The Feminized People and the Patriarchal State: Studying the Portrayal of Gender in North Korean Films

Josefine Edström

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Supervisor: Anna Danielsson

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Introduction: Studying the “Hermit-kingdom”

When discussed in the West, and to a certain extent even in the southern part of the peninsula, North Korea is often talked about in terms of security and stability, rather than from a developmental perspective. Current debates often focus on the potential nuclear threat of North Korea and international news media frequently covers its missile tests as provocations to international peace and security. However, it is important to acknowledge that North Korea is one of the world's poorest countries in which, as recent statistics from the UN shows, 41% of the population is undernourished (United Nations Country Team DPR Korea, 2017). Taking into consideration other aspects of development, North Korea arguably has a long way to go in regards to political development and equal human rights.

Talking about North Korea from a perspective of security in the international system and almost exclusively focusing on the North Korean regime, especially the Kim-family, overlooks the situation of the North Korean people and the poverty and abuse of human rights that they experience. Furthermore, the portrayal of the North Korean regime as North Korea while obscuring the situation of the people inside the country, risks portraying every North Korean as sympathetic to the regime and its military ambitions. As Barbara Demick shows in her book “Nothing to Envy” (2009), where she interviews North Korean refugees about their daily life in North Korea, all of the interviewees - no matter how loyal they had been to the Kim-family and the North Korean regime in the beginning - started to lose faith and hope with North Korea, whether it was from experiencing widespread famine or getting access to outside information.

Furthermore, the common belief from a Western, but also South Korean, audience that North Korea is a society that never changes or that there is no information to be gathered from the country since it is closed-off from the rest of the world, is far from the truth. It might be more difficult to study the “hermit-kingdom” of the northern Korean peninsula than other developing countries because it is in fact a rather closed-off country in which the official documents are written to portray the North Korean regime and its governance over the country in the best possible way. However, scholars have gone around this problem by for example interviewing North Korean refugees that have fled to China or South Korea, or are basing their information on statistics from international non-governmental organizations active inside the country (see for example Demick, 2009, Haggard and Noland, 2013, Lankov, 2004, Lankov, 2006 and Yu et. al., 2012).

Another perspective one can take in order to do research on North Korea is to conduct studies on the propaganda from the state itself, but instead of relying on what the regime portrays as facts, analyze the frames and discourses the regime uses in portraying the country and its people and the social constructions of reality they present (see for example Ryang, 2000 and Jung and Dalton, 2006). North Korean scholars have previously analyzed different aspects of
poverty in the country and related this to economic and political development, or taken a perspective that is more based upon social development such as issues regarding human rights. Gender equality is one of the issues that arguably falls under the last point but has cross-cutting political and economic dimensions at the same time. North Korean scholars show that gender relations in North Korean society has changed during the history of the state related to political, economic and societal issues in the country (see for example Jung and Dalton, 2006 and Haggard and Noland, 2013).

In order to contribute to studies on gender in North Korea, this paper will study what discourses the regime uses in its propaganda by analyzing the portrayal of gender in North Korean films. From this perspective one can discuss how the North Korean regime constructs social reality, problems in society and solutions to these problems, especially related to the portrayal of gender. Previous studies of North Korea from a developmental perspective have gathered information about the hard-to-access country from, for example, refugees (see Haggard and Noland, 2013), by studying tourism in North Korea (see Kim et. al., 2007) and to some extent by analyzing discourses influencing the rhetoric of the regime (see Ryang, 2000). Finding different types of material to analyze in order to better understand the development situation in North Korea is of vital importance since it is difficult to access data from within the country. This study will therefore contribute to gaining further knowledge about the developmental situation in North Korea by analyzing the material of propaganda films.

**Aim and Research Questions**

In the light of the issues discussed above, this paper aims to further explore development issues in North Korea, specifically the situation of women, by analyzing North Korean films from a gender perspective. The purpose of this study is mainly to study the portrayal of gender roles in North Korean society and the discourses that these portrayals stem from. As Ryang (2000) argues, there has been a lack of research on the frames and discourses the North Korean regime uses in its propaganda, and this paper aims to contribute to research on North Korea from a discursive perspective, especially focusing on gender. Besides from being an empirical contribution to gender studies in the North Korean context, this study also aims to be a methodological contribution to understand a country - in which reliable information is hard to access - better, by analyzing the material of propaganda films.

The North Korean film industry was given a lot of attention and resources under the second leader of the country, Kim Jong-il, and really came to have a substantial impact as propaganda in the 1970s (Kim, 2010). Therefore, the films analyzed in this study are taken from the 1970s and onwards, the most recent film being from 2006. The reason for choosing films over this timespan is to see if there are some constant ways of portraying gender by the regime, but also if current societal issues in North Korea are talked about in the films and how this relates to how the regime frames and portrays gender. Following the arguments
made above, the main research question this essay will aim to answer is thus: how is gender portrayed in North Korean films with female main characters from the 1970s to 2006?

Besides from contributing to studies on gender in a North Korean context which is the main purpose of this study, analyzing the portrayal of gender in propaganda films could potentially contribute to studies on gender in propaganda more generally. Even though gender studies have been conducted in former socialist states and research about propaganda has been conducted as well, there is a lack of research combining these two elements. Chatterjee (1999) summarizes the field of research on gender in Soviet propaganda, but while there has been some research on the topic, gendered analysis of propaganda film is limited.

**Propaganda Film and Gender**

There are several studies done on socialist propaganda, especially in the Soviet Union, and to limit the previous research on this topic that will presented in this section, the main focus will be on studies of gender in propaganda. Since North Korea is a socialist country that is built upon Marxist-Leninist ideology, this section will focus on previous gendered studies on propaganda in socialist countries since this is where the North Korean regime has taken much of its inspiration from (see Gabroussenko, 2010). As argued earlier, there is a lack of gendered analyses of propaganda film, therefore, this section will present previous research done on gender in propaganda more generally, not only in propaganda films. Since North Korean propaganda is based upon Socialist ideas from the Soviet Union, research done on the portrayal of gender in propaganda in this context will be presented in order to later see if the findings from existing research of how socialist regimes portrayed gender can be used when analyzing the portrayal of gender in North Korean films.

In her paper “Ideology, Gender and Propaganda in the Soviet Union: A Historical Survey”, Chatterjee (1999) summarizes several studies made on gender in Soviet propaganda. She argues that even though women's equal rights were officially promoted in the Soviet Union, in reality, Soviet was far from a gender equal society. Bolshevik ideology was ambiguous in that it wanted to draw women into the public sphere but traditional gender connotations still prevailed and women were exhorted to be mothers to the society at large. Bonnell (1998) describes how female icons were often seen as unnecessary or even hostile to ‘socialist revolution’ and positive female models eventually became subordinated to their male counterparts. Most of Bolshevik history portrayed men as the main revolutionaries who were the center of important socialist events in Soviet history. This means that in Soviet propaganda, men were given the main roles, but this is not the case in North Korean film industry, at least not to the same extent. Several North Korean films have female main characters, and therefore this study will analyze films with female main characters in order to better understand North Korean propaganda and discourses of gender used by the regime in propaganda film.
Chatterjee (1999) concludes that: “the notion of the female comrade as articulated in Bolshevik propaganda was not the unencumbered self of liberal theory, the bearer of individual rights. Rather, it was the situated self or the communitarian self, whose identity was located in the intersection of the obligations of social justice, the commonweal, and the Party. A woman's identity was imagined in terms of her relationship to the family, children, community, and state, but not necessarily in that order” (p. 22). In the gendered analysis of North Korean films, this emphasis of loyalty to the state or the party before all else would also be interesting to look for.

Furthermore, according to Reid (1998) in her article on representations of gender in Soviet art of the late 1930s: “the audience for images directly promoting the Stalin cult was imagined as female, and spectatorship was construed as an act of 'feminine' identification and submission” (p. 172). North Korean gender scholars have also discussed the portrayal of the North Korean people as being “in love” with the masculine Kim-leaders, which we will see in the following section of this paper.

**Existing Research on North Korea**

Research about North Korea has taken off during the last two decades, which some scholars argue is related to the fact that it was during this time that South Korea became democratized and thus the heavy anti-communist rhetoric lessened and South Korean scholars could now study their northern neighbours more freely (see Kim et. al 2011). Today, North Korea is analyzed within different fields of research with scholars studying the country from many perspectives. However, if one looks upon studies of North Korea in general, the major research done on North Korea is from a perspective of international peace and security. North Korea is often framed as a ‘threat’ to international stability and is studied in terms of how the international community should deal with this threat. Fewer studies are done on the country from a developmental perspective, even though development scholars have studied the hard-to-access country to some extent, focusing on material such as official documents, statements from the Kim-family, testimonies from refugees or their own (although limited) experiences of being in North Korea (see for example Ryang, 2000 and Haggard and Noland, 2013).

The following section of this paper will present research previously done on gender in North Korea as well as research on North Korean propaganda within film and literature, in order to make use of existing research about these topics in the theoretical framework used to analyze North Korean films from a gender perspective in this study.

**Research on Gender in North Korea**

Studies on gender in North Korea have discussed issues such as how the nexus of Confucianism and Socialism have affected women in the country. In “Gender in Oblivion:
Women in the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea”, Ryang (2000) studies Kim Il-sung’s words from a discursive perspective and argues that: “the category “woman” and the notion “gender” are systematically omitted in the corpus of his work” (p. 324). She argues that it is not primarily the tradition of male superiority within neo-Confucianism that has affected the question of women in North Korea, but that it is the paternal leadership cult and its discourses that have made the construction of the category of woman impossible. She uses first-hand information from her own visits to the country in the 1980s to argue that there is no discussion about “the woman question” in North Korea. The female figure in Kim Il-sung’s speeches is either depicted as a mother or part of the youth in society, and he frequently mentions children, youths, mothers and men as social categories of people, but never women as a category of its own.

Ryang (2000) further argues that in the discourse of the leadership cult “Kim Il Sung is depicted as the benevolent father, whose love and wise guidance the nation must reciprocate with eternal love and loyalty. [...] What is notable is a monotonous repetition of how much he loves North Korean people and how grateful people are to him in return” (p. 340). Ryang calls this the ‘state-engineered process of the production of love and loyalty discourse’ and argues that the North Korean people, both male and female, are playing the stereotypical ‘female’ role in romantic stories, in which the female is depicted as passive and submissive to the man. She goes on to explain that this has the consequence of feminizing the population, both men and women, which conceals gender inequality in society.

Another major theme discussed in previous research on gender in North Korea relates to how the role of women have changed as society itself has changed. In “Rhetoric Versus Reality for the Women of North Korea: Mothers of the Revolution”, Jung and Dalton (2006) give a historical overview of women’s policy in North Korea and discuss the roles of women in different aspects of society. They argue that the discourse of the Juche ideology [주체사상] (which will be described more in detail later in this paper), based upon self-reliance, in general describes women as equals to men, which can be seen in official documents such as Article 62 of the 1972 Constitution, but that Kim Il-sung constantly talked about the importance of women as ‘revolutionized mothers’ and that their primary role was to instruct their children.

Jung and Dalton (ibid.) argue that, as in other communist states, women are equal to men officially but are living under persistent patriarchal social values in reality, but that the North Korean context differs from other communist states in that gender inequality was pushed into the private sphere in, for example, the Soviet Union while in North Korea it is still very prevalent at the surface through the analogy of the father and the leadership cult which recasts the whole nation in line with patriarchal family structures. This, along with Confucian values in East Asia which has diffused the line between the public and private sphere, has made the state North Korean exceptionally pervasive in all spaces in society.
North Korean Propaganda and Film History

In order to analyze North Korean films effectively, basic knowledge of North Korean film history and North Korean propaganda in general is arguably necessary. Therefore, a brief section on the literary influences of North Korean literature and film, as well as an introduction to the ideas behind North Korean propaganda will be presented below.

Scholars studying North Korean literature often emphasize the influence of the Soviet Union and its socialist ideas on literary works in the northern Korean peninsula. As Gabroussenko (2010) argues in her book “Soldiers on the Cultural Front: Developments in the Early History of North Korean Literature and Literacy Policy”, North Korean literature and propaganda was originally inspired from the Soviets, especially in terms of the impoverishment and empowerment of the Korean peasantry, anti-industrialism and Marxist class struggle. Gabroussenko also writes that different Soviet cultural images and clichés were (and still are) used in North Korean literature such as the image of ‘the industrial paradise’ in which the country is portrayed as being technically sophisticated with great living and working conditions while hushing human costs of this. One contrast still embedded in North Korean propaganda that stem from this image is that of martyrdom and the happy socialist worker.

However, North Korean literature is not entirely based on Soviet ideas regarding Socialism. Gabroussenko (2010) agrees that North Korean literature also has an essential core of anti-colonialism, ethnocentrism and Korean Confucian values. In “The Origins of North Korean Cinema: Art and Propaganda”, Armstrong (2002) describes that the North Korean film industry began by being influenced by Japan and the Soviet Union. But by analyzing the first North Korean film called “My Hometown” [내 고향] from 1949, Armstrong argues that the propaganda focuses on the role of Kim Il-sung in liberating Korea form the Japanese - not even mentioning Soviet - and that the film is technically influenced by Soviet but the narrative is more distinctively ‘Korean’ since it is more melodramatic. Armstrong comes to the conclusion that the film is more populist-nationalist rather than international-socialist, since it mainly focuses on peasants and the struggle for liberation.

Focusing more on North Korean propaganda and the organizing principles of the state, one should highlight the importance of the official state ideology of the country, Juche, which is based on self-reliance and stresses that North Korea should be independent from other countries in every aspect of society. As Robinson (2007) puts it in his book “Korea’s Twentieth Century Odyssey”, the ‘cult of the leader’ is a major organizing principle of the North Korean state. According to Robinson (2007), the North Korean cult of the leader hinges on two assumptions, the first being that the leader is the father of the people, which is an idea based on Confucianism according to Robinson, and the authority of the father of the household and complete loyalty to them from the members of the family, or the North Korean people. The other aspect is Kim Il-sung's idea of Juche as the organizing principle of society in which North Korea is an independent and autonomous nation and the center of world
revolution. Robinson argues that according to this idea, all problems in North Korean society, technical or otherwise, are solvable if the people's consciousness become organized after Juche principles. By having the leader in their hearts and mind - since the leader is the embodiment of Juche - he guides their thoughts and actions to the solutions to all problems.

Some scholars have studied in what ways North Korean ideology and propaganda is prevalent in North Korean literature and arts. In “The Literary Ideas of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il: An Introduction to North Korean Meta-Authorial Perspectives” David-West (2009) discusses one major theme he finds in North Korean literature which he names ‘the seed theory’, referring to the ‘seed’ as the guiding criterion which provides the principles for the organization of content and the unification of all formal elements of the work in conformity with content. Kim Jong-II describes this as how the ‘seed’ finds its main embodiment in the hero(ine), and how it organizes conflicts, events, mood, plot, structure and themes of the art. The main value of the ‘seed’ is its political instructions which teaches people that the workers and everyone else must continuously revolutionize themselves at all times, and this is more important than plot or literary aesthetics.

When describing how Kim Il-sung wish that characters would be portrayed in North Korean art, David-West argues that ‘model workers’ are the prefered heroes of his stories while villains are given less attention and are there to evoke hatred and hostility. Kim Jong-il however, holds the perspective that the hero can have imperfections, but that (s)he is a virtuous character who is developing throughout the story and their personality converges with the main story line. He furthermore defines a category of ‘semi-villains’ or ‘non-hostile, negative elements’ who can be re-educated and reformed. Kim Jong-il furthermore identifies people from different classes and backgrounds as heroes of the story and this makes ordinary North Koreans identify with the characters more easily (instead of with a ‘model worker’) and thus inspires them to be as the character and work for revolution.

**Theoretical Framework**

Based upon the arguments made in the introduction about the lack of research on gender in propaganda film, this study will use feminist film theory as a tool for studying the portrayal of gender in North Korean films. Scholars have used these theories when studying gender in films more generally - see for example Ryan and Kellner (1989) for a gendered analysis of Hollywood films focusing much on the portrayal of women through the male gaze and women being women only in relation to men - but not as much in propaganda films, especially not in a North Korean context.

Some concepts taken from feminist film theory will be used when analyzing the films in this study, but in order to see what ideas lies behind the regime's portrayal of gender in its cinematic propaganda, frame-analysis will also be used in order to see in what ways the regime uses different ideas regarding gender in order to influence the North Korean people.
This theoretical framework based upon feminist film theory and frame-analysis will also be combined with the themes on portrayal of gender in North Korea that previous scholars on gender in the country have found as well as portrayals of women stemming from research on gender in Soviet propaganda.

A section on feminist film theory and some key concepts of the theory will be presented below, followed by an introduction to frame-analysis and how themes presented earlier about how gender portrayal in North Korean state propaganda can be combined within this theoretical framework in order to analyze the portrayal of gender in North Korean films.

**Feminist Film Theory**

As Smelik (2016) describes it: “feminist film theory claims that cinema is more than just a reflection of social relations: film actively constructs meanings of sexual difference and sexuality” (p. 2). This means that feminist film theory is an approach analyzing discourses and power-relations within film, in this case related to the portrayal of gender. She mainly talks about two aspects in the portrayal of gender in film, that of woman-as-image and the male gaze, based upon early research within the field of gender studies in film made by Laura Mulvey. The first concept means that women in films are portrayed as passive sex objects and the word woman only gets meaning in relation to man, as a ‘not-man’ - thus it has no meaning by itself. The other main concept is that of the male gaze which explains how the spectators in theaters are made to identify with the male look by looking upon women as objects for their visual pleasure while identifying with the male figure in the film. This means that the female spectator and character in the film has to turn their active desire into a passive desire to be the desired object, and as Smelik argues, the female character - and through identification the female spectator - are ‘seduced’ into femininity. These analyses are based upon Hollywood movies, but the themes of woman-as-image and the male gaze will be searched for in the North Korean films analyzed in this paper to see if they accurately explain the portrayal of women in the North Korean film industry as well.

**Frame-analysis**

In the chapter on frame-analysis in his book “Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Actions”, Kuypers (2009) introduces the concept by talking about how framing an issue means that we encourage others to see facts in a certain manner and that frames induce us to filter our perceptions of the world in particular ways, which is something that often goes unnoticed. He explains the process of framing as following: “framing is the process whereby communicators act - consciously or unconsciously - to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner, with some facts made more or less noticeable (even ignored) than others. [...] When highlighting some aspects of reality over other aspects, frames act to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies.” (p. 182). He argues that framing-analysis thus is
useful to understand the impact of rhetoric and the effects of mediated communication. Using frame-analysis to understand North Korean film is relevant since the films made by the regime frame issues in society in different ways and encourages people to look upon reality from certain perspectives - for example who an ideal North Korean citizen is or what the cause of poverty is in the country - which will also lead them to see solutions to these problems in certain ways while ignoring other approaches to deal with problems. This will be further explored in the analysis of North Korean films.

**Themes on Portrayal of Gender in North Korea and in Propaganda Film**

As presented earlier in this paper, some of the themes on portrayal of gender in propaganda film (mainly in the Soviet Union) as well as earlier research on gender in North Korean society will be used while analyzing the films in this study. The main themes taken from previous studies on gender in propaganda are those of the state being more important than anything else (such as family or one's own individual aspirations) following the arguments of Chatterjee (1999), the imagined feminized Stalin-cult (see Reid, 1998) and the view of female icons as being counter-revolutionary and thus men being portrayed as the ideal citizens (see Bonnell, 1998).

Looking upon existing research on gender in North Korea, the main themes that will be discussed in relation to the film analyzed in this study are, drawing upon arguments of Ryang (2000), firstly that the category of “woman” is excluded in state propaganda and women are only talked about in terms of being workers, youths or mothers, and this is connected to the feminist concept of woman-as-image. The second theme based upon research of Ryang (2000) but also Robinson (2007) is that the Kim-leaders are seen as “benevolent fathers” who requires complete love and devotion from their people at the same time as the people is portrayed as being “in love” with Kim Il-sung, resulting in feminization of the North Korean people. The third theme is based upon Jung and Dalton's (2006) findings that in North Korea, women are equal to men officially, but in reality they are living under persistent traditional patriarchal social values just as in other Communist states. They also talk about the importance of keeping Confucian values in North Korean society in order for the patriarchal leadership cult with the Kim-leaders as the North Korean people's father to prevail.

Looking more upon studies on propaganda in North Korean film, Gabroussenko's (2010) argument that propaganda falsely portrays North Korea as an “industrial paradise” which creates conflicting images of a happy socialist worker and self-sacrifice will be looked for in the analysis as well. Also, what David-West (2009) calls the seed theory, after the seed within the characters of North Korean films that later blooms, thus making them revolutionized, “ideal” citizens, will also be discussed in relation to the films studied.

**Methodology**
Analytical Framework

The analytical framework used in this study to analyze the portrayal of gender in North Korean films is thus based upon the concepts of woman-as-image and the male gaze taken from feminist film theories, as well frame-analysis in regards to the North Korean regime's portrayal of gender. Furthermore, previous research on gender in North Korea will be used to search for different themes in the portrayal of gender in propaganda films.

The first aspects that will be analyzed in the films are the concepts of woman-as-image and the male gaze. Drawing on the definition of these concepts from feminist film theory presented above, the answers to the following questions will be looked for in the films: is the category of “woman” only given meaning by the female characters relation to men? Is the audience imagined as being male and thus made to identify with the male characters while female characters are portrayed as objects for visual pleasure by the viewer?

Another theme that will be searched for, more in relation to frame-analysis and previous research done on gender in the northern Korean peninsula, will be that of the gender roles in Socialism and Confucianism and how women and men are portrayed by the regime in relation to these discourses. How does the North Korean regime frame the roles of women and men based upon Socialist and Confucian ideas? Drawing on the arguments made by Jung and Dalton (2006), does the nexus of these different discourses dominant in North Korean society show the double burden on women they entail in the films?

Also, as Robinson (2000) argues, the Kim-leadership cult is based upon Confucian ideas of the Kims as “fathers of the nation” and promoting the patriarchal leadership cult is a major part of North Korean propaganda. Therefore, based on the research made by Robinson (2000), how does the patriarchal leadership cult affect the portrayal of gender in the propaganda films? Is the North Korean population portrayed as being “in love” with the Kim-leaders as Ryang (2000) argues?

In summary, these three major themes - objectification of women, gender roles in the Socialist-Confucian nexus and portrayal of gender in relation to the North Korean leadership cult - will be explored in the North Korean films analyzed in this study.

Material

As mentioned previously, someone who wants to gather research material about North Korea could face some challenges, however, this paper will analyze North Korean films that are accessible outside the country without much difficulty. Since the aim is to study the discourses used to portray gender in these films, and not if the films for example reflect real North Korean society, the problem of having limited, reliable research material will not be as
big of a problem by taking this analytical approach as it perhaps is for other studies on development in North Korea.

Since the North Korean film industry began producing movies in a large-scale in the 1970s, much due to the personal interests of Kim Jong-il (see David-West, 2009), this will be the starting point of the films analyzed in this study. Furthermore, this study will focus exclusively on films with female main characters since this is a fact that differs North Korean film from that of other socialist states. As Bonnell (1998) argues in her work on representations of women in public iconography, Bolshevik historians chose male models as personifying the important processes and events of the Soviet Union, subordinating female models to their male counterparts, and often saw women as unnecessary or even hostile to the revolution itself. But the North Korean film industry frequently uses female main characters in many of its large-scale film productions.

Following this, the films analyzed in this paper will be “The Flower Girl” [꽃파는 처녀] from 1972, “Bellflower” [도라지꽃] from 1987, “Oh, youth!” [청춘이여] from 1994 and finally, “The Schoolgirl's Diary” [한 녀학생의 일기] from 2006. These movies are all large-scale North Korean films with female main characters from each decade from the 1970s until the 2000. By studying these films more closely, this paper aims to understand what discourses on gender are prevalent in North Korean society and how the regime portrays gender in these films.

Limitations

This study is only focusing on North Korean films, and thus not other forms of state-led propaganda. Even though the films chosen are well-known North Korean films, there are many other films beside these four that potentially might portray gender in different ways. North Korean films with male main characters - even though these are less common than films with female main characters which is interesting in itself - might portray gender differently. However, this study aims to analyze films with female main characters specifically since women have big roles in many North Korean films which differs from propaganda films in other Socialist countries such as the Soviet Union (see Bonnell, 1999) but also differs from American Hollywood movies in which the audience is often made to identify with male characters and view female characters as passive sex-objects through the eyes of the male character (see Ryan and Kellner, 1989).

Furthermore, taking an approach of frame-analysis, the discourses used by the regime in portraying gender can be analyzed, but other questions regarding the of the role of women vis-a-vis men in real North Korean society or how affected the North Korean people actually are by the portrayal of gender in these films cannot be answered with this analytical approach. Also, since this is a qualitative analysis studying four different North Korean films, this study does not aim to map the frequency of, for example, different ways of portraying
gender in North Korea as a quantitative study might do, but rather show what different ways of gender portrayal there are in the country's film industry and what ideas the regime is using in the portrayal of gender in the films studied.

**Analysis**

“The Flower Girl” (1972)

*Background and Plot of the Film*

The first film analyzed in this study is a filmatized version of the revolutionary opera called “The Flower Girl”, which according to official North Korean sources was originally written by Kim Il-sung while he was imprisoned by the Japanese in the 1930s (Fischer, 2015). The film is set during the Japanese occupation of Korea and the main character of the movie is Kkotbun [꽃분] - literally meaning flowerpot - a young woman who sells flowers to get money to buy medicine for her sick mother. Kkotbun’s father is dead, her brother Chol Ryong is imprisoned by the Japanese and her younger sister Sun Hui is blind.

In the beginning of the movie the hardships that Kkotbun and her mother goes through in order to provide for their family are highlighted. Kkotbun sells flowers while her mother is working hard for the Pae family - Japanese collaborators that are using ransions of rice as exchange for something like slave labor of the Korean villagers. Throughout the film, the hard-working spirit and commitment to family that Kkotbun and her mother have is emphasized and Kkotbun’s mother works herself to death in order for Kkotbun to not be forced to work for the Pae family. It is later revealed that Kkotbun’s older brother Chol Ryong got sent to prison for taking revenge on the Pae family after the madam of the house poured hot water over Sun Hui which made her go blind.

After her mother dies, Kkotbun escapes the village and goes to look for her brother. The prison guards tell her that he is dead and she gets very disheartened. Eventually she returns to her home village and gets imprisoned by the Pae family. Near the end of the film, however, it is revealed that Chol Ryong joined the Korean independence movement and along with other fighters he returns to the village, frees Kkotbun and releases all the villagers from the tyranny of the Pae family.

*Symbolism of Flowers: The Patriarchal North Korean State and Feminization of the North Korean People*

The opening images of the film show the young, traditionally beautiful Kkotbun walking through a field of pink Azalea flowers. The director is using wide-angle shots of the landscape while portraying Kkotbun as a small part of this whole picture - almost like she is one of the flowers. This usage of flowers in several dimensions - for example naming the
main female character Kkotbun, having her work with selling flowers and using nature as a background shot of many scenes in the film - shows the importance of the symbolic meaning of flowers in “The Flower Girl”. Several songs in the film furthermore use images of flowers, one song near the beginning of the movie which Kkotbun sings includes these phrases:

“Every spring the hills bloom with beautiful flowers. But we have no country, no spring. When will flowers bloom in our hearts? On the hill path brother was dragged along. Spring comes and flowers bloom every year. Why doesn’t my dear brother come back yet?”

This usage of the word “spring” entails that the end of winter is the end of imperialism and spring symbolizes Korean independence. Entangled with this picture of a spring of independence and flowers blooming in the hearts of the North Korean people, is the image of Kkotbun’s brother. In the way the lyrics are sung it is as if spring - Korean independence - equals the return of her brother. In is not until Chol Ryong and his men return to the village that the villagers are saved from the tyranny of the Pae family.

This clearly shows how the male brother’s return to the village is what brought the symbolic spring (independence) to the villagers (the North Korean people) from the Pae family who were symbolizing the Japanese occupation of Korea. Even though Kkotbun is the main character of the film she is portrayed as a passive character while her brother is the active leader of the revolution. The underlying message of this relates to the liberation of Korea as being brought by one man, Kim Il-sung, and that it is only with his guidance and leadership that Korea became independent. Therefore, the bringer of “spring” and independence is a male character while the person benefiting from this or “being saved” is a female character, namely Kkotbun.

In another part of the film in which Kkotbun and Sun Hui have bought medicine for their mother and are on their way to give it to her, the two sisters sing this song:

“Thousand of blossoms, Azalea blossoms, our devotion to mother bloomed like flowers. Our devotion permeated in every Azalea petal, bloomed prettier than flowers in our hearts.”

These lyrics are using the image of blooming flowers as devotion. In the film, this devotion is portrayed from the girls to their mother, but in a broader picture this is arguably an image portraying the devotion of the North Korean people to the North Korean regime. Throughout the film, the female characters hard-work and devotion to their family is emphasized, and this can be seen as an image portraying the ideal North Korean person and is made to inspire the North Korean people and instill in them that devotion to the nation is a good thing. Furthermore, the focus on the blooming flower can be seen as part of the seed-theory (see David-West, 2009) in how the seeds of revolution are sown in the hearts of the characters and later blooms when they are devoted to their family and their community while being hard-working. The song used in the last scenes of the film when Kkotbun is selling bigger,
more beautiful flowers and is seen as smiling uses the symbolism of flowers in the following way:

“Fierce is frost and icy is wind, but flowers bloom in spring. Under the benevolent sun shining bright, red flowers of revolution bloom up. In villages streets and every heart, lovely flowers bloom. In my beautiful land of 3000 ri I sow the seeds of revolution flower.”

This frost and ice is symbolizing hardships, but since spring with blooming flowers follows, the message of the song is that by enduring hardships and working hard better times will come. The part of the song exclaiming that flowers bloom in every heart can also be read as an explicit manifestation of the seed in the so-called seed theory, since the revolutionary seed has now come to bloom in the hearts of the North Korean people. Furthermore, the image of the benevolent sun shining bright over the “red flowers of revolution” can be seen as a symbol for Kim Il-sung who is often portrayed as the sun in many propaganda images in North Korea (Portal, 2005). Thus, only with his guidance, the flowers of revolution can bloom.

Based on the arguments made above of how Kkotbun is the passive victim waiting to be saved by her brother, along with how the female characters are devoted to each other, to hard-work and to Chol Ryong, and how images of flowers are used to portray people and their feelings, it is possible to interpret the female main characters in the film as symbolizing the North Korean people. This differs from Soviet propaganda which almost exclusively used men in the portrayal of the ‘ideal revolutionary worker’ as Bonnell (1998) argues. By analyzing how Chol Ryong is portrayed in the film it is quite clear that he symbolizes Kim Il-sung, or at least the male independence fighters, and he is the one who explains to Kkotbun why she is living in misery, since she apparently is not capable to do this herself, which can be seen in the speech Chol Ryong holds near the end of the film while Kkotbun looks upon him with awe.

“Kkotbun, you don't know why we're living in bitter tears. It is because we lost our country and the Japanese, landlord Pae and other thugs are giving Koreans a hard time. This is the tragedy of a stateless nation. Villagers! In order to get rid of this spite and agony we should restore our country and build a new society without landlords and capitalists. To clothe, feed and educate our poor children we should all unite and make revolution. Now the Korean Revolutionary Army has taken arms to regain the country, in order for the Korean people to live a happy and free life.”

This part of the film clearly shows the portrayal of Kkotbun as a passive female character who needs the help of her active, male brother who holds the knowledge about the causes for their misery and can show the villagers how to live a “happy and free life”. However, it is not with Chol Ryong that the audience of the film is made to identify with. Rather, the characters the audience watching the film are identifying with are the female characters of the film, specifically innocent, hard-working, devoted Kkotbun who receives guidance from her brother. This feminization of the audience - the North Korean population - along with the portrayal of them as flowers - arguably a feminine symbol - is thus different from socialist
propaganda in other states as well as different from Hollywood movies in which the audience is usually made to identify with the male hero (see Bonnell, 1998 and Ryan and Kellner, 1989).

The feminization of the population can be seen as a strategic move from the regime since the patriarchal leadership cult of Kim Il-sung which states that he is the fatherly leader who should be unquestioned requires complete devotion and subordination from his subjects (see Ryang, 2000). This is why the North Korean people are made to identify with the female, devoted, hard-working, passive characters and the regime installs in them that by acting like these ideal “revolutionary” characters - thus in practice following Kim Il-sung and working hard - “spring” will come, which means better times for the Korean people.

In the film, the female characters constantly wish for their brother to come back to them and seem to have the belief that once he returns everything will be much better for the family. Their poverty and hardships cannot be solved only by their own hard work, but the female characters also need to have the guidance of the male brother. The solution to the problem of poverty or misery is thus, as the regime frames it, to work hard and be devoted to the North Korean nation, which they construct as being devoted to the North Korean state and thus its regime led by Kim Il-sung. In using flowers to describe the characters in a feminine way and making the audience identify with these female characters rather than Chol Ryong, the film feminizes the North Korean population in order to install submissiveness and complete devotion to the fatherly leader of the country. One can draw parallels to the arguments made by Reid (1998) regarding the feminization of the Soviet people and their submissiveness to the masculinized figure of Stalin, as well as the feminization of the North Korean people being passively, submissively “in love” with the Kim-leaders (see Ryang, 2000).

“Bellflower” (1987)

*Background and Plot of the Film*

“Bellflower” was the most popular film production in North Korea during the 1980s. It was filmed during the period when the economic foundations of the country were starting to tremble and thus deals with challenges of development and the proposed solutions to these challenges. The plot revolves around Song Rim, who goes by the nickname of Bellflower, and her struggles in turning her remote mountain hometown of Pyokgye-ri into a model socialist village. The movie uses two timelines simultaneously in order to make the story go forward, one which is set about 30 years earlier and the other one in the present. The other main characters in the earlier timeline are Song Rim’s younger sister Song Hwa and Song Rim’s love interest Won Bing, and the main characters of the present timeline are Song Hwa as an older woman - now the leader of the village - Won Bing as an older man, Won Bing’s son Se Ryong as well as Song Hwa’s daughter Tal Lae.
The film starts with the older version of Won Bing and Se Ryong looking over Pyokgye-ri village from the top of a hill and Won Bing misses his home village while he tells his son that he cannot go back and that Se Ryong has to deliver a letter for him. The earlier timeline goes on to show the audience how Won Bing was in love with Song Rim and that while Song Rim and her younger sister Song Hwa were working hard for the development of the back-then poor village, Won Bing wanted to move to the city and tried to take Song Rim with him. However, Song Rim chose to stay in the village and work for its development, even sacrificing herself in the end to save a sheep sent from the government to Pyokgye-ri. In the present timeline Won Bing is now seeing how much the village has developed and regrets the choice he made to leave his hometown and Song Rim behind. Also, Se Ryong gets to know Tal Lae who shows him the beauty and development of Pyokgye-ri and when Se Ryong realizes what his father did he begs the present village leader - Song Hwa - to forgive the faults of his treacherous father.

Portrayal of Male Characters: Revolutionary Heros or Hostile Elements?

Compared to “The Flower Girl”, the male main characters have larger roles in “Bellflower”, and most of the film is told from the narrative of either Won Bing or Se Ryong. However, even though the male characters have more screen time in this movie than in “The Flower Girl”, it is still the female characters who are the most important. They are the ones who develop their village instead of “escaping” to the city and are portrayed as ideal “revolutionary” citizens while the male characters are personifying hostile elements to the revolution. Interestingly, while in “The Flower Girl” the main male character is seen as the bringer of Korean independence and Socialist revolution, in “Bellflower” the male characters are portrayed in a negative light, however, the male characters have much more screen time in “Bellflower” than the male characters in “The Flower Girl”.

Since the main male characters in “Bellflower” are functioning as negative examples of citizens for the North Korean audience, it is reasonable that they get more screen time so that the audience can identify with them and learn in what ways a “revolutionary” citizen should not act by looking at the mistakes of primarily Won Bing. What is interesting is that in neither “The Flower Girl” nor in “Bellflower”, the male characters are portrayed as ideal citizens and role models for the North Korean audience, since Chol Ryong is portrayed as a leader that the ideal citizen should follow but not identify with and Won Bing is a negative example of a North Korean citizen. Won Bing and Se Ryong are portrayed as the “semi-villains” David-West (2009) argues that Kim Jong-il used in his propaganda. These characters can be reeducated to become ideal citizens (which in this case is true for Se Ryong) or work as a plot device through which the hero of the story fully embraces the “revolutionary spirit” which can be seen in how Song Rim fully realized the importance of developing the village when she was faced with the option to follow the love of her life, Won Bing, to the city or stay in Pyeokgye-ri and chose to stay in her home village. Even though
the story is told through the perspective of Won Bing, Song Rim is thus portrayed as the heroine of the story which we will see in the following section of the film analysis.

Portrayal of Female Characters: The Nexus Between Socialism and Confucianism

The female main characters in this film are, in contrast to the male characters, portrayed as loyal to their family and always happily working with whatever projects are needed in order to develop Pyeokgye-ri. The audience is made to identify with the female characters once again and take after their hard working-spirit and devotion to their village since this will lead to development, much as in “The Flower Girl”. In this way, the female characters are portrayed as the ideal “revolutionary” citizens that the North Korean audience should aspire to be while the male characters are the negative examples that tells the audience that by being “selfish” - by leaving one's hometown to find a better life in the city - you will have regrets in the end, as can be seen in Won Bing’s remorseful thoughts near the end of the film.

However, even though the audience is made to identify with, and aspire to be like, the female main characters in “Bellflower” and “The Flower Girl”, they are also portrayed from the perspective of the male gaze. Both Kkotbun and Song Rim - whose nickname is Bellflower - are named after flowers and traditionally beautiful, feminine-looking young women who have pleasing, quiet voices. Song Rim is described as being “pretty as the moon” by Won Bing’s friend and this portrayal of women is arguably a portrayal from a male perspective as well as fitting traditional Confucian ideas of the ideal woman. Throughout the film, Song Rim is very interested in different development projects while Won Bing is more interested in Song Rim. He is quite literally chasing her and is certainly the active partner in their relationship, while Song Rim is portrayed as being passive. This is a Confucian portrayal of gender roles. However, there are conflicting messages embedded in the film related to this traditional relationship between a man and a woman, and while Won Bing wants to move to the city, Song Rim refuses to leave her home even though Won Bing tells her that she is almost his wife and therefore should follow her husband’s will. When Song Rim chooses to stay in Pyeokgye-ri instead of following her lover, this is portrayed as something good since this leads to the village being developed while Won Bing ends up feeling regretful.

Another thing that is interesting in “Bellflower” is that the other female main character - Song Hwa - fits less into this objectifying portrayal of a woman and is described as being not nearly as beautiful as Song Rim and being “stubborn as an ass”. She is active in the Socialist Youth League and is often seen being in charge of different projects aimed at developing the village and does very active things such as climbing in trees and carrying heavy objects. Later on she becomes the village leader and it is under her guidance that Pyeokgye-ri becomes a developed socialist village that even has tractors. Chairwoman Song Hwa mentions how these tractors are “gifts from the fatherly leader”, meaning Kim Il-sung, and frequently praises the kind-hearted “fatherly leader”. This shows that even though the female characters are working hard to develop their village they still need the guidance from Kim Il-sung and
the North Korean regime, thus again signifying the importance of portraying the patriarchal leadership cult as vital to development in the country.

These two somewhat conflicting portrayals of women as being socialist workers that bring development to their villages at the same time as they are portrayed as passive, stereotypically feminine characters hints at what discourses are dominant in North Korea and used by the North Korean regime in portraying women in propaganda. Even though the Juche-branch of Socialism is the official state ideology of North Korea, Confucian ideas about women are still prominent in society and female characters in North Korean films are often portrayed as the ideal beautiful, passive, domestic Confucian woman. These ideas are not combated by the regime, in contrast, they use them to portray the ideal woman in films. One could go further to say that the whole patriarchal leadership cult around the Kim-family is based upon Confucianism in which Kim Il-sung is the father of the North Korean people that demands complete submission and devotion from his “children” (see Robinson, 2000), thus making this portrayal of women - and in turn feminization of the North Korean people - an effective tool for the regime to use to legitimize their power.

“Oh Youth!” (1994)

Background and Plot of the Movie

“Oh Youth!” is a rare attempt from the North Korean film industry at making comedy film. More specifically, the movie could be classified as belonging to the genre of romance-comedy and the humor is mostly situational or stemming from the confusion the main characters feel, mostly in regards to the true identity of the character named Un Gyeong. The story revolves around a family consisting of the mother, the father, their 30-year-old son named Ki Ho who is working as a historian, and their five athlete daughters: Il Ok the soccer player, Lee Ok the weight-lifter, Se Ok the basketball player, Ne Ok the rhythmic gymnast and Oh Ok the swimmer. The main plot of the film is that the mother wants Ki Ho to get married to a traditionally feminine girl - not another female athlete since the family already has five - and while Ki Ho agrees with her, the father and the five daughters would prefer another female athlete as their daughter- or sister-in-law. In the beginning of the film the mother asks her five daughters to set their brother up with a girl they know, but she disapproves of all of their choices because they all picked female athletes. Oh Ok does not even get to show the girl she picked to the family and later on the audience finds out that this girl named Un Gyeong is a professional Taekwondo-player.

As the film continues, Un Gyeong goes to the study hall to study the history of Taekwondo for her upcoming tournament, and there she meets Ki Ho who is writing a thesis about the history of Taekwondo in Korea. Ki Ho agrees to help her with her studies, and mistakes her for being a embroidist when in reality she is a Taekwondo-instructor at the embroidery institute. Both Ki Ho and the mother likes Un Gyeong for her “beautiful appearance,
feminine job and quiet personality” which is the very opposite of the five athletic daughters in the family. Later on, the father and the five daughters realize that Un Gyeong is actually a Taekwondo-player and they arrange for some men to pretend to attack Ki Ho and Un Gyeong so that Ki Ho can see how good Un Gyeong is at Taekwondo. Their plan is successful and when Ki Ho sees Un Gyeong’s athletic abilities he accepts who Un Gyeong really is. However, the mother is still a problem and by pretending to be her mother's spy, Ne Ok makes their mother go to the stadium where Un Gyeong is competing in an international Taekwondo competition. When the mother realizes that Un Gyeong is a Taekwondo-player who wins the competition and brings honor to their country, the mother's attitude changes and she now tells her daughters not to get married too quickly and to bring honor to their nation by being athletes.

Conflicting Portrayals of the Ideal Woman

As discussed previously, Ryang (2000) argues that discussions about women has been silenced in North Korea since Kim Il-sung systematically omitted the notion of gender in his rhetoric. However, one of the main themes in “Oh Youth!” is the picture of the ideal North Korean woman. Both Ki Ho and the mother of the family seem to prefer the traditional Confucian ideal woman since they see it as important that a woman should be beautiful, have a quiet personality and a “feminine” job. Ki Ho and the mother frequently criticize the daughters of the family for being too aggressive and for being tomboys. Ne Ok, nick-named “nice girl” by her parents, is the most stereotypically feminine daughter among the five, and her mother often tells her that she is her only hope. When Ki Ho and his mother meet Un Gyeong they both like her because of her feminine job (mistakenly thinking that she is an embroiderer), quiet personality and beautiful appearance.

However, what is interesting is that the father of the family - a male character - along with the five daughters have a different view of the ideal woman. Throughout the film, the father praises his daughters for being athletes who will “bring honor to their country”, and frequently says that he lays his hope on them to become the athlete he could never become. When Ki Ho criticizes his sisters for being tomboys the father replies with: “You think passionate girls are tomboys? Do you know a girl as diligent, clever and loyal as athletes?”. The five daughters even tell their mother that she is “so behind the time” when she tells them to act more ladylike, hinting at a change in younger generations' view on gender roles.

Even though the daughters, their father, and in the end even their mother and Ki Ho praise female athletes, it is not because of their athletic abilities or for wanting to do something for themselves instead of obeying the will of their husbands or fathers. Rather, it is because of their eagerness to bring honor to their nation. When the father realizes that Ki Ho is dating a Taekwondo-player he tells his daughters that: “Ki Ho has to be charmed by her love for the country and her noble idea to bring glory to the fatherland.” In the end, this is what Ki Ho and the mother both praise Un Gyeong for, and thus one could argue that this portrayal of a
strong athlete woman as the ideal woman instead of the passive Confucian ideal woman, has more to do with promoting a Socialist ideal of the working woman - even more specifically a woman devoted to the nation, and by nation referring to the regime and the Kim-leadership - than an independent woman who is actively taking decisions for herself. In this way, love, family and sports are all entangled with bringing honor to the nation and being devoted to bringing glory to “the fatherland” - which is portrayed as the most important aspect of a woman's personality in the film.

Looking at the character of Un Gyeong, she is portrayed as traditionally beautiful and seems to act quiet and stereotypically feminine when she is with Ki Ho or his mother. However, she does act outside this role occasionally, for example when she beats the men coming after her and Ki Ho in a fight or near the end of the movie when Ki Ho asks her to give a professional opinion about Taekwondo for him to use in his thesis, and she states that:

“Taekwondo never safeguarded this country. So I think you should add the soul of Kim Il-sung nation to the thesis. We professionals do not win the game by techniques but by the honor of being a sportsman of the great leader General Kim Jong-il and by the spirit to let the flag of Kim Il-sung nation fly throughout the world.”

Perhaps this portrayal of Un Gyeong conveys the message that a woman does not have to choose one role to fit into, whether this is a passive, feminine role or an active, tomboy-like athlete, but that you can be both at the same time. Nevertheless, the quality that is praised in the athlete woman is her devotion to bringing glory to “the fatherland” - even more directly, the Kim-leaders, and not that she is an independent woman per-se. As the mother tells her daughters and her husband in the end of the film, an ideal woman should “sacrifice their youth to their party and the fatherland”.

In this way, Confucian and Socialist ideals of women are put in conflict with one another, and it does seem like the Socialist woman is portrayed as being better than the Confucian equivalent even though the five daughters and, especially, Un Gyeong still have some traditionally Confucian female characteristics. However, it is never the women's personal struggles to be who they want to be that is put in focus, rather, it is their personal qualities of devotion to the fatherland or what an ideal wife or daughter-in-law should be like, not who a woman by herself should aspire to be as a person.

“The Schoolgirl’s Diary” (2006)

Background and Plot of the Film

“The Schoolgirl's Diary” was an attempt initiated by Kim Jong-il during the late 1990s and early 2000s to portray North Korea's distinct film aesthetics internationally and it is the first North Korean film that was screened at the Cannes film festival (National Public Radio, 2007). Perhaps due to the audience being imagined as not only North Korean but also
foreign, “The Schoolgirl's Diary” is less blunt in its propaganda, less anti-Western and even makes use of some symbols familiar to foreign audiences such as a Mickey Mouse-backpack.

The main character of the film is Soo-ryun, whose biggest dream is to live in a newly built apartment. Her family consists of her, her father, her mother, her grandmother and her younger sister named Soo-ok. Throughout the film, Soo-ryun's father is being absent due to his work at a factory and while Soo-ryun's friends' fathers got doctor degrees, Soo-ryun's father instead chose to keep working at the factory, much to Soo-ryun's dismay. Throughout the film, her father's absence and his lack of success angers Soo-ryun, and it is not until he successfully makes the manufacturing at the factory completely automated and gets to meet Kim Jong-il as well as is given an apartment to live in that Soo-ryun realizes what “sacrifices” her father made and appreciates his hard work that paid off in the end.

*The Selfish Daughter and the Devoted Father*

As in the films previously analyzed in this study, the characters who gets most screen time in “The Schoolgirl's Diary” are female. Soo-ryun is the main character and is - as the female main characters of the other films - also a young, traditionally feminine, beautiful woman. However, what differs in the portrayal of Soo-ryun compared to the main characters of the earlier films is that she is not the model citizen the audience should aspire to be, but she is doubting her father and even looks down upon his work because he fails to gain material wealth.

Lim (2007) explains in her book “Value Changes of the North Korean New Generation and Prospects”, that the generation that grew up during the food shortages in North Korea after the 1990s have other values than those who are directly promoted by the state. She argues that while the regime portrays youths as devoted to the nation and self-sacrificing for the party and the people, the actual youth is eager to be materialist independents who pursue their own wealth, thus creating conflicting ideas in society. Lim states the cause of these conflicting ideas as money becoming more important than ideology in North Korea as a consequence of the famine. She concludes that there is an increasing value gap between the North Korean state and the people, and that this gap began with the Arduous March.

In “The Schoolgirl's Diary”, the main character Soo-ryun is part of this younger generation, and she is portrayed as having more materialistic desires than previous main characters. The main symbols of her almost capitalist dreams is the Mickey Mouse-backpack she wears as a young girl and the apartment she wants to live in more than anything else. She constantly criticizes her father for not fulfilling her materialistic desires and even does this openly in front of her family, which is a very non-confucian behavior. As in previous films, the audience is made to identify with the female main character, but instead of being inspired of her “revolutionary spirit”, hard work and devotion to the nation, the audience is made to identify with the female protagonist's struggles with what is portrayed as her self-centered
desires. However, Soo-ryun is not portrayed as a villain, but rather a flawed character that can learn from the example of her father and grow into an ideal citizen. In the film, she is first portrayed as being selfish and materialistic, but then goes on to help her family in the absence of her father. Later, when she realizes how her father's hard work eventually led to success for their own family and for the factory, Soo-ryun adopts more communal values and chooses a career that will benefit the nation instead of only herself.

Drawing on the arguments made by Lim (2007) presented above, the purpose of portraying Soo-ryun in this light is to install in the younger North Korean generation the importance of being loyal to the nation (thus the regime) and working for the betterment of the whole country instead of one's personal economic gains. In the film, the hard work and devotion of the father of the family, even though this entails sacrificing things such as spending time with one's family, is rewarded in the end while Soo-ryun's “selfish”, materialistic ambitions never are. In this film, it is the father, thus a male character, that teaches his daughter how to live one's life in order to be a good person. This differs from for example “Bellflower” or “Oh, Youth!” in which the female characters generally were portrayed as ideal citizens by the regime. However, even though the character of the father is constructed as the positive example for the audience to follow, he is not the main character and the audience is not made to identify with him since Soo-ryun and the other female members of the family get much more screen time than the father.

Since the audience is made to identify with the character of Soo-ryun and learn from her growth from a materialistic, self-centered character to someone who will dedicate their life to the nation, she is the embodiment of the North Korean people in this film. The character she is first disappointed in, but later realizes how his hard work and sacrifices brought success for their family and the community and nation in a larger sense - her father - could be seen as symbolizing the North Korean state. The sceptical attitude Soo-ryun has towards her father thus possibly reflects the attitudes the younger generations hold towards the regime since those who came of age after the famine saw the shortcomings of the North Korean state. However, the audience is made to be inspired by Soo-ryun's transformation and she comes to understand her parents' sacrifice for the nation and she realizes the value of filial piety - the Confucian virtue of respect for one's elders. In this way, the North Korean regime tries to influence the younger generation to maintain Confucian values (but also Socialist values of putting the community before oneself) instead of more liberal values favoring individualism and personal economical gains. These liberal values has influenced the younger generation in North Korea partly because of the shortcomings of the North Korean state during the famine, partly because the growth of the private market in the country as Haggard and Noland (2013) argue and partly because of increasing international influence in North Korea as Lim (2007) argues.

As Robinson (2000) argues, the North Korean patriarchal leadership cult around the Kim-family is built upon Confucian values, and thus the leader of the country is often spoke
about as “the father of the nation”. In “The Schoolgirl's Diary” there are some examples of this, such as the lyrics of a song near the end of film.

“You and I call him our father with so much affection. Our Father who watches over all the families of the Nation. We follow you to the end of the earth and the sky. We listen with joy, the footsteps of our Dear General.”

In order for this image of the leader as the father-figure of the country who as in their position of “the father” are given the rights to decide over the rest of the family - thus the North Korean people - Confucian values promoting this traditional view of family, and in a larger sense the national community itself, are of vital importance. Therefore, the audience is made to identify with what is portrayed as the female main character's selfish thoughts and how she transforms these to communal values and realizes the importance of self-sacrifice and devotion to the community and how this better makes her appreciate the actions of her father, or the father of the nation to a larger extent.

The Self-Sacrificing Mother

Another important character in the film is the mother of the family who works as a librarian by day but also takes care of the housework and her family while spending her nights translating literature for her husband's work. This is arguably a traditional portrayal of the role of women but it is at the same time a portrayal of a working, educated Socialist woman. This Socialist-Confucian nexus makes the mother in the film bear double burdens and while Soo-ryun initially despises her father for making her mother work so much she later realizes that all this work makes her mother happy. In the mother's own words:

“People think I work too hard and suffer for it, but for me it is a pleasure. Isn't one happy when one is proud of what one is doing?”

In this way, the ideal Socialist-Confucian woman that takes care of the housework and supports her husband while also working and educating herself in order to better the nation, is a woman who makes self-sacrifices. This portrayal of women is, drawing on the ideas of Gabroussenko (2010), part of the conflict of the “self-sacrificing martyr” and the “happy socialist worker” that stems from the promoted image of North Korea as an “industrial paradise”. This theme of portraying women in North Korean film can also be seen in for example “Bellflower” in which Song Rim sacrifices her own happiness and future with the man she loves and ultimately dies in order to develop her home village. In “The Flower Girl” Kkotbun's mother is also working while taking care of her children and ultimately dies from working too hard in order for her children to not have to do housework for the Pae family. The self-sacrificing martyr is thus another role assigned to female characters in many of the films analyzed which highlights the double-burden women feel in a society dominated by Socialist-Confucian ideas. However, this idea of the role of women is not criticized but rather promoted and this, along with the audience being made to identify with these female
characters, is arguably connected to the regime promoting the idea of personal self-sacrifice in order for the nation to develop, even though North Korea at the same time is constructed as an “industrial paradise” such as in “Bellflower” or in the images of Pyongyang and all its modern facilities shown in “Oh, Youth!”.

**Conclusion: Gender in Relation to the Patriarchal Leadership Cult**

As the analysis of the films has shown, the audience is made to identify with the female main characters, whether this is in the form of being inspired by their hard work and devotion to the community or to learn from the personal growth of a “selfish” young girl who becomes someone who later chooses to work for the greater good of the nation. This feminization of the audience is thus different from the typical imagined male audience identifying with the male main character prevalent in both Soviet propaganda films and in Hollywood movies.

Furthermore, since the audience of the films analyzed in this study are imagined as being the North Korean people, along with the propagandic nature of the films teaching the audience how to be “ideal citizens”, feminizing the audience of these films means feminizing the North Korean people. Building upon the arguments of Ryang (2000) and Robinson (2000) about the patriarchal leadership cult around the Kim-family requiring unconditional loyalty and devotion from the people, the feminization of the imagined audience of the films as well as the North Korean people in general is arguably useful propaganda for the North Korean regime. By portraying the “ideal citizen” as female and making the audience identify with this character, attributes traditionally associated with women - especially in Confucianism - such as being passive and following the will of men, will arguably be used in the portrayal of the female main character the audience is made to identify with. This, because it will result in the ideal North Korean citizen being portrayed as someone with Confucian feminine qualities of being devoted to the Kim-family (perhaps almost in love with them) and follow their guidance without question. In this way, the category of woman is excluded from the North Korean films analyzed in this study since they are only depicted as model workers, mothers, daughters or wives and not women by themselves. However, as the analysis shows, the female characters are not always portrayed in roles only in relation to men since these films have female main characters, but rather portrayed as an “ideal” woman or citizen in relation to the North Korean state.

Looking are the example of Soo-ryun in “The Schoolgirl's Diary”, her independence and materialistic aspirations are portrayed by the regime as selfish thoughts and it is not until she internalizes more communal values that her dreams are fulfilled. Thus, her devotion and loyalty to the North Korean state or “the communal good” is praised while independence is portrayed as something bad. In “Oh, Youth!” it is not female independence that is seen as the most positive characteristic of a female athlete, but rather her devotion to bringing honor to the nation. In “Bellflower” it is Song Rim's devotion to developing her village that is portrayed as admirable when she does not follow Won Bing to the city, not that she refuses to
obey the will of the man she loves and thus is an independent woman. Kkotbun in “The Flower Girl” and her mother are both hard-working and devoted to their family, but their circumstances do not get better until they have the guidance of Chol Ryong - a male leader.

Another major theme in the portrayal of gender in the films analyzed in this study is that of gender in the Socialist-Confucian nexus of North Korean society. In the films the double burden of women such as the mother in “The Flower Girl” or the mother in “The Schoolgirl's Diary” in which the female characters are both hard-workers, stemming from a Socialist ideal of women, and simultaneously taking care of housework and their families which is arguably a Confucian idea of the role of women. The Socialist-Confucian nexus of ideas regarding women's role in society thus leads to female characters whose self-sacrificing qualities are portrayed as something good. Also, even though there are some examples of female characters seemingly breaking gender norms regarding being passive females - for example the athlete daughters in “Oh, Youth!” or Song Hwa leading Pyeokgye-ri to development - the main female characters of the films analyzed in this study are all traditionally beautiful, perhaps indicating that they are portrayed through the male gaze (see Smelik, 2016), and it is usually the secondary female characters that are portrayed outside the traditional feminine, submissive role. The Socialist-Confucian portrayal of women is thus dominant in the films analyzed and this portrayal of women is arguably necessary in order to instill a hard-working communal spirit and unconditional devotion to the North Korean state and the fatherly Kim-leader within the North Korean audience made to identify with the female characters of these films.

Based upon the analysis of the portrayal of gender in these films, the North Korean regime constantly promotes the idea of a hard-working, passive, traditionally feminine female character who is devoted to the nation (either directly as in an athlete bringing glory to “her nation” or indirectly through being devoted to her father, her village or her family) and with whom the North Korean audience is made to identify with. Threats to Socialist-Confucian ideas, such as the more individual values common among younger generations, are dealt with in “The Schoolgirl's Diary” to make sure that the Socialist-Confucian ideas the patriarchal leadership cult is built upon prevails. Female characters are never portrayed as women as a category (drawing on arguments made by Ryang, 2000) but always as ideal citizens in relation to the North Korean state and its patriarchal leadership cult. Throughout the films analyzed, the female characters are more important to the story than the male characters, but they are always portrayed by the regime from ideas of the ideal woman taken from Socialist-Confucian ideas. Female independence by itself is not celebrated, female devotion to the community and the nation as a whole is. The traditional view of women as passive, submissive and loyal to their husbands or fathers is promoted within the films analyzed, and by making the audience identify with female characters that have these characteristics - thus feminizing the North Korean people - they are induced to being devoted to the “father of the nation” because of his masculinity that is portrayed as something unique only to him. By making the audience identify with female characters instead of male characters the legitimacy
and almost god-like image of the Kim-leaders and their “masculine beauty and wisdom” is thus unthreatened.

References


**Material of Analysis**

