

The Flip: Mobile Communication of North Korean Migrant Women During Their Journey to South Korea

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This study focuses on the role of mobile communication in the migratory experiences of North Korean women as they journeyed to South Korea. We examine how mobile telephony played into their transition from perhaps the world's most digitally disconnected country to one of the most digitally oriented societies. Based on interviews with 20 North Korean women living in South Korea, we examine their use of mobile communication in North Korea and during their journey when it was extremely restricted, clandestine, and fraught. Nonetheless, the phone was often instrumental in their escape. By contrast, on entering South Korea, their use of the mobile phone became structured into everyday life and, in this case, not to have a phone was problematic. Thus, the mobile phone becomes a lens with which to understand relationships and the shifting positions of these migrants vis-à-vis different power structures.

Keywords: mobile communication, migration, North Korea, defectors

The mobile phone, in addition to being a communication device, illuminates power differences. Relatively powerful groups often attempt to assert control over its use. Powerless groups often adopt various forms of submission, negotiation, and resistance. This has been seen among Norwegian teens (Ling & Yttri, 2003), Singaporean maids (Thomas & Lim, 2009), teen girls in Palestine (Cohen, Lemish, & Schejter, 2007), hospital workers in the United States (Stephens et al., 2017), and midwives in Indonesia (Chib & Chen, 2011). In this article, we examine a particularly illustrative example of this in the lives of North Korean migrant women.

Every year, hundreds of North Koreans make a perilous attempt to cross the Tumen River, which flows along the Sino-Korean border. To this day, it is unclear how many North Koreans have fled the country.

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Estimates vary from 50,000 to 300,000, with Amnesty International suggesting approximately 100,000 (Lankov, 2004; Seymore, 2005; Song, 2013). Among those border-crossers, only 1,422 North Koreans have obtained official refugee status (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017), and approximately 30,000 people have managed to settle in South Korea.¹ The rest lead a precarious life as illegal migrants mostly in China and Russia, often hiding their identity in fear of repatriation. Some, especially women and children, are reported to have been trafficked and sold for forced marriages and modern slavery (E. Kim, Yun, Park, & Williams, 2009; S. K. Kim, 2014; Y. Kim, 2014).

This study focuses on the role of mobile communication for North Korean women who made their way to South Korea. The migratory experiences of these women often involved a dramatic transition from the authoritarian communism-based social system of North Korea to the democratic but highly competitive capitalist society in South Korea. Furthermore, in relation to communication technology, they were transplanted from the world's most digitally disconnected society to one of the most digitally oriented societies. The transition exposed them to a profoundly different life.

In this study, we drew on interviews with 20 North Korean migrant women with a particular focus on their mobile use. We found that, in many cases, they moved from the fraught and illegal use of smuggled Chinese mobile phones in the North to the granted and assumed use in the South where, for example, it is difficult to find work and carry out daily tasks if one does not have a mobile phone (Ling, 2008; 2017).

The stories of North Korean defectors have been a popular topic of media reports and human rights advocacy. Here, we bring their case in the current literature of mobile communications and migration studies by analyzing their migratory experiences through a lens of mobile phone use in two contrasting societies of Korea. By examining their perceptions of and experiences with mobile telephony during their journey, we gain insight into the structural differences between the two Koreas and their shifting positions vis-à-vis different power structures. This also leads us to a better understanding of their struggles and negotiation in the transition. It also provides unique insight into the role of mobile communication. We first explore the women's migration from the North, often including a difficult sojourn in China, to South Korea. We then examine their access to and use of mobile phones in North Korea during the crossing and in South Korea.

Research Context: Mobile Communications in Two Koreas

With the 1953 Korean War ceasefire, the Korean peninsula was divided into Soviet-controlled North Korea and U.S.-controlled South Korea. Since then, the two Koreas have allowed no exchange of goods and people except for sporadic, tension-filled political negotiations. Over the last 65 years, despite sharing the same ethnicity, language, and culture throughout their centuries-long history, the two Koreas have diverged into highly distinct countries with contrasting political and economic systems. Indeed, South Korea, with its population of 51.2 million, evolved into the world's 11th largest economy with GDP per capita of US\$27,539²

¹ Ministry of Unification of Republic of Korea:

<http://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/NKDefectorsPolicy/status/lately/>

² World Bank data: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/korea-rep>

(2016), whereas North Korea, with its 25.4 million people, remains to be one of the poorest countries with estimated GDP per capita below US\$700.³

Among other things, communication environments in these countries illuminate stark divergence. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), South Korea was ranked first in the 2016 ICT Development Index, with 118.5 mobile subscriptions per 100 inhabitants.⁴ As ICT is one of the critical dimensions to its economic growth, South Korean society is dominated by ICT-driven discourses such as "smart city," "ubiquitous life," and recently "the fourth industrial revolution." It is estimated to have the highest smartphone penetration, with ownership reaching 88% of the population (Poushter, 2016). Undeniably, mobile telephony is increasingly structured into the everyday life of South Koreans, permeating their ways of working, socializing, consuming, coordinating, navigating, and so on.

By contrast, North Korea has one of the most oppressive media environments in the world. Although mobile connectivity is gradually spreading in North Korea, the most recent statistics from the ITU show that there were approximately 14 mobile subscribers per 100 people in 2016.⁵ Save Eritrea, this is the lowest penetration of mobile telephones recorded by the ITU. Although it is difficult to determine the actual number, there are also some unregistered domestic SIM cards traded in black markets (*jangmadang*) as well as smuggled Chinese phones (Y. Kim, 2014). North Korea is ranked at the bottom of the World Press Freedom Index, as well as in the Press Freedom Scores (Freedom House, 2017). The state-controlled Korean Central News Agency is the single provider of all of the domestic media. The Internet is limited to social elites (e.g., diplomats, high-level government officials, elite students, and those who work in overseas business and IT), and its use is under strict surveillance (Kretchun & Kim, 2012).

The North Korean government forbids Internet access via mobile phones as well as any unauthorized attempt to use mobile phones for making international calls. For instance, the government operates special surveillance units to crack down on any sales or use of foreign media content or Chinese mobile phones (Kretchun, Lee, & Tuohy, 2017). The punishment for violators can range from fines, writing a self-criticism statement to serving in a labor camp. Nevertheless, it seems that even this strict surveillance cannot stop people's desire to contact the outside world. According to a recent survey by the U.S. government on North Korean refugees and defectors (Kretchun & Kim, 2012), 23% of respondents ($N = 350$) reported that they used mobile phones to arrange the escape.⁶ Among those live near the Sino-Korean border, there continues a silent battle between those who desire access to foreign information and the government's efforts to stamp this out. In this context, North Koreans who migrate to the South make a

³ United Nations Statistics Division, National Accounts Main Aggregates Database 2016: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/selbasicFast.asp>

⁴ ITU ICT Development Index 2017: <https://www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/idi/2016/>

⁵ <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

⁶ The survey also identified that 15% of the mobile phone owners used their phones to access sensitive media content via Bluetooth, USB, or SD cards. Reacting to this, the North Korean government is intensifying its censorship methods with a new built-in digital signature system for all smartphones and increased random inspections (Kretchun et al., 2017).

dramatic transition from the heavily restricted mobile environment to a highly advanced smartphone-oriented society.

Research Framework

Defining North Korean Migrants

The women interviewed here are North Korean “migrants” living in South Korea. We focused on women because approximately 70% of the North Koreans who enter South Korea are women.⁷ The feminization of North Korean migrants reflects the gendered socioeconomic and political conditions in North Korea where women tend to be more mobile, under less state surveillance, and have a higher motivation to flee. In the firm patriarchal Confucian-based system of North Korea, the majority of women are not employed in the formal sector (Song, 2013). The economic crisis in the late 1990s, moreover, forced North Korean women to become breadwinners often involved in informal or illegal businesses such as smuggling and trading Chinese commodities in local *jangmadang* (Park, 2011).

When entering South Korea, North Koreans are automatically entitled to South Korean citizenship. Despite their legal status, there exists negative social labeling of and discrimination against North Koreans in South Korea as the “other” (Chung, 2008; Kang, Ling, & Chib, 2017; S. K. Kim, 2012). By defining them as a new group of *migrants* in South Korea instead of the popular term *defectors*, we acknowledge their diverse experiences of mobility and various strategies of exhibiting agency while reflecting their currently disintegrated status within South Korea as the “other” types of citizens.

Migration as a Multistage Process

In this study, we examine migration as a process consisting of consecutive stages of mobility. We focus on the migrants’ experience of the journey. This includes predeparture considerations and preparation, the journey itself, and some aspects of their arrival. The long-term issues of acculturation/integration are beyond the scope of this article. There exists vast research examining why people migrate and how they acculturate in the destination countries (see, e.g., Castles, De Haas, & Miller, 2013; Stark, 1991). Classical migration theories examine the causes of migration such as macro-level factors influencing labor mobility (i.e., push/pull factors, the political economy of the world system, etc.), micro-level factors affecting individuals’ decisions to move and choices of destinations (Massey et al., 1993; O’Reilly, 2013). Researchers also provide theoretical frameworks and empirical accounts of migrants’ acculturation and integration, as well as the issues of multiculturalism in host societies (Berry, 1997; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Nevertheless, there still is a lack of studies covering the holistic process of migration as a *journey* that individuals experience.

⁷ Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea: http://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/#. Statistics on North Koreans Outside North Korea who entered South Korea (Korean only): <http://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/NKDefectorsPolicy/status/lately/>

In this regard, Drachman (1992) provides a broad framework of three stages of migration consisting of premigration and departure, transit, and resettlement. Applying the life-course approach, Kley (2010) proposes a four-stage framework of migration involving planning migration, realizing migration, and living in the South. It also suggests a "crossing the Rubicon" phase wherein the migration moves from being a mere aspiration to the actual planning and preparation stage. These phases mirror those journeys noted above for the North Korean women. Our focus was on the first two phases, including the trigger experiences in the North, extended transit and trafficking experiences in China, and some aspects of adjustment to new social norms in the South. We were interested to trace the role of the mobile phone in each of these phases.

The Structural "Flip" of Mobile Use in the North and the South

In examining the migration of North Korean women to South Korea, we focused on their use of mobile phones as a lens through which to understand their life-changing transition. Indeed, this can be seen as a structural "flip." The suspicious attitude by the authorities in the North toward mobile communication contrasts with its structurally embedded position in the South. As noted, in the North, use of a mobile phone, particularly one with a Chinese subscription, can lead to incarceration in a labor camp. By contrast, in the South, mobile phones go beyond being a useful gadget. Indeed, in some ways, those without a mobile phone are unable to be fully engaged in the flux of everyday life (Ling, 2008). Not having a mobile phone makes coordination of daily tasks more difficult because interlocutors often assume people are telephonically available (Ling & Lai, 2016; Ling & Yttri, 2002). In some cases, jobs require people to have a mobile phone (Stephens et al., 2017), and public services such as transportation schedules and payment systems increasingly use the mobile phone as a terminal. Thus, the mobile phone is increasingly required in contemporary society, reducing individuals' ability to disconnect and be free from social engagement (Ling, 2012; Morley, 2017; Waisbord, 2014). To paraphrase James Katz (Ling, 2012), the person without a mobile phone becomes a problem for others in their social sphere because the mobile phone is increasingly structured into everyone's daily lives (Campbell, 2014).

The contrasting understanding of mobile telephony illuminates the position of the device in the broader power structure and the situated autonomy of individuals. As noted above, when mobile telephony spreads into a social context in which a powerful group has the ability to control interpersonal communication channels, there is often an associated control crisis. In a somewhat mild case, as the mobile phone was adopted by teens in Norway, discussions centered on the morality of their use (Nordal, 2000). In a much more fraught case, in Palestine, a traditionally patriarchal society, the father of a household has a large say in the social life of his daughters (Cohen et al., 2007). There, the daughters' ownership of a mobile phone can be a symbol of defiance. Indeed, the study describes Palestinian teen girls who suffered the wrath of their fathers when they found a phone that had been given to the girls by their boyfriends. It is this dimension of the device that characterizes its use by the women in North Korea (Kretchun et al., 2017) or in China where use is restricted by human smugglers or husbands of forced marriage.

In other words, mobile use in North Korea is fraught with danger and fear. Nonetheless, the migrant women used a mobile phone clandestinely to exercise their fundamental agency of pursuing freedom. By contrast, once they arrived in South Korea, not having a mobile phone contradicted social expectation and

their autonomy. Focusing on this transition occurred during their structural flip, we asked the following questions:

RQ: How do mobile phones play into the transitional experiences of North Korean women from the North to the South? (a) How and under what conditions did mobile phones help North Korean women in organizing their exit from the North? (b) How did mobile phones facilitate North Korean women's journey? (c) Finally, how does use of mobile phones play into the women's integration in the South?

Method and Data

The study is based on semi-structured interviews with 20 North Korean women migrants living in South Korea, conducted between August and December 2016 in Seoul. There were follow-up interviews and observations at the IT training for North Korean migrants in South Korea in September 2017. Questions centered on their use of mobile phones during their migratory journeys, including their motivations to leave, experiences with human smugglers who shepherded the women in their journey, and in several cases, their experiences with traffickers who sold them into bondage with rural Chinese men,⁸ as well as their arrival and early experiences with ICTs in South Korea.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed in Korean and later translated into English. We examined the transcripts for themes using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The interviewees were located using snowball sampling via the networks of North Korean migrant communities such as churches, sports club members, and friends. The use of intermediaries helped lessen the interviewees' discomfort in telling personal stories to others. All names appearing here are pseudonyms and their age and time of departure are intentionally given at a broad level of granularity.

All interviewees were from northern provinces (e.g., Musan, Hyesan, Chongjin, and Onsong) near the Chinese border. This is a common characteristic for most North Korean migrants as more than 70% of the total North Koreans settled in South Korea are from northeastern provinces (Ministry of Unification, 2017). Given that internal mobility within North Korea is quite limited and requires travel permits, it was easier for residents in the borderland areas to access smuggled mobile phones with Chinese subscriptions to contact human smugglers. The average age of the interviewees was 37.5 years, ranging from 24 to 58 years. The point of their departure ranged from 1996 to 2015. Three left in the late 1990s, seven in 2000s, and 10 in 2010s, making 2009 the median year of departure. Thus, the earliest left the North before the rise of mobile communication.

⁸ Although both are illegal, there is a fundamental difference between human smuggling and trafficking. With human smuggling, there is consent between the person being smuggled and the smuggler. Human trafficking, however, is against the will of the individual being trafficked and is often done for the purpose of forced labor, sexual slavery, or other forms of exploitation (<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/smuggling-of-migrants.html>).

Most interviewees had experienced a long escape journey across China and Southeast Asian countries. For the women who traveled somewhat directly to the South via China, Laos, and Thailand, the trip took between a few weeks to several months. However, six of the 20 interviewees were trafficked and sold as "wives" to rural Chinese men. These women often lived in China for several years before leaving for South Korea. The majority of the interviewees either had some level of high school education or had graduated. Only one had completed college in North Korea and four had entered the university in South Korea. Only three women were employed full-time in the South. Most were unemployed, staying at home with children or studying to prepare for their next career, although almost all have previous work experiences in factories, restaurants, or shops. The rest of the women held part-time jobs.

Predeparture: Fraught Use of Mobile Telephony in North Korea

In this analysis, we follow the sequential stages of the migratory experiences of North Korean women from their departure, through their journey, to their arrival in the South Korea.

Motivations to Leave the Homeland

Their motivations to cross the border into China are complex, extending beyond mere political or economic reasons. As described by our interviewees, their life in North Korea was severely restricted by economic hardship, social immobility, and limited political and social freedom. Exposure to the outside world was also prohibited, although those who lived near the Sino-Korean border were more likely to have heard about living conditions in provincial China from smugglers. As one interviewee, Ok-ja (who was in her early 40s at the time of the interview and left North Korea in 2011), put it, "China was practically our backyard . . . even if I didn't cross over myself, we have eyes and ears." The majority of the interviewees secretly watched foreign media, such as Chinese, U.S., or even South Korean dramas, on smuggled DVDs. According to them, younger women were often attracted by the lifestyles shown in these dramas. Older women, on the contrary, tended to discount these influences as in the case of Young-hee (in her late 40s, left in 2005), who believed those were "South Korean propogandas targeting North Koreans."

Escaping North Korea involves a risky journey into an unknown world. Furthermore, it means putting one's family and friends in danger because authorities can prevent their relatives from advancing to better jobs or higher education. If the escape fails, the women can be deported back to North Korea and incarcerated for months or years (Chang, Haggard, & Noland, 2009). According to our material, the decision to make such a dramatic change was often triggered by certain events involving interpersonal and social networks. The women noted that they were (1) "pulled" by the prospects to reunite with family, (2) "allured" by human traffickers, and/or (3) "pushed" by the conditions in the North.

Looking at the first of these, many interviewees said they decided to leave the North based on phone calls (via Chinese mobile phones) from family members in the South. In these cases, the person in the South often helped to pay for and arrange the escape with human smugglers. Others, especially younger women, followed their mothers or relatives without serious contemplation of their choices or even against her will, a theme to which we return below.

Our material indicates that for those who were tricked by traffickers, their initial motivations often were short-term economic gains in China. These women were often allured by the traffickers who promised them that they could make money in China for a few months, and then return home. They did not know that the return was impossible. These economic motivations were also driven by the increasing role of North Korean women as a breadwinner, good mother, or dutiful daughter, especially in the wake of the food crisis (Haggard & Noland, 2013; S. K. Kim, 2014; Park, 2011).

Turning to the third category, only one of our interviewees made a politically conscious decision to abandon the North Korean regime after her son died of starvation in military service. Her first attempt to cross the border failed and she was sentenced to a labor camp where she decided it was not the country in which she wanted to live. Other interviewees had personal reasons “pushing” them to migrate, including abusive in-laws and the desire to take control over one’s own marriage and life with more freedom.

Freight Use of Mobile Phones in North Korea

Our material indicates that the escape from North Korea involved a complex process of decision making. This included careful coordination assisted by mobile, internal and external negotiations, and dangerous preparations. Many of the interviewees said that mobile phones played a critical role in the process of migration. As noted above, ownership and use of mobile phones were limited among the women who lived in rural areas in northern provinces. Most interviewees did not own a North Korean mobile phone as they said there was “no need” or it was “too expensive.” Of the 20 interviewees, 10 used a mobile phone while in the North and, in almost all cases, this was a smuggled Chinese mobile phone. Eight people owned a Chinese mobile phone and two people accessed a Chinese mobile phone owned by someone else. Among the five who left after Kim Jong Un took power in 2011⁹, only one participant owned a domestic mobile phone in the North and four others did not own a mobile phone at all because they lived in remote areas or were too young and poor to own a phone. One of the interviewees who did not have a mobile phone said,

I didn’t have one myself, but I saw people use it. I didn’t need one because if I was the only one who had one, who would I call? People in Pyeongyang are said to have it. But Chongjin is a provincial city. (40s, left in 2013, lived in a rural village near Chongjin)

Only one interviewee, Ji-yoon (in her 20s, left in 2015), owned a smartphone. She noted that given that mobile Internet is restricted in North Korea, her smartphone was mainly for “showing off, not using.” She stopped using her smartphone to take photos when people interrogated her about why she took photos; instead, she used it mostly for listening to music with smuggled memory cards.

⁹ In 2009, the International Telecommunication Union first reported North Korea having mobile telephone subscriptions (<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>). Although some suggest that mobile phones have been popular in urban areas of North Korea since 2012 (Y. Kim, 2018), our respondent sample differs because it comprised only women from rural borderland areas of North. Our evidence-based research does not suggest widespread mobile adoption and use in North Korea in that period, perhaps because of a considerable digital divide by gender, location, age, and income.

Most participants used smuggled mobile phones with Chinese subscriptions to plan their journey as they lived near the border where the Chinese mobile signals were available. These phones were often owned by the smugglers or "phone brokers" who sold airtime. In a few cases, the interviewees had their own Chinese mobile phones. Despite intermittent access and danger of being caught, they saw the devices as a necessary tool. Young-ja (40s, left in 2005) recalled that she had buried her phone to avoid government control:

My husband crossed the border first and gave me his mobile phone. I was afraid of the police searching my house so I buried the phone in the ground. Then, I would turn it on only when I needed to use it. It was a dangerous situation.

Making calls via a phone broker was also risky. Interviewees said that to avoid detection by the authorities, they would take lengthy hikes into the forest with the broker to make a call. Others, who lived farther from the border, would travel in secret for several days to reach the border where they could use a broker's mobile phone to talk with their family abroad:

We didn't get the Chinese mobile signal in my hometown. So, people go to the border areas to make calls at night. . . . I went to the border area to call my mother. They check people vigorously so you have to travel in secret. Five hours in total, one hour by car, and then by train, which you jump down from before they check for permits, and you have to hide. (Yoo-jin, 20s, left in 2009)

The informants explained that they were willing to assume these risks because the mobile phone was the main conduit through which they could contact their family outside North Korea. Receiving calls was also fraught. When a family living abroad wanted to contact their relatives in the North, there was a clandestine system for seeking them out. For instance, the summons to the call could come with a sudden and unexpected visit by a phone broker:

While I was working, someone came and asked me if I had a younger sister. I was so shocked as she disappeared several years ago. He said my sister wanted to see me and asked me to follow him. I went to someone's house and he gave me a mobile phone. It was connected with my sister so I could talk to her. (Mee-ok, 50s, left in 2009)

Mee-ok's experience was disturbing on several levels. First, the sudden reappearance of her sister was not anticipated. Furthermore, there was the possibility that the person offering the call could be a government agent trying to entrap her. Last, as the call was legitimately from a relative in the South, it forced Mee-ok to consider whether she should take the risk of embarking on the dangerous journey to the South, leaving her family behind. In this context, the simple decision to accept a call, something that is a matter of course for many of the world's mobile phone users, is a decision that can have far-reaching consequences for women in North Korea.

As the women began to plan their journey, they also relied on telephonic contacts throughout their surreptitious preparations. Our interviewees described how they developed secret forms of communication

with their interlocutors to circumvent surveillance. Furthermore, they avoided mentioning the callers' names or the locations from which the other person was calling. For instance, Gyung-mi (30s, left in 2013) called her sister in North Korea after she settled in South Korea. When she spoke to her sister in the North, she was afraid of being taped by the government and said, "I'm well in China" instead of mentioning South Korea. Mee-ok, who was first contacted by her sister in the South, later received a warning from the North Korean Political Security Office, which threatened that they would arrest her family. She needed to take special measures when calling her sister via a phone broker:

I was so scared. . . . I tried to contact her through a broker . . . everything should really be in secret. When we called my sister, we used a mobile phone at night. . . . Even then, the phone gave off too much light, so we covered ourselves under a blanket.

Once they made decisions to leave North Korea, the interviewees said that mobile phones played a critical role in assisting their crossing. They used it to plan meeting points, set times to meet brokers, and gather tips on how to avoid the border guards:

Mobile phone was very useful during the escape. I contacted my relative frequently to set up a date and place where the border guard will overlook my escape. I used it until I crossed the border to contact the broker and set up the meeting points. (Ok-ja, 40s, left in 2013)

In many cases, they used Chinese mobile phones to coordinate the escape with the human smugglers. They also called relatives living in South Korea who arranged the smugglers for them. Despite the constraints and the danger, the experiences of the interviewees underscore the critical role of mobile phones in assisting their decision to leave North Korea and in organizing the escape.

Crossings: Restricted but Critical Mobile Use During the Journey

Risky Journey to Escape North Korea and Restricted Use of Mobile Phones

The Sino-Korean border is defined by the Tumen and Amlak Rivers, which allow some porous spots for illegal crossings. This is particularly true in winter when the rivers are frozen. The majority of our informants crossed the border with a series of human smugglers who were coordinated via mobile phone. In the most "streamlined" case, one smuggler helped them cross the river and took them to a nearby Chinese city. They were then handed over to another smuggler who, in turn, escorted them in a small group across China and Southeast Asia where they could claim their illegal status and be handed over to the South Korean government.

Approximately 75% of our interviewees passed through China and Southeast Asian countries.¹⁰ The routes of these journeys change by the shifting diplomatic relations between these countries vis-à-vis North and South Korea (Song, 2013). The journey with the smugglers was risky, exhausting, and costly.

¹⁰ These routes often went through Mongolia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and/or Thailand. The rest escaped by sea or across the demilitarized zone.

For the interviewees who went more or less directly to South Korea, the trip took from several weeks to months and cost from US\$2,500 to US\$10,000. The payment was usually made by family members in the South or the migrants themselves when they signed a contract to pay after they settled in South Korea. Some women spent extra years in China either of their own volition or because they were trafficked (Choi, 2014).

In this situation, the mobile phone became an important tool. This is seen when, for example, examining Syrian and Iraqi refugees who use mobile phones as lifelines to access maps, messengers, and social media with the same importance as water, food, or infrastructure during their journey (Gillespie, Osseiran, & Cheesman, 2018; Latonero & Kift, 2018; Ling, Li, Geldof, & Chib, n.d.). That said, on the contrary, mobile access and use among North Korean migrants during their journey were more restricted. The majority of the women did not own a mobile phone and were unable to purchase one in China or in the other transit countries. Several of those who had a mobile phone reported that they had it taken away by the smugglers for fear of being caught by the Chinese police who could have potentially deported them back to North Korea. The human smugglers, however, used mobile phones to coordinate the journey:

It was not possible to carry mobile phones on the way here. [The smugglers] took it away. But one man somehow hid and carried a phone . . . the broker had a mobile phone but we couldn't even touch it. (Hyun-suk, 40s, left in 2010)

As an exception, those who managed to hide their phone while traveling used it to contact their family in the South and let them know their safety and whereabouts. Ji-yoon (30s, left in 2015) was a rare case because she was allowed to buy a mobile phone in China. She said that she used it to signal her safety and locations to family members in South Korea. As noted, fear of surveillance meant that use was restricted to the extent that the women could make only quick instrumental calls using encrypted phrases:

I bought a mobile phone right after crossing the border. I asked the broker to buy for us and used my phone because I needed to let my family know where I was. I called my younger sibling, cousin, and home [North Korea]. Every time I moved to a different location, I called to say like, "I'm here, I'm doing okay" because the call could be bugged in China as well. So, it was just simply notifying my location. (Ji-yoon)

Human Trafficking and Escape With Mobile Phones

Approximately 30% of the women in this study were trafficked and sold as "wives" to rural Chinese men, a practice that has been examined by several scholars (Chang et al., 2009; Choi, 2014; E. Kim et al., 2009; Lankov, 2004). North Korean women are in high demand by human traffickers and their clients, mostly bride-seeking Chinese men in rural areas of the northeastern province. The one-child policy in China and the cultural preferences for male offspring have contributed to a severe gender imbalance. This was further exacerbated by the internal migration of Chinese women seeking jobs and better life opportunities in cities (E. Kim et al., 2009). Thus, there is a shortage of marriageable women in rural China, leading to a high demand for "brides-for-sale" in some regions of China. For those men who are poorer, older, undereducated, or with disabilities, the trafficked North Korean women—who can

also become caretakers for elderly parents, housekeepers, and subsistence farm workers—are an affordable option.

In some cases, North Korean women voluntarily enter this marriage market by contacting the marriage brokers out of poverty or to support their family by marriage migration to China (Choi, 2014). In many other cases, the situation is clearly against their will. The trafficked victims among our interviewees were not aware of being trafficked until they were confined and sold to Chinese men. Indeed, Kim et al. (2009) reported the severe violation of women's human rights, including violence, rapes, and mental abuse. Although our interviewees did not go deeper into revealing such experiences, the trafficked victims described the poverty and hopeless life they went through in rural China. Because they did not have a proper identity in China even after marriage, the trafficked victims risked getting caught by Chinese police and being deported to North Korea. As with their situation in the North, access to mobile telephony was restricted and controlled by their husband. Their situation was further constrained because they did not know the Chinese language or anyone to whom they could reach out for help.

A couple of these trafficked interviewees were able to gain access to a mobile phone. In the case of Sun-hee (20s, left in 2009), she was able to get a secondhand mobile phone from her Chinese husband after a long negotiation. In another case, Mi-sun (20s, left in 2009) saved money to buy her own mobile phone. For these two women, having control over their own communication channel was an important element in their eventual escape. Mi-sun met by chance another North Korean woman who had been trafficked in her village but had escaped to the South. When this woman visited Mi-sun's village to see her child,¹¹ the woman gave Mi-sun a mobile number of a smuggler who could help her escape:

I saved money and bought a mobile phone. I used it when I was running away to contact the broker [smuggler]. I had been caught twice, so I knew I couldn't take a bus. I told him to bring a car and to have the windows darkly tinted. He picked me up and got me out.

As in the case of Mi-sun, access to her own mobile and autonomy of using mobile phones to coordinate with the smuggler were important enablers of her escape. What is noteworthy is that merely having access to a mobile phone was not a sufficient condition for her escape. In the midst of the persisting hopelessness of forced marriage and impoverished life, she needed a trigger experience to motivate her escape as well as the phone number of someone who could help. When these other conditions were met, the mobile phone played a crucial instrumental role in changing her life.

Settling in South Korea: The Mobile Phone as Taken for Granted

Once North Korean migrants arrive in South Korea, they spend approximately six months at Hanawon, a government agency providing resettlement and training programs. They are also offered the basic resettlement package including lump-sum cash, housing, health care, vocational training, and school tuition support. After Hanawon, North Korean migrants are allocated to nationwide Hana centers that

¹¹ Some of the trafficked women had children by their Chinese husbands.

support their initial settlement including opening a bank account, getting used to nearby shops, finding job opportunities, and so on. After two weeks of initial orientation, North Korean migrants are left to begin a new life in South Korea. In fact, this transition to the South is often sudden and confusing: Young-mi (20s, left in 2010) felt as if she "stepped out of a time machine." With the help of a resettlement worker at a local Hana center, Dong-hee (20s, left in 2012) said that she spent "a day to get used to things, a day to get a mobile phone, and then a day to get a job."

As mentioned by Dong-hee, access to the mobile phone is an assumed part of the adjustment process. Indeed, getting a mobile phone is one of the first things they do once they arrive at a local Hana center. The center workers often take them to a nearby shop and help them get a smartphone using some of their resettlement money. Some interviewees were bewildered by this experience. For example, Choo-ja (40s, left in 2008) noted her sense of inadequacy and self-doubt when she went to buy such a fancy technology:

When I came here, I first got my mobile phone and it was a flip phone. Then, I saw others got smartphones. . . . It looked amazing and strange. I thought to myself, "When would I be able to use that kind of thing?" As I wasn't working due to my baby, I thought I wouldn't be able to buy and use such a thing and I could only use a flip phone.

Conversely, younger women were more comfortable with the new technology. For example, Do-won (20s, left in 2010) said that she found it "so liberating to be able to own a mobile phone and do what I want with it."

Most interviewees said they did not find learning to use a smartphone particularly challenging aside from the initial difficulty with English loanwords (e.g., *store*, *games*, *shopping*, etc.). They reported using trial and error to pick up its use on their own. Some explained that, because phones had Korean language menus, it was not so intimidating, unlike the Chinese characters on the phones they had seen in North Korea or China.

Mobile phones quickly began to figure in their lives. For example, for the women who had to pay back the human smugglers or came with children to support, they immediately started to work in restaurants or factories. Thus, they reported that they quickly learned to use a mobile phone to manage their personal lives and to interact with employers, colleagues, and social contacts. Sometimes with employers, the mobile phone can become a kind of leash in that employees are perpetually available should their employers need them (Wallis, 2011).

Mobile phones were also their conduit to the Internet. Indeed, they noted that this was a key conduit through which they learned about life in South Korea. They used mobile-based Internet to read the news, search for jobs, seek educational possibilities, reach people, and gather information on how things are done in their new situation. The interviewees explained that in the digitally oriented high-tech South, not having a mobile phone could be a problem. Seung-hee, who is in her 40s and left North Korea in 2003 and now teaches IT classes for North Korean migrants, explained common difficulties that most North Koreans experience when they arrive without knowing how to use smartphones:

In South Korea, everything is done by mobile phones and computers. For example, people who just came from North Korea have a lot of trouble finding ways to navigate the city. Without knowing how to use apps like Naver map and Seoul Bus, they are confused and easily get lost in Seoul. . . . They need to learn to use mobile phones to survive here.

Her comments underscore how the device has been structured into South Korean society and how the migrants were, in effect, compelled to conform to the norms by mastering the technology. The women also described their experiences of feeling the need to adjust their social interactions to the heavily mobile-based society in the South. Myung-Suk (30s, left in 2012) recalled that she originally considered a mobile phone a voice-based device. Her interactions with the locals soon disabused her of this as she recalled the following:

At first, I wanted to make a call and talk to people on my mobile phone but they didn't answer and just responded via Kakaotalk.¹² Then they wanted to chat there. So, I had to learn to use Kakaotalk or text messages to talk to people.

Many interviewees said that mobile phones were interwoven into their lives. It was the essential channel through which they received information and entertainment as well as navigated the new territory and socialized with the locals. Hence, the interviewees traced the transiting relationship to mobile communication from being extremely fraught and dangerous in the North to being taken for granted and expected for survival in the South. Reflecting the contrasting structural contexts between the two Koreas, these women's mobile use behaviors illuminate the different social constraints and expectations with which they needed to comply for survival.

Discussion: The Katzian Flip

In this study, we explored the experiences of North Korean women in their journeys from the North to the South by examining the contention over their access to and use of mobile phones. By doing this, we have framed their transitional experiences as a structural flip between the two Koreas. We found that their relationship with mobile communication in the North and during their journey was extremely restricted, intermittent, covert, and fraught with danger and fear. Indeed, powerful actors (e.g., the authorities in the North and the traffickers and "husbands" in China) worked to limit their access to this communication channel and their autonomy of using mobile phones was heavily constrained. Nonetheless, mobile phones often played a critically instrumental role in their ability to exercise agency and pursue their escape.

On the other hand, the material shows that they faced new mobile-based social expectations and constraints in South Korea where not having a mobile phone was problematic. In the South, the access is taken for granted and use is a prerequisite for survival. The interviewees said they were required to be always on the mobile phone so that they could stay connected, informed, and addressable. Such was newly gained freedom as well as a constraint for North Korean migrants as they become mobile-configured beings in South Korea. Autonomy of mobile phone use is again compromised by new social norms in the South and limits the ability to be disconnected.

¹² A popular South Korean messaging app similar to WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger.

We see this transitional experience of these women as a "Katzian flip." In its original formulation, the Katz principle states that we are a problem for our social sphere if we do not have a mobile phone (Ling, 2008). For the women interviewed here, when they were in the North, it was the opposite. They were a problem to their social sphere if they had a mobile phone. Conversely, in the South, they are a problem if they do not have a mobile phone as the power of their social context coerces ownership and use of the device as well as constant engagement (Ling, 2016).

The women we studied followed a difficult transition from the North, often via a parlous period in China, to South Korea where they face the challenges of becoming integrated in the society. Mobile phones become a lens through which we can understand these contrasts. Use of the mobile phone in the North was fraught. Young-hee, for example, noted that she buried her Chinese phone to avoid being discovered. Had she been discovered, she, and perhaps her family, could have received severe penalties. Even when the women made the crossing to China, ownership and use of a mobile phone were problematic. The smugglers restricted their use for fear of being discovered, and for those women who were trafficked, their husbands did not allow ownership and use of a mobile phone not to lose control over the women's behaviors.

Given this fraught relationship with the mobile phone, it was sometimes disconcerting for the women to come to South Korea where the same issues do not exist. Indeed, it was quite the opposite. Not to have a mobile phone was the difficult position. We saw this in the comments of Do-won, who said that it was "so liberating to be able to own a mobile phone and do what I want with it." The comments of Bok-hee (50s, left in 2011) take this even further. She noted, "You couldn't survive in this country without it."

Bok-hee's comments underscore her sense that the mobile phone is not just a luxury, but rather it is a necessity. These comments suggest how when a technology becomes structured into the ongoing functioning of society, those without the ability to use the technology are impaired. Note that these comments do not suggest that the device will integrate them in South Korean society (Aricat, Karnowski, & Chib, 2015). Rather, they note that to have access to the flux of daily life in South Korea, one needs to have and use a mobile phone. This is, in many ways, the polar opposite of the fraught use of the device in North Korea. This is what we see as the Katzian flip.

To a lesser degree, all mobile users have experienced this transition over a long period. Migrants who come from developing countries with limited mobile access to developed countries with full access experience a similar level of dramatic change in their mobile use contexts. Those who travel between mainland China and Macau and Hong Kong also experience two very different user environments in which the availability of popular Internet services from U.S. companies is flipped as they cross the border. Interestingly, the women interviewed here experienced both sides of this divide within a very short time as they made the journey through this flip.

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