

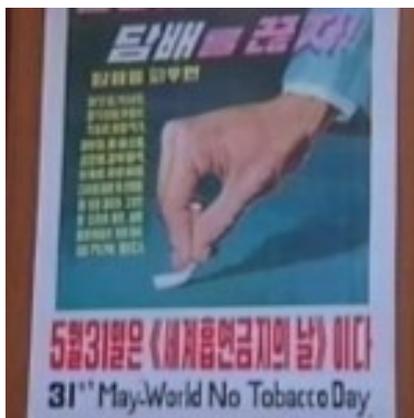
“A North Korean Woman Must Be Crazy To Take Up Smoking”: The Gendering of Smoking in North Korea

by Benjamin Young

In the West, tobacco smoking is universally recognized as an incredibly unhealthy activity. Prior to the dawning of popular consciousness in the United States of the health problems that inevitably arose from cigarette smoking, advertisements for Marlboro, Camel, and Virginia Slims were commonplace. In this tobacco-rich milieu, some cigarette advertisements were directed solely at women, portraying smoking as a [symbol of female independence, stylishness, and beauty](#).

In North Korea, cigarette smoking resides on the other side of the gender spectrum as an exclusively male activity. North Korean women do not smoke because they are supposed to be pure, clean, and untainted – like the nation itself. In an article entitled “[A Woman’s Life](#),” scholar Andrei Lankov includes a telling comment by a North Korean defector: “A North Korean woman must be crazy to take up smoking.”

On the surface, the DPRK declares that “[in] all areas of the country’s economic, cultural and social political life, [women have the same rights as men](#).” However, North Korea remains a strongly patriarchal society and cigarette smoking, as an exclusively masculine activity, is an imminent example of the continuation of this trend. In addition to discussing the gendering of cigarette smoking in this essay, I will also be detailing the North Korean government’s failed attempt at curbing cigarette smoking amongst the populace.



North Korea participating in “World No Tobacco Day” May 31 | Image via NK Economy Watch
Source: <http://www.nkeconwatch.com/2011/05/31/dprk-struggling-with-smoking/>

Trying to Kick the Habit | As early as 2000, [North Korean officials were encouraging citizens](#) to kick the smoking habit. In June of that year, the Korea Central News Agency called on DPRK citizens to give up cigarettes in order to help build a “great, prosperous, and powerful nation” by 2012.

Enlisting the “powerful nation” meme in the service of public health might be more significant than it appears. In 2008, North Korea media reported that [54.7% of the population](#) smoked. The [United Nations in 2010](#) reported that there are 97.1 males for every 100 females in the DPRK, so

this means that some North Korean women do smoke, if the the 54.7% statistic holds for nationwide smoking. However, [another estimate](#) says it is most likely around 40% of the population who smokes. This estimate seems more accurate as the DPRK media may have been inflating the numbers of smokers in order to convince the populace that the smoking problem is too widespread.

The government had hoped to drop the number of smokers down to 30% of the population by 2012, the centenary of the birth of Kim Il Sung's birth. Nonetheless, the North Korean government certainly understands that [smoking is an unhealthy activity](#) and is a significant health problem for its people. However, the [government's efforts at curbing smoking have failed](#). Perhaps cigarette smoking has become yet another subtle way of passively resisting the North Korean government?

Kim Jong Il Looking at Things, Smoking | In 2007, cigarette smoking in the DPRK finally caught the attention of Western media when it was reported that Kim Jong Il, in as early as 2000, had decided to quit smoking under the advice of his doctors. The news appeared to be confirmed in 2007 when the North Korean leader [imposed a ban](#) on smoking at places he was visiting. Kim Jong Il went so far as to label smokers among the "[three main fools of the 21st century](#)" along with "fools" who did not appreciate music and who did not use computers.

However, in the Western media, Kim's moralizing edict was reconjured as "the Dear Leader" banning cigarettes for selfish reasons: if he had to quit the habit, the logic went, all the people must follow suit. On its very face, this was a false claim, as only the places Kim Jong Il was visiting, and not the whole country, had to ban smoking; no one was calling for the entire to kick the habit.

Sang Jong-min, a former South Korean MP, was told of the ban by a Chinese diplomat. "Kim's home, office and all other places he goes to have been designated as non-smoking areas," said the legislator-turned-academic. "Even the highest-ranking officials are going outdoors to smoke," Sang Jong-min said.

Had Kim Jong Il actually banned cigarettes for all Koreans, there would have been significant discontent amongst the male populace. Conversely, such a ban would have invited lawbreaking, cost state tobacco factories dearly. Thus, life in North Korea would continue with cigarette smoke clogging the arteries and destroying the lungs of the populace.

Kim Jong Il Kicks the Habit? | It appeared that Kim Jong Il had a hard time kicking the habit. In 2009, [Kim Jong Il was pictured smoking](#) while on a tour of the Hoeryong Taesong Cigarette Factory in North Hamgyong Province, North Korea. However, the outside world did not know if Kim Jong Il had actually took up smoking again or was simply posing for a photograph. His relatively sudden death might suggest the former.

Kim Jong Il's own "on-site inspections" were one way to gauge changes on the smoking front in North Korea, but there are others. On the long list of sources about life and daily practices in the DPRK, a certain travel agency that brings Westerners to North Korea should not be omitted.



The photo of Kim Jong Il at the Hoeryong Taesong Cigarette Factory

Source: <http://www.newser.com/story/51875/stroke-survivor-kim-puffs-away.html>

Give the Ladies Chocolate or Cosmetics, not Marlboros- On the [“Tour Tips” page of Koryo Tours](#), a is a statement that while explicitly does not mention a gender divide, it implicitly does. The statement reads:

“Most Korean men smoke and it is a good idea to bring a carton or two of Western cigarettes to share amongst the driver and guides. Korean women do not smoke so giving cigarettes to a female guide will benefit only her father or husband. . . . It is also worth having some additional bars of chocolate or cosmetics such as hand/face cream as you will meet various female guides during your trip.”

The absolute statement “Korean women do not smoke,” is neatly offset by the implication that North Korean women are seen as too pure and clean to be polluted by the harmful effects of cigarette smoking. Thus, sweets and cosmetics are seen as much more allowable.

Surely, there are North Korean women who do smoke. [Andrei Lankov notes](#),

“There have been reports about women being sent into exile for their persistence with the smoking habit. I am slightly skeptical about these reports, but it is clear that in smoking, a woman risks some serious ‘criticism’ during an ideological study session, and this is not a good turn of events in North Korean society.”

Lankov further states that older women are allowed to smoke and many begin to smoke after they turn 50. This seems rather unusual but perhaps their perceived “beauty” having been perceived (at least by the state) as having already withered away, cigarettes can only accelerate the harm that time has already exacted.

Lankov’s perceptions are rather useful, as always, but perhaps more insight can be gained from statistics. In 2012, The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that in North Korean male deaths over the age of 30, [13 percent was due to smoking](#). For North Korean women over 30, 11 percent of deaths was due to smoking. This seems like a rather high percentage for a category of people who allegedly do not smoke.

Surely, secondhand smoke takes a toll on the human body but 11 percent seems rather high when compared to the 13 percent of male deaths are from men who “smoked like chimneys.” Perhaps, more North Korean women smoke than it seems. As in the case of market activity, North Korean women are operating outside the lines, as outliers even within the most oppressive system.



Source: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/01/116_102883.html

Looking Ahead- The Western media is constantly overanalyzing every tidbit of information that is emitted from the new leadership of Kim Jong Un. Smoking is no exception. Just like his father and grandfather, it seems that [Kim Jong Un has also taken up the bad habit of smoking](#). Kenji Fujimoto, the former Japanese chef for Kim Jong Il, called Kim Jong Un “one who loves to smoke” and stated that around the age of 15, he had started to smoke and drink. SinoNK pointed out evidence on April 15, 2012 that appeared to confirm that **in North Korean state media, Kim Jong Un’s smoking habit is openly acknowledged**. Regardless of the “Respected General” and what his undoubtedly large medical staff see as appropriate, smoking remains a distinctly masculine activity in North Korea and cigarette smoking, despite the government’s “off and on again” approach to curbing the habit, will continue to be rampant amongst the men.

KEYWORDS: North Korean smoking, North Korean cigarettes, Kim Jong Un smokes, DPRK cigarettes, North Korean tobacco, DPRK tobacco, gender studies, women’s studies, female smoking, North Korean women, DPRK women