

COMMENTARY

"I Can Send That Money to My Mother"**Remittances, Telecommunication and Post-Migration Strategies of North Koreans**

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As perhaps the last standing totalitarian country in the world today, North Korea remains closed, inaccessible, isolated and disconnected from the world. North Koreans are victims of severe human rights violations. Ruled by a dictator, the people are under surveillance, forced to labor in concentration camps, and often publicly executed. The rest of the world ponders why North Koreans remain silent under a repressive regime. We wonder why they do not resist, why there are no revolutions, why they continue to live under a culture of terror.

But is North Korea impermeable? Despite the restricted nature of North Korea, where the flow of people, goods and information are strictly monitored by the regime, North Koreans are crossing heavily secured national boundaries, fleeing from humanitarian crises, and searching for better lives beyond the walls of North Korea. Yet, a nuclear North Korea is regarded as a serious dangerous security threat to geopolitical stability, and concern over its nuclear capabilities distracts from the ever-increasing flow of North Koreans migrating out of North Korea. Its fortified boundaries are being penetrated, its concrete walls breached by information flowing in and flowing out of North Korea. Furthermore, ordinary North Koreans who have already left North Korea are re-engaging in transnational activities, such as remittances and telecommunication, to support and maintain ties with family in North Korea.

Remittances to North Korea

But how are such activities possible? Satellite photos of East Asia at night show North Korea as an empty void with no electricity, as dark and vacant as the oceans around it while the territories of China, South Korea, and Japan gleam with light, a symbol of their prosperity. As disconnected and isolated North Korea seems from the well-networked countries surrounding it, telecommunication *is* possible. Communicating with and sending remittances to family take place frequently, even daily.

I first heard of such possibilities from North Koreans living in South Korea. It was a humid summer evening in 2011 and I had just finished conducting an interview with Kang (pseudonym). As we walked underground for the subway, we discussed the politics of food aid to North Korea. "I completely oppose providing rice to North Korea," he exclaimed. "Aid gets diverted to the military. Instead, if people want to help the North Korean people, a better alternative is to provide money to the North Koreans in South Korea. Then," he continued, "I can send that money to my mother."

Broker System

Remitting money to Kang's mother in North Korea is made possible through a complex, multi-layered

underground broker system. With enough money, these middlemen can arrange exits from North Korea and transportation to South Korea. Brokers can also deliver remittances to North Koreans and arrange phone calls between people in North and South Korea using Chinese-based cellular phones.

The unintended ramification of the broker system is the movement of information, goods and people in the other direction, literally back *into North Korea* via China.

Such a network emerged out of an emerging need of North Korean escapees to be smuggled out of China. Chinese authorities forcefully repatriate North Koreans—so called "illegal economic migrants"—back to North Korea where perceived defectors are punished for their crime of betraying their country. Therefore, no freedom awaits North Korea escapees. Rather, they face extreme hardships and hostile state policies, albeit in different forms. Vulnerable to arrest and exploitation, North Koreans in China remain in hiding and eventually seek entrance to South Korea. Many North Koreans regard South Korea as a safe haven because the state grants them citizenship and resettlement support, and also because the two Koreas have a shared history, culture and ethnicity.

Why exit through China given its refusal to protect North Koreans as refugees? North Korea is located in a peninsula, and exiting by boat in the east coast via the East Sea or the west coast via the Yellow Sea is a rarely attempted option. Secondly, the demilitarized zone (DMZ) which divides the two Koreas along the 38th parallel is the most militarized and armed strip of land in the world; the strip is full of mines and both sides of the border are heavily guarded. A direct entrance to South Korea, then, is nearly impossible. Because these geographic barriers limit options available for exit, the first destination in North Koreans' arduous journey out of North Korea is through China.

The unintended ramification of the broker system is the movement of information, goods and people in the other direction, literally back *into North Korea* via China. Kang lives frugally and saves as much as he can in order to send money to his mother back home. Because sending remittances transnationally into North Korean territory is a multi-layered procedure involving several hands, a large chunk of the remittance goes towards commission (up to 30%). But this is acceptable, Kang contends, because "there is no other way. At least this will reach my mother."

Telecommunication and Trafficking

When he has enough money saved up, Kang sends it to his mother through brokers. To confirm to Kang the proper transfer of the remittance, the broker will let Kang speak to his mother on the phone to acknowledge her receipt of the money. But communication also takes place the other way around. His mother frequently calls *him*. During one of our meetings, he explained that she had called him a few days ago, but he had not picked up the phone. "Why would you not pick up the phone?" I asked. "It gets stressful," he told me grimly. "She is calling to ask for more money. I just do not have any at this point." As a college student, his funds are limited and he does not make enough money to send her what she needs. Kang had already sent her 1,000,000 Won in several partitioned transactions throughout that year, an equivalent of about \$1,000 USD.

Kang's ultimate goal is to get his mother out of North Korea so they can be reunited in South Korea. This will not be cheap; sneaking a person out of North Korea is a complicated process that will involve bribing border security guards, traversing through China while avoiding arrest, and reaching a third country like Thailand where North Koreans can claim refugee status and finally enter South Korea. This entire process can cost as much as \$4,000 USD, though some NGOs have started to develop their own networks to rescue North Koreans at a much more affordable price (\$2,500 USD), a form of humanitarian trafficking.

Because Kang does not have \$4,000 USD in cash, he is contemplating selling his apartment back to the government (South Korea provides subsidized housing to North Koreans). "I will figure something out," he said about where he would stay if he sold his apartment. "Maybe my pastor will let me sleep in the church." (Religious groups also support refugee resettlement in China and South Korea.)

Kang's story illustrates gaps in discourses that would have us believe North Korea is cut off from the rest of the world. Indeed, as his story shows, North Korea is not impermeable. Not only are people exiting North Korea in increasing numbers, but remittances and information are transferred back and forth and telecommunications are increasingly common. Through broker networks, people are even employing strategies to get their family out of North Korea. Kang's story is but one out of thousands.

The conditions in North Korea may not be ripe enough for a full revolution to change the country, but perhaps these activities are the small resistances, the small revolutions, the small talk-backs to North Korea's culture of terror that are slowly amounting cracks in the dam. It is a question of *when*. Yes, a nuclear North Korea is frightening, but so is being unprepared for 23 million refugees.

Joowon Park is a PhD student at American University. His dissertation research examines the multiple forms of violence North Korean refugees experience in their migratory processes across national boundaries in East Asia and how such violences influence ideas about citizenship in their integration or assimilation to South Korean society. ☞