

Transnational Mothering and North Korean Women's Strategies of Survival: Impact of China's One-Child Policy and *Hukou* on Migration and Kinship

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Why do so many North Korean women resort to leaving their children born in China and resettle alone in South Korea? What survival strategies have they employed? And what conditions contribute to them becoming transnational mothers? To answer, this article explores the status of North Korean border-crossers in China, the influence of the one-child policy and industrialization on North Koreans' gendered migration, and China's *hukou* household registration system. Drawing on ethnographic research, the article argues that the mothers' migration and kinship are grounded in a search for security, repositioning themselves for greater control of their lives and futures. Practices of transnational mothering emerge as North Korean women resettle in South Korea and become long-distance mothers to their children who remain with their Chinese fathers.

Keywords motherhood, family, gender, remittance, migration, North Korea

Introduction

The school was established in 2004 with the goal of providing education to resettled North Koreans in South Korea. It is an alternative school in Seoul for the *talbukmin*, people who left North Korea, who often face discrimination for their identity in South Korean institutions or fall behind their South Korean peers. The school was established at a time when thousands of North Koreans began to enter South Korea via China annually. However, since its inception, this institution has undergone a demographic shift where approximately seventy to eighty percent of the enrolled students today are categorically not "North Korean," but rather they are the children of North Korean mothers and Chinese fathers. In June 2023, as the students swept the hallways and helped clean their classrooms during the after-school hours, I observed most of them conversing among themselves in

Chinese. They had lived with their fathers in China for most of their childhood and had only just arrived in South Korea in the previous year or two as teenagers. Some had been separated from their mothers for ten years, and others even more.

This article seeks to untangle the question of why so many North Korean women resort to initially leaving their children who were born in China and go to South Korea alone. Research on migration has pointed to its feminization, a trend that is reflected not only in Asia but across the globe (see Palriwala and Uberoi 2008; Parreñas 2001; Piper and Roces 2003; Williams 2010). As De Haas, Castles, and Miller (2020, 181) write, “[I]ntra-Asian migration has been feminizing,” and scholars have pointed to the rising availabilities of gendered work in the service, entertainment, and labor sectors. Pei-chia Lan (2003), for example, studied the challenges of Filipina domestic workers in Taiwan. While these women became primary breadwinners for their families through their feminized domestic labor overseas, they faced the task of employing help back home in the Philippines to take care of their left-behind families. In this sense, Lan suggests, these women simultaneously straddle the boundaries between “maid” and “madam” and demonstrate the continuities of paid and unpaid domestic labor. However, this feminization of migration in association with labor migration is only one aspect of human mobility in Asia, and I wish to draw attention to the entanglements of kinship with the political. How does kinship adjust to geopolitics and global inequalities, and how have North Korean women responded to the pushes and pulls of migration? Furthermore, what survival strategies have the women employed, and what conditions contribute to them becoming transnational, long-distance mothers? In seeking answers to these questions, I explore the status of North Korean border-crossers in China, the one-child policy and the industrialization that has led to North Korean women’s gendered migration, and the Chinese hukou household registration system.

This research builds on previous studies from scholars in a variety of disciplines who have explored the legality of North Koreans’ status in China vis-à-vis their human rights (Chan and Schloenhardt 2007; Chung 2003; Lankov 2004; Lee 2000; Kang 2013; Wolman 2012), humanitarian and religious aid to North Koreans in China (Jung 2015), and the gendered nature of their migration (Choi 2014; Kim 2016; Song 2013). In the predominant literature about North Korean defectors, migrants, and refugees, Lee Hwa-Jin (2014) argues that North Koreans’ experiences have largely been spatially divided into nation-specific experiences. Studies of North Korean women’s experiences, due to this compartmentalization, have been unable to account for the contradictions, contentions, and (re) constructions of motherhood as the women move across national boundaries of North Korea, China, and South Korea. Their practices of mothering vary across residence, and their mothering sometimes even challenge notions of the “ideal” mother (Lee 2018). For example, while their mothering in North Korea may have been concerned predominantly with keeping their child from starving, the

mothers in China lack legal status and, consequently, may have to prioritize their own safety over their child's. It is in this search for legal status via resettlement in South Korea that long-distance forms of motherhood emerge, and Kim Sung Kyung (2017) has shown that some women grapple with guilt and a sense of shame as they confront idealized notions of motherhood.

North Korean women employ various strategies of survival in China as it relates to their (il)legal status, hukou registration, and transnational mothering, and I argue that their mobility and kinship is grounded in a search for security as they reposition themselves for greater control of their lives and futures. This article is based on ethnographic research conducted between 2012-2014 with resettled North Koreans in South Korea, supplemented by additional fieldwork during the summer months of 2019, 2022, and 2023. In addition to participant observation, conversations with the women in their homes, and interviews, I also draw on government materials and archival data. The first section attends to the legal status of North Korean border-crossers in China and the gendered nature of their border-crossings. It then engages with the challenge of obtaining hukou, Chinese household registration. It is their legal precarity in China and the threat of deportation (back to North Korea) that force many North Korean women to resettle in South Korea in search of legal protections and resettlement benefits. Because this separation from their children produces a distanced relationality, some women try to be an absent presence in their children's lives through digital communication and the sending of remittances.

North Koreans' Gendered Migration

Before any discussion can be had on North Korean women's transnational mothering, their migration must first be situated within the legal, political, and social conditions that contribute to such long-distant forms of care. Of the 34,078 North Koreans who have resettled in South Korea (as of the end of December 2023, Ministry of Unification 2024), a great majority of them arrive after having spent time in China. Some transit through the Chinese mainland for a brief period while others resettle in South Korea after having resided in China for up to ten years. Today, 72% of resettled North Koreans in South Korea are women (ibid.), but it was not always this way. Between 1953 (after the Korean War ceasefire) and 1998, in a span of forty-five years, a total of 947 North Koreans resettled in South Korea, and men accounted for nearly nine out of ten of them (87.8%). They were predominantly high-profile figures such as government officials or military officers who had the means to escape the repressive country. However, the migration pattern changed in the early 2000s in major ways. By 2002, more North Korean women than men began to enter South Korea on an annual basis, and in 2004, the total number of North Korean women resettled in

South Korea surpassed that of men (3,309 women to 3,006 men). Additionally, the annual number of those resettling increased to over a thousand people per year (versus the 947 in total in a span of forty-five years prior to 1998). From 2006 to 2011, more than two thousand North Koreans resettled annually in South Korea reaching its peak in 2009 when 2,914 North Koreans resettled to South Korea that year. At the time of writing, a total of 24,536 women and 9,542 men have resettled in South Korea (*ibid.*).

Another change in the migration pattern was that most of those resettling in South Korea left North Korea via China. In the past, many elite figures, diplomats, and military officers defected to South Korea across the Demilitarized Zone, through the western maritime boundary of the Northern Limit Line and the East Sea, or via third countries where they were stationed diplomatically. Since the ceasefire to the Korean War, North Korea has rarely allowed “outbound overseas migration” (Lankov 2006), though many of its workers have travelled overseas in various capacities (for example, to work in state-sponsored restaurants, in diplomatic posts, or to build monuments). This privileged group of defectors offered valuable military intelligence to South Korea and were welcomed with great monetary rewards.

In the 1990s, however, North Korea underwent a turbulent period with the death of their founding leader in 1994, the collapse of the country’s main trade partners (East Germany, the Soviet Union, and other Eastern Bloc countries), and ecological calamities—monstrous rainfall and flooding that destroyed crops, followed by a series of frigid winters that led to widespread famine and mass starvation. A conservative estimate is that two to three million North Koreans died during this period (Woo-Cumings 2002; Yoo 2020) due to malnutrition and the malnourished body’s vulnerability to disease and illness (Fahy 2015). With the North Korean state’s failure to provide food to its citizens, many ordinary citizens sought survival in a variety of ways: some engaged in the black markets, others scavenged for food in the forests, and many crossed over to China in search for work and opportunities.

As reported by the *New York Times* at the time, North Korean authorities acknowledged that two hundred thousand of its citizens crossed over into China due to the famine (Crossette 1999). In response, since the early 2000s, the Chinese government has arrested and forcibly returned border-crossers to North Korea, citing bilateral agreements, the economic nature of the border-crossers’ motivation for exiting North Korea (thus not being refugees), and claims of increased crime in the borderlands by unauthorized border-crossers. But why was it that border-crossing and resettlement became so highly gendered? One answer is that young North Korean men, because of the ongoing war with South Korea, are conscripted in the military for ten years, and men are generally under the scrutiny of surveillance in the workplace (Park 2023, 55-8). Similarly, Lankov and Kim (2014, 73) observe that “all able-bodied males have been required to

hold 'proper' full-time jobs in state enterprises, military units, or hold positions in the bureaucracy." Furthermore, when North Korea's Public Distribution System collapsed, many women became their families' primary breadwinners. Sung Kyung Kim (2020, 99) writes that this was in part due to the way North Korea's patriarchal system, combined with its *Juche* ideology of self-reliance, "placed the double burden on women of being both socialist revolutionaries and self-sacrificing mothers." Many women, under the stress of the unprecedented famine, took on the responsibility of caring for both their families and their livelihoods.

If North Korean border-crossers were "pushed" by the famine, they were equally "pulled" by China's multiple decades-long family planning policies (that later included the one-child policy), industrialization, and the opening of diplomatic relations with South Korea. The one-child policy was not the *beginning* of family planning policies, but rather the culmination of years of political debates—since 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded (White 2015). Rising out of the ashes of the civil war and the disastrous Great Chinese Famine (1959-1961), the Chinese state saw a need for family planning policies that could attend to the stress that rapid population growth placed on its economy. As Vanessa Fong (2002, 1100) noted, the goal was "to promote modernization by reducing the number of people who must compete for resources, both in the family and the nation." At first, the government encouraged its citizens—initially with its "Late, Long, Few" policy—to marry at a later age (for later childbearing), to have longer intervals between childbearing (usually three to five years), and to have fewer births. But to further control population growth, the promotion campaign for the one-child policy began in 1979, followed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party's "Open Letter" issued in September 1980. The Letter was a nationwide call, published in newspapers across the country, advocating all couples to only have one child. In 1982, the "Family Planning" policy was written into the Chinese Constitution with Article 49, stating that "couples have the obligation to implement family planning." A new slogan began to be propagated: "It's good to have only one."

The policy helped stem population growth, but it resulted in a growing elderly population and cases of infant abandonment, sex-selective abortions, transnational adoptions, and unreported births of additional children to avoid penalties. The one-child policy had a tremendous bearing on skewing the gender disparity, resulting in a surplus of thirty-four million more men (Denyer and Gowen 2018). Although the policy was enacted differently across regions (for example, some ethnic minorities or rural farmers were allowed more than one child), it produced nationwide demographic changes, which led to an overall shortage of marriage-aged women and, exacerbated by increasing rural-to-urban migration, a more pronounced shortage in rural areas. Industrialization led many women in rural regions to migrate to urban areas for work. Women also left rural regions because they had opportunities to "marry up" the socioeconomic ladder

due to the surplus of men. Moreover, the 1992 diplomatic relations established between China and South Korea prompted many Chinese citizens of Korean ethnicity living in northeast China, which borders North Korea, to migrate to South Korea as laborers (Kim 2016).

These structural factors generated an absence of women in the rural areas and created a pull for North Korean women to fill that gap. Faced with the famine, many ordinary North Koreans crossed into China in search of better opportunities. Some went in search of work, many became brides, and others became care workers in the borderlands (Kim 2020). Because cross-border movements had already existed as a coping strategy in the Chinese and North Korean borderlands between the 1950s and 1970s (during the years of China's Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution) (North Korea International Documentation Project 2012), North Koreans could, at the time of their famine in the 1990s, turn to border-crossing as a strategy of survival. Much of the border shared by China and North Korea is marked by the Tumen and Yalu Rivers, and North Korean border-crossers covertly swam across the rivers at night, walked over the frozen rivers in winters, or bribed soldiers to help them cross to the other side. Some were frequent border-crossers moving back and forth between the countries as needed, others were forcibly returned to North Korea upon arrest, and many of those attempted to cross again after their punishment from the North Korean state for their unauthorized crossings. Furthermore, the business of brokerage emerged for smuggling North Koreans into China. Both young and older women were coerced and sold into marriage, deceived by the false promise of job opportunities and security in China. Other women used the system to their own advantage and willingly took part in their own trafficking to improve their lives.

Struggles to Obtain Hukou Household Registration in China

The Chinese government has long taken the stance that the North Korean border-crossers are unauthorized economic migrants—not refugees. Its policy has been to forcibly return the border-crossers to their home country, a stance not dissimilar to how other nation-states respond to migrants on their borders. According to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, the definition of a refugee fundamentally rests on the principle that a person has left their country out of a fear of persecution. The claim that North Korean border-crossers fled due to fear of persecution has been contested by China. While China has taken the position that the motivations for North Koreans' migration were economic, human rights activists have argued that the root of their economic flight is still political in nature, caused by the failed policies of the North Korean state. In addition, activists have pointed to the repressiveness of the North Korean regime

in disallowing exits from the country and its cruel policies toward those who did leave the country without authorization. North Korea's Criminal Law stipulates against unauthorized border-crossings and considers the act of defection to be treasonous (North Korean Criminal Law Articles 233 and 62, respectively), and testimonies from resettled North Koreans have revealed human rights violations upon their repatriation and detention in North Korea in the form of forced labor, inhumane treatment, and physical violence (Database Center for North Korean Human Rights 2012).

This has led some to speculate whether North Korean border-crossers could be considered refugees *sur place*. This principle is in place for situations where a person may not have been a refugee at the point of departure but becomes one at a later point in time. The key to this principle is that some fundamental change has happened to a person's country of origin. Because the situation inside North Korea, however, has remained largely unchanged, the *sur place* principle would likely not apply to the North Korean case (Park 2023, 122). Furthermore, South Korea's policy to grant citizenship and nationality to North Koreans is based on ethnic homogeneity and its constitutional claim over the entire peninsula (i.e., North Korea) and is not based on their refugeehood. Separately, the United Nations Refugee Agency has taken the stance that North Koreans are "persons of concern." It is due to these complexities that I refrain from using "refugee" to describe *all* who have left North Korea. Instead, I use the terms "border-crossers" and "resettled North Koreans" rather than the sweeping Cold War terminology of "defector."

North Korean border-crossers in China face the constant fear of arrest and forcible return to North Korea, and the women often perceived marriage as a potential safety net and source of security (Lee 2014). The following interview comes from two Chinese citizens of Korean ethnicity, whom I call Mr. and Mrs. Lee (pseudonyms). They have been helping North Korean border-crossers in China for several decades. Initially, the couple worked as the local field staff for one humanitarian organization. They now work independently, since the Chinese government shut down the NGO's activities in the country.

Mrs. Lee: There are many children even now [in China], probably around twenty thousand, children who were born [in China] after they [North Korean women] left North Korea...

Mr. Lee: More than twenty thousand!

Mrs. Lee: People estimate that there are twenty thousand.

Mr. Lee: There are almost no women who did not give birth to a child after crossing over from North Korea. They crossed over when they were young. Many crossed over again after being deported. Many also crossed over for their family's well-being [to earn money in China]. There are many who are still in China.

Mrs. Lee: But many did not give birth to just one. They would give birth to a child in Yanbian (Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, Jilin Province, China), leave

behind that child and give another birth elsewhere. Leave again and give birth somewhere else—one person giving birth to about three children.

Mr. Lee: When the women first exit [North Korea], they try to start a family right? But they find the [Chinese] husbands unsatisfactory, maybe economically. They first leave North Korea with fervent hope and give birth to a child to live, but that's difficult. So they give up and go somewhere else. But even there [it is the same]... The desires of Chinese bachelors to have their own child is only natural. And the women use that to gain personal security [through marriage]. (author's interview with Mr. and Mrs. Lee in South Korea, December 2012)

The interviewees address the gendered migration of North Koreans and the issue of children born between North Korean mothers and Chinese fathers. As their narrative suggests, many North Korean women viewed border-crossing in opportunistic ways and marriage to Chinese men (whether through coercion or complicity) was one form of their survival strategy. These unions helped many women to quickly assimilate and thus hide in Chinese society by learning the culture and language through their marriages. Developing language fluency was critical because it was the only real marker of difference as there is no visible physical difference between North Koreans and the predominant Han Chinese.

As Mr. and Mrs. Lee note, however, many North Korean women continued their migration journey upon dissatisfaction with their Chinese partners. While it is easy to view the women's flight from their husbands with stigma or to view their abandonment of their children as immoral, it is important to recognize that many do not leave only due to economic dissatisfaction but rather due to factors such as domestic abuse, conflicts with their husband and his family, discontent from the physical toll of laboring on the farm, and their lack of security. In addition, Lee Hwa-Jin's (2014) study reveals the many internal conflicts mothers have in deciding whose safety—one's own or their child's—to prioritize. As she explains, a mother may separate from her child for her own safety, but a mother may also prioritize her own safety to protect her child (via future legal status in South Korea for the child, or resources she might provide to the child from South Korea), thus countering the notion that these mothers are heartless or selfish (*ibid.*, 183).

Even in situations where North Korean women marry Chinese husbands and have children with them, the women and their children may still face the juridical obstacle of obtaining hukou. Hukou is often misunderstood in the West as an identification card, but hukou is a registration system for the entire family and not just individuals. All members living together in one household share the registration document, which is similar to family register systems used in other East Asian countries. One of the key differences between the hukou and identification cards is that people do not carry their hukou paperwork around. As a Chinese scholar explained to me, "What people carry around is the ID card, *shenfen zheng*. It is of the size of a normal credit card. The ID card only shows the information of the holder but not the information of the holder's family."

This distinction, though seemingly trivial, is important because North Koreans living in China without hukou can still manage to buy fake identification cards with relative ease. Born to Chinese fathers within China's territory, the children born of cross-border unions are by law entitled to Chinese citizenship and hukou registration (although during the one-child policy era, the entitlement to hukou registration applied only to one-child families). To obtain hukou, however, North Korean mothers must register with local authorities. There is fear that doing so may put the mothers in danger of being deported due to North Koreans' unauthorized status in China. Some take on this risk, and the mother and father often rely on extended family connections, social capital, and bribery to hide the mother's North Korean identity while obtaining hukou for the children.

Children who do not have hukou are not entitled to public school education, and they lack access to various other social services, like healthcare. Nevertheless, many families find alternative means to get access to the services they need. The following excerpt is from an interview with a North Korean woman I call Soyang (pseudonym) who left North Korea at the age of five with her mother. Upon crossing the border, her mother married a Chinese man and the three of them lived together in China for nearly ten years before she and her mother resettled in South Korea. In response to my inquiry about her experience attending school in China, she responded:

You tell them you came from the rural... that you came from Yanbian. If you're nervous, you can use the name of a child you knew in your neighborhood because children's pictures do not show up in the system until adulthood. Plus, most children do not memorize their own registration numbers until they become adults. Schools record your information but they don't investigate. They do ask for you to bring the hukou, but you can say that you left it at your place of origin and didn't bring it. (author's interview with Soyang in Seoul, September 2013)

Even without hukou, Soyang attended Chinese public school until she was fourteen, when she resettled in South Korea. She has since maintained communication with her Chinese stepfather.

When I first met her in 2010, she struggled with the Korean language and was more comfortable speaking in Chinese. A few years later, she spoke to me in Korean with ease, telling me with great pride that she was slowly improving her English as well as taking additional foreign language classes at her university in Seoul. She reminisced about her time in China, showing me pictures of her childhood there. "It was my dream to attend this school after elementary school," she told me pointing to a picture of a Chinese middle school on her phone. "Connections and money granted entry [into the school], not simply good grades, and my [Chinese] stepfather had that." (author's interview with Soyang in Seoul, September 2013). This recollection about her time in China points to the important role of the fathers in their kinship formation to offer care through his

abilities, connections, and money.

While Soyang was able to creatively work around her lack of hukou, others who are born to Chinese fathers and who are fluent in the language may not feel the same kind of anxiety around hukou. One of the teachers at the school I introduced at the beginning of this article told me,

Not having hukou produces insecurity if you don't speak the language. For these students (born from the union of North Korean mothers and Chinese fathers) who speak Chinese but do not have hukou, that may not even be a concern to them if nobody has ever told them that they do not have it and why they do not have it. They speak fluent Chinese. They were born in that village. All the villagers know them. (author's interview with the teacher in Seoul, August 2013)

Relatedly, it is also important to note that Chinese children born in violation of the one-child policy also had problems obtaining hukou registration. It is therefore possible that one can have Chinese nationality but no hukou. However, whether the children born to North Korean mothers and Chinese fathers can obtain hukou or feel a sense of security through their father's care, North Korean mothers often do not have the same luxury and must come to terms with their precarious status in China. To live without the fear of arrest and deportation, the women become transnational mothers by resettling in South Korea where they can obtain (South Korean) citizenship and resettlement benefits specially set aside for North Koreans.

Becoming Transnational Mothers

Women must make tough choices to separate from the fathers of their children in order to seek security and legal status in South Korea—a survival strategy that brings on other forms of pain and prolonged suffering. A woman named Youngok (pseudonym) made the decision to split with her husband and come to South Korea even though her husband encouraged her to register for hukou. She had wondered if she “could live with this man for the rest of my life,” for she was a victim of human trafficking and was sold into marriage across the border at the tender age of twenty (author's interview with Youngok in South Korea, November 2013). She had been deceived by an older woman from her hometown who claimed she would help Youngok find a job on the Chinese side. Believing the older woman, Youngok left a note for her mother and wrote that she would return in just a few months. She desired to support her family through her labor but was soon introduced to a Chinese man living in Liaoning. To her surprise, he was an alcoholic and an abusive husband. Yet, she told me that she lived with him for nine years because she needed to develop her Chinese fluency before she could separate from him. When she ultimately did leave him, she also left

behind her seven-year-old son and had to think about ways she could maintain an absent presence in her child's life. For now, she continues to keep in touch over the phone but has been thinking about how she might be able to bring her son to South Korea if her former husband permits it.

Similar to Youngok, Soonbok (pseudonym) was sold into marriage across the border, but with her own complicity. During an interview in November 2013 in South Korea, she explained to me her two attempts to cross the border into China. In her first attempt, she followed a female merchant across the border and, within a few days, was caught and deported to North Korea. After tasting a little bit of freedom in China, she was dissatisfied with her life in North Korea and desired to leave once again. She sought out the same merchant to seek safe passage into China. The merchant introduced her to a North Korean border guard who would carry Soonbok on his back secretly across the Tumen River at night. Unbeknownst to her, a Chinese broker had arranged to meet the soldier on the other side of the river, where they exchanged money. She was told that she needed to find a suitable man for marriage to make money and learn the language, and the broker introduced her to several Chinese men. She did not consider this transaction as "being sold," but rather as "getting married." She rejected four of the men the broker introduced her to, and eventually settled on the fifth man. Soonbok's experience complicates the common narrative that North Korean women are victims who are sold and trafficked across the border. Her story reveals that there was negotiation at work and that there are varied avenues for North Korean women's border-crossing. The notion of non-agentive women who are simply passive victims in such transactions needs to be critiqued and challenged. As Nicole Constable (2003, 90) writes, paying attention to their agency allows us "to see how women assert dignity, express strength, and in so doing resist and transform the role and image of passive sex object."

Soonbok and her Chinese husband eventually had a child together. Her husband made sure their child was registered for hukou and paid five hundred Chinese Yuan. However, like many other North Korean women living with precarity in China, Soonbok and her husband decided to split so she could resettle in South Korea. She said, "I came here [to South Korea] after consulting [with my husband]. He told me to go." When I asked about her continuing relationship with him, she replied, "I speak on the phone frequently with my husband. Had he been a *Joseonjok* (a term for ethnic Koreans in China), he would have come to South Korea." (author's interview with Soonbok in Seoul, November 2013). Although she wishes to bring her child to South Korea, her husband has so far refused and she has had to resort to becoming a transnational mother, communicating with her child frequently over the phone and sending remittances when she has enough saved up. She is unable to be a physical presence in her child's life, but she told me that she tries to maintain a motherly presence by sending remittances, an alternative means of showing intimacy and care. This

form of long-distanced mothering—in the form of remote communication and material care—challenges idealized notions of motherhood and motherly love as centered on physical presence, physical affection, and childrearing (Kim 2017; Lee 2014, Lee 2018). It could be said that Soonbok prioritized herself over the child in seeking refuge in South Korea, but it was her legal precarity in China that led her to become a transnational, long-distanced mother. Additionally, some North Korean women do not have the choice to bring their children because the fathers refuse to allow their children to accompany their mothers. In such cases, it is the father and his side of the family who are adamantly opposed to it. When Mrs. Lee, the woman introduced earlier, asked the mother of a Chinese father why they do not give the child to the mother, the grandmother countered, “What about us?”

In contrast to the two women’s experiences above, Kyungok (pseudonym) deliberately left her daughter in China. Furthermore, Kyungok was not sold into marriage, but rather was encouraged to marry across the border by her own mother. Her father had passed away during the North Korean famine in the 1990s, and her family did not have food to put on the table. Her mother pushed her to start a new life through cross-border marriage. Upon crossing over to China, she married an older Chinese man of Korean ethnicity and had two children with him. She eventually resettled in South Korea with her five-year-old son but left their thirteen-year-old daughter in China. One of the main reasons she left her daughter in China was the language issue: “Because my daughter does not speak Korean, I left her under the care of my sister-in-law. Perhaps she can come study as an international student... She wants to come... I want to bring her here, but she’s been studying in China and will have to relearn everything here in Korea.” (author’s interview with Kyungok in South Korea, November 2013).

As shown in the three cases, the practice of transnational mothering requires the father (and his extended family) to care for the child, too. If her child remains with their Chinese father and his family, North Korean mothers entering South Korea must nonetheless inform the South Korean government of her child’s existence and situation, which Kyungok diligently did. Otherwise, the child may have difficulties obtaining South Korean citizenship in the future, should the child desire to join their mother. If a child of a North Korean mother and a Chinese father seeks resettlement in South Korea and wants to claim and obtain citizenship but the whereabouts of his or her mother is unknown (for example, if the mother was deported to North Korea while in China), then the child has the burden of proving to the South Korean government that their mother is a North Korean national. The mother’s seemingly inconsequential “confession” to the state authorities about her child’s existence and situation thus becomes a “political action” (Lee 2018) in the negotiation of her child’s status and belonging across national boundaries.

South Korea’s policy for the children born of unions between North

Korean and Chinese parents is to recognize their Chinese nationality and to categorize them as “multicultural.” Like the students at the alternative school that I introduced earlier, the children of North Korean women who seek resettlement in South Korea may be granted South Korean citizenship, but they are not considered to be fully North Korean and are consequently excluded from South Korea’s resettlement policy. Those whom the South Korean government acknowledges as North Korean receive resettlement benefits when they arrive in South Korea, such as subsidized housing, resettlement money, welfare support, education, and medical care. Children born to North Korean mothers and Chinese fathers are not considered North Korean, and thus not eligible for the same benefits nor the same protections because they were not born in North Korea and legally take on their father’s Chinese nationality. However, these policies have slowly begun to change as the teachers at the alternative school have pushed the government for recognition and support for these children.

Conclusion

Choi Eunyoung (2024) addresses the changing, gendered patterns of North Korean migration. Between the official end of China’s one-child policy and the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korean migration has undergone interesting shifts. The total number of North Koreans seeking resettlement in South Korea dropped drastically from 1,047 in 2019 to just 229 in 2020, the peak year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministry of Unification 2024). In subsequent years, the trend continued with just sixty-three resettled in 2021 and sixty-seven in 2022. In addition, since the start of the pandemic, more North Korean men than women have been resettling in South Korea. For example, in 2021, for the first time in over two decades, more men entered than women (forty men to twenty-three women). It is possible that as border controls in North Korea and China tightened, physical strength became more necessary to cross the dangerous border with China, to swim to South Korea, or to cross the Demilitarized Zone. It could also be that North Korean families are increasingly sending young and physically fit males to South Korea and relying on their remittances to support their livelihoods in North Korea. While these changes are on the horizon, the reality that seventy-two percent of all North Koreans resettled in South Korea are women speaks volumes about the profound ways that the Chinese dimensions discussed in this article have shaped North Korean migration.

North Korean women have had varied experiences with transnational mothering, and the practices of proximity, intimacy, and forms of care are multiple (see Kim 2017 and Lee 2022). However, by tracing the gendered experience of North Korean migration in relation to China’s policies and the hukou household registration system, this article asked how two related and yet fundamentally

different systems have shaped North Koreans' migratory flows. When the 1990s famine rocked the very foundations of North Korea, many women looked across the border for a better life. With the increase in border-crossings, networks of trafficking emerged for the business of marriage, and North Korean women—whether coerced or voluntarily—married Chinese bachelors looking for foreign brides. However, because of the precarity of their lives in China without proper authorization or hukou, many looked to South Korea for resettlement. In other words, while the surplus of men and the increasing industrialization in China created a pull for North Korean women's migration to China, the precarious status from the lack of hukou serves as a push factor for many North Korean mothers' migration to South Korea. In all stages of their migratory journey, we see the women employ various strategies of survival: viewing cross-border marriage and even trafficking in opportunistic ways, living with abusive husbands to master language fluency, and becoming transnational mothers. We see the significance of the interlocking relation between mobility and kinship as North Korean women face uncertainty, legal barriers, and violence along their journey. Separated and in different countries, many of the women interviewed in this research have shown motherly care in the form of sending remittances, and they have expressed hope that sometime in the future they might reunite in South Korea and be able to offer a different kind of mothering to their children in the form of citizenship status and educational opportunities.

Many of the students at the alternative school had been separated from their mothers for over ten years, and though some mothers had managed a visit or two to China after their resettlement, their main source of communication had been through the Chinese QQ and WeChat platforms. As the students told me (in Seoul, June 2023), one of the biggest hardships they face during their transition to South Korea is reestablishing and rebuilding their relationships with their North Korean mothers, whom they had not seen in a long time or whom they have no memory of living together with. Another great challenge has been with language. Because the students had lived in China for most of their lives, they were not only fluent Chinese speakers, but they were culturally Chinese. Also not uncommonly, a child joins their mother in South Korea with the assumption that the father will eventually come, too. Only subsequently does the child realize that their father will likely never come, leading to hurt feelings and souring relations with their mother. As I have illustrated in this article, new forms of kinship and family structures emerge from these forms of migration—shaped by both the North Korean mothers' journeys and the circumstances of their Chinese citizen children. Therefore, while this article has attended to the women's migration and their transnational motherhood, it is equally a story about the children of the North Korean mothers and the Chinese fathers who are part of a larger story of transnational migration to South Korea.

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