

The End of Feminized Migration?: Gendering Violent Borders and Geographies of North Korean Migration from the Arduous March to the COVID-19 Era

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This article examines the spatial and temporal changes of North Korean (NK) migration by analyzing the interactive process between NKs' efforts to cross borders amidst changing geopolitical and economic circumstances and the activities at the domestic, local, state, and international levels to manage displacement from a gender perspective. In doing so, I argue that the border between North Korea and China became violent and that NK migrations became spatially gendered and class-stratified. The proportion of NK women entering South Korea remains high, primarily due to the secondary migration of those who have long resided in China in de facto marriage relationships with Chinese men. In contrast, among recent direct defectors, NK men constitute a significant proportion and they often play an active role in family migration.

Keywords violent borders, North Korea, gender, feminization of migration, transit migration

Introduction

The gendered landscape of North Korean (NK) migratory flows across different transit spaces has shifted over time, although NK migration is commonly portrayed as a feminized flow. The dramatic increase in the number of female NK migrants since the NK famine of the 1990s as well as their vulnerable status in neighboring China have been widely studied (Sung 2023; Park 2022; Kook 2018; Choi 2014, 2010; Kim 2014). In particular, the trafficking of NK women for unofficial marriages to Chinese men has been identified as a major factor contributing to the feminization of NK migration. The existing literature, however, lacks a comprehensive account of the spatial and temporal changes in NK migration. With the tightening of border controls, the cost of crossing the

North Korea-China border has increased dramatically. The shifts in migration patterns, modes, and routes resulting from these changes have not been addressed well. The increase in chain migration by families arriving first in South Korea and direct defections by sea or through posts where NKs work or study call for a discussion of how borders are being classed and re-gendered. In addition, previous research has focused primarily on NK women, while the involvement and experiences of NK men in migration have been largely ignored (Lee 2020).

Through linking existing research on gender and migration in Asia (Cheng and Choo 2015; Fan 2004; Pratt 2012; Piper 2003; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014; Yi 2012) with feminist political geographers' work on border and undocumented/forced migration (Torres et al. 2022; Sahraoui 2020; Choi 2010; Hyndman 2000; Hyndman and Giles 2011; Mountz 2010, 2020; Scarpellino 2007), this article analyzes spatial and temporal changes in NK migration from a gender perspective. The focus is specifically on NK defection—NKs' escape from North Korea and their entry into South Korea through various transit spaces—spanning the period from the Arduous March (a time marked by severe economic hardship and famine in North Korea in the 1990s) to the COVID-19 pandemic. The main research question is how the interactive process between NKs' efforts to cross borders in the midst of changing geopolitical and economic circumstances and activities at the domestic, local, state, and international levels to manage displacement have produced gendered patterns and experiences of NK migration. Furthermore, I will illuminate how gendered spaces of transit have been politically and socially constructed between the imagined state of origin and the state of destination. This analysis will highlight NK migrants' security implications, which vary depending on their political and economic positions in transit spaces, as well as the power relations between them.

Through extensive fieldwork in the North Korea-China border area, interviews with NK migrants in South Korea, and analysis of available statistical and survey data, I argue that not only are the methods of migration across violent borders gendered, but so too are the duration and routes of migration. The proportion of NK women entering South Korea is still high due to the secondary migration of those who have long resided in China in *de facto* marriage relationships with Chinese men. In contrast, men represent an increasing proportion of recent defectors who left North Korea with the intention of reaching South Korea, and they are also frequently playing an active role in family migration. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified digital surveillance in China, making border crossing more difficult and dangerous, which has contributed to a resurgence of masculinized defections organized primarily by men, whether directly from North Korea or from overseas posts where they work or study.

After outlining the research methods and theoretical framework, this article is divided into four chronological sections. First, I analyze the early phase of NK migration between the mid-1990s and 2005, which took place primarily in

the North Korea-China border regions and featured gendered border enforcement and feminized migration. Second, I explore the subsequent phase of NK migration between 2006 and 2011, examining the interplay of human rights politics, Cold War geopolitics, and the refugee industry that influenced the expansion of migration routes and produced gendered transit spaces. Third, I examine the sudden decreases in NK migration and changes in gendered migration during the Kim Jong Un regime, focusing on the decline in trafficking and increase in direct defections in relation to gender dynamics and border controls. Fourth, I explore the border enforcement and changing geographies of gender and migration during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Methods

This study relies on a comprehensive approach, integrating various available statistical and survey data concerning NK refugees, with the primary objective of discerning subtle shifts in migration patterns and population composition. Obtaining accurate statistics on NKs escaping their homeland and on those residing in neighboring countries, primarily China, is challenging due to their clandestine and undocumented status. However, insights can be derived from data produced within South Korea with NK defectors and secondary information sourced from recent human trafficking research conducted in China.

Limited information on annual entries of NK defectors into South Korea has been disclosed through South Korean government data. This data includes the gender ratio of NK defectors entering South Korea each year and their socio-economic backgrounds when in North Korea. Nevertheless, since this information is based on the year of entry into South Korea, and the duration spent in transit countries (particularly China) remains unknown, inferring the scale of escapes from North Korea and changes in the socio-economic backgrounds of escapees by year of entry proves challenging. Yet, the “2023 Report on North Korean Human Rights” (Ministry of Unification 2023) and “The Perception on Economic and Social Status of North Korea: Informed by 6,351 North Korean Defectors” (Lee et al. 2024), both conducted by the South Korean government and released in 2023 and 2024, respectively, offer extensive survey data on recently arrived defectors entering South Korea. In addition, this data was made based on the year of final departure from North Korea. A survey (Kim et al. 2022) of NKs’ reunification consciousness was also used, which was conducted annually with recent defectors in South Korea between 2008 and 2020 by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University. These sources enable speculation on evolving trends in NK migration, both spatially and temporally.

Extensive fieldwork undertaken in the North Korea-China borderland of Yanbian in July 2003, ten months between March and December 2005, and

during January 2007 has yielded invaluable insights into both the dynamics of enforcement of the North Korea-China border and the migration experiences of NK women residing in China. Subsequent fieldwork was also conducted in that borderland region October 14-18, 2023, to elucidate alterations in the border landscape and border regime. Fieldwork was emotionally and physically challenging and entailed ethical and methodological difficulties of doing research with a highly vulnerable population. Conducting rigorous research while simultaneously negotiating dangers in the field proved to be an immense challenge. Therefore, in 2003 and 2005, rather than conducting independent research, I worked as a full-time student intern for a non-governmental organization (NGO) that provides humanitarian aid to undocumented NK migrants in China. My colleagues at the NGO were familiar with the region and followed specific security guidelines that were based on their past experiences in the field. I complied with the NGO's security guidelines and carefully protected research participants. Through the support of colleagues who had a network across villages in Yanbian, I interviewed and observed the daily lives of undocumented NK migrants throughout Yanbian by travelling from Yanji city to Tumen, Lonjing, Helong city, Dunhua, Hunchun, and Antu. I selected key informants based on initial interviews and met them multiple times and over specific intervals in order to collect meaningful data, which was gathered on the basis of mutual trust between myself and the research participants.

I conducted other research projects in South Korea between 2013 and 2020, in which I collected interview data that I have revisited for this study. Between 2021 and 2023, I conducted semi-structured and open-ended interviews with forty-three NK defectors in South Korea. Among the interviewees, eight defectors left North Korea in the 1990s and early 2000s, residing first in China in de facto marriage relationships with Chinese men for durations ranging from seven to eighteen years before entering South Korea. The remaining thirty-five interviewees are among those who left North Korea between 2017 and 2022. One individual managed to escape during the COVID-19 pandemic, directly reaching South Korea by sea. Additionally, four interviewees were laborers sent overseas by the North Korean government and were stationed in Russia and on other continents with official visas. These individuals departed their work locations during the pandemic, arriving in South Korea within several months of their departure. The remaining interviewees left North Korea before the pandemic, within three years of their interviews, and entered South Korea via China. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, stringent confidentiality measures have been implemented to safeguard the security and privacy of the interviewees, including the protection of their names.

Theoretical Framework: When Feminized Migration Meets Violent Borders

The end of the Cold War brought a significant shift in global migration patterns in Asia. As borders loosened, some citizens of former communist states found new opportunities outside their home countries, leading to extensive international movements. Feminist scholars pay particular attention to the gendered nature of these migration patterns in relation to capitalist globalization, focusing particularly on the phenomenon of the feminization of migration (Jung 2008; Choi 2010; Freeman 2011; Cheng and Choo 2015; Piper 2003; Yi 2012). This stream of research often analyzes two main aspects of international migration. First, feminist scholars observe not only the increasing participation of women in international migration flows, but also their move away from their traditional role as mere companions in migration to actively deciding and undertaking migration as their own initiative. Second, these scholars emphasize the reality of women's migration into fields traditionally considered women's work, particularly in the areas of reproductive and sexual labor. Women's geographical movements across borders toward more developed countries have a potential to enhance their economic and social status. However, the academic and international communities have also been attentive to the exploitation and gender-based violence experienced by migrant women during the process of migration and settlement (Piper 2003).

NK migration has commonly been understood as feminized migration because women comprise an extremely high proportion of migrants. It is also regarded as feminized because, in the transit space of China, NK women frequently undertake the reproductive and sexual labor previously performed by Chinese women who leave the rural borderlands for either urban areas or foreign countries (Choi 2010). Much research exists about NK women's efforts to cross the border, including by way of human trafficking, and their experiences of human rights violations (Sung 2023; Kook 2018; Choi 2014; Kim 2014). Comparatively, very little research has analyzed the feminization of NK migration in relation to other gendered migrations in Asia. There is notable research that underscores the interconnectedness of *Joseonjok* (ethnic Koreans who have Chinese citizenship) migration and NK migration and the intersectional processes of NK defection, marriage migration, and labor migration. In her analysis of the life story of a NK woman experiencing transnational migration involving North Korea, China, and South Korea, Hee-Young Yi (2012) illustrates how the NK woman's body served as a tool for the migration of her Joseonjok family to South Korea, while experiencing changes in her identity as she crossed borders. Within the discourse on migration, involvement in human smuggling and human trafficking for the purpose of seeking asylum is often delineated

from the formal processes of labor migration and marriage-related migration. A more thorough examination can unveil a profound interconnectedness among these seemingly disparate realms and offer analytical insights to comprehend the feminization of NK migration.

The undocumented marriage migrations, often in the form of marriage trafficking in China, have increased with marketization in China and are still being conducted (Zhao 2003; Zhuang 1998; Robinson, Branchini, and Weissberg 2018; Liang 2023). In China's peripheral regions, undocumented international marriages, specifically between people of the same ethnicity across borders are common. Elena Barabantseva (2015) explores Yao ethnic marriages across the China-Vietnam border. She argues that border regulations illegalize customary ethnic marriages and strictly enforce family planning policies. Nevertheless, undocumented spouses remain crucial to the Chinese border economy and society, revealing the complex effects of border governance. Thus, in the case of the human trafficking of NK women for the purpose of marriage to Chinese men, questions arise about how the trafficked NK women's mobility is constructed differently from that of Yao women. Namely, why has China become a transit space for some NK women (and not, for example, Yao women) as they move on to other destinations in other safe countries?

Political geographers' work on borders and forced migration provides an analytical framework for understanding how international concerns and politics, inter-Korean relations, transnational NGOs' activities, and even gender dynamics at the household level have interacted and contributed to promoting and regulating the mobility and migration of NKs. Many scholars argue that with increased border security, forced displacement and undocumented migration flows are more tightly regulated than ever before and their security has consequently been seriously threatened (Newman 2006; Mountz 2010; Varsanyi 2008; Torres et al. 2022; Fluri 2023). The strengthening of discourses and restrictive laws has intensified the criminalization of displaced populations, instilling fears of arrest, detention, and deportation. Nadig (2002, 1) argues that as receiving states have further tightened their immigration procedures, more sophisticated and lucrative forms of irregular migration—and, specifically, human smuggling—have developed. She contends that the intricate relationship between the reinforcement of external borders in host nations and the concomitant rise in human smuggling creates a self-reinforcing cycle. As a consequence of this phenomenon, undocumented migrants and asylum-seekers find themselves exposed to increasingly precarious circumstances (Koser 2005, 2). Furthermore, the tightening of regulations at international borders to curb unauthorized migration has resulted in severe suffering and even tragic loss of life among individuals attempting to reach safe countries. These violent borders have changed the geographies of migration as people attempt to evade detection, manifesting the cycle described by Nadig.

Those researchers tend to exclusively focus on the receiving state's immigration policies, and few examine migration at the international or global level of geopolitics (Hyndman 2000; Mountz 2020). While it is true that receiving states' policies directly impact the security of undocumented migrants and displaced people, I contend that state policies toward NK migrants are always negotiated with and challenged by non-governmental and supranational actors (such as the United Nations [UN]), by other states, and by migrants themselves. The way that strategic concerns over NK human rights and NKs' active efforts to use them to increase their mobility needs to be explored.

Next, I ask, how have violent borders produced gendered mobility and migration? Along many borders, young male migrants are more often the ones involved in active human smuggling to seek refuge in safe third countries in the global North. Hyndman and Giles (2011) specifically highlight the gendered mobility of asylum seekers. They contrast the feminization of the "still waiting" and the confined "long-term limbo" status of asylum-seekers in the global South with the active, mobile masculinities of asylum seekers attempting to reach the global North (*ibid.*, 362). They argue that the feminization of asylum in protracted situations is depoliticized and these asylum seekers are understood as being "in place," but asylum-seekers and refugees on the move to the global North are considered to be threatening and highly politicized.

In contrast, in the case of NK refugee flows, women tend to cross highly controlled and dangerous borders and then bring their families in chain migration after settling in safe countries. NK women have been at the forefront of migration, and trafficking has made this possible. Although trafficking is the most exploitative form of forced migration, it has provided the necessary mobility for poor NK women to cross violent borders. This contradictory nature of human trafficking has been understood very differently, even within feminism, and has led to debates about anti-trafficking programs. In my previous research on NK trafficking (Choi 2014), I argue that the international concern about NK women that led to anti-trafficking programs (whose activities aim to protect women at risk), unfortunately hindered the mobility of NK women who—despite being trafficked—are wanting to move. It needs to be explored further how the international concerns about NK women have produced different mobility between women who are already in China and seek asylum in other safe countries and women who are waiting to cross the border from inside North Korea. Since China's border controls have tightened through digitized surveillance, trafficking on the North Korea-China border has become very difficult. In response, NKs have tried to develop new routes, which can be more dangerous and precarious. At this time, NK men moved to the frontline of migration flows. This variation in gendered mobility evolves over time, suggesting that work on feminist political geography on border and forced/informal migration and gender and migration in global restructuring need to be linked to fully explain the phenomenon.

NK Famine, Gendered Border Enforcement, and Feminization in NK Migration (Mid-1990s-2005)

As per research by Seoul National University's Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (Park et al. 2011), NK migration before Kim Jong Un's tenure can be classified into five stages: (1) 1989-1994, which largely involved defections of overseas NK workers and students in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, amidst global anti-communist sentiments; (2) 1995-1999, which was the most significant exodus of NKs, due to famine; (3) 2000-2003, when the number of NK defectors entering South Korea increased, driven by greater access to information and economic factors; (4) 2004-2008, when NKs gained refugee status with the passage of the 2004 North Korean Human Rights Act in the US, which prompted international attention on NK refugee rights and led to the international spread of their resettlement; and (5) after 2009, when defections diversified, reflecting varied motives and migration patterns. I agree with this classification, but from a gender perspective, I conceptualize just two stages and focus only on migration toward South Korea through the transit space of China. The first stage (1990s to 2005) is the period that, even though forceful deportation is severe and the numbers of NK migrants moving to South Korea started to increase, there were still significant numbers of NK women residing in rural areas in northeastern province of China.

The NK famine in the 1990s drove destitute NKs to cross the North Korea-China border for survival. In the very early stage of mass migration, the Yanbian area in China's Jilin Province exhibited discernible manifestations of NK presence. This included NKs visiting their Joseonjok relatives in pursuit of material assistance, unaccompanied NK minors wandering the streets engaging in activities such as theft and panhandling, and short-term NK labor migrants seeking employment (author's interviews with NGO workers, Yanji city, 2005). The dynamics of migration in the Yanbian area, however, swiftly evolved into a gendered phenomenon. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, it was estimated that at least seventy-five percent of undocumented NK migrants in China were women, most of whom were in de facto marriage relationships with Chinese partners (Baek 2002; Kang 2004). Poverty and the expansion of global markets for brides and reproductive labor have resulted in the trafficking of NK women, which has been identified as a significant contributor to the feminization of NK migration. However, the gendered presence of NKs in China must also be understood in the context of gendered practices of border enforcement in China.

In the mid- and late 1990s, each year, hundreds or thousands of NKs were repatriated to North Korea, even though China knew that repatriated NKs were starved, tortured, made to do hard labor, and even executed as "betrayal against the people and the fatherland" (Article 86 of the old North Korean constitution)

(Lee 2004). Since the early 2000s, international concern over NKs' human rights violations both in China and upon repatriation have proliferated, accompanied by a mounting chorus advocating for legal refugee status of NKs in China. The catalyst for this attention was when, on June 26, 2001, the NK family of Jang Gil-soo entered the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Beijing after their refugee application in China failed because China considered them to be economic migrants. Their visit to the UNHCR office was filmed and broadcasted internationally. The South Korean government responded with a diplomatic effort to have the family enter South Korea via the Philippines. Such stories continued to raise international awareness about the human rights issues facing NKs. In response, China only further intensified its crackdown and repatriations. In just June and July of 2001, for example, about six thousand North Koreans were arrested and detained (USCR 2002). Two years later in June 2003, UNHCR estimated the number of escapees in China at one hundred thousand (Lee 2004, 39).

From a national security perspective, Chinese policymakers believe that granting refugee status to undocumented NK migrants will lead to a mass influx into China, which could cause enormous economic strain and social disorder (Choi 2011). Chinese security authorities have searched homes, street corners, churches, and factories for illegal NKs and forcibly repatriated them under the "Strike Hard Campaign," an anti-crime campaign launched in 2001 (Pomfret 2001). Even those who are found to have helped NKs are subject to large fines, and those who report undocumented NK migrants to the police receive a reward from the Chinese government.

The increased surveillance of NK migrants threatens their very survival, and their numbers in China in the 2000s decreased significantly from the peak in the 1990s. The arrests and deportations of NKs, however, are practiced differently according to gender. A Joseonjok Christian pastor who has a church in the borderland near the Tumen River told me that "NK beggars can be changed into thieves. Since there is nothing to eat in North Korea, they secretly crossed the river at night to steal unripe grains and take clothes left out to dry. As NK men spend ten years in military, we are afraid of fighting" (author's interview with the Joseonjok pastor, Yanji, 2005). At the beginning of the mass NK migration in the mid-1990s, those in the Joseonjok community were willing to support NKs since many of them had NK relatives and, during the political turbulence of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, Joseonjok went to North Korea and received assistance (Margresson 2007, 5). The campaign to detect NKs in China, however, has deepened the social distance between NKs and Joseojok by depicting NKs as dangerous criminals and by encouraging them to report NKs to authorities in the name of protecting the security of "our" people (Choi 2011, 522).

In particular, NK men are often believed to be violent, aggressive, and

dangerous. Because finding a place to stay in China was hard for NK men, many men returned to North Korea immediately after they got food or other support from relatives or refugee support organizations in China (Charney 2004, 83). Some NK men were lucky enough to stay in shelters provided by humanitarian or religious organizations and then tried to get to safe third countries. On the other hand, women are seen as more docile and controllable. Therefore, they have more chances than men to lead a relatively hidden life in Chinese households as hired domestic workers and nannies or in de facto marriage relationships with Chinese men (Muico 2005, 2). In 2003 and 2005 when I was in Yanbian, NK women largely stayed in rural areas of Yanbian as de facto wives of Chinese men. They told me that if they paid regular bribes to local policemen, they could obtain information about police searches.

These women were advised to “behave well” as good mothers, good wives, good daughters-in-law, and good neighbors so as not to be blamed for anything by the local villagers. My informants told me that if they have a baby with a Chinese partner, the Chinese family will often try to help them, even by bribing the police, so that the police will be more sympathetic. Bodies are disciplined by government regulations that define and inform acceptable bodies (Pratt 1998, 283-304). Gendered Chinese border enforcement reflects and reinforces traditional gender norms. Most NK women stayed at home and conformed to expected social norms, lest they be accused of unacceptable bodies and thus be forcibly repatriated to North Korea.

In 2005, the NGO I worked for focused on providing Chinese language education, vocational training in home crafts and cooking, and health education to NK women in rural areas, as it was believed that if NK women stayed at home and stayed out of trouble, they could settle in China. However, NKs had already begun moving either further inland in China and far from the border area, or to South Korea. The number of NKs entering South Korea each year were as follows: 72 in 1998; 148 in 1999; 312 in 2000; 538 in 2001; 1,139 in 2002; and 1,281 in 2003 (Ministry of Unification 2024). As the South Korean constitution proclaims jurisdiction over the whole Korean Peninsula and its adjacent island, the Constitutional Court has interpreted this to mean that every NK is the citizen of the Republic of Korea. Based on this Cold War geopolitical legal fiction, the South Korean government has an official policy that accepts all NKs who wish to resettle in South Korea and give them citizenship right after they arrive in South Korea (Chang, Haggard, and Noland 2009). Thus South Korea provides citizenship, resettlement funds, and a house to all NK migrants—which are pull factors promoting NK defections into South Korea—under the “Protection of Defecting of North Korean Residents and Support of Their Settlement Act” enacted in 1997 (Lee 2004, 46).

The peak period for NKs entering China clandestinely was in the 1990s. Their substantial influx into South Korea, however, has significantly increased

since the 2000s, and from 2001 onwards, the number of women entering South Korea surpassed that of men. Among the NKs who entered South Korea in 2002, over sixty-three percent had lived in China for more than four years (ibid.). According to interview data, most defectors initially entered China without the intention of entering South Korea but later decided to pursue resettlement in South Korea.

The Refugee Industry, Extended Transit Spaces, and the Explosion of Feminized Secondary Migration (2006-2010)

International criticism—specifically, a naming and shaming strategy—to pressure China to improve its protection of refugees intensified around the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The global relay of the torch leading up to the Games sparked protests in many cities, highlighting concerns about China’s human rights violations, including those related to NK refugees (*New York Times* 2008). This criticism, however, did not lead to positive changes. International intervention is perceived as hostile by the targeted state and can trigger a rallying effect when authoritarian states manipulate the information to frame the intervention as an attack against their regime (Kim 2023). China perceives international pressure concerning the human rights issues of NK refugees as interference in its sovereignty. Crackdowns and forced repatriations of NKs notably intensified in the period before and after the Beijing Olympics, affecting even NK women residing with Chinese partners and their children born in China. The secondary migration of NKs who lived in China before moving toward safer third countries has led to a feminized flow. The willingness of countries like the US, Canada, Australia, and those in Western Europe to accept NKs as refugees served as an impetus for this departure from China. Significant humanitarian funds have been used to rescue NKs in China.

According to Hyndman (2000), because money for humanitarian aid is limited, the refugee industry is selectively implemented in specific sites around the globe, often for geopolitical strategies, such as colonial practices, Cold War interests, or cultural politics. The international community’s enormous attention to the human rights of NK refugees in China was not unrelated to China’s increasing power and its efforts to constrain North Korea’s nuclear development. In particular, the suffering and exploitation experienced by North Koreans in China resonated well with the international community’s human rights concerns.

Most NKs move to Thailand to seek asylum after traversing the vast expanse of China (over three thousand kilometers), and then they go to South Korea. The physical dangers of multiple border crossings have, at times, resulted in migration-related deaths and, more frequently, led to traumatic experiences for those involved. The following interview illustrates the difficulties faced by

NK women as the number of defectors wanting to go to South Korea suddenly increased in 2006 compared to the previous year:

In October 2006, I left Yanbian and arrived in Thailand after just thirteen days. From October to March, nearly six months, I was trapped in a detention center in Bangkok. The conditions inside were extremely poor. There were too many people. The space could accommodate around three hundred people, but there were eight hundred inside. You had to pay money to someone leaving for South Korea just to have a place to sit. I paid KRW 1.5 million (US\$1,500) for my spot. People had to stand or even sleep standing. There was no room even in the restroom. Before experiencing it, I didn't understand why people recommend to gather money before leaving for South Korea. I bought a tile, 90 cm by 30 cm, as my spot. It's a cramped space to lie down. People with more money bought two tiles, and those with even more rent out their spots to earn money, about THB 25 per day in Thai currency. People hung their belongings on the wire mesh wall because there was no place to put them down. People with no money are the most pitiful. They can't buy water or food. Provided food was terrible. The journey to South Korea is a battle against money. Those helped by their Chinese husbands or by families in South Korea paid broker fees and had enough money for expenses during the journey, but for escapees from Chinese families or direct NK refugees who do not family for support, it's challenging. However, the situation for men was quite different. With only a small number of NK men in the detention center, it appeared that they could even play football (author's interview with a NK woman, South Korea, November 15, 2023).

The interviewee told me that she stayed there shorter than other people because she was pregnant. The situation, coupled with the insecurities experienced during the journey and the dire conditions in the detention center, highlights the challenges women face as a result of the feminization of asylum in protracted situations.

Some NK women who escaped from abusive Chinese husbands embarked on the journey to South Korea without financial resources. They could start their journeys without money but with a contract with a migration broker, promising to relinquish the entirety of their settlement fund as payment once in South Korea. Thus, these women did not have money to spend during the journey or in a detention center and commenced their new lives with hardship. Conversely, others have proactively exerted agency by engaging in negotiations with their Chinese families. The goal of attaining citizenship in South Korea empowers these constrained NK women to negotiate with their established Chinese families for the necessary resources to make the journey to South Korea. These negotiations involve promises that the women will either invite their Chinese husbands and their husbands' families to South Korea or send remittances to China after making money in South Korea. Those receiving financial support from Chinese husbands or relatives in South Korea can afford safer routes and more comfortable stays in detention centers. It has been observed that certain

NK women who enter unofficial marriages with Chinese nationals opt to acquire forged *hukou* and Chinese passports and then subsequently travel via direct flights from China to Jeju Island in South Korea, where Chinese citizens do not require visas (Kang 2019, 7). This range of experiences highlights that NK women are not a homogeneous group and shows how class intersects with gender to create diverse experiences of transit migration.

From 2006 until Kim Jong Un's rise to power, over two thousand NK defectors entered South Korea annually, with peak numbers recorded as 2,803 in 2008 and 2,915 in 2009. Women constituted over seventy-five percent of this group, while the number of NK men entering South Korea remained relatively low and stable throughout the 2000s. While the exodus of NK refugees from China accelerated in the late 2000s, migrations along the North Korea-China border decreased due to tightened border controls. Nevertheless, NK women who have resettled in South Korea have played an important role in reshaping NK migration by sending remittances to family members in North Korea and facilitating their relocation through providing brokerage fees, essential information, and networks.

Shifts in Gendered Migration Under Kim Jong Un Regime (2012-2020)

The number of NKs entering South Korea in 2012 decreased to 1,502 from 2,402 the previous year. The decline in NK migration since the Kim Jong Un regime took power in 2011 has been influenced by tighter border controls due to strained inter-Korean relations and changes in North Korea's political and economic situation.

During the famine and before the July 1, 2002, economic reform measures, NKs exchanged goods and earned incomes from black markets. The July 1, 2002, measures, however, absorbed many of the unofficial economic activities into a new set of institutions (Kim 2021, 77). Marketization in North Korea not only increased in the exchanges of goods, capital, labor, and information, it also changed NKs' ways of thinking and living (Cho et al. 2023). After Kim Jong Un came to power, the market became more active. Yet there is a contradiction in how much this change actually improved the lives of the general NK population. According to Hong and Kim (2021, 191), living conditions of NKs under the governance of Kim Jong Un experienced notable enhancement, at least until 2016 when sanctions against North Korea were tightened after its first nuclear test. Jung (2022) also contends that despite the challenging initial circumstances, the regime managed to sustain consistent economic growth for the first six years following the July 1, 2002, measures. However, with the tightening of the UN economic sanctions, followed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NK economy has significantly deteriorated.

It appears evident that the market economy in North Korea did alleviate the economic challenges of the 1990s NK famine era. Despite the near cessation of state food provisions, NKs found means to survive through engagement with the market economy. According to “Perception on North Korean Economic and Social Status: Informed by 6,351 North Korean Defectors” (Lee et al. 2024, 164), among defectors who left North Korea after 2012 and resettled in South Korea, 89.7% reported having three meals a day while in North Korea.

Anti-Trafficking Campaign and Immobility of Poor Young Women

According to my own interviews and empirical research on the trafficking of NK women for forced marriage in China using official Chinese court documents, although the number of trafficking cases has decreased, the practice continues (see also Xia et al. 2020; Mei 2023). The following interview was conducted with Youngha (pseudonym) in her sixties who entered South Korea with the support of her daughter. Her daughter was trafficked to China in December 2016, when Youngha was hospitalized. Because Youngha was sick, her family had economic difficulties. Then her daughter decided to go to China to earn money without discussing her plans with her family members. Youngha explained her daughter’s involvement in human trafficking as follows:

In 1998 and 2000, the price of a NK woman was about CNY 3,000, CNY 4,000, CNY 7,000 yuan. Fifteen years ago, people were selling for CNY 10,000, CNY 20,000, CNY 30,000... the price is getting higher and higher. I said, “How much did you really sell for?” Then my daughter said, “I sold for CNY 100,000. She was twenty years old and a virgin. Even a forty-year-old woman in the same group sold for CNY 60,000. My daughter was lucky because she was sold into marriage and not into the sex industry. It’s better to marry and live with a man. My daughter’s Chinese husband told her, “If you have my baby, I’ll send CNY 10,000 home to North Korea every year. Ten thousand Yuan is a lot of money in North Korea. Smart daughters go out and make their own money or somehow convince their Chinese husbands to send money home. My daughter sent money home regularly (author’s interview with Youngha, a woman in her sixties, Seoul, September 4, 2023).

The above information about the cost of trafficking was consistent with the information I gathered from other interviewees. In the interviews, I also heard testimonies that the conditions of trafficking have improved and human rights violations have reduced. Although most women use the term trafficking, they use the word like the brokage of international marriages. Although, because the NK women who have resettled in South Korea tend to hide their trafficking experiences or pretend that they lived a normal married life in their de-facto marriage relationships, I may be interpreting their silences as less serious.

It has been noticed that traffickers on the Chinese side try to match NK women with Chinese men who can afford the high brokerage fees, and not men

in poor situations—women might more easily run away if they are sold into a very poor family. And, if the NK women do not endure one year of marriage (the contractual guarantee often given to Chinese men), traffickers would not receive their expected payments (author's interview with a woman in her sixties, Seoul, August 7, 2022). Nonetheless, it is clear that the tremendous international attention given to the trafficking of NKs has led both China and North Korea to impose the highest penalties on traffickers of NK women. Because NK women may reveal the names of their traffickers during the investigation process if they are returned to North Korea from China, trafficking has become a very dangerous business, as evidenced by the comments of one NK women who used to transfer money in North Korea:

There are many poor young girls who are looking for a line to go to China without their own money. Even when people close to me asked me to help them find a trafficking route as I had a Chinese cell phone that can be connected with a Chinese-side merchant, I told them that I did not want to risk my life for that (author's interview with a woman in her sixties, Seoul, August 7, 2022).

According to the 2020 “White Paper on North Korean Human Rights” published by the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (Ahn et al. 2020), 42.7% of the 288 cases of trafficking of NK women that were investigated occurred in the 1990s, while 37.5% were from 2000-2005, and 9.4% were from 2006-2009. Although there is no statistical data available, data from my interviews suggest that the trafficking of women has decreased significantly, even in the 2010s. In contrast, as China's economy has grown, the number of young women from neighboring countries, such as Myanmar and Vietnam, marrying Chinese rural bachelors in the form of human trafficking has increased significantly (Xia et al. 2020; Mei 2023). NK women are becoming less desirable in the marriage market due to their risk of deportation, the possibility of them running away to South Korea, and the increased cost of crossing the border. For example, it was found that some NK women were asked by the traffickers not to reveal their nationality to their husbands' families until the marriage was settled because some Chinese families are afraid of buying NK women. Most of the women I interviewed were sent far away from the North Korea-China border where they would not be able to find an ethical Korean network, but the increasing telecommunications and Internet networks have nonetheless provided opportunities for these women to make the connections necessary to cross the border into South Korea.

Direct Defections: Changing Migration Motives and Changing Gender Roles in Migration

According to the survey (Kim et al. 2022) of NKs' reunification consciousness

Table 1. Main Motivations for Escaping North Korea (Escaped Between 2017-2019)

Main motivations for escaping North Korea	Number of respondents (%)
Dissatisfaction with the NK regime/political oppression	94 (30.13%)
Persuasions of family members who already resettled in South Korea	63 (20.19%)
Yearning for freedom	56 (17.95%)
Economic difficulty	49 (15.71%)
Providing better opportunities for children	36 (11.54%)
No response/error	14 (4.49%)
Total	312 (100.00%)

Source: Kim et al. (2022, 217).

conducted annually by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University (with individuals who had departed North Korea within one year from the time of the survey), there have been changes in the motivations for departing North Korea. The respondents are mostly defectors who left North Korea with the intention of entering South Korea and passed through transit spaces. In response to the question, “What is the main factor that made you leave North Korea?” among 312 NK respondents who departed North Korea between 2017 and 2019, “the dissatisfaction with the North Korean regime and political oppression” became the number one reason for escaping North Korea (see Table 1).

Economic difficulties, including food shortages, were the main reasons for NKs escaping in the 1990s and 2000s. But for recent migrants, discontent, oppression, and family encouragement were the most important motives. As seen in the interview below, however, the various motivations are interconnected:

I’m here for my children’s future. My husband went to prison, and that has limited my sons’ career paths... It affects everything from them going to college and getting a job. We felt so sorry for them, because the decedents of the man who has any troubled records cannot go to good schools and cannot be a member of the political party. Being a member of the political party is essential to get a good job, which provides the power to protect the family and can make you money with that position... The record follows even after the death to the decedents. We want to be free from that restriction. Furthermore, after being freed from prison, my husband had nothing to do and suffered from the cold look of neighbors. Since he was the one who got into trouble with the law, he couldn’t do anything because they were watching his every move. Even at night, police just came in and checked our room. That means they want some money. My husband decided to escape from North Korea. He said there is no hope for us. I followed (author’s interview with a woman in forties, Seoul, May 18, 2023).

The above narrative shows how the motivations of yearning for freedom and providing better opportunities for children are mixed. As the border crossings from Hyesan in Yangan province were severely regulated, the family decided to cross the border from Jagang province. As water was deep, they practiced several times, and then crossed into China. Then, they paid US\$8,000 each for their journey from China to South Korea. Half was paid by cash before the journey and half paid once they arrived in South Korea. According to interviewees, average brokage fees, which are paid to arrange and support the trip from North Korea and China, were around US\$20,000 in 2019. With the marketization in North Korea, the number of people who have accumulated capital has increased. Thus, NKs who already knew about the conditions of life outside North Korea through information from transnational networks and who had specific reasons to escape risked making the journey to South Korea, despite the very high cost and real risk of losing their lives on the way.

There was a time when NKs used the settlement fund that is provided by the South Korean government to plan their defections by promising the migration broker their funds. However, during the first pro-work reform period (2005-2014), there was a reduction in the provision of unconditional cash transfers, and during the second pro-work reform period (2015-2019), conditional cash transfers were linked to job preparation (Han 2023). The reduction in the provision of cash meant that only NKs with enough existing funds could afford the journey to South Korea, thus turning it into a class-based opportunity.

Direct defections organized from North Korea, as opposed to family chain migration supported and organized by family members in South Korea, are often led by the men of the household. Prior to the Kim Jong Un era, married women in North Korea played a central role in market activities, resulting in higher mobility for women than for men. However, under the Kim Jong Un regime, there has been a significant increase in the number of men—known as “8.3 workers”—who have received official permission to engage in informal economic activities on the condition that they contribute a portion of their income to the workplace. In addition, it has become increasingly acceptable and common for NK men to use their positions in the government or military to earn money in the market. With the increasing role of men in the market, the patriarchal structure within households is regaining strength. These changes also have implications for NK migration, where family defections are on the rise and men are taking the lead in migration decisions.

There is no publicly usable data that shows detailed demographic characteristics of NKs at the time of their escape from North Korea. However, with the publication of the “2023 Report on North Korean Human Rights” by the North Korean Human Rights Records Center of the Ministry of Unification (2023, 16), it has become possible to approximate the gender composition of recent NK defectors. Of the total 508 respondents who left North Korea between 2017 and 2022 and

subsequently arrived in South Korea, the gender distribution of respondents is 53.1% female and 46.9% male. Considering that females made up about 80% of the arrivals between 2017 and 2019, it can be inferred that the gender gap among those who left North Korea since 2017 has narrowed significantly. The data also shows that those under the age of thirty, including teenagers, make up 67% of the total, indicating that defections are predominantly led by the younger demographic.

COVID-19, Digitalized Border Surveillance, and the Spatially Gendered Migration (2021-2023)

With the outbreak of COVID-19, the North Korea-China border was tightly regulated for fear of the virus spreading to both sides. In addition, the movement of NKs within China was severely restricted by a digital surveillance system that was expanded during the pandemic. Based on fieldwork conducted in October 2023, technological measures to monitor irregular migration along the border, including the use of CCTV, facial recognition, and electronic ID authentication at checkpoints, have made it very difficult for NKs to cross the border to China and to migrate through China to safe countries.

As a result of this situation, the number of NK defectors entering South Korea has sharply declined. In 2021, the proportion of male defectors was higher than that of female defectors, with forty males and twenty-three females, and in 2022, the number of defectors was still higher for males, with thirty-five males and thirty-two females (Ministry of Unification 2024). The strict control of the North Korea-China border has led to a significant decrease in the number of defectors passing through China, most of whom are overseas residents (mostly foreign workers). According to interviewees, there have also been direct defections from North Korea to South Korea without going through China. Whether by swimming or by boat, these cases have involved physically healthy young men or were planned by male heads of households. One who swam from Kangwon province to South Korea told me that he escaped from North Korea due to economic difficulties during the pandemic. According to that interviewee, as the North Korean regime did not allow fishing during the pandemic (out of the fear that the virus could be spread through the water) and he had made his living by diving and collecting seafood, he experienced severe economic difficulties (author's interview with a male in twenties, Seoul, October 25, 2021). The extreme poverty during the pandemic pushed him to cross the Korean Demilitarized Zone (the heavily militarized border between North Korea and South Korea), fully aware of the high risk of being killed.

Even after COVID-19, the number of NK defectors has not recovered much because of the established digital infrastructure of surveillance in China. The

North Korea-China border is effectively considered to be blocked, while chain migrations supported by resettlers in South Korea are also almost impossible.

Everyone says it's hard to get my daughter out of North Korea, even if I pay US\$100 million. I do not have that much money. Even if I take a loan, how will I pay it back? ... And there is no guarantee that she can safely come to South Korea. If I have that much money, I will not take her out and (instead) just send the money to North Korea... With that money, my daughter can live very well in North Korea even though she can be continuously checked by police, as I am here.

A total of 196 NK defectors (164 females and 32 males) entered South Korea in 2023, most of them after long stays in third countries, especially China (Ministry of Unification 2024). According to information released by the Ministry of Unification (Koo 2024), there is an increase in elite defectors who went abroad as workers or students and then went to South Korea. Around ten such defectors arrived in 2023. It happened at end of the pandemic as they felt pressure to return to North Korea. In addition, in May and September of 2023, two families with a total of thirteen members arrived by boat directly from North Korea. The information can be analyzed as the spatially gendered patterns of NK migration. Migration routes differ spatially and also differ by gender: secondary migration, which is mainly done by women who have lived in China for a long time, and defection, which is mainly organized and led by men and takes place either directly from North Korea or from foreign posts where they have been working or studying.

Conclusion

The interrelationship of the need for reproductive labor in Chinese households, severe economic difficulty in North Korea, and gendered border enforcement has produced insecure forms of feminized NK migration and vulnerability in China through lack of protection in their marital status. Since 2001, international attention on the human rights of NK refugees and international society's active involvement of rescuing NK people in China caused more severe crackdowns and have facilitated the secondary migration of NK women who have resided in China for longer periods to safe third countries, mostly South Korea. NK women have experienced various hardships and violence during their migration and settlement. The feminization of migration, however, also means that women have taken an active role in deciding their own migration and that of their family members. They have been at the forefront of migration by developing migration routes, expanding resettlement spaces, supporting their families back home through the remittance economy, and helping them find their way to South Korea

and other safe countries by providing information and financial support.

However, changes in North Korea's political and economic situation, migration policies, and NK men's increased mobility via North Korea's marketization has led to a rising number of family defections and to men frequently taking the lead in migration decisions. Specifically, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased militarization of the North Korea-China border and increased digital surveillance in China. This produced spatially gendered migration patterns. While NK women who have lived in China for a long time continue to enter South Korea, their numbers have dwindled dramatically, and the new NK escapees are led by men via direct maritime migration from North to South and the migration of overseas workers or students. The ostensible closure of the North Korea-China border has led to a return to the era of defection before the mass migration caused by the 1990s famine, when only a small number of people who could afford the journey entered South Korea mainly to escape political oppression and direct punishment and to pursue freedom.

North Koreans' efforts to cross the border and migrate to safer countries and the states' level of management to control those unofficial flows have been a continuous cycle. In this process, the North Korea-China border became classed and almost blocked, pushing migrants to use more dangerous routes to cross these violent borders. Furthermore, as chain migration decreases after the pandemic, family separation will become a more serious issue. Throughout this article, I have demonstrated how international society's enormous concerns also contributed the intensification of border enforcement both in North Korea and China, producing gendered patterns of migration. By highlighting various power relations that have influenced the changes in NK migration over the last three decades, I argue that the security of displaced people needs to be considered as a matter of public concern, but caution against strategic interests in achieving this goal.

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