

Crossing Families: North Korean Refugee Women
and Monetary Remittance in Jero Yun's *Mrs. B, A
North Korean Woman* (2016),
Beautiful Days (2018), and *Fighter* (2021)*

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Abstract

More than 70 percent of North Korean refugees who cross the Sino-North Korean border are women, and approximately 60 percent of them send money to family members that they left behind in North Korea. How does the North Korean refugees' monetary remittances change the relationship with their family members? This article answers this question particularly focusing on Jero Yun's trilogy about North Korean women: *Mrs. B, A North Korean Woman* (2016), *Beautiful Days* (2018), and *Fighter* (2021). By reading North Korean refugee issues as a part of dispersed families (*isan'gajok*) in the history of a divided Korea, the director delivers a strong message of motherhood through the North Korean women in his films. The women in the films, however, reveal how desperately they want to escape from the conventional image of "Korean mothers" who are supposed to sacrifice and devote themselves to their children. With monetary and emotional remittance to their family members, the North Korean women gradually turn over their hierarchy in the patriarchal family system and transform themselves into tearless mothers who do not apologize for their absence. By establishing their own moral boundary, these women not only cross the conception of clan-based family but bid farewell to the nation (North Korea), which is a collective of individual families.

Keywords: North Korean refugees, North Korean women, dispersed family (*isan'gajok*), monetary remittance, emotional remittance, motherhood, Jero Yun

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Introduction

It is reported that more than 70 percent of the North Korean refugees who arrive in South Korea are women, and that regardless of their marital status most of them cross the border alone. Among the North Koreans who have settled in South Korea and China, about 30,000 to 40,000 regularly send money back to their families and relatives in North Korea (S. Kim 2014, 61).¹ What does this money—measuring approximately six million dollars per year—do? How does this process of sending money change the senders' roles and relationships within their families in North Korea? Furthermore, how do the geographical and contextual changes of the refugee women's locations challenge their conception of a clan-based family relationship? Finally, how do these women understand the boundary of morality in terms of making money for their family? In this article, I attempt to answer these questions by focusing on Jero Yun's trilogy about North Korean women: *Mrs. B, A North Korean Woman* (2016), *Beautiful Days* (2018), and *Fighter* (2021). Rather than problematizing the deconstruction of the family itself due to the women's dislocation, I focus on the role of refugee women within their families to explore how they are being, doing,² and crossing their family bonds.

In the trilogy of films about North Korean women, Jero Yun portrays the female protagonists as mothers in their families. The North Korean refugee women are tied to their family through the monetary remittance and their acts are based on their sense of morality. Although the director demonstrates sacred images of the mothers, the women in the films paradoxically reveal how desperately they want to escape from these family relationships. The act of women sending money to their family members challenges and changes their roles and status within the family. Furthermore, this process eventually helps these women move beyond the conventional structure of familyhood.

¹ In this article, Sung Kyung Kim emphasizes that the money that the North Korean women send to their families totals at least six million dollars, which is possible due to the transnational connections on which the North Korean refugees rely: North Korean defectors → Korean-Chinese individuals living in China → Chinese individuals living in North Korea → North Korean locals.

² The expressions, "being" and "doing" families, originate from Nancy Folbre in her 2001 book (Folbre 2001). Evangeline O. Katigbak also uses these expressions a couple of times in her 2015 study (Katigbak 2015). I used these expressions to stress that familyhood is not given but formed based on the family members' efforts to be and do (act as) family.

“Korean” Mothers: North Korean Refugees and Separated Family (Isan’gajok)

³ In this article, I refer to North Korean border crossers as “refugees” regardless of their visa status. Recent studies on North Korean border crossers have tended to understand these individuals as economic migrants rather than as political refugees. Although the political climate of East Asia has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, considerations of the reasons for North Koreans’ escape need to include the historical context of the division of Korea. Whether these border crossers achieve a legal status in South Korea or not, their lives lack material and psychological stability. Considering their social status, the risk of repatriation during their stay in China, and their reluctance to settle in South Korean society, the North Koreans in Jero Yun’s movies can be called “refugees” in terms of their state of mind.

⁴ The “umbrella” is both a metaphor and an indication of crucial scenes, which the director achieves through the use of slow cuts. For example, a South Korean police officer opens an umbrella alone when he goes to a convenient store to buy liquor (*soju*) and dried squid for a North Korean man. In another umbrella scene, the police officer and the North Korean man are under the same umbrella when they go to a bar together. This umbrella can represent a unified Korea, but I argue it also a homosocial commonality or the patriarchal order for the men in the film.

Since 2010, South Korean films have actively depicted North Korean refugees.³ Unlike commercial films, independent films have focused on the stereotyped images and socioeconomic discrimination against the North Korean refugees and revealed the reality in which they struggle to survive in their new society. For example, Pak Jung-bum’s *Journals of Musan* (2010), Jeon Kyu-hwan’s *Dance Town* (2010), and Kim Kyung-mook’s *Stateless Things* (2011) all portray the North Korean defectors as marginalized individuals in South Korean society. While in their films these South Korean directors disparage the status of North Korean defectors as second-rate citizens in the neoliberal structure of South Korean society, Jero Yun portray the North Korean border crossers’ complex motives for border crossings as well as their incomplete journey even after their resettlement. Since directing the short film *Hitchhiker* in 2016, Jero Yun has interestingly focused on the North Korean refugees’ relationships with their own families. *Hitchhiker* centers on the mutual understanding between a South Korean man and a man from North Korea. The South Korean police officer earns money for his family who is living in an English-speaking country for the sake of his child’s education while the North Korean man makes money in South Korea to support his family in North Korea. Although the two main protagonists do not explicitly exchange words, they understand each other’s hardships as the breadwinner for their family. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s ([1985] 2016) notion of “homosociality,” or the friendship and camaraderie within same-sex relationships, is a key concept of this short film wherein females experience alienation from their family narratives. In this way, *Hitchhiker* is not far from a story about a head of the family (*kajang*) who sacrifices his own life for the rest of their family. The two men from the South and the North reach a common understanding under the umbrella of patriarchy.⁴

Jero Yun began narrowing his focus from North Korean refugee issues to North Korean women after meeting Mrs. B for his documentary film *Mrs. B, A North Korean Woman*. In

addition, he expanded his understanding of North Korean women through the production of his fictional movies *Beautiful Days* and *Fighter*. This trilogy of movies about North Koreans centers on the refugee women's interiority as well as their family relationships and separation. Family separation is a crucial topic in understanding North Korean refugees, because the North Koreans' separation (*isan*) is not only a consequence of their border crossing but also a motive for them to decide to cross the border. North Korean refugee women's separation from their families in North Korea is a part of the separated family (*isan'gajok*) issue on the Korean peninsula that began with the division of Korea. North Korean refugees are not only a result of North Korea's failing system but also of the political and gendered violence tied to the division of Korea. Therefore, North Koreans' dislocation and relocation should be considered a result of the continued division between South and North Korea. Current studies do not include North Korean refugees' family separation as a part of *isan'gajok*, as shown by the Korean Red Cross's definition: "*Isan'gajok* refers to the persons or their children who were separated from the North or the South due to the division of Korea after the 1945 liberation and/or the 1950 Korean War" (as quoted in Yoon et al. 2011, 97; Korean Red Cross 2005, 6; Y. Yoon 2006). However, Article 2 of Act on Confirmation of Life or Death and Promotion of Exchange of Inter-Korean Separated Families, which was enacted in 2009, defines *isan'gajok* as "those who are relatives within the eighth degree of consanguinity, relatives by marriage and who are or were a spouse dispersed in areas south of the Military Demarcation Line and areas north of the Military Demarcation Line at present, irrespective of reasons and circumstances of separation."⁵ Since the Act does not specify the time frame of family's separation, it can include any type of separation between family members, including those that occurred as a result of the Korean division. Therefore, based on the current law, family separation between North Koreans can qualify as *isan'gajok* (G. Kim 2008, 326).⁶

The narratives of the North Korean refugee women in Jero Yun's movies particularly center on the women's relationships with their children. By transmitting the women's narratives

⁵ Ministry of Unification, Republic of Korea, Act on Confirmation of Life or Death and Promotion of Exchange of Inter-Korean Separated Families, <https://www.law.go.kr/engLSc.do?menuId=1&subMenuId=21&tabMenuId=117&query=Act%20on%20Inter-Korean%20Confirmation%20of%20the%20Life%20or%20Death%20of%20Separated%20Families#>.

⁶ Gwi-Ok Kim (2008) also points out that the South Korean government does not officially categorize North Korean defectors as dispersed families. Kim outlines that the North Korean defectors are also the victims of the Korean division, and the government should recognize them as dispersed families for family reunions and returns home.

to their sons and daughters, the movies pass on the history of division and separated families to the next generation. In this manner, the topic of the separated family itself delivers political significance to the audience. Family separation is still an ongoing issue in the Korean peninsula. The separation does not only occur between North Korean women and their families in North Korea but can also include new relationships with the people they meet in China. These refugee women create communities, but due to frequent border crossings and dislocations, they inevitably leave the communities soon after their relocation as undocumented migrants. For example, in *Mrs. B, A North Korean Woman*, Mrs. B is sold to a Chinese farmer and then she creates a family with her new husband and his parents. Her subsequent defection to South Korea leads to another separation between her and her Chinese family. The heroine in *Beautiful Days* moves to South Korea, where she meets another South Korean partner. In the meantime, her son, who was born in China, visits her without notice to learn the reasons for her abandoning him. The separation becomes a motive for the family members to cross the border, but reunion does not guarantee the resolution of the conflicts; rather, it magnifies the family issues.

In *isan'gajok* narratives, the women are always mothers—notably in the two films *Gilsoddeum* (1986) and *Ode to My Father* (2014). Indicating that there are no narratives more impactful than that of a mother who lost her child, the films showcase mothers with tears. *Ode to My Father* portrays a broadly accepted image of a Korean mother who endures hardships, sacrifices her life for her children, and devotes herself to them. The mother (acted by Jang Young-nam) is sitting in a living room while watching the television program, “*Isan'gajok-ül ch'atsŭmnida*” [Finding dispersed families] (1983), and is waiting for information regarding her missing daughter who she lost during the 1950 Heungnam Withdrawal. Since then, she has lived life like a sinner. Although filmed twenty-eight years earlier, Im Kwon-Taek's *Gilsoddeum* showcases a deviation from a typical mother figure. Hwa-young, the female protagonist of the film, reunites with her ex-lover Dong-jin while looking for her lost son whom she had with him in their time of innocence.

After a long journey searching for their son, they finally find Seok-chul, who shows a high possibility of genetic match, but they are disappointed by Seok-chul's culture, attitude, and impoverished life. Hwa-young eventually denies Seok-chul, separates from Dong-jin, and returns to her legitimate family. The final scene of the movie where Hwa-young denies Seok-chul and drives her car alone to the other end of the road shocked audiences because her actions defied how a Korean mother should behave. The denial of a blood relation can be interpreted as a metaphor of the hostile relationship between the South and the North after the division; however, the most exact reason for Hwa-young's denial of Seok-chul was their economic and cultural class differences. Young Suk Oh observes, "What the man (Dong-sik) and the woman (Hwa-young) face is a class difference, like an unbreakable wall that cannot be disguised with a romance or a fantasy" (Oh 2013, 208). A mother denying her child of their clan-based family is rarely discussed and is almost a taboo in Korean fictional representations. Despite the different contexts and temporality, the issue of separated families due to the division of Korea and the women's desire to escape from or deny their blood relationships are commonly represented in Im Kwon-Taek's *Gilsoddeum* and Jero Yun's North Korean women trilogy.

The issue of separated people in Korean history is always about a clan-based family, which inhibits imagining separation in other types of relationships. In the next section, I will discuss the North Korean women's crossing of the border and the concept of family as a way to criticize the portrayal of women as mothers as well as their gendered relationships with their children. The director's fantastical portrayal of motherhood in the context of a separated family fails to highlight the woman's desire to escape from her past, instead linking her solely with the role of mother. However, these women chose to live their lives nonetheless by developing their own rules and becoming strong and fearless women who have been rarely represented in Korean cinema.

Tearless Mothers: To Ruling Sons and Distancing Daughters

The North Korean women's money making and their financial remittance change their relationship with the rest of their family. Earning an income to support family not only provides them with the authority to decide their position but also helps them reduce their feelings of guilt toward their children due to a long absence. Indeed, when it comes to the case of transnational mothers, "sending emotional remittances is often seen as a form of penance for leaving their children behind" (Katigbak 2015, 532). The films *Beautiful Days* and *Fighter* are the stories of adults who cross the border to find their mothers who defected alone from North Korea to China and eventually to South Korea. Their mothers left them when they were very young, only sending money to them. Although they have little memory of their mothers, the absence of a mother gives them mixed emotions, such as longing and anguish, and pushes them to break their silence as adults. Motherhood is a key focus for Jero Yun throughout his cinematic works, and he presents his admiration for maternal figures in his recent fictional movies.⁷

⁷ For example, his documentary *Letters* (2017), which was co-produced with Marte Vold, explores the cultural differences between the two directors' families and mothers in Korea and France. Also, the *Beautiful Days* is a fictional adaptation of Jero Yun's documentary film *Mrs. B, A North Korean Woman*, and before the film was funded for distribution, the title was "Mother" (*amma*).

In this section, I will examine the North Korean refugee women's gendered relationships with their children in the films. The children of the refugee women feel that their mothers abandoned them when they left, but the ways in which the children return to their mothers differ according to their genders. The son in *Beautiful Days*, for example, violently intrudes into his mother's life, demanding his mother's apology for leaving him. One son in *Mrs. B, A North Korean Woman* says in the interview that he would never let his mother leave for her Chinese husband, while the other respects his mother's decision to leave her family. Although the daughter in *Fighter* also holds strong love-hate feelings towards her mother who left her when she was little, she does not disrupt her mother's new life in South Korea, but rather watches her at a distance. Contrary to the broadly accepted image of Korean mothers, the North Korean refugee mothers in the films neither apologize for leaving nor ask forgiveness from their children. Thus, I argue that although the director

showcases a strong admiration for motherhood—or his ideal of a mother (*omma*)—the refugee women in his trilogy are dynamic and reveal their powerful desires to evolve their lives beyond their clan-based relationships. The gendered relationships between the children and the mothers reveal the patriarchal order which the mothers have survived, and the mothers achieve their agency by breaking the relationship with and maintaining a certain distance from their children. These fearless mothers are strong, self-reliant, and respectful of their own life choices.

Fighter is the story of Jina, a North Korean girl who defected to South Korea alone. Her mother left her family fourteen years prior, settled in South Korea, and formed another family. The movie does not center on Jina's defection story; rather, it focuses on her present-day life in South Korea. She is working multiple part-time jobs to send money to her father in North Korea in order to enable his defection to South Korea. The image of women sending money for support continues from mother to daughter in this movie. According to Jina, Jina's mother sent some money a couple of times to the rest of her family in North Korea, but soon became disconnected from the family. The grown-up Jina crossed the border alone and is earning money to send to her father. Since Jina's narrative centers on the achievement of her agency and understanding of her mother, Jina's connection with her father rarely appears on the screen. Although her remittance to her father is only vaguely implied, is it clear that she feels a moral obligation towards her father that motivates her to work and causes her to be obsessed with money. Jina regularly calls her father and checks his status. The audience does not even hear her father's voice, but based on her response, it seems he pushes her to shorten his waiting time for his defection. Jina expresses her annoyance to her father and abruptly orders him to simply follow the middleman's instructions. Why couldn't Jina's father cross the border just as Jina had done and simply ask her for some help instead? In other words, how could Jina cross the border, which her father could not do? How does her position as a money sender change the power dynamic between father and daughter? As the high ratio of North Korean female border

crossers shows, there are gendered differences at the North Korean border. Paradoxically, this provides North Korean women a possibility of overturning the hierarchy within the patriarchal family structure. At the same time, however, the women's roles do not quite overcome the typical narratives of women in a family—they are still either sacrificial mothers or devoted daughters who must save their left-behind family members.

It is worthwhile to carefully examine Jina's character and compare her to the previous depictions of North Korean refugee women who were timid, passive, and ignorant. Presented as part of a new generation of North Korean refugees, Jina does not hesitate to react to South Koreans' preconceptions about North Koreans. She points out that South Korean media portrays North Korean people as either savages or war machines, gives a hard punch to a South Korean man who harasses her, and finally becomes an amateur boxer who dreams of her debut in a professional match.

Jina in *Fighter* is reluctant to find her mother at first. She keeps her distance from her mother, and even after they encounter each other, she does not ask her mother the reasons why she left her family in North Korea. After a series of incidents, her mother finally has a chance to explain to Jina how things went, but does not directly apologize. She delivers her story from a third-person point of view: "There was a girl. She wanted to escape from the village to see a bigger world." Before the mother's story becomes melancholic, Jina verbally cuts her off, as if she understood her already when she crossed the border herself. In this way, she brings the focus of the story back to herself, and the distance between the two remains. In the ending sequence, Jina is watching her mother sitting at her boxing match, and the last shot is a close-up of her mother's faint smile. *Fighter* demonstrates how these two women become independent by maintaining their own distance from each other and repositioning themselves as two independent women.

Distance is a key factor in the relationships between dispersed family members. In the above-mentioned movies, despite family reunion, emotional distance is rarely overcome.

Beautiful Days demonstrates how the relationship between a mother and a child can be violent as a result of such distance. In *Beautiful Days*, Zhen Chen's relationship with his mother is dramatic. Zhen Chen's mother would have a much easier time paying back her debt (the fee of her border crossing) compared to other North Korean women since she did not have any financial obligations to anyone when she crossed the border. Selling her to a Chinese farmer, the middleman orders her to run away after a couple of months of the marriage, but the middleman's rape of the woman before the wedding impregnates her. Trapped in the situation, she decides to stay with the Chinese family, but does not reveal to anyone who the father of the child is. Her tie to the child, Zhen Chen, prevents her from escaping from both the Chinese family and the Korean Chinese middleman. Due to the middleman's threat towards her child (in fact, his own child), she returns to him to pay back her debt which had been piled up since her border crossing. By earning money from working at a bar and drug-trafficking, the woman is able to send money to Zhen Chen to compensate for her emotional debt.

Zhen Chen, who does not know the secret of his birth, visits South Korea to find his mother and delivers his dying father's message. Encountering his mother, Zhen Chen mimics the ruling language and gestures that he learned from the patriarchal order. Learning that his mother works at a bar, Zhen Chen spits the insulting swear words "filthy bitch" at his mother. He interrupts his mother while she is drinking soju and takes the bottle away from her. He practices the imagined violence of his father—it is an *imagined* violence because his father (not his biological father, but the Chinese farmer whom he believed to be his real father) never did such acts. The mother, however, has no intention of losing to her son, despite his mimicry of the patriarchal ruling language. Confronting her son, the mother throws the *soju* cup on the floor, breaking it: "What is wrong with my work at a bar? I do what I can do."



Figure 1. The son surrogates Father's language to control his mother (Yun 2016, 23:07–26:19).

However, the son regrets immediately having cursed his mother in her face. He does not know how the woman has protected him, even though he is a son of the Korean Chinese middleman who raped and sold her to the Chinese farmer. His self-positioning as a surrogate of his Chinese father leads him to attack a South Korean man who is in a relationship with his mother. Out of fear, he soon regrets his failed attempt and cries when his mother tells him the positive news about the man's status. In this scene, the camera shows a profile view of Zhen Chen crying, and he soon turns around, seeking a hug from his mother. The mother then holds her son's head between her head and chest. This image of a mother's embrace is a representation of motherhood that the director pursues throughout the movie and repeats when the woman visits the Chinese man before he dies. In this scene, the woman displays a form of quasi-motherhood to her Chinese husband, who is longing for her return.

Although these scenes are the images that the director wanted of the woman, they are clearly a limitation of this movie. These images of the woman in the pose of the Madonna justify the woman's sacrifice and at the same time purposefully reverse the status of the woman's "filthy" body to that of a saint or sacred mother. What saves this movie from evoking typical motherhood clichés are the following

moments: the woman's embrace of her son ends abruptly and the woman gazes into the void next to her sleeping son. In a similar way, the Chinese husband observes an emptiness on the woman's side of the bed after receiving her embrace.

The abrupt cuts and visible editing between the shots leave the audience wondering if the mother's embrace indeed occurred at all. Considering the mother character has limited dialogue in the script and does not express her emotions toward other people, the Madonna scenes feel artificial and excessive. Hence, these scenes can be interpreted as a fantasy of the son and the husband as well as of the director, who intends to resolve the audience's dissatisfaction about the blunt and tearless mother character. The violent relationship between the mother and the son reveals the fundamental violence which the woman has lived, and this violent definition of a clan-based family is the conventional familyhood that the woman wants to escape from.

The woman in the film, however, understands the concepts of family and community differently from the two men. She is just with the people who are destined to be with her and does not question why they are with her. The last scene of the film, which is necessary to understand her idea of community, takes place a few years after their story ended: the woman is at a table with her South Korean partner, a young boy (presumably her new son with her partner), and a grown-up Zhen Chen. She is still not saying a word, just filling a rice bowl for the group. If eating together makes a family (*shikku*), she embraces the people sitting at her table without question. The woman who crossed the border alone now sits with her own family, but interestingly she does not show a strong attachment to her blood relations. In this final scene, Zhen Chen wears a suit and puts a spoonful of rice into his mouth as if he can now understand everything about his mother. He shows this gesture of forgiveness for his mother after receiving his father's will and bankbook. The father's request says: "Do not blame your mother," and the bankbook shows him that his mother kept remitting money to him despite her absence. The father's request provides him a justification to forgive his mother, and the mother's money clearly diluted his negative feelings towards her. In the next

section, I will examine how North Korean refugee women form and transform relationships with their family are based on their performance of monetary remittance.

Being, Doing, Crossing Family: North Korean Refugee Women's Monetary Remittance

The North Korean women in Jero Yun's films are blunt, active, and sometimes aggressive. Mrs. B in the documentary *Mrs. B, A North Korean Woman* is an intermediary who trades North Korean border crossers and sells drugs along the border area, and the woman in *Beautiful Days* is a manager of a bar who controls other bar girls. Jina in *Fighter* becomes an amateur boxer, and she gives a hard punch to a man who harasses her. These women showcase very strong and powerful characteristics despite their marginalized status as refugees in the given society. Money is not only a motive for their border crossings and survival, but is also an essential means to transform themselves and understand their relation to others. In this section, I will examine the North Korean refugee women's money making and remittance to their families, focusing on how these monetary performances affect the women's understandings of clan-based family and morality.

After crossing the border, the women in Jero Yun's trilogy make money and send it to their families in North Korea. The women in *Mrs. B, A North Korean Woman* and *Beautiful Days* are sold to Chinese farmers. Before and after they are sold to the farmers, these North Korean women are engaged in night business, drug trafficking, and the intermediary work of helping other North Koreans cross the border. Without Mrs. B's monetary income, neither her family in North Korea, her new husband, nor her parents-in-law in China could have survived. Mrs. B becomes a breadwinner for both families, and all her family members await her support and decisions. However, these highly risky jobs are classified as illegal in South Korean regulations, and when a South Korean agent interrogated Mrs. B following her defection to South Korea, her commitment to illegal activities impeded her chance to acquire South Korean citizenship. Mrs. B appealed to the police, explaining that those illegal jobs were her only

option for survival in China which did not recognize any North Korean border crossers as refugees. Nonetheless, her naïve honesty and confession of her past had no effect with him; rather she was accused of being a spy. She blurred her own boundaries between morality and legitimacy due to her obligation towards her families, but the nation-state's regulations were precise and unexceptional.

The woman's background in *Beautiful Days* is different from that of Mrs. B. The woman in *Beautiful Days* was completely alone when she crossed the border, but the middleman's rape and impregnation of her trapped her. After being sold to a Chinese farmer, she raises Zhen Chen, but soon has to return to the middleman to pay off her debt. The Chinese farmer appears in the film as a kind and gentle man who cares about the woman and longs for her return. At the table in a shabby restaurant, he finally meets the woman as she is just returning from drug trafficking, and their conversation explicitly reveals that they are living very different lives.

THE CHINESE HUSBAND. Thank you for the money.

THE WOMAN. Did you come all the way here to say that?

THE CHINESE HUSBAND. Let's go home together.

THE WOMAN. I am not going.

THE CHINESE HUSBAND. Zhen Chen is looking for you. I told him that you were away making money. You can come back anytime.

THE WOMAN. Go back alone.

THE CHINESE HUSBAND. I know what it was [that you delivered to the middleman]. Wasn't it a drug? You shouldn't do such things.

THE WOMAN. Don't you dare say that. Aren't you living a comfortable life thanks to my money? Don't ever come back.

After the conversation, the husband realizes that he cannot make her come back home. Feeling helpless, he stands up to leave, but the woman stops him, saying, "Eat before you go." She then starts eating. The man looks at her as if he cannot

believe how she could eat during this serious conversation, but for the woman, life is about survival. No matter what happens, eating to avoid starvation is important. The dramatic differences between their two lives becomes explicit at this point. The woman lives with a sense of being between life and death at any time, whereas for the man, life is about family romance. He wants to have her back without resolving to pay off her debt. Their distinctive understandings of family are fundamentally based on their different statuses as money maker and receiver. The receiver does not need to know the source of the money all the time, thus the moral responsibility of money making is always on the sender. If the sender is in a risky environment for making money, her sense of selflessness and sacrifice paradoxically alienates her from the rest of her family. She feels lonely while making money, and the emotional distance between them prevents her eventual return to the family.

Ethnologist Evangeline O. Katigbak delineates that the sender's remittance is an "act of sacred love," and the sender expects "the same sacred feelings in return" (Katigbak 2015, 529). While these sentiments bind family members together, the monetary remittance is also the message sent by the sender to the left-behind family in an attempt to eliminate the risk of being forgotten and to ensure that the family will "prepare for their eventual return" (Katigbak 2015, 531). By doing so, the senders invest money into their present and future relationships with the rest of the family in their home country. However, this is not the case with North Korean refugees because they escaped from their home and are not willing to return. Unlike Katigbak's case study on Barangay Pulong Anahao, the North Korean refugees' emotional remittances⁸ are not quite reciprocal but rather one-sided; the senders cannot expect "the same sacred feelings" from the left-behind family in return (Katigbak 2015, 529). Instead of positive feelings such as love and gratitude, negative feelings or emotional debts are more prevalent amongst North Korean refugees because the escapees' dislocation or failed identification can be worrying for the family members left behind. Therefore, the refugees often send money home to assuage the guilt they may feel towards their family members.

⁸ Katigbak establishes her concept of "emotional remittances," arguing, "emotional constructs such as love, ingratitude and guilt are reshaped by transnational familyhood" (Katigbak 2015, 519). Looking at both the positive and negative emotions of senders and receivers, she defines those emotional remittances as "the continuity of emotions and economies, expressing how money, ideas, and material things that travel back and forth between and among family members across translocal spaces are not devoid of meaning and feelings" (Katigbak 2015, 521). Sociologist Ji Yeon Lee conducted an empirical study on North Korean migrants living in South Korea, focusing on family remittances (Lee 2019). Stressing Katigbak's notion of emotional remittance, Lee examined the transnational network and the informal relationships across South Korea, China, and North Korea. She underlined the social context of North Koreans' remittances, such as the connections between middlemen (*pūrok'ŏ*), the black market (*changmadang*), and security officials (*powibu*).

If moral obligation is a motive for North Korean refugees to send money to their family, the remittance fosters gradual changes in the refugees' understanding of their own agency as well as their families. The question is how much is enough to compensate for this guilt? When do they stop sending money and cease their obligation? Mrs. B's case in *Mrs. B, A North Korean Woman* is interesting to consider as an example. Her moral obligation towards her North Korean family seems to end when her two sons arrive in South Korea, but then she gains a subsequent obligation towards her new Chinese family. Her new marriage with the Chinese husband puts her at a crossroads and leaves her with a choice between the two husbands. Her money is also at a crossroads between South Korea and China.

Upon crossing the border, Mrs. B empowers herself by making money, and her monetary remittance to her family gradually reverses the hierarchy between her and her husband in North Korea. Although her border crossing is not evidence of a collapse of the patriarchal family structure of North Korea,⁹ her family only technically maintains the typical gendered roles after her crossing. She makes her own decision to live with her Chinese husband before her migration to South Korea. After two years of living in South Korea, she says in an interview:

⁹ After the defection of her family and herself to South Korea, we see her North Korean husband lying on the floor all day long while she is working as a cleaner at work and as a cook at home in *Mrs. B, A North Korean Woman*.

I don't want to live in South Korea anymore. I'm going to go back to China. I'm going to live there. Because for me, even if I was sold to him [the Chinese farmer], with him, I felt safe. I could live serenely. He respected my children. I didn't bear him any children. He accepted me. He never forced me to have another one with him. Even if I'm here [in South Korea] now, how could I forget him? He understands me. I want to live with him (*nae-ga kũ saram-irang sarajuryõgo haeyo*).

The meaning of her saying, "*nae-ga kũ saram-irang sarajuryõgo haeyo*," would be close to "I want to give him [her Chinese husband] a chance to live with me" although it was translated into "I want to live with him" in the documentary's official

subtitles. She wants to live the rest of her life with the Chinese man, no longer worrying about her ex-husband and grown-up sons. She promised to invite her Chinese husband to South Korea after she obtained South Korean citizenship. She expected to live with him in an apartment that the South Korean government provides for those who are eligible to obtain citizenship. The South Korean government, however, does not distinguish between her and her North Korean family who defected to South Korea before she had done so. She then had to live with them, and her dream of having her own apartment was discouraged. What is worse, as a result of her confessing her illegal activities in China—such as drug trafficking and intermediary work for other North Korean border crossers—her case was suspended. Mrs. B. is trapped in her situation because South Korea does not recognize her *de facto* marriage in China. Although she was undocumented, she was always full of confidence in China. She looks miserable in South Korea because she lost her hope.

Mrs. B wants to stop living and communicating with her North Korean family members and instead wants to go back to China to live with her Chinese husband. With her decision, she not only crosses the conventional understanding of Korean mothers but also ultimately wants a divorce from her home nation (North Korea). As the North Korean constitution indicates, “Family is the fundamental cell of society” (1972) in North Korea, which “legally binds the nuclear family to the state, blurring the dichotomy of private and public spheres” (I. Kim 2018, 21). When Mrs. B crossed the border, leaving her family members behind, her ties with the family were loosened, which also makes her connection with the state (North Korea) irreducible. Her disconnection with the North Korean family thus signifies her willingness to cut her relationship with the state.

Although they already crossed the national border, the North Korean refugee women’s relationship with their nation continues to include monetary and emotional remittances to their left-behind families in North Korea. These women’s remittances gradually reverse the hieratical relations between them and their patriarchal family members, and the money making and money sending reduce their moral guilt

on “illegal” practices such as intermediary works for other North Korean refugees, night industry businesses, and drug trafficking. Monetary remittances to their family become a morally framed performance. With their own boundary of morality, the North Korean refugee women strive to cross the conventional understanding of family with which they have lived.

Conclusion

This article examined the relocation of North Korean refugee women as an extension of family separation that has taken place during the history of Korean division. Unlike the stereotyped images of Korean women as being devoted and sacrificial within the setting of a clan-based family, North Korean refugee women in Jero Yun’s films migrate beyond the boundary of the patriarchal family, developing their own conceptions of morality and independence. The purpose of this article is not to exclude North Korean women from the stereotyped conception of motherhood but to suggest a deviation from the typical woman’s role and place in the family structure. This article also questions the discourse regarding clan-based families that takes mothers’ sacrifice for granted and implicitly tolerates violence against them. Despite the physical and emotional distance between the women and other family members, the refugee women in the films push themselves to extremes to maintain their membership as part of a family. Monetary remittance helps them fulfill their roles, connecting senders and receivers with a morally defined economic obligation; however, it also becomes a motivation in itself that prompts these women to transcend the limits of the conception of family. In my discussion of monetary remittance as the price for the North Korean refugee women’s guilty feelings toward their families, I have asked, “How much is enough to compensate for their guilt?” This question, however, should be revised to take other factors into consideration. The newly formed question is as follows: when a relationship becomes violent and threatens one’s survival, is

it immoral to discontinue the relationship, including the one that is clan-based? The women in Jero Yun's films answer this question by establishing their own concepts regarding the distance among various family members and the boundary imposed by morality as part of completing their crossing.

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