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Modern, Feminine and Bright: Kim Jong-un's First Lady

by Darcie Draudt

In any juicy celebrity marriage worth its salt, the details of a public figure's beloved inevitably seem to have been spun under the care of skilled PR professionals. To an even greater degree, Wednesday's confirmation of Kim Jong-un's marriage is reasonably met with a certain degree of suspicion. This is no chic Sarkozy-Bruni, nor the darling William-Kate. When the marriage of Kim Jong-un was a long-held secret it seems particularly suspicious, and the added mystique of North Korean secrecy makes it all the more sensational.

The Kim-centric Rumor Mill | Sparked by a photo released by the KCNA on July 9 from a performance of the [Moran Band's not-so-traditionally Korean performance](#) earlier this month in Pyongyang, the international media circuit

scrambled to guess the identity the mysterious woman sitting next to the DPRK leader, along with their relationship.

For the following weeks, speculation of her identity wove a tale that identified her as North Korean pop star Hyon Song-wol (often pointing to her patriotic ode to feminine factory work, [here with subtitles](#)). Ostensibly Hyon grew close to the Kim progeny while both spent time getting “Westernized” at a Swiss boarding school, the story goes, eventually leading to Kim Jong-il’s disapproval of his son’s relationship. After their forced split, South Korean sources speculate that Hyon married a high-level military official.

Sorry Ladies, He’s Taken | One Wednesday evening, in a North Korean television report covering Kim Jong-un’s visit to a new amusement park, the “[Rungna People’s Pleasure Ground](#),” the announcer identified the woman, whose identity and relationship were previously only the subject of speculation, as Ri Sol-ju. If we’re to follow a report released by the ROK National Intelligence Service, Ri was born in 1989 in a “normal home” and married Jong-un in 2009.

In the South Korean media—which by its very nature revels in celebrity gossip of any sort—speculation about Ri is characteristically rampant. Many are now trying to connect Ri to a different singer from the Unhasu Orchestra, also named Ri Sol-ju ([here in a 2011 performance](#)), pointing to their similar appearance ([from her “round face” to “the same snaggletooth”](#)). One South Korean news outlet even [consulted plastic surgeons](#) as experts on facial comparison to link photographs and videos of a various North Korean girls to official photos of the DPRK First Lady.



Yonhap News compiled these photos to support their claim that the girl on the left, as well as in the middle, are Ri Sol-ju. The left picture was part of an inter-Korean event in Mt. Kumgang in 2003, and the middle picture was taken of a girl who participated on the cheering squad for DPRK at the Asian Athletics Championships held in Incheon, South Korea, in 2005.

Others deny that the singer Ri and Kim's wife are the same person. Despite similar appearances, [Cheong Seong-chang](#), a senior fellow at the Sejong Institute in Seoul, claims the Ri Sol-ju who is the wife of Kim Jong-un is actually graduate of Kim Il-sung University who majored in the natural sciences. Yonhap News [points out](#) though two may share the same name in Korean, they use different Chinese characters to write their name which signals they could be different people.

It's easy to be suspicious and conjecture that Ri's identity has been propagandistically finagled into a suitable figure as First Lady to the DPRK. Just as is the case with any North Korean public figure, it's likely her official story differs from the factual historical one.^[1]

The Public First Lady, a New Kind of Woman? | Interest in this woman is derived not of her qualities as a Comrade but through her relationship to the leader. However, she, like Go Young-hee before her, may figure prominently in "stabilizing" the 20-something leader, portraying him as a family man when his young age has been cited as a potential handicap in the DPRK public eye. In fact, logistically speaking it was a military-led effort back in 2002 to position Go Young-hee as "respected mother" that led to her sons' being positioned for succession over other Kim Jong-il heirs (Lim 2012).

So, while lineage drawn through his father and grandfather is undoubtedly his most important family relation, Kim Jong-un's current persona is also being grounded by two *female* figures: now we see Jong-un is not only a son of the noble Comrade Go Young-hee, but the husband of one as well. The next question is: is this revelation merely a political move, showing the new leader as a "family man" for the North Korean, or does it say something more about how the new leadership will view women?



Kim Il Sung Style Meets Modern First Lady Archetype | Image KCNA, via National Post News

The Importance of the Surface | To begin with, Comrade Ri *looks* different. This fact hasn't gone unnoticed by American media outlets, from the Huffington Post's comment about her "cute peep-toe pumps" (in "[New First Lady Remains a Style Mystery](#)") to one *Washington Post* blogger's facetious suggestion that the "international woman of mystery" may be prime editorial content for fashion mags ("[New Bride Ready for the Vogue Treatment](#)").

But her (staged) differences may be more substantive than just her following cosmopolitan footwear trends, when taken in context. She's seen walking with her husband arm-in-arm, "looking at things." This rarely if ever happened under Kim Jong-il, whose family was practically always hidden. In a nation where women were banned from riding bicycles or wearing hair in anything other than the "[socialist style](#)," it is certainly meaningful that this now-official First Lady has neatly trimmed hair and wears fitted Western-style clothing with above-the-knee hemlines.

In contrast, according to one of our analysts who recently visited DPRK, among the general public there is little Western influence on clothing there and preferred styles tend to be drab communist suits. Ri's smart, brightly colored outfits are a big departure from the norm, actual and official. She is not walking around in *hanbok* or drab conservative socialist outfits, which she could have been ordered to wear.

Conclusion | Kim Jong-un has publicly confirmed his commitment to the military first policy (선군) preferred by his predecessors. Some scoff at the suggestion this glimpse of his family life may reflect a “Westernization” or potential opening of North Korea. We’ve recently witnessed reports of Kim Jong-un’s cultural departures, including a policy lifting bans on women wearing pants, his penchant for foreign foods such as pizza, and watching an unlicensed Mickey Mouse on a Pyongyang stage. These changes may only be cosmetic, and any conclusion based on Ri’s short hairstyle, fitted dresses, or high-heeled shoes seem a bit premature. But in a sea of stoic male faces in military garb, the unquestionably Western and modern Ri is a significant symbolic presence of what modern femininity may come to mean in North Korea.

References | Lim, Jae-chon. “North Korea’s Hereditary Succession: Comparing Two Key Transitions in the DPRK.” *Asian Survey*, 52, No. 3 (May/June 2012): 550-570.

[1] Recently SinoNK analyzed the importance of [canonizing the mother figure](#) for producing and reproducing the nation. Though her past is even murkier, Jong-un’s mother, Go Young-hee, has recently been promoted and constructed through a film that positions her (under another name) as companion to Kim Il-sung, an upstanding comrade who supported Il-sung and trained her son Jong-un. Though it’s generally accepted she was a performer in the elite Mansudae Art Troupe in the 1970s, her story in the film seems to be reduced to her role as mother.