 8th," *Funu gongzuo* 妇女工作 (Women's Work), No. 3 (1960), as quoted in Zhou (2013, 71).

here is a kind of Chinese discourse that emerged in the process of China's modernization. Its core word is *model*, which reflects the value-oriented nature of role model, demonstration, and exemplar.

Under such words of model female worker, Chinese media portrayed North Korean women as pivotal builders of a socialist nation. They were celebrated as self-reliant heroines embodying the Cheongsan-ri spirit and methods, deemed essential figures in North Korea's socialist development and foundational to advancing the Chollima movement (Shi 1963b). Kil Hwaksil and Yi Sinja were highlighted as role models for implementing Kim Il-sung's directive that "politics comes first, and political and ideological work and social ethics must be prioritized" (Y. Wang 1962b). Women workers from food and textile factories were praised for their determination to leave their homes and contribute to socialism, becoming skilled and confident machine operators (Y. Wang 1963b). Kim Subok and Jeong Seonghui devoted their lives to the people, following the leadership of the North Korean Workers' Party and Prime Minister Kim Il-sung in education and healthcare (Han 1961; Tian 1961). Kim Jeongsun, a member of the Heungsanggun Pogu Agricultural Cooperative, was honored as a hero of the DPRK and a commendable daughter of the North Korea Workers' Party, inspiring both North Korean and Chinese youth with her noble spirit (Han 1962).

China and North Korea share a male-centered traditional culture wherein men and women occupy distinct roles. Historically, with the social division of labor, women were denied economic independence, social production, and political participation, leading them to rely on men and adopt a mentality of dependence, obedience, and subjection. This limited living space also fostered a self-enclosed mindset in full-time housewives, making them more introverted, timid, and obedient. In such cultural settings, women were deprived of developing independence and autonomy. However, as society and culture transformed, women entered a new era of social development. According to Chinese media in the early 1960s, North Korean women were active participants in social production and political affairs, shedding outdated mindsets of dependence and obedience. They were developing independence, autonomy, and self-reliance, emerging as a new generation of women in a socialist country. Some of these North

Korean women became role models for the youth of both China and North Korea to admire and emulate. This can be seen in Chinese reportage of the period.

### **The Principal Socialist Status and Features of *Young Lady Yi Sinja***

As discussed above, Chinese media depicted North Korean women as integral to the socialist state. This status was largely shaped by their active participation in social labor and production under the guidance of Kim Il-sung and the leadership of the North Korean Workers' Party. This highlights how women were incorporated into the new social order as key contributors. The Chinese media's intent became more apparent with the spread of North Korean dramas like *Bulgeun seondongwon* (The Red Agitator) by Jo Baekryeong, featuring Yi Seonja, a character modeled after the real Yi Sinja.

In the early 1960s, *Bulgeun seondongwon*, a North Korean drama based on the story of Yi Sinja, was translated into Chinese and adapted into a traditional Chinese drama, sparking a Yi Seonja craze among Chinese audiences. The main cause of this popularity was that Yi Seonja, a political publicity agent, effectively addressed people's complaints about officials through her mediation skills. As a result, Yi Seonja became a socialist role model for the Chinese to emulate and was elevated to a cultural symbol, sparking the Chinese people's collective imagination about North Korea.<sup>5</sup> This phenomenon inspired Chinese writers to create narratives about Yi Sinja, the archetype of the fictional Yi Seonja. In January 1963, the *People's Daily* published an article by Wang Yingxiu, inspired by Yi Seonja, the protagonist of *Bulgeun seondongwon*. After watching the drama in Pyongyang, Wang was moved by Yi Seonja's "passionate love for the Workers' Party, the people, and the socialist countryside" and she visited Yi Sinja, the real-life inspiration for the fictional character.

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5. For a detailed discussion of the cultural fervor surrounding *Bulgeun seondongwon* in China and its protagonist Yi Seonja's influence on Chinese women, refer to Shen (2022, 225–253).

On an evening in early November 1962, I watched the renowned North Korean drama *Bulgeun seondongwon* at the Mokdanbong Theater in Pyongyang. The story of Yi Seonja captivated me, as she passionately loves the Workers' Party, the people, and the socialist countryside. A North Korean friend informed me that the character was modeled after Yi Sinja, a celebrated labor heroine and chairman of the management committee of the Rihyeon-ri Cooperative. So I decided to visit her. Yi Sinja wore her hair in a long, thick, black braid and was still unmarried. With a tall and sturdy figure, she appeared bold and resolute, highlighted by her high cheekbones. She spoke candidly and decisively yet remained kind and amicable. (Y. Wang 1963a; emphasis added)

This article exemplified the narrative surrounding Yi Sinja. When interviewing Yi Sinja, Wang's description highlights her impressions of Yi Sinja and even makes readers forget the fact that Yi Sinja is a woman. Her "tall and sturdy figure" signifies the external qualities needed for effective producers or laborers, while being "bold and resolute," "candid and decisive" underscores her internal leadership qualities in a principal social role. Wang was focused on those physical and personality traits of Yi Sinja that made her suitable for labor and emphasized her role in national construction. "Being kind and amicable" reflects the noble character pursued by humanity and is essential for Yi Sinja to address the people's grievances concerning officials. She "cared for backward people with the class amity of a comrade, sincerely helping them solve specific difficulties and influencing their ideological perspectives to inspire conscientious self-reform" (J. Wang 1963).

In Wang Yingxiu's depiction of Yi Sinja, her femineity would be difficult to detect if not for the description of her hair worn in a long, thick, black braid. Yi Sinja, a real-life figure, was presented as a typical socialist laborer devoid of traditional *feminine traits*.<sup>6</sup> This portrayal reflected the very

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6. The concept of femininity referred to in this paper was conceived by Simone de Beauvoir in her masterpiece *The Second Sex* (1949). It does not refer to the innate nature of women, but the stereotyped characteristics of women formed by the cultural mechanism of a patriarchal society.

qualities that key socialist roles demanded of women in China at the time.

The period of the North Korea's first Five-Year Plan (1957–1961) nearly coincided with China's Great Leap Forward period (1958–1960). The success of North Korea's first Five-Year Plan led to a complete socialist transformation of the country and initiated a second phase that sustained North Korea's economic development from 1961 to 1986. By contrast, after the Great Leap Forward, China entered a period of economic adjustment marked by labor shortages. Consequently, Chinese authorities began to eliminate gender differences in labor, emphasizing the role of women laborers. From 1955 to 1966, women laborers were prominently celebrated in the editorials of the *People's Daily* on International Women's Day (March 8).

**Table.** March 8 Editorial Titles from *People's Daily* (1955–1966)<sup>7</sup>

Year	"March 8" Editorial Titles
1955	Women Throughout China Mobilize to Participate in the Great Struggle to Build Our Socialist Motherland, Liberate Taiwan, and Defend Peace
1956	Giving Full Play to the Great Role of Women in Socialist Development
1957	Giving Fuller Play to Women's Socialist Enthusiasm
1958	Every Trade Has its Female Champion
1959	Women, Muster Sky-high Energy and Make a Greater Contribution!
1960	A New Stage for the Women's Liberation Movement in China
1961	Women, Make a Greater Contribution to this Year's Agricultural Harvest
1962	Women-related Work should be More Practical, Deeper, and More Meticulous
1963	Women, Struggle for New Victories
1964	Women, Carry Forward the Revolutionary Spirit to Strive for New Victories
1965	Setting Ambitious Revolutionary Goals, Work Hard to Enhance Capabilities — The March 8 International Women's Labor Day
1966	Prioritize Politics and Give Fuller Play to the Great Role of Women

Source: Adapted from Jin (2006, 176–179).

7. For further detail on the March 8 editorials of the *People's Daily*, refer to Jin (2006, 176–179).

As indicated in the above table, Chinese state media emphasized the political significance of women's roles by honoring working women and highlighting the value of labor. It was through labor that women could realize their social value and earn recognition from the state.

In this social atmosphere, a tall and sturdy physique, along with a candid and decisive manner, became defining features of women as principal socialist figures and standard for beauty at the time. As North Korea completed its socialist transformation before China, it naturally set a precedent for China to follow. North Korean women involved in this transformation, such as Yi Sinja, perfectly embodied the ideal of feminine beauty for China at that time. Consequently, North Korean women were portrayed in Chinese media as socialist women with strong bodies and a passion for labor. The beauty of strength, socialist ardor, and sacrifice they displayed were viewed as virtues "worthy of admiration by Chinese youth," as Han Yuchen noted (Han 1962).

A period's zeitgeist always captures the attention of the literary world. During the 1950s and early 1960s in Chinese literature, women who lacked traditional feminine traits were celebrated as socialist laborers. A notable example can be found in the story of Huang Gang, *Young Lady Yi Sinja* (*Li Xinzi guniang*), published in the 11th issue of *Beijing Literature* (Huang 1963), and included in Huang Gang's *Collection of Features on North Korea* by Writers Publishing House the same year. Using the genre of reportage,<sup>8</sup> Huang Gang introduced to Chinese readers the figure of Yi Sinja, a model worker during North Korea's first Five-Year Plan for socialist development, conveying his understanding of a typical socialist figure.

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8. As understood here, "reportage" is a form of prose somewhere between the news story and fiction, blending the characteristics of journalism and literature. It demands truthfulness while employing literary language and various artistic techniques. It must depict real people and events accurately, reporting them promptly and effectively through vivid plots and representative details. Similar to a news bulletin, reportage excels in quickly delivering on-the-ground events to readers. However, unlike standard newspaper articles, it presents its content in a vivid and engaging manner. It brings circumstances and characters to life with graphic and lively descriptions, aiming to immerse readers in personal experiences and communicate the author's intended message through concrete and realistic depictions of life (Mao 1937, 622).

*Young Lady Yi Sinja* consists of six chapters. Chapters 1 to 4 recount the true story of Yi Sinja, a propagandist who helps Kim Oksun, a typical backward farmer, gradually progress in her thinking and actively participate in socialist labor. Chapters 5 and 6 describe North Korean leader Kim Il-sung's meeting with Yi Sinja, his visit to the village of Rihyeon-ri, and the transformation of Rihyeon-ri's outlook. Huang Gang adopts an objective approach, depicting the natural environment of Rihyeon-ri and the psychological changes, behaviors, and language of the people in need of reform. In contrast, Huang subtly portrays Yi Sinja, the protagonist, in only two scenarios. These *understatements* not only enhance the truthfulness and imagery of reportage but also embody the key socialist role of North Korean women, vividly revealing their character.

In the first scenario, Huang Gang, writing from the perspective of an observer, portrays Yi Sinja's appearance in a single sentence:

Sinja lowers her head and strokes the furbelow of her large, overused, cotton-padded military overcoat with her thick fingers. (Huang 1963, 89; emphasis added)

In the writer's view, Yi Sinja appears rough. Her "thick fingers" suggest manual labor, while her "large, overused, cotton-padded military overcoat" obscures her gender. During this era, women were transformed from aesthetic objects of desire into subjects of labor, and their clothing reflected the politics and culture of the time (Zeng 2017, 39–43). Similarly, Chinese women were encouraged to adopt "*renmin* clothing and work wear,"<sup>9</sup> which downplayed feminine features and embodied the political and cultural significance of socialist working women. Huang Gang encapsulates the external traits of a socialist woman laborer with two simplified expressions: "thick fingers" and "large, overused, cotton-padded military overcoat."

In the second scenario, Huang Gang illustrates the internal character of Yi Sinja through the perspective of North Korea's supreme leader, Kim Il-sung:

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9. For a detailed discussion of the cultural significance of Chinese women wearing *renmin* clothing and workwear, refer to Zeng (2017, 39–43).

As Yi Sinja raises questions, Comrade Kim Il-sung looks at the attentive girl in rather plain apparel, who has high cheekbones, a rosy face, and a stout physique. Before the interview, her exemplary deeds and performances had been told to the Supreme Leader. She is a new Korean youth who grew up during the war and made a great contribution to the construction of her hometown. At this moment, however, what is more noteworthy at the meeting was that Yi Sinja's manner of speech and intelligence were not as gentle and simple as people usually said. She has a special expression of maturity and understanding on her face. When she tilts her head and takes notes on what is said at the meeting, she seems to be listening attentively to the opinions of others while thinking hard on her own accord. Sometimes when she talks to a companion who is a demobilized soldier and task force leader, Yi Sinja keeps gesticulating and opening her arms. During an argument, she flips her notebook, taps the table with a pencil in her hand, or waves the pencil back and forth in front of her eyes. In short, her expression and movement are very strong, determined, and courageous with alacrity. She is calm and composed when she stands up to speak, holding her outlines on a scrap of paper in her hand. All this manifests Yi Sinja's character: like an iron fist in a velvet glove, with fully self-disciplined willpower and modest intellect... (Huang 1963, 121–122; emphasis added)

The above paragraph is the longest and most detailed description of Yi Sinja in *Young Lady Yi Sinja*. It clearly represents Kim Il-sung's perspective, a third party in the work, rather than the writer's own view. This ensures the objectivity of Yi Sinja's portrayal by Huang Gang. Additionally, it indicates that Yi Sinja is a character shaped by the power discourse. There are two noteworthy points in this paragraph.

First, while describing Yi Sinja's external character from Kim Il-sung's perspective, Huang Gang aligns his views with those of the Supreme Leader, portraying women as the new force of socialism.

In Kim Il-sung's view, Yi Sinja is described as having a sturdy physique and wearing simple clothing. This portrayal aligns with the writer's own words: "Yi Sinja strokes the furbelow of her large, overused, cotton-padded

military overcoat with her thick fingers.” Through his own perspective and that of Kim Il-sung, Huang Gang emphasized Yi Sinja’s identity as a youth while deliberately downplaying her feminine traits to highlight her role as a principal figure in socialist society. Furthermore, women as key agents of socialism were characterized through such descriptions as “stout body,” “thick fingers,” “very plain apparel,” “large, overused, cotton-padded military overcoat,” and “youth who grew up during the war.”

The second concerns the inner character of Yi Sinja as seen from the perspective of Kim Il-sung. According to the above passage, Kim Il-sung observed “intelligence” and “maturity” in Yi Sinja through her “attentive listening,” “insightful thinking,” “flipping notebooks,” “tapping the table,” and “calm, composed speech.” Kim Il-sung believed that Yi Sinja was no meek and simple person, but rather strong-willed, resolute, agile, and courageous, embodying the essence of an iron fist in a velvet glove, with a strong will combined with humility and reason. As Yi Sinja was “humble and rational” and remained focused on her work, she became, in Kim Il-sung’s eyes, a new socialist youth with both intelligence and courage, which starkly contrasted with the traditional saying, *a woman without talent is virtuous*. Like many other North Korean women portrayed in the Chinese media, Yi Sinja, from Kim Il-sung’s perspective, participated equally in social production and political affairs, devoid of traditional feminine traits such as dependence and obedience. Instead, she exhibited an independent personality, autonomy, and self-reliance, alongside noble human qualities such as intelligence, courage, humility, stability, composure, and fortitude. This is precisely the beauty of the socialist personality and the significance of women in principal socialist roles that Huang Gang constructed through the perspective of Kim Il-sung.

After being molded to fill a principal socialist role, Yi Sinja “not only gains a strong ability to comprehend the Party’s guidelines and policies with unwavering conviction, but also becomes adept at swiftly reporting and resolving issues. She is meticulous in handling matters related to the people’s needs and excels in getting things done with carefulness, determination, and decisiveness” (Huang 1963, 123). At the same time, “she considers and addresses a wide range of issues with a strong sense of responsibility in every

activity” (Huang 1963, 107). It is clear that she sees herself as a true master of her country. This is in line with the “female model worker” standard first set in China in 1960.

Through his own perspective and that of North Korean authorities, Huang Gang applied several descriptive labels to Yi Sinja, such as having “thick fingers,” of “stout body,” a “youth who grew up during the war,” a “rational character of fortitude, resilience, agility, and courage,” of “firm stance,” with the “ability to understand the Party’s guidelines and policies,” and “good at getting things done in a careful, resolute, and decisive way.” Huang emphasized Yi’s healthy physique, necessary for the socialist principal role she occupied, and endowed her with an ideology as sound as her robust body. When the perspectives of the writer and authorities were aligned, Yi Sinja ultimately became a socialist principal role as an ideal laborer with national stance, intelligence, and ability. A laboring physique combined with political consciousness rendered Yi Sinja gender-ambiguous. As Wang Yingxiu noted, it would have been impossible to find feminine characteristics in Yi Sinja as described by Huang had there been no references to her braided hair and dress and the term “girl.” This was the key socialist role occupied by North Korean women when great emphasis was placed on collectivism. Huang emphasized that North Korean women achieved their socialist principal roles through labor and the process of degendering under the Party’s indoctrination. In so doing, he illustrated to the Chinese readership a pathway for integrating themselves into the new national order—a lifestyle characterized by mutual assistance, shared improvement, and collective advancement. This approach involved “pushing forward the collective innovation movement in production while educating and reforming workers” and in making “great efforts to carry forward true collective heroism and create an unprecedented miracle” (Y. Wang 1962b).

### **Conclusion: After Becoming a Role Model**

In the early 1960s, within the national discourse, Chinese media and writers presented a pathway for Chinese citizens to integrate into the socialist order

by reshaping the labor image of North Korean women as principal agents of socialism. This reflects social and cultural logic in two respects.

First, in the 1950s and 1960s, labor held special significance in the socialist PRC. Productive labor was seen as the driving force of history, making hard work the sole means for individuals to prove themselves worthy citizens and thus was considered a virtue (Song 2012, 118). Those who did not engage in labor would be sidelined by history and would not find their place in the national order. During this period, women of this new China were encouraged to emerge from the home and compete with men in factories and workshops. They transcended the traditional gender division of labor by operating, improving, and even upgrading the large-scale industrial machinery previously the exclusive domain of men. Only through labor could women integrate into the new national order and achieve principal status. In this social and cultural context, North Korea, having completed its socialist transformation ahead of China, naturally set a precedent for China to follow. Chinese youth were encouraged to emulate the ardor, physical strength, and spirit of sacrifice exhibited by North Korean women who participated in the social and economic transformation of the country. Therefore, by emphasizing the physical features and ideological consciousness of North Korean women, Chinese media and writers constructed a principal socialist role whose political consciousness and personal thought were unified through labor under the Party's guidance, thereby solidifying the socialist vision of a new China.

Second, following the Great Leap Forward, China experienced a period of economic adjustment and faced a labor shortage. In response, Chinese authorities began to emphasize the importance of women's roles in the workforce. In this context, Chinese media and writers promoted the principal status of the new socialist woman, encouraging women to integrate into the new national order through labor. They celebrated the tall, stout, candid, and energetic North Korean women who embodied such ideals, presenting them as role models devoid of traditional femininity.

Considering this social and cultural logic, labor was of great significance in the formation of a female principal role in China, becoming a symbol of the women's liberation movement for gender equality. Women became

political tools adept at following the instructions of the state. By portraying North Korean women as loyal laborers of the North Korean Workers' Party, Chinese media and writers emphasized the power of women in the success of socialist development, praising the significance of socialist labor. This was intended to publicize the role of women's labor in promoting national development and the positive effect of labor on the formation of women's principal status. In a sense, China and North Korea shared the same socialist community and social and cultural attributes at that time. This common political implication for the women's liberation movement was evident in both countries during the early stages of socialist development. The North Korean working women portrayed in Chinese media and Chinese reportage in the early 1960s actually appeared in North Korean films in the 1990s. At that time, North Korean films used advertising and pedagogical purposes to portray the image of women as strong laborers who devoted their lives to their country and hometowns (Lim and Shin 2000, 267–268). This phenomenon also reflects the uniform way women were perceived in China and North Korea within the cultural framework of socialist societies.

Unlike the early 1960s, it is now difficult to find stories about North Korean women in Chinese media. However, during major international sports events, reports often focus on women's physical beauty. For instance, during the 2023 Asian Games in Hangzhou, a Chinese news report on North Korean women emphasized their beauty, as reflected in their headlines.<sup>10</sup> Netizens who saw North Korean athletes visiting West Lake praised them for being as good-looking as stars.<sup>11</sup> These reports, issued by new media platforms such as Tencent and Zhihu, which are freer than official

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10. *Tencent News*, "Chaoxian shige san nian canjia guoji bisai, Hangzhou ya yunhui jiang pai meinu laladui!" 朝鲜时隔3年参加国际比赛, 杭州亚运会将派美女啦啦队! (North Korea Will Participate in International Competitions for the First Time in Three Years, Will Send a Beautiful Cheerleading Team to the Hangzhou Asian Games!), May 17, 2023. <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20230517A05XT000> (retrieved January 30, 2024).

11. *Zhihu*, "Wangyou ouyu chaoxian yundongyuan guang xihu, chengzan qi yanzhi bu shu mingxing" 网友偶遇朝鲜运动员逛西湖, 称赞其颜值不输明星 (Netizens Spot North Korean Athletes Strolling around West Lake and Praise Their Beauty, Comparing Them to Celebrities), September 26, 2023. <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/658539134> (retrieved January 30, 2024).

counterparts, represent public viewpoints. In the comment sections, netizens left messages about the North Korean athletes: “Like hibiscus standing tall on clear water, pollution-free, pure natural beauty!” “Sheer beauty”; “With rich inner spirit, appearance turns out to be more dignified, demure, beautiful and unrestrained.” It is clear that the Chinese public’s perception of North Korean women today is vastly different from that of the early 1960s. However, today’s emphasis on natural feminine beauty parallels the way Chinese media in the early 1960s depicted North Korean women as gender-ambiguous laborers in order to set socialist aesthetic standards. In the past as now, depictions of women on the Korean peninsula by the Chinese media or the general public have always been based on China’s position and the real needs of its social and cultural development.

Since the early 20th century, Chinese representations of Korean women have evolved across various historical contexts. Initially portrayed negatively, they later came to be depicted as model female citizens defined by maternal love, patriotism, and resilience in overcoming war and hardship, and as role models embodying socialist values. This evolution highlights how Korean women became central figures in Chinese historical narratives. In the early 1960s, North Korean women were viewed in China as socialist role models, but how has their image evolved since then? How does this relate to the rise of the image of South Korean women in China? Furthermore, how are these developments connected to the representations of South Korea and North Korea as constructed in China? Answering these questions will allow us to better understand the overall evolution of Chinese images of Korean women in the 20th century and will be the focus of the author’s future research.

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