

Ko Young-hee: Joseon's Nameless, Newly Canonized Mother

by Darcie Draudt

As the *Rodong Sinmun* recently asserted, [family is the ultimate national defense](#). Presumably part of the effort to defend the supreme leader against [questions about his leadership](#), Kim Jong-un's own hereditary pedigree is being bolstered through a recently released [cinematic narrative](#) of his mother, Ko Young-hee (고영희 [高英姬]), third wife of Kim Jong-il. A copy of a 2011 documentary about Young-hee was screened for party cadres back in May, subsequently procured by RENK, a Japanese NGO, and has [finally been released](#) to the general public by the efforts of DailyNK. The existence and steadily widening propagation of the film has led to [new international attention](#) on the personality propaganda related to Kim clan lineage.

The film's photographic footage comes from the 1990s, focusing on her relationships with the Kims Jong-il and Jong-un, including her support and dedication during the March of Tribulation.



Ko Young with Kim Jong-un

The Next Great Mother | Titled “The Beloved Mother of the Great Songun Korea” (위대한 선군 조선의 어머니님 [伟大的先军朝鲜母亲]) the film omits any mention of her life as a dancer and certainly her birth in Osaka. This is the first official recognition of her as mother of Kim Jong-un, though there were attempts in the late 1990s to elevate her status that ended upon her death in 2004. The film refers to her as “dear comrade” to the former and mother to the latter. In the film she’s given the name Lee Un-sil but is mostly called “Our Respected Mother.” It is significant both politically for the Kim regime and theoretically for women’s roles in North Korea that the film makes no mention of the name “Go Young-hee” or her historical life, since her birth in Osaka and family background in the lowest levels of the [songbun system](#) make her a threat to the “pure” bloodline of Jong-un.

A Songbun Cinderella | Go’s father Kim Tae-mun, born on Jeju Island in 1920 while Korea was under Japanese colonial rule, moved to join his father in Japan in the 1930s to the Tsuruhashi district in Osaka, notable for its concentration of ethnic Koreans. There he learned judo and became one of the most famous and skilled Korean judo athletes. In 1952, Ko Young-hee ([née Ko Hui-hoon \[고희훈\]](#)) was born in Osaka. Because of his prowess in judo, Kim Tae-mun and his family were moved in 1961 to Pyongyang as part of Kim Il-sung’s program initiated in December 1959 to repatriate ethnic Koreans living in Japan to DPRK. He became so famous in Pyongyang that even today he’s known as the “[father of North Korean judo.](#)”

Because of his increased influence and promotion in *songbun* levels, the pretty and graceful Young-hee was able to join the Mansudae Art Troup in around 1970. Kokita Kiyohito, writer at the *Asahi Shimbun*, likens her story to [that of Cinderella](#), rising from lowly Osaka beginnings to become consort to the Great Leader.



Image of record of Ko Young-hee’s listing in Mansudae | Image via Daily NK

This sort of story may make for dramatic fodder popular in Korean broadcasts, but for the purity of their newly appointed leader threatens his legitimacy as a pure son of the DPRK. [1] However, even this aspect could work depending on the right spin. A former high-ranking Chongryon official said a legend about Kim Jong-un [could be constructed as follows](#):

Ko Tae Mun carried on the will of Jeju islanders who fought bravely under the guidance of Kim Il Sung. After fleeing to Japan, he returned to North Korea to be embraced by the greatness of Kim. Ko gave up his life to serve as a soldier for Kim. Kim Jong Un would be an individual who carried on the great revolutionary bloodline from Jeju.

Political spin, for sure, but at least it incorporates the problem of omitting history. Indeed, it might even work to evolve the notion of lineage. This isn't the first time the purity of the Kim blood has been contested. As [Ko Young-ki](#) of the DailyNK points out:

This [covering up of her birthplace] is all the more ironic since Koh [Ko Young-hee] is also a long way short of being the first "returnee" to make the highest grade in North Korea. For what is Kim Il Sung, if not a returnee

himself? The North Korean founder left North Korea with his father Kim Hyung Jik when he was 14 and moved to Jilin Province, China. It was only later that he would “return” under the wing of the Soviet Union.

Just as the returnee status of Kim Il-sung has been brushed under the rug, Young-hee’s existence has been bounded within the North Korean geography and Kim clan, perpetuating the self-contained nature of their lineage.

Party Mother | Though much focus is paid in the film to the idea of “pure bloodlines” and concurrent legitimacy in the DPRK context, the film’s attention to Ko contains a much stronger ideological implication: Constructed narratives of the Great Leader(s)’s mother speaks also to the figure of “mother” in North Korean sociopolitical constructs. Generally speaking, the mother writ large has long been a metaphor for the nation, and so the Great Mother plays a special role. Diction used to describe the nation speaks not of the father but of the mother; indeed, the word used for the homeland in Korean, though translated as “fatherland” in English, is “motherland” in Korean (*cho-guk*). The *Rodong Sinmun* explained the metaphor in 2003:

The Great Rule Comrade Kim Jong Il has remarked, ‘Building the party into a mother party means that just as a mother deeply loves her children and cares warmly for them, so must the party take responsibility for the fate of the people, looking after them even in the smallest matters, and become a true guide and protector of the masses. (in B.R. Myers *The Cleanest Race*, 2010:79)

With the Party thusly imagined as maternal, we might argue the feminine progenitor becomes a personalized extension of the political structure. At times Kim Il-sung had been imagined as an amalgamated father/mother figure to the Korean people, to be sure; for the actual mother of the leader, her role is strictly maternal in a desexualized way full of responsibility for people and Party.

Mothers for the Nation | On the local and theoretical level, individual mothers in DPRK are to be pure citizens who literally and figuratively produce and reproduce the nation. Instead of looking at liberating women as the marker for women’s status in social revolution, [Suzy Kim](#) (Professor of Korean Language and Culture at Rutgers University) invokes [Foucault’s theory of discipline and governmentality](#) by focusing instead on how “subjectivities are created and shaped rather than assuming that there is an authentic subject to be liberated at all.” In the context of North Korean social revolution, mothers were imagined as the “most sacrificial model citizen” and motherhood was the model for “construct[ing] not only women’s revolutionary subjectivity but all North Koreans” (S. Kim 2010:745). In this way, canonizing Ko Young-hee is a way to reify model citizenship for all

North Koreans. Here is a woman who lovingly waits for her son's return from school or dutifully knits a sweater for her husband as a gift. Like Kim Jong-suk and the guerilla women of North Korean myth, she is good with handguns, which she provides to her son as a "Songun mother." She is praised for her place in this leading family, and thus as a social woman provides a model for citizens as members of the national family.

As biological woman, the mother role embodies symbolic roles of women for the nation. S. Kim further argues that it was women's *reproductive roles* that made them eligible for national citizenship, fusing duties of the household to the nation-state (2010:748). In the case of Ko, it is neither her membership to the Party nor her skill as a dancer (which was, after all, her occupational contribution to the nation) that warrants her value. Rather, it is her ability to reproduce Kim Jong-il in the form of Kim Il-sung that makes her an esteemed citizen worthy of praise and "canonization."

Future Prospects for the Lineage? | With partially true, heavily-edited hagiographies and idealized accounts of their behavior and qualities, the consorts to the Kim clan are and continue to be a tool in upholding leadership. Are we catching a glimpse of the next potential [comrade/consort/mother figure](#) for North Korea? Though celebrity gossip in the guise of international news [that Jong-un has a penchant for performers just as did his father](#), official description of her relationship to Kim Jong-un will be just as interesting as the truth.

References

Kim, Suzy. "Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Volume 52, No. 4 (October 2010).

[1] The most explicit statement of how tenuous is the *songbun* status of many of the Koreans who returned from Japan in the wave of the late 1950s can be found in Kang Chol-hwan's memoir *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*; Kang's family returned to the DPRK with great patriotic visions but ended up in a North Korean prison camp.