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Benjamin Young  
ben.r.young@dsu.edu

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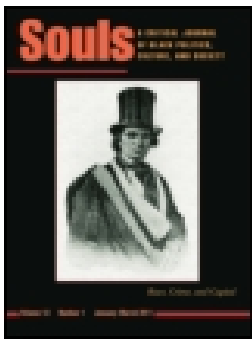
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# Imagining Revolutionary Feminism: Communist Asia and the Women of the Black Panther Party

Benjamin R. Young

*Using newspapers, autobiographies, and interviews, this article examines the ways in which women of the Black Panther Party imagined the women of Vietnam, China, and North Korea as radical archetypes during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Using Judy Wu’s theory of “radical orientalism” in conversation with Ashley Farmer’s concept of the “gendered imaginary,” I argue that the Panther women imagined the women of “the East” as pioneers in world revolution and women’s liberation in order to protest against gendered injustices within the Party and broader U.S. society. This article also investigates the realities on the ground for the women of Communist Asia and the ways in which the patriarchy preserved itself despite the social revolutions of these three Marxist–Leninist governments.*

*Keywords: Asia, Black Panther Party, Black internationalism, China, feminism, North Korea, Vietnam*

Perhaps more than any other group that grew out of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s, the Black Panther Party connected the African American struggle for civil rights with global revolutionary discourse on anti-imperialism, anti-racism, and anti-capitalism. By depicting the Black freedom struggle in the United States as a part of a global effort to dismantle capitalism and white supremacy, the Black Panther Party became an internationally renowned group that operated as foreign representatives of revolutionary African Americans. With an international section based in Algeria, the Black Panther Party sent delegations and representatives to all corners of the revolutionary world.<sup>1</sup> However, it was the communist nations of Asia, especially Vietnam, China, and North Korea, that most captivated the political consciousness of the Black Panther Party. With their anti-colonial mentality, revolutionary society, and nonwhite character, these three communist

Asian nations became Marxian models for the Black Panthers (hereafter “the Party” or “Panthers”).

While men occupied most senior-level positions in the Party, women made up more than half of the membership by 1969.<sup>2</sup> Initially, scholarship on the gender politics of the Panthers focused on the sexism within the group.<sup>3</sup> Patriarchal tendencies and male chauvinism existed within the Party, but, as recent scholarship demonstrates, the intersection of gender, sexuality, and femininity among Panthers were much more complex and dynamic than previously assumed.<sup>4</sup> Panther women often resisted the patriarchal behaviors of men within the Party and formed a discourse that stressed gender equality. As Kathleen Cleaver, communications secretary for the Panthers and wife of Party leader Eldridge Cleaver, told a *Washington Post* reporter in January 1970, “No one ever asks what’s a man’s place in the revolution.”<sup>5</sup> Within their revolutionary discourse, women in the Party imagined an ideal socialist society that confirmed gender equality.<sup>6</sup> In imagining this utopian anti-capitalist future in the United States, Panther women looked to Communist Asia for usable feminist examples to follow and adopt. In Vietnamese women, Panther women found models of toughness and resilience, while in China, Panther women discovered theoretical justification for women’s role in revolutionary struggle. In North Korea, Panther women explored notions of self-reliance and independence.

During the Cold War era, many Black radicals within the United States looked to Vietnam, China, and North Korea as the trailblazers of world revolution.<sup>7</sup> Vietnamese Communists were waging a fierce military struggle against U.S. armed forces while Mao Zedong’s revolutionary theories, encapsulated within his *Little Red Book*, ignited the passions of anti-colonial peoples around the world. Meanwhile, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung’s concept of Juche (radical self-reliance) resonated with Black Panther Party leaders, chiefly Eldridge Cleaver who traveled there in 1969 and 1970.<sup>8</sup> While the international dimensions of the Panthers have been well researched, the specific linkages with Asian women fostered by women within the Party have been underexplored.

Using newspapers, autobiographies, and interviews, this article examines the ways in which Panther women imagined the women of Communist Asia as radical archetypes. As Edward Said explained in his foundational work *Orientalism*, the long history of the West’s imagining of the East as its inferior Other produced false stereotypes about Asia and inflated the West’s sense of superiority.<sup>9</sup> However, as Judy Wu explains in her recent book *Radicals on the Road*, many leftist radicals, including some Panther women, during the late 1960s inverted Said’s concept and created a system of “radical orientalism” in which “the East” stood as a revolutionary ideal vis-à-vis the West in order to resist white supremacy, colonialism, and sexism back at home.<sup>10</sup> For example, after returning from her trip to Communist Asia in 1970, the editor of the *Black Panther* newspaper Elaine Brown referred to Asia as “civilization” and the West as “madness.” Upon arriving in New York City after her visits to Asia, Brown claimed, “Returning from civilization into madness

was a real cultural shock. We almost weren't able to adjust. ... If you could really see the difference yourself, you would see that it is total madness here." She added, "It's a shame that the American people are subject and slaves to this madness that has been perpetrated upon them by a few people. ... You really feel sorry for the people that have never had the experience of being in the civilized world."<sup>11</sup> Panther women depicted Communist Asia as the frontline to a new world, a "civilized world."

I put Wu's theory of "radical orientalism" in conversation with Ashley Farmer's concept of the "gendered imaginary," which she defines as "activists' idealized, public projections of black manhood and womanhood." Ashley Farmer's recent groundbreaking book, *Remaking Black Power*, examines the ways in which radical African American women both reimagined and redefined the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In describing her theory of the "gendered imaginary," Farmer explains, "Black Power activists collectively reimagined black identity and gender constructs by developing oppositional, black-centered models of manhood and womanhood. These were collective symbols that united activists around a set of ideas and organizing goals."<sup>12</sup> Using these two theories, I argue that the Panther women imagined the women of "the East" as pioneers in world revolution and women's liberation in order to protest against gendered injustices within the Party and broader U.S. society. By depicting the women of Communist Asia as feminist archetypes, Panther women reimagined womanhood within the Party and redefined gender politics within the Black Power movement. However, the Panther women's imagination often overlooked the retention of traditional patriarchal ways in Communist Asia and the difficulties women still faced in these revolutionary Asian societies. Despite their communist revolutions, the governments in Vietnam, China, and North Korea continued to restrict the political and socioeconomic advancement of women within society. The lived experiences of women in Communist Asia differed from the Panther women's radical imagination of them.

Specifically, to the Panther women, the women of Communist Asia became examples of women's independence, self-defense, and self-sufficiency. As June Culberson, a Party member in the Southern California chapter, wrote in a May 4, 1969 op-ed criticizing Panther men, "You tell us that we are the backbone of the Party and yet you won't allow us to put this into practice for fear that if you really help us get politically educated, we might learn a little more than you do, or may shoot a little straighter." In her *Black Panther* newspaper article, Culberson emphasizes "the examples" of Chinese and Vietnamese women who fought in their national liberation struggles. This posing of Asian Communist women as revolutionary feminist examples was a way for Panther women to condemn the patriarchal culture back at home. Culberson concluded women within the Party "would like to be regarded as Panthers, not females, just Panthers."<sup>13</sup>

However, unlike Judy Wu's *Radicals on the Road*, this article also investigates the realities of life for the women of Communist Asia during the Cold War era.

Despite the romanticization of their radical struggle by the Panther women, reality proved to be different for the women of Communist Asia. From the continuation of traditionalist male chauvinism and gender inequality, the Asian revolution demonstrated itself to be a project of state violence, discrimination, and oppression rather than women's liberation. The potentiality of Communist Asia as a revolutionary space halted as authoritarian regimes in Vietnam, China, and North Korea chose political stability over radical social change. By examining both the Panther women's imagination of "the East" and the reality of life for Communist Asian women, this article does not discount the usefulness of these "radical orientalist" images for the Black Panther Party but rather complement this strategic messaging with the real complexities and difficulties of women's lives in Communist Asia.

This study also contributes to a growing body of scholarship that corrects the historical misperception of African American women as un-internationally minded.<sup>14</sup> For example, the Panther women who visited Vietnam, China, and North Korea in the early 1970s were among a select group of Westerners who visited Communist Asia during the Cold War era. In addition, as scholarship by Nico Slate, Ernest Allen Jr., Gerald Horne, and Yuichiro Onishi demonstrates, Afro-Asian solidarity has long been a vital component of Black internationalism.<sup>15</sup> In particular, as Keisha Blain and Shailaja Paik have revealed, African American women have been at the vanguard of building this transnational solidarity.<sup>16</sup> Building on this foundational work, I will examine the ways in which Panther women looked across the Pacific for anti-capitalist allies in their struggle against racism, imperialism, and sexism. In so doing, the Panther women expanded upon the Black internationalist tradition of Afro-Asian solidarity and oriented it in a more radical Marxist direction.

## **Vietnam**

As part of the Black Panther Party's global struggle against U.S. imperialism, no other movement occupied such a vital position in this "radical orientalist" imagination as the Vietnamese liberation struggle. Due to its ongoing war against the U.S. military, the Vietnamese Communists were seen as models of revolutionary fortitude and martial spirit. According to the Panthers, the Vietnamese were the most revolutionary as they directly confronted U.S. imperialism on the battlefield. In August 1970, Black Panther leader Huey Newton offered to send members of the Party to fight with the Vietnamese Communists on the battlefield. In a letter to the National Liberation Front of Vietnam, Newton said, "It is appropriate for the Black Panther Party to take this action at this time in recognition of the fact that your struggle is also our struggle, for we recognize that our common enemy is the American imperialist who is the leader of international bourgeois domination."<sup>17</sup> Thus, Newton's message of solidarity with the Vietnamese tied to traditional masculine notions of militarism and war fighting.

While much of Newton's Vietnam-related agenda was revolutionary bravado and machismo, the women of the Party looked at Vietnamese women as exemplars of a new kind of rugged femininity. The iconic image of the rugged Vietnamese woman soldier with a Kalashnikov rifle draped around one shoulder and a baby hanging on her back exemplified motherhood and a woman's place in the revolution. In a September 1969 interview with a leftist newspaper, women of the Black Panther Party said as a collective, "We feel that the example given us by the Vietnamese women is a prime example of the role women can play in the revolution. The Vietnamese women are out there fighting with their brothers, fighting against American imperialism, with its advanced technology. They can shoot." The Panther women continued, "They're out there with their babies on their backs, as the case may be, and they're participating in the revolution wholeheartedly just as the Vietnamese men are participating in the revolution." The Panther women concluded, "We hold them up as our example and we hope that the revolutionary women in the U.S. can follow that example and live up to the goal that they have set."<sup>18</sup> Faced with the double burden of armed resistance against U.S. troops and childrearing during a national liberation struggle, the Vietnamese women stood as models of soldierly vigor and maternal strength to the Panther women.

In addition to the Vietnamese women's military role on the battlefield, the Panther women also venerated the ways in which Vietnamese women used their sexuality to resist their oppressors. For example, in her autobiography, editor of the *Black Panther* newspaper Elaine Brown recalls a time when Ericka Huggins, the head of the Panther chapter in Los Angeles, embraced the ways in which Vietnamese women used their sexualized bodies as weapons. According to Brown, "Ericka told us point-blank that as women we might have to have a sexual encounter with 'the enemy' at night and slit his throat in the morning. ... She reminded us of the Vietnamese guerilla women who were not only carrying guns but using their very bodies against American forces."<sup>19</sup> By discussing Vietnamese women in this manner, Huggins emphasized the unique gendered ways in which women could provide advantages to the revolution vis-à-vis men.

However, the aspect of Vietnamese femininity that appealed to most Panther women was their overall toughness and creativeness to combat the oppressor. From fighting with babies on their backs to slitting the throats of U.S. soldiers in bed, Vietnamese women appeared wily and resilient. For example, *The Black Panther* newspaper published a sympathetic piece on the Vietnamese woman, nicknamed "Hanoi Hannah," who encouraged U.S. troops over broadcasts to lay down their weapons and return home.<sup>20</sup> Along with other Panthers and U.S. radical leftists, Elaine Brown visited North Vietnam in the summer of 1970 where she saw young Vietnamese women resting on a Gulf of Tonkin beach away from the battlefield in Saigon. She said these "girls ... should have been giggling about boys or lipstick or hairstyles" and not fighting for their nation's independence against foreign occupiers. She also saw "stalwart old women who had lost everyone in their families in U.S. troop destruction of their villages."<sup>21</sup> A year later, a

pregnant Elaine Brown reflected on the strength of Vietnamese women and hoped to replicate their toughness in her own situation. In her autobiography, she wrote, “I realized I had done nothing to prepare for the moment of the birth of my baby. The Vietnamese women had their babies one day and got back into battle the next, I had told myself.”<sup>22</sup> These depictions of Vietnamese women’s toughness became useful for Brown during difficult moments when the double burden of motherhood and revolutionary struggle confronted her on a deeply personal level.

Kathleen Cleaver felt similarly about the toughness of Vietnamese women. In 1970, during her maternity stay in North Korea, she attended a national celebration in Pyongyang and saw delegations from both the Soviet Union and North Vietnam. In her memoir, Cleaver described the scene, “Soviet Union was represented by several beefy military officials, gray-haired and pale skinned, who posed such a contrast to the delicate young women with the delegation from Vietnam, who wore army uniforms with medals and their long black hair in braids hanging down their backs.” Cleaver continued, “To me, these soldiers looked like they were about sixteen years old, and they are the ones fighting the Yankees on the ground, while the Soviets—with all their power—stayed in the background and sent them weapons!”<sup>23</sup> Cleaver imagined Vietnamese women as models of revolutionary action and militant womanhood.

While the Panther women reproduced positive portrayals of Vietnamese women in their own accounts, Vietnamese women also used the Panthers for their own propaganda purposes. For example, the Vietnam Women’s Union hosted Elaine Brown during her visit to the Southeast Asian country in 1970. The Vietnam Women’s Union established international contacts with a number of sympathetic feminists and women’s movements abroad.<sup>24</sup> By stressing international feminist solidarity, the Vietnam Women’s Union depicted their national liberation struggle as globally popular. It also showcased a less masculine and militant side of their struggle. Thus, this international feminist solidarity between Panther women and Vietnamese women was bidirectional and benefited both sides in different ways. As Judy Wu explains, “the East and the West worked together to foster a radical orientalist sensibility.”<sup>25</sup>

However, the lived experiences of Vietnamese women during wartime stood in stark contrast to the idealistic images produced by the Panthers. As Sandra Taylor explains, the “long-haired warriors” of the Vietnamese independence struggle faced accusations of depravity if they openly engaged in sexual activity with men and leadership told women to avoid marriage until after the successful conclusion of the revolution.<sup>26</sup> In addition, as traditional gender norms dictated, Vietnamese motherhood demanded that many women during wartime care for both the home and the nation. In addition to fighting for the nation, women were also expected to be the primary caretakers in the domestic space. This dual burden of traditional and revolutionary motherhood resulted in difficult lived experiences for many Vietnamese women during the U.S.–Vietnam war.<sup>27</sup> Despite their many sacrifices, the contributions of the Vietnamese women soldiers to the revolution proved to



be invaluable and forged the path to independence for the Communists. Nonetheless, these contributions are largely forgotten within Vietnam's official histories of the war.<sup>28</sup> Ironically, the women of the Black Panther Party did more to celebrate Vietnamese women's contributions to the war effort than the government in Hanoi.

## China

Chinese leader Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book* became one of the central theoretical texts within the Black Panther Party. As a nonwhite guerilla fighter that initially led a small group of Chinese communists against overwhelming imperialist forces and later became the leader of the world's largest country, Mao's theories on guerilla warfare and armed resistance became well known among Party members. Elaine Brown recalled how the Panthers studied the *Little Red Book* in political education classes. In her autobiography, Brown explained, "We were given a *Red Book* to read, a collection of Mao's philosophical treatises and statements on revolutions and revolutionaries. We were ordered to study his writings, to be prepared to recite portions of them on command, and to distribute his books to the masses."<sup>29</sup> This revolutionary text became a lodestar for the Black Panther Party as it presented a flexible interpretation of Marxism-Leninism from a nonwhite perspective. Mao's application of socialism to China's national conditions appealed to the Party's desire for a unique anti-capitalist system in African American communities.

In addition to admiring Mao's unique viewpoint on the peasant class as the revolutionary vanguard, members of the Black Panther Party also noticed Mao's inclusion of women as an equally revolutionary gender to men. As historian Robin D.G. Kelley explains, the rhetoric in the *Little Red Book* regarding women's importance in revolutionary struggle and gender equality "provided space within the [Black Panther] party to develop an incipient black feminist agenda."<sup>30</sup> In fact, the Panthers directly borrowed from Mao's theories on women's equality. Safiya Bukhari-Alson, the Party's minister of Information and Communications for the East Coast chapter, recalled, "In defining the work of the Party they looked to other struggles around the world and to Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book* 'Quotations of Chairman Mao' for direction. The 'Eight Points of Attention' and 'Three Main Rules of Discipline' were lifted directly from this book." Bukhari-Alson continued, "One of the 'Eight Points' was 'Do Not Take Liberties With Women.' This was a monumental step forward in addressing the issue of the treatment of women." She concluded, "The simple fact that the issue was placed in the books was a step forward; now we had to make it a part of our everyday lives, the everyday lives of the lumpen who were the majority element of the Black Panther Party."<sup>31</sup> Mao's *Little Red Book* provided Panther women with a pathway to Third World feminism that was separate and different from white feminism. This brand of feminism promoted an anti-colonial agenda along with gender equality.

In 1970, Elaine Brown traveled to China with Party co-leader Eldridge Cleaver. During this trip, she encountered the ways in which Mao's revolution improved the lives of the average Chinese citizen. In her memoir, she explains, "Old and young would spontaneously give emotional testimonies, like Baptist converts, to the glories of socialism. ... They affirmed that, but for the revolution, they would not have had the possibility of a decent life."<sup>32</sup> In 1971, Elaine Brown, as the newly appointed minister of Information, sought to return to China with the co-leader of the Panthers, Huey Newton. During a visa run to the Chinese embassy in Canada, Brown held a conversation with a Chinese diplomat in which she lauded Mao's role in elevating the status of women in politics and the military.<sup>33</sup> Brown was granted reentry to China and spent ten days touring with Newton and his body-guard Robert Bay.<sup>34</sup>

This initiative by the Panthers to reach Beijing before U.S. President Richard Nixon's historic visit to China was highly publicized in the Western media. During their travels, the Panther delegation met with high-level Chinese officials, including Mao Zedong's wife Jiang Qing. The first lady of China, sometimes referred to as "Madame Mao," was a leadership figure in her own right and developed China's cultural production, such as promoting the creation of revolutionary operas and arts. Thus, Brown's dinner with Jiang was a rare meeting of two prominent women revolutionaries in typically male-dominated spaces. However, as historian Ross Terrill explains, Jiang did not promote feminist politics but rather "would use her feminine skills to get where men were, to attain the posts that men attained, almost to be like a man."<sup>35</sup> After Mao's death in 1976, Chinese authorities blamed the violent excesses of the Cultural Revolution on the "Gang of Four," which included Jiang, and sentenced her to life in prison.

After her 1971 tour of China, Brown said at a press conference in the United States, "The Black Panther Party acknowledges the progressive leadership of our Chinese comrades in all areas of revolution. Specifically, we embrace China's correct recognition of the proper status of women as equal to that of men."<sup>36</sup> As the Party's minister of Information, Brown's public promotion of China's stance on women indicates the degree to which the Panthers borrowed their feminist agenda from Maoism. The Panthers also evoked Maoist phrases in their intra-party criticisms of sexism, domestic violence, and male chauvinism. For example, Safiya Bukhari-Alson said that the Panthers reiterated Mao's saying that "(S)He who is not afraid of death by a thousand cuts, lives to unhorse the emperor." Bukhari-Alson explained, "It is with this thought in mind that we use the weapon of criticism and self-criticism to correct the way we deal with each other."<sup>37</sup> The Maoist tradition of self-criticism was applied within the Black Panther Party as a means to rid the organization of domestic violence and patriarchal actions.

While the Panthers imagined Maoist China as a model of women's equality, the reality was much different on the ground. From the lack of career advancement for women to sexual violence, women in China continued to be oppressed by sexism and male chauvinism. Despite Mao's famous slogan, "The times have changed,

men and women are the same,” gender equality was never achieved in China.<sup>38</sup> However, the official “women hold up half the sky” policy of China allowed women to imagine a different life.<sup>39</sup> This radical Chinese reconfiguration of gender equality allured Panther women as well. Thus, it was not Chinese feminism in practice that appealed to the Panthers but Mao’s theories about gender equality that invigorated the women of the Black Panther Party.

### North Korea

Despite its relatively small geographic size and remoteness, North Korean communism appealed to Panther women due to its concept of Juche. The Panthers interpreted North Korean leader Kim Il Sung’s concept as radical autonomy. The Panthers’ emphasis on Black self-determination naturally meshed with the three pillars of the Juche ideology: self-defense militarily, self-reliance politically, and self-sufficiency economically.<sup>40</sup> Eldridge Cleaver and Kathleen Cleaver brought Juche to the forefront of the Party’s ideological project. In 1969 and 1970, Eldridge Cleaver traveled to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK; the official title of North Korea) for an anti-imperialist journalism conference. Meanwhile, in 1970, Kathleen Cleaver gave birth to a baby girl in a Pyongyang hospital. Thus, it was the Cleavers who disseminated Juche’s core message of radical self-reliance to fellow members of the Party.

For the Panthers, the most important concept borrowed from Kim Il Sung’s ideas was Juche. This concept’s stress on self-defense, self-sufficiency, and self-strengthening naturally resonated with the Panthers, who sought Black autonomy in the United States. To both North Koreans and Panthers, Juche meant to achieve a goal through one’s own efforts and to reject outside interference. In numerous articles, the Panthers applied Juche to their specific situation as a Black revolutionary group in the United States. The Panthers crudely defined Juche as, “Use what you got to get what you need.” A *Black Panther* newspaper article from February 1970 explained that, “Broken wine bottles and hypodermic needles are very effective. Pork chop and chicken bones can even be utilized as weapons. This is ‘Juche’ relying on what you have, to sustain your resistance.”<sup>41</sup> Another *Black Panther* article theoretically described Juche as, “Holding fast to the principle of solving for oneself all the problems of the revolution and the construction in conformity with the actual conditions at home, and mainly by one’s own efforts.”<sup>42</sup> Juche allured the Panthers because it resonated with their central message of Black self-rule and self-defense.

The Panthers grew fond of Juche because of its almost singular emphasis on self-reliance. This concept appealed particularly to Panther women, who sought a space within the Party for women’s self-expression and independence. For example, Party member Assata Shakur preferred reading the works of Kim Il Sung over Marx, Engels, or Lenin.<sup>43</sup> Shakur explained that her closest friends in the Panthers would come over to her house and spend hours “talking politics, the

Party, North Korea, and what was happening on 116th street.”<sup>44</sup> Juche also filled a gap in the Party’s revolutionary lexicon. As Katherine Cleaver explained in her memoir, “The Black Panther Party has been practicing [Juche] since its inception without knowing of the theory.”<sup>45</sup> In 2014, Katherine Cleaver told a British journalist, “... the Panthers were attracted to the concept of Juche; adapting ideology to your circumstances. It was kind of what the Black Panthers did anyway.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, Juche fulfilled a variety of ideological roles in the Party’s revolutionary consciousness.

In addition to Juche, Panther women also praised the materialist successes of the North Korean revolution. Following her 1970 visit to the wealthier areas of rural North Korea, Elaine Brown claimed that the “the entire countryside has electricity in all houses” and that “most of the people even in the countryside have television.” Brown contrasted the oppressed situation of the working class in the United States with that of North Koreans thriving under socialism. She contended that, “The people who live on cooperative farms actually live at a much higher living standard than the average person in the United States who would be involved in farming work, or even a worker.” She added that, “Each person, for example, is provided already with health care and medical facilities, with child care, with housing, with some clothing allotment, with a free educational system up through what we would call high school and even college education.”<sup>47</sup> Brown imagined North Korea as a radical alternative to U.S. capitalism and a model of postcolonial development. In a recent 2014 interview with *The Guardian*, Kathleen Cleaver said that North Korea “seemed like a sort of Stalinist Switzerland: high up in the hills, very clean, very quiet.”<sup>48</sup> The Panther women’s imagination of the DPRK as a clean and egalitarian socialist paradise was far from reality. Kim Il Sung ruled over North Korea with an iron fist and restricted socioeconomic advancement to only the most loyal classes. Unlike Mao’s revolution that valorized the countryside, rural North Korea was typically the site of banishment and exile for hostile classes.<sup>49</sup> However, the Panther women’s radical imagination of the North Korean revolution allowed them to conceive of an alternative system of social justice and economic equality for African Americans.

Panther women also lauded the revolutionary exploits of Korean women from the colonial era and placed them within their pantheon of historical heroines. As North Korean propaganda officially promotes, women guerillas fought alongside Kim Il Sung during the 1930s anti-colonial struggle in Manchuria. In an effort to entice U.S. radicals to visit Pyongyang, the North Korean ambassador in Algeria showed a propaganda film to several leftist women from the United States, including Kathleen Cleaver. At the North Korean embassy in Algiers on April 8, 1970, the U.S. radical women were shown a film that highlighted an anti-Japanese Korean woman partisan. According to Kathleen Cleaver’s unpublished memoir, this self-reliant Korean heroine was “dispatched to a village behind enemy lines to organize the people to support the revolution.” Cleaver added, “She is so successful that she is finally captured and jailed, and it is only as she is on the way to her

execution that she is rescued by a guerilla attack on the Japanese soldiers—firmly winning the control of that village for the revolutionary army, and winning the faith of the people in General Kim Il Sung.”<sup>50</sup> This visual depiction of Korean guerilla women as the vanguard of national independence may have initially led Kathleen Cleaver to believe the North Korean system was genuinely feminist and opposed to patriarchy.

After the liberation of Korea from Japanese colonial rule and subsequent division of the peninsula at the 38th parallel by the Soviet and U.S. governments, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung enacted the Gender Equality Law in 1946.<sup>51</sup> As the first Asian nation to officially recognize the equality of the sexes, North Korea set a precedent for other Asian communist governments. Eldridge Cleaver celebrated North Korea’s initiative in promoting women’s rights. During his 1970 visit to Pyongyang, Cleaver said, “We have seen too the great successes you have made in the emancipation of women. Centuries upon centuries of oppression and exploitation have been wiped out since the passage of the Law of Equality of the Sexes just 24 years ago.” Cleaver continued, “The special care paid to the needs of Korean revolutionary women cannot be matched—such a complete system of child care and maternal benefits is the dream of women throughout the world.”<sup>52</sup> Eldridge Cleaver brought his wife, Kathleen Cleaver, to North Korea a year earlier to give birth in a Pyongyang maternity hospital. Thus, Eldridge Cleaver seems to have sincerely believed North Korea’s system supported women in legalistic ways and in medical care.

In addition to officially declaring gender equality, state-supported maternity leave in North Korea appealed to the Panthers. Elaine Brown said, after her 1970 trip to North Korea, “Every working woman receives 77 days of maternity leave. These human things, automatic for every single person in this society, are the very things that people in our society struggle for.”<sup>53</sup> While African American women often faced the burden of child-rearing alongside work obligations, the North Korean government provided maternity leave to its citizens. During her travels to Pyongyang in late May 1970, Kathleen Cleaver wrote in a letter to Eldridge, “On the airplane ride, which was perfectly smooth, I learned that the [North] Koreans have a custom which had been made into law that gives all pregnant women 100 days vacation from their labor from the later part of their pregnancy to after the birth of the child.” The letter continued, “Whether or not you were aware of it, you are following that law by sending me there for my 100 days, and all appearances and statements to the contrary, I am genuinely grateful.”<sup>54</sup> While Brown and Kathleen Cleaver recognized the many flaws in North Korean communism, they strategically used the DPRK’s socialist system as a means to protest against the poor healthcare for African American women in the United States.

Kathleen Cleaver’s stay in Pyongyang was organized by the North Korean Women’s Union. Headed by Kim Il Sung’s wife Kim Song-ae, this organization mobilized North Korean women into a political force to domestically bolster the personality cult of the Kim family. Similar to Mao’s wife Jiang Qiang, Kim Song-

ae held a prominent role with the Party leadership. In 1970, she became a member of the Korean Workers' Party's Central Committee, and in 1971, became the chairwoman of the Union of Democratic Women. After receiving this leadership position, she received the distinguished title of "Respected Chairwoman" in some North Korean publications.<sup>55</sup> She also published a book in 1969 entitled, *Let Us Women Become Revolutionary Fighters Infinitely Loyal to the Party and Reliable Builders of Socialism and Communism by Revolutionizing and Working-Classing Ourselves*.<sup>56</sup> In the highly autocratic North Korean system, this reverence for someone other than the "Fatherly Leader" was unprecedented and suggests that Kim Song-ae held a lot of power within the regime.

Kim Song-ae's Women's Union arranged for Cleaver to stay in a lakeside house on the outskirts of Pyongyang. The comfort and luxuries offered to Cleaver by the Women's Union was meant to depict the DPRK as a socialist paradise. The Women's Union provided Kathleen with a translator, a cook, a maid, and a driver. Kathleen Cleaver also requested lectures on Marxism-Leninism from her North Korean hosts, which she promptly received.<sup>57</sup> Kim Song-ae even hosted Kathleen Cleaver son's first birthday party in Pyongyang.<sup>58</sup> Most importantly, the Women's Union treated Cleaver as an official representative of the Panthers, not merely the wife of Eldridge Cleaver. As Cleaver wrote in her memoir, "Being greeted as an official of the Black Panther Party instead of as Eldridge Cleaver's wife was rare, and I felt flattered by their expression of respect."<sup>59</sup> In North Korea, Kathleen Cleaver's status went beyond being the mere wife of the Black Panther Party co-leader. The North Korean Women's Union saw Kathleen Cleaver as a prominent revolutionary figure in her own right and treated her as a distinguished guest of the state.

With its free medical care and generous maternity leave, Pyongyang became a hub for pregnant Panther women as another pregnant Party member, Barbara Easley, soon joined Kathleen Cleaver in her North Korean guesthouse. As Cleaver explained, "Having another sister from San Francisco, another Black Panther, certainly made life easier, although Barbara didn't share my absorption in revolutionary ideology. 'Real people don't care about things like that,' she told me with certainty." The two pregnant Panther women collectively received lectures on Marxism-Leninism and attended national celebrations in Pyongyang. Kathleen's son, Maceo, also enjoyed having Easley around the guesthouse as "another set of welcoming arms."<sup>60</sup> The two Panther women would both later give births in the Pyongyang maternity hospital. The luxuries given to these two Panther women by the increasingly cash-strapped North Korean government speaks volumes about the degree to which Kim Il Sung's regime supported the international revolutionary movement.

Of the three communist Asian countries Panther women romanticized during the late 1960s and early 1970s, North Korea's regime stood above the others in terms of its highly autocratic nature. In particular, Kathleen Cleaver lamented the social control and lack of diversity in North Korea. In her memoir, she said, "I

hadn't realized how numbed I'd become by being immersed within the puritanical communist orthodoxy of Korea, seeing everyone wearing the same drab colors, looking very much alike, and talking about the same subjects in identical phrases."<sup>61</sup> Within North Korean society, the equation of femininity with motherhood reaffirmed traditional notions of womanhood.<sup>62</sup> The omnipresent personality cult of the "Fatherly Leader" Kim Il Sung and its patriarchal narratives in propaganda restricted women to being primarily maternal figures in North Korean society. Perhaps more than in Vietnam and China, North Korean women were seen as mothers rather than revolutionary equal members of society. This can be traced back to Korea's historical linkages to patriarchal Confucianism, which placed family as the basis of social cohesion and the father and first sons as dominant members within the family.<sup>63</sup> The North Korean regime did not remove vestiges of patriarchal Confucianism but instead reconfigured it into the personality cult of the Kim family as a way to bolster domestic support for the government in Pyongyang.

## Conclusion

The Panther women were not ignorant revolutionaries unaware of their patriarchal surroundings in Communist Asia. The Panther women were radicals, not journalists or academics, and thus their imagination of Communist Asia as a superior Other in world affairs reinforced their anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-racist discourse back at home. The Panther women's lenses toward Communist Asia were not rose-colored but rather red-colored in terms of their commitment to socialism and the application of revolutionary Marxist theory to the African American community. In "the East," the Panther women found useful models of feminism, womanhood, and sisterhood in order to reconstruct a more equal and just U.S. society in the future. This utopian imagination of Communist Asia was not a result of the Panther women's obliviousness but rather a result of their commitment to equality and human rights.

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### **About the Author**

Benjamin R. Young, PhD, is an assistant professor in Cyber Leadership and Intelligence at Dakota State University. His research interests include North Korean foreign relations, Marxism in the Third World, and Cold War studies, and his works include “Juche in the USA: The Black Panther Party’s Relations with North Korea, 1969–1971” (*The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 2015) and “Not There for the Nutmeg: North Korean Advisors in Grenada and Pyongyang’s Internationalism, 1979–1983” (*Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, 2018). He is finishing a book on the history of North Korea–Third World relations.